

Seeing is not Believing

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[0 : 00] If only God would give me a sign. If only God would give me a sign, then I would believe in Him.

Then I'd go to church, then I'd give my life to Him. If only I could see something that I could not explain away, then that, that would make the difference for me.

I wonder if you've ever found yourself thinking something like that. Maybe you know someone who is saying just that in your life right now. Give me a sign, and then I'll believe.

People long for signs, don't they? Because they think if they see, then they will believe. If we think seeing is believing, seeing is what we will demand.

Show me a sign, and then I'll believe. But what we'll see in our passage this evening is that seeing and believing don't necessarily go as hand in hand as we think they might.

[1 : 21] Seeing is not always believing. At the beginning of our passage this evening, in verse 38 there of Matthew 12, the scribes and the Pharisees come to Jesus with a question that at first glance might seem fairly reasonable.

Teacher, they say in verse 38, we wish to see a sign from you. Show us a sign.

Prove to us that you are who you say you are. I mean, Jesus, in the verses just gone by, he has claimed to be the greater temple, the Lord of the Sabbath, empowered by the Spirit of God to cast out demons.

Those are not your everyday claims, are they? We probably all know people in our lives who claim to be able to do things we doubt, but Jesus is seriously upping the stakes here, isn't he?

These are not the average claims of your overambitious mate down the pub. So is it unreasonable for the Pharisees to ask for some proof? Well, actually, yes.

[2 : 40] It is not unreasonable to want to see the evidence that backs up Jesus' claims about himself, but the Pharisees, they have already seen more than enough.

That is why the request is not as reasonable as it might first seem. If you've got a Bible up in front of you, just glance back with me to verse 13 of chapter 12.

Jesus here is engaging with the same group of Pharisees, and what does he do there in verse 13?

Then he said to the man, stretch out your hands. And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other.

Glance down to verse 22. Then a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw.

If you went back through chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew's gospel, you'd have a far longer list to go on. Here is a man who healed a centurion's servant with a word.

[3 : 43] He cured a woman's fever with a touch. He stilled the raging seas with a rebuke. He brought a young girl back to life by taking her by the hands.

And now the Pharisees come to him and say, show us a sign. Prove yourself.

What more did they want to see? What more could they have seen? They had seen it. They had heard it. But they still refused to bow to God's king.

And so Jesus utters in this passage some very serious and solemn words of warning. And this is where I think it's probably worth being clear early on, right at the beginning here, making a distinction between who Jesus is speaking to in these verses and who he is not.

Because we will see in the verses that follow, Jesus offering a solemn warning to the scribes and Pharisees because of their demand for another sign. I just want you to hear right now, okay, that warning is given specifically to people who have seen and heard Jesus for themselves and yet still refused to respond rightly to him.

[5 : 13] That is who this warning is primarily directed to. So let me be clear from the outside. If you've just come into church the first time this evening or today, maybe you've only been with us a few weeks.

Let me just say to you, taking some time to figure out if Jesus really is who he says he is is not unreasonable.

That is a good thing to do. We want you to take the time to see all the evidence for yourself. Genuine seekers who have not yet seen and heard Jesus, that is not who Jesus utters these fearful words to.

It is rather, I think, directed at those who have sat in church most of their lives, have heard countless sermons, have heard Christ clearly revealed to them as king and savior, and yet have not submitted to him as their king and savior.

Don't let that discourage you from listening to the first half of the sermon if you don't fall into that camp, because we all need to hear the severity of Jesus' warning to these people as a reminder to ourselves, but also so we can speak well and urgently into the lives of those who have seen but not believed.

[6 : 44] So let's just dive into our first point this evening and see Jesus' solemn warning to those who see but do not believe. So perhaps not the most straightforward little passage, but three things happen here.

Take them one at a time to make sense of how Jesus is responding. First, Jesus promises them one more sign in verse 39 and 40. Secondly, Jesus warns them against demanding more evidence than they need.

And then thirdly, Jesus warns them of the danger of looking outwardly orderly, but not submitting to him as their king.

I'll explain each of those in more detail as we go through, so don't panic if you didn't pick them all up there. But let's begin in verse 39, where Jesus promises them one more sign to come.

Just look with me at those verses again. But he answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

[8 : 00] 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.

The Pharisees ask for a sign. And Jesus calls them out as an evil and adulterous generation.

I wonder what your first thought when you saw those words. It might seem a pretty sharp response, doesn't it? And it is a pretty sharp response, but it is not unwarranted.

Because it is a solemn warning to people who are not really looking for a sign so they can believe, but looking for an excuse not to believe.

They seem to have faded into obscurity recently, but it was not so long ago that the flat earth society seemed to be in the ascendancy.

[9 : 11] Do you remember them? It was a kind of a curious period of human history, wasn't it, where a remarkably large group of people denied a fact that had been well established for the best part of 2,500 years.

I had the experience, I suppose you'd call it, of engaging with a couple of people who really did believe the spherical nature of our planet was nothing more than a conspiracy.

Each of them were perfectly pleasant and respectful to talk to, but what we'd find as you spoke to them was that no amount of evidence would change their opinion.

No amount of evidence was enough. You provide one line of reasoning after another, but rather than kind of provide a counterpoint, they'd just constantly ask for more proof.

They knew what they wanted to believe, and that was that. For them, asking for more signs was not an attempt to arrive at the truth, but an excuse for not embracing the evidence they had already been presented with.

[10 : 34] That, I think, is where the Pharisees find themselves here. They already had an overwhelming amount of evidence right in front of them.

But they refused to believe what they saw before their very eyes. In the face of overwhelming evidence, asking for more signs is not an indication of wisdom, but of foolishness.

Demanding more signs than Jesus provides is an excuse, not a request. That is why Jesus responds so starkly in the way that he does, calling them out as an evil and adulterous generation.

But he also responds, doesn't he, by promising them one more sign to come. You'll get one more sign, Jesus says, to this disbelieving audience, and it will be the sign of Jonah.

Jonah was a prophet in the Old Testament. His short book we read from earlier in the service. Many of us will know the story well because it is a great story, isn't it? Jonah was called by God to go and preach to the truly wicked people of Assyria, the city of Nineveh.

[11:59] But instead of doing as God commanded, Jonah legged it, didn't he? He was a man on the run. Jonah did not want to see Nineveh saved.

He wanted to see Nineveh destroyed. And so he hopped on a boat to literally the complete opposite end of the known world. God caused a great storm to arise that threatened to destroy the boat Jonah was on.

And so the sailors had no choice but to chuck Jonah overboard into the raging sea. But instead of leaving his disobedient prophet to drown, God sent a great fish to swallow Jonah up.

And that is where he was for three days and three nights. That is what Jesus is referring to here.

But then after three days in the deep, Jonah was vomited up alive, wasn't he?

Three days and three nights in the depths of the earth only to return alive. These Pharisees were out to get Jesus.

[13:24] They wanted to see him dead. But to that, when they faithlessly asked for yet another sign, Jesus says, well, when you finally succeed in getting your way, then you're going to see the greatest sign of all and the only sign you need.

Because I am going to be in the heart of the earth only as long as Jonah was in the belly of that fish. On the third day, just as the fish gave up Jonah, so the earth would give up Jesus.

And he who was crucified and buried would and did rise again. In Jesus' life and ministry, we are given one sign after another.

But in Jesus' death and resurrection, we are given the greatest sign of all. Jesus Christ is alive. You will not find his bones on earth no matter how hard you look. There were countless witnesses to that very fact in his time, many of whom were ready to die defending that truth.

[14:50] The earliest opponents of the gospel could not provide evidence against it, which they would have if they could have. We don't have time to go into the depths of the evidence here, but if you are not yet sure of Jesus, go and weigh up the evidence of the greatest sign of all, his resurrection.

And decide then what you will do with him. If he rose again from the dead, then come to him as he lives and as he calls you to do. The sign is sufficient.

It is all we need. But even then, it would not be enough for those who see but will not believe. Jesus promised them one more sign. But then he warns them against demanding more evidence than they really need.

Having introduced the sign of Jonah, Jesus moves on immediately to the testimony of those to whom Jonah was sent to preach. The men of Nineveh, we are introduced to in verse 41, they repented at the preaching of Jonah.

[16:13] And Jesus says, something greater than Jonah is here right before you. Remember who we just said Jonah was?

Right? The runaway prophet who didn't even want to preach to people or even see them saved. Well, he eventually went. And that's what Stuart read for us earlier in the service from Jonah chapter 3.

He eventually went and preached. But what he preached was not exactly a rousing sermon, was it? I don't like to stand in judgment over other people's sermons.

And I confess to have preached some pretty poor sermons in my own short time. But I think even my worst would look all right next to Jonah's. What was Jonah's message? 40 days, then you're all going to die.

We'll try that next week. 40 days, then you're all going to die. That was Jonah's sermon. It wasn't particularly engaging.

[17:16] There's not much in the way of illustrations. There wasn't even any application. Just judgment. Because judgment is all Jonah wanted them to receive. But what happened?

The people of Nineveh heard the word of God. And so they responded to the word of God.

What's Jesus' point? The Pharisees are standing in front of him demanding more and more and more and more. But Jesus says, look at the men of Nineveh.

How much evidence? How many sermons? How much proof did they need to respond rightly to the word of God? Jesus is saying, the moment you heard my voice, the moment you saw my first miracle, you had more than enough to go on.

Standing there and asking for more and more and more proof is not evidence of your thoughtful decision making. It's evidence of your determination not to believe. Similarly, with the Queen of the South, we're introduced there in verse 42.

[18 : 32] She was a queen in the time of Solomon who traveled hundreds and hundreds of miles to go and hear the wisdom of God's king. But now something greater than Solomon is here, Jesus says, right in front of you.

The Queen of the South willingly traveled long distances to hear Solomon. The greater Solomon has come to you. He's come to preach to you and yet you do not believe.

And so both the people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South will rise in the day of judgment and condemn the evil generation of Jesus' day.

because they rightly responded too far less. Whereas the scribes and the Pharisees were determined to respond wrongly despite all that they had presented before their very eyes.

Let me just stop for a moment and think where the rubber hits the road for us reading this now.

Jesus is specifically isn't he here addressing an audience who had seen and heard Jesus' life and ministry who knew their scriptures and yet willfully refused to submit to the authority of God's king.

[20 : 06] Just to emphasize again Jesus is not speaking specifically here to people who are genuinely curious and want to know more. that if you have seen and heard Jesus if you have sat under his words and had him made known to you but have not yet given your life to Jesus as your Lord and your king then this warning I think is directed at you if you have heard Christ proclaimed week after week month after month year after year if you know who he claims to be and you know what he has done if you know he was raised from the dead and yet you are not ready to hand over the reins of your life to him then the men of Nineveh and the queen of the south will rise up and condemn you on the day of judgment you have seen and heard all you need to hear do not

I beg you blind yourself to what is plain and obvious it is a most terrifyingly perilous position to be in and one that we long no one would be in but this warning is here for a reason isn't it because there will be those in every generation who see but do not believe do not please do not let that be you Jesus offers one final warning to the religious looking Pharisees in verses 43 to 45 in what is admittedly a less than straightforward little parable that I think I'm still getting my head around but I think it becomes clearer what

Jesus is saying here when we remember he is addressing the generation as a whole that he is speaking to and he likens the generation to those who are seeing but not those who are seeing but not believing he likens them to a person that has a demon removed from them that is what Jesus I think has been doing literally and figuratively for the generation of his day casting out demons healing wounds causing the blind to see and the lame to walk raising the dead the generation Jesus is speaking to has had their house put in order but they are doing nothing with it with this orderly house they are not filling it with the kingdom of God nor with God's king as they ought to have done and so Jesus warns if you receive my benefits but you do not receive me as king your latter state will be worse than your previous one end of verse 45 the last state of that person is worse than the first so also will it be with this evil generation

Jesus points and you can look like you have it all together to the watching worlds but if Jesus does not take up residence in your hearts though it might look okay for a time in the end greater evil will befall you than anything that has gone before so the warning to the seeing but disbelieving is complete and I'm sure she would agree it is a solemn warning is it not for those who have seen and heard Jesus clearly but have not responded to him rightly to them on the day of judgment the people of Nineveh and the queen of the south will rise up in condemnation and the last state will be worse than the first it is a solemn warning one we need to heed that is not the only audience in front of

Jesus and praise God it is by no means the only audience here today Jesus offers a solemn warning to those who see but do not believe but to those who see and do believe Jesus extends the warmest of welcomes let's turn now to our second point this evening which is briefer but much more hopeful as we see Jesus offer a warm welcome well Jesus was still speaking his family arrive his mothers and brothers Jesus had brothers Mary had other children but when they arrive for whatever reason that they stay outside and send someone in to go and fetch Jesus for them and when the

message gets relayed to Jesus he again responds probably not how we think he'd respond verse 48 but he replied to the man who told him who is my mother and who are my brothers who is my mother and who are my brothers and stretching out his hands toward his disciples he said here are my mother and here are my brothers for whoever does the will of my father in heaven he is my brother and sister and mother this chapter has been dominated by

[26 : 29] Jesus conflict with the Pharisees but now in these last verses Jesus turns to his disciples he turns to them who have by to him as king who have acknowledged him as their lord and not only does he turn to them but he stretches out his hands towards them and welcomes them warmly into his family Jesus welcomes into his family those who do the will of God just two questions briefly ask and answer in this last point what what does it mean to do the will of the father and what does it mean to be part of God's family first of all what does it mean to do the will of the father in heaven well in a few chapters time we will hear the voice of God the father tell us exactly what his will is

Matthew 17 just a few chapters on from here Jesus and his disciples they that they ascend a mountain and at the top Jesus is transfigured before them his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light and then a voice spoke from heaven the voice of the father saying this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased listen to him listen to him that is the will of the father that we listen to his son listen to him as God's prophet the greater Jonah who came to preach a message of repentance and forgiveness submit to him as God's king the greater

Solomon who will rule over and defend you come to him for forgiveness and rest as God's priest the greater temple and lord of the sabbath come to him and find rest for your weary and burdened soul that is the will of the father in heaven that you come and see the son and then trust in him believe in him listen to him and when we do that Jesus turns to us with arms outstretched and says welcome to my family you are my mother and my brother and my sister the first part of the sermon I recognized was heavy going because it was a heavy message from a difficult passage but now now though we hear again don't we the tender voice of

Jesus the gentle servant the compassionate king open his arms to those who would have him as king he looks at his disciples and he sees his true family that brothers and sisters is something truly beautiful the son of God the king of heaven and earth the one who has all authority given to him opens his arms to you broken and bruised as you are and sees a brother a sister someone dearer than the closest friend second question what does it mean to be part of God's family well a lot of things for one I think it means you are his forever he will never let you go he will never stop loving you he has signed the adoption papers and made you his own friends come and go acquaintances are made for time family lasts and

God's family the family of faith is one that will last into eternity it's an eternal family and it is a family in which love is forever unconditional you will be loved in your moments of joy and loved in your moments of sorrow you will be loved in your moments of strength and loved in your moments of weakness you will be loved when you succeed and you will be loved when you fail you will be loved when you are healthy and loved when you are not when you want to when you want to Jesus turns to his disciples with his arms outstretched he is making a declaration that the bond of love between him and his people is one that cannot be broken Jesus warns those who see and do not believe but he oh so warmly welcomes those who see and do believe and in welcoming us into his family he introduces us doesn't he to a new family of brothers and sisters that we get to love and be loved by in

[32 : 31] Christ if you're a Christian here today you can turn to your neighbor and say hello to your sibling in drawing us to himself Jesus draws us to one another not only do we get to enjoy the unconditional love of Christ but we can and should extend that unconditional love to one another that that is what it means isn't it to be part of a family some of us might be blessed with loving earthly families others might not but every single one of us should know the love and warmth of being part of Christ's family here are Jesus mother and brothers and sisters right here in this place just to be clear

Jesus was not rejecting his earthly family here as unimportant some of his final words as he hung the cross were to see that his mother Mary might be cared for Jesus cared deeply about his earthly families and we should care deeply about our earthly families too but he is saying that his family of faith meant even more to him than his own mother and brothers that if our faith and trust is in him is you and me that is how Jesus sees you more dear than his own flesh and blood and so we see in this passage don't we Jesus utter a solemn warning to some but the warmest of welcomes to others

difference of course lies in our response to him where I wonder are you this evening if you have seen and heard Jesus teaching his life death and resurrection but have not responded in repentance and faith friends you are in a perilous position and I would urge you with all seriousness to heed

Jesus warning in these verses but if you have seen and believed as Jesus invites everyone to do then know that you are dearer to Jesus than you can possibly imagine that you mean more to him than you will ever be able to get your head around he will love you through thick and thin he will love you when you are weary and burdened broken and bruised know he has that love for you and know too that he invites and expects you to show that same love to the rest of his family for we are one in Christ and as we were here this morning we have the privilege don't we of building one another up in our faith through the truth spoken in love let us know who we are to Christ rejoice in it and share it let us pray as we close together father we thank you and praise you for you who you are we thank you that even these solemn words of warning you speak are uttered out of love and care that you might draw us nearer to yourself that we all might respond rightly to you in repentance and faith submitting to you as our king and we thank you and praise you that when we do just that when we come and listen to the son we are welcomed into your family with open arms we thank you for the love you have for your people a love that will never change that will never grow weary or faint a love that is unconditional and a love that will last into eternity as you take us in as your sons and daughters and as we come to

Jesus as our elder brother we thank you and praise you that we can do that now and we can know that unity together and love one another as the family you have made us into in the name of Jesus we pray amen