

“CONDEMNED FOR NOT BELIEVING”
MATTHEW 12:38-45

Gospel means simply, “good news”. Jesus provided the clearest and most concise explanation of this good news in a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16 *ESV*). The good news is not only that God loves us, but that He loves us *so much* He gave His one and only Son so that we might not have to be punished forever in hell for our sin, but that we might live forever with Him in heaven. Only later do we find out the astonishingly profound extent of this love—that He gave His Son to die in our place.

But there is something else that is good news. We receive eternal life, not by being religious, or by doing good works, but by *believing* in Jesus. Later in John’s Gospel Jesus’ audience asked him, *“What must we do to do the works God requires?”* (6:28). They wanted to know what it takes to get to heaven, and they expected Him to say, “You need to obey these rules and perform those duties and jump through these moral hoops.” Instead, Jesus simply said, *“The work of God is this: to believe in the One He sent”* (6:29).

For John, believing in Jesus meant more than just believing He exists—that He was a historical figure who was a great teacher and miracle worker. It means more, even, than believing Jesus died on a cross and rose from the dead. Believing is akin to trusting, and it is a very personal matter. It means believing that Jesus is the One sent by God to be His provision for your *salvation* and trusting that what He has done on your behalf is what it takes to be in right standing with God. Just after He proclaimed the good news to Nicodemus in John 3:16, Jesus said, *“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved”* (John 3:17).

But as wonderful as this good news is, even though it is simple and straightforward (Acts 16:31), and even though it is a free gift from God (Eph. 2:8), many people choose *not* to trust in Jesus for their salvation. Most of Nicodemus’ colleagues reacted this way. In Matthew 12, after Jesus had performed yet another miracle, exorcising demons from a man, they accused Him of doing it by the power of Satan. They couldn’t deny that it was a powerful miracle, for the demons had made the man mute and blind, and they had to admit that He could now talk and see. But it was another evidence of their stubborn unbelief.

After Jesus rebuked them for their careless and thoughtless words and attitudes, they pressed Him further to prove that He was from God. **Verse 38.** *“³⁸ Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”*

Don’t let the Scribes’ and Pharisees’ apparent politeness deceive you. We are told in both Mark’s and Luke’s account of this same incident that they were “testing” Jesus, which implies that they were goading him, challenging His authority, looking for an opportunity to discredit Him. But in asking Him for a sign, they must have meant something different than the healings and exorcisms that they had seen Him perform.

It is possible they may have been thinking about a well-known messianic prophecy in the book of Haggai in which the LORD says, *“⁶ Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. ⁷ And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts”* (Haggai 2:6-7). Perhaps the Scribes and Pharisees were asking Jesus to produce an earthquake, or a tsunami, or some other cosmic phenomenon which might fulfill this

prophecy.

But Jesus was unmoved, knowing their real motivations and the hardness of their hearts, and, instead, **Verses 39a.** ³⁹ *“But He answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign...”*

Jesus says, “Look, we’re not playing games here. I’m not some magician or circus performer who does wonders on demand, especially for skeptics and scoffers who aren’t about to change their minds.” But Jesus also tells them what their request for a sign reveals about them. It reveals the condition of their hearts—that they are wicked; that they are part of an evil and adulterous generation.

Adulterous implies that they have been unfaithful to the very God they so adamantly profess to love and serve. Because to reject Jesus is to reject God. For everything that God has ever done with and for mankind, everything that God has ever done with and for His people, Israel, has been building toward and is consummated in Jesus, His Son. To be against Jesus, as the Pharisees were, is to be against God. To be against Jesus is the ultimate slap in God’s face.

The Scribes and Pharisees had seen Jesus perform plenty of miracles that should have convinced them that He was truly from God. But their demand for a sign is an evidence of their faithlessness, which is spiritual adultery.

So, Jesus says, **verses 39-40,** ³⁹ *“...An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*

Jesus does not perform wonders on demand. But He does offer to give them the sign of Jonah; literally, the “sign that is Jonah the prophet.” Jesus is saying that Jonah himself is the sign, which means that what is recorded of the man, Jonah, is what constitutes the miracle. Of course, the Scribes and Pharisees were intimately acquainted with the prophet Jonah and what happened to him as the result of his disobedience. On his voyage to Tarshish to escape the assignment God had given him, God created a perilous storm that threatened to wreck the ship. Jonah was thrown overboard and swallowed by a great fish, where he languished in its belly for three days before the fish spit him up on dry ground.

Those three days in the fish’s belly and that expulsion from the fish on the third day parallels Jesus’ death and resurrection, though the Scribes and Pharisees certainly would not have made this connection (the disciples didn’t even make this connection until after his resurrection).

A couple of comments are appropriate here. First, Jesus’ reference to Jonah in the belly of fish for three days and three nights is evidence that the story of Jonah is no myth. If Jesus claimed that it really happened, it really did, and Jonah’s survival in the belly of the fish is nothing short of a miracle.

Second, Jonah’s experience in the fish’s belly, as interesting and significant as it was, is only a shadow of a greater reality. It is what theologians call a “type.” It foreshadowed Jesus’ death and burial and resurrection after three days, which is far more significant and consequential.

Incidentally, “three days and three nights” is a Semitic idiom for any portion of three calendar days. The Jews counted the day on which any period began as one day, and they did the same with the day on which the period ended. Thus, we have Friday, Saturday, Sunday—three days. It does not matter that neither the Friday nor the Sunday was complete.

According to the method of counting in use at the time, this is the period during which Jesus would be in the heart of the earth (Morris, PNTC).

But Jesus is only getting started in his comments to the Scribes and Pharisees, because He obviously knew they wouldn't understand or accept the sign of Jonah either. So, He proceeds to indict them for their unbelief. **Verse 41.** *41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*

God preserved Jonah so that he could preach to the Ninevites, one of Israel's fiercest enemies. The Ninevites were as wicked and hard-hearted as any civilization in history. They were Gentiles, they were idolaters, and were extremely anti-Semitic. And all Jonah did was show up and say, "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed." He didn't perform signs and wonders, he didn't endear himself to the Ninevite population, he didn't communicate tenderness or compassion. Yet they still believed and repented.

The Jewish do-gooders of Jesus' day had also been confronted with their sin, and should have responded with repentance, particularly with all that Jesus had done to establish His messianic credentials. Yet they reacted with arrogance and insolence and hostility toward God's Messenger. And their guilt was all the more serious because *something greater* than Jonah is here. Not *someone* greater, as we might have expected Jesus to say, but "*something greater*," which points to God's whole work in Jesus—His sending of his very own Son, His provision for the salvation of repentant sinners through Him, and the establishment of His kingdom. All this represents something far greater than the coming of a Jewish prophet to the ancient city of Nineveh (Morris).

We should notice two contrasts: the Ninevites repented and the people of Jesus' day did not; and again, the Ninevites were confronted with Jonah, these Jews with something far greater. Therefore, on the Day of Judgment, they will rise up and condemn the Scribes and Pharisees for not believing in Jesus, who is far greater and more trustworthy than Jonah.

But that's not all. **Verse 42,** *42 The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.*

Jesus cites another Old Testament event where another Gentile responded enthusiastically to the teaching of a Hebrew man of God—one who will also rise up on the Day of Judgment to indict Jesus' contemporaries for their unbelief. *The queen of the South* is a reference to the Queen of Sheba, who went to great lengths to listen to the wisdom of King Solomon, though he was a mere mortal (1 Kings 10:1–10). *The ends of the earth* means that she came a long way to meet Solomon, most likely from the region we now call Yemen. In some ways she forms a more impressive example than the Ninevites, for they responded to a man who came and preached to them on their home turf, whereas she embarked on a lengthy, difficult journey to hear Solomon. But she made the journey in order to hear his renowned wisdom, and she was not disappointed (Morris).

Like the Ninevites, she will rise on the Day of Judgment to condemn Jesus' generation, because they closed their ears to Jesus' wisdom, and rejected God's wisdom—God's plan of salvation that was fulfilled in Jesus. The Pharisees and Scribes prided themselves on being the custodians of God's revelation, but the queen of the South will rise up and condemn them for rejecting God's *supreme* Revelation—Jesus Christ—who is the very essence of His will and the consummation of His plans and purposes.

But Jesus goes on to address not just the Pharisees, who had now been warned of

their precarious eternal state, but the entire audience—all of whom had seen Him heal the man who was mute and blind by casting out demons. You might remember that those who had witnessed this miracle asked, “Can this be the Son of David?” (v. 23). The wording in the Greek might be better translated, *This man isn't the Son of David, is He?* And the question is posed in such a way as to indicate a measure of *perplexity*—they weren't sure how to interpret Jesus.

Jesus now turns His attention to them, to warn them that unbelief, even passive unbelief, has very serious consequences. He says in **verses 43-45**. *43 “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. 44 Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. 45 Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation.”*

Jesus, who is the Lord of the universe, the Creator of all the angels, including the ones who rebelled with Satan and became demons, is communicating a profound spiritual reality in this story. This is not a parable or an allegory, but a hypothetical situation that describes what can happen in real life. He talks about a man who is forsaken by an unclean spirit (an evil spirit or a demon) who had previously possessed him. The spirit in this story apparently leaves voluntarily and wanders about waterless places looking for rest. There are numerous references in Scripture and other resources that describe demons residing in dry, desert places (cf. Isa. 13:20–21; 34:14). Jesus doesn't tell us why the spirit in this story is seeking rest, but perhaps spirits, like people, seek respite from whatever it is that spirits do.

This spirit, however, was unable to find the rest it sought, and returned to the person whom he had inhabited, finding its former home *empty, swept, and put in order*. This may well be a reference to the *efforts* of the person whom the spirit vacated trying to improve or reform himself in his own efforts, without the help of the Holy Spirit. But because the Lord's spiritual presence is not in the house, the house (the man) is *empty*, so there is nothing to prevent the spirit from re-inhabiting the person.

So, in this story, the original occupant returns, accompanied by seven other demons who inhabit his body, making his condition far worse than it was before. In other words, the change for the better when the original spirit left was temporary and short-lived, because he did not have the spiritual resources, namely, the Holy Spirit, to protect himself.

Jesus is asserting that simply to be rid of an unclean spirit is not the goal, because it results in a vacuum that makes a person vulnerable to even greater evil and destruction. And it reinforces Jesus' earlier point that everyone is either for or against Jesus. One cannot be neutral. In this story, neutrality results in a much more harmful condition.

The Scribes and Pharisees had seen Jesus cast out demons and had accused Him of doing it by the power of Beelzebul. Others had seen Jesus cast out the demon but didn't know how to interpret, because they weren't sure if Jesus was really from God. Jesus has already condemned the Pharisees for their unbelief, but He is now pointing out the danger for any person who remains non-committal or undecided about Jesus.

Not to put one's faith in Jesus, not to trust Him as God's provision for one's salvation, is to be in just as precarious a spiritual state as the Scribes and Pharisees. In the conversation with Nicodemus we talked about earlier, after explaining the good news, Jesus said, *18 “Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”*

You don't come to be on Jesus side by birth or by spiritual pedigree. We must believe in Him—we must make the conscious choice to put our trust in Him as God's provision for our salvation. If we don't make that choice—even if we like Jesus and have a good opinion of Jesus—we are condemned, and we face a grim future.

The only way not to be condemned is to believe. Believe that Jesus is the One sent from God, and that he is God's sole provision for your salvation.

“Condemned for Not Believing” Matthew 12:38-45

Main Idea: Those who reject Jesus and His provision of salvation are in a precarious spiritual state, both now and for eternity

The Unbelievers Demand a Sign from Jesus (38)

Jesus Refuses Unbelievers' Demand (39-42)

Those who demand a sign are evil and adulterous (39a)

Only the sign of Jonah will be given (39b-40)

Jonah was admired by the unbelievers

Jonah's experience in the fish's belly foreshadowed something greater

Gentiles Will Condemn Unbelievers in Jesus' Day (41-42)

The Ninevites believed and repented, even though Jonah was nothing special

The Queen of the South went to great lengths to hear Solomon's wisdom, even though he was a mere mortal

The Danger of Neutrality (43-45)

Just because a person has been vacated by a demon doesn't mean it is safe (43-44)

A person who does not replace unclean spirits with the Holy Spirit may be worse off (45)

Jesus is God's provision for complete salvation