

“The Dangers of Being Close...”
Matthew 12:38-45
Mercy Hill Church | September 11, 2022

Big Idea: *Jesus warns us that sometimes we may think we are close to God when in reality we might be closed to God.*

³⁸ Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” ³⁹ 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.” Matthew 12:38-45 (ESV)

1. The Danger of Signs Without Faith & Belief (vv. 38-40)

- The question which arises is, “What’s wrong with asking Jesus for a (miraculous) sign?” -- esp. as we see Jesus’ seemingly harsh rebuke (in v.39).
 - We see throughout the life and ministry of Jesus in the Gospels Jesus performing numerous miraculous signs and wonders – all of which point to Jesus as the Son of God, Messiah and King.
 - All of Jesus’ miracles were demonstrations of His power and sovereignty – over nature, over disease, over other spiritual powers, over people, over sin, over life and over death.
- The context of Matthew 12:38-45
 - Scribes & Pharisees, religious leaders of the time, have been growing more antagonistic towards Jesus (re: all that Jesus has been claiming, teaching and doing).
 - More specifically, right before this morning’s passage, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their false accusations that Jesus is demonic, as well as calling out their hypocrisy (cf. Matthew 12:24-37), which leads to our passage this morning
- Jesus rebukes the Pharisees because He has already showed them numerous signs (cf. Matthew 12:22-24, 12:9-14, 9: 32-34) and their response has continually been to reject Jesus.
 - The Pharisees might appear to be close to Jesus, but in reality are closed to Jesus – their hearts are hardened – so Jesus says He will not give them a sign (cf. Matthew 16:1-4)...except for the sign of Jonah (v.40)
 - What is the sign of Jonah (cf. Jonah 1:17)? The death and resurrection of Jesus – the first time in the gospel of Matthew which Jesus alludes to his forthcoming death and resurrection.
 - But yet will the Pharisees believe even if they witness Jesus’ death and resurrection? (Cf. Luke 16:30-31, Matthew 11:20)
- The Sufficiency of Jesus

- The question which arises from this passage is: “What is our faith and trust in?” Is who Jesus is and what Jesus has done enough? Is the cross of Christ sufficient? Is Jesus’ life, death and resurrection enough for us to believe in Him? If not, why? How much more “signs” or evidence does one need to believe and have faith in Jesus?
- While the Christian faith has ample evidence and rationale validity to defend and support its beliefs and convictions, ultimately it is an issue of faith and belief in Jesus. Jesus is sufficient!

2. **The Danger of Familiarity Without Repentance & Humility (vv. 41-42)**

- Jesus continues this response to the Pharisees with two familiar Old Testament stories to the Pharisees:
 - The Ninevites (cf. Jonah 3)
 - Jesus reminds the Pharisees, who would have been familiar with the story of Jonah, how the most unexpected people, the people of Nineveh (of Assyria) – non-Jewish/pagan -- responded to Jonah’s preaching with repentance, confession and remorse.
 - The Queen of the South/Sheba (cf. 1 Kings 10)
 - Jesus reminds the Pharisees how the Queen of the South/Sheba -- non-Jewish/pagan – was intrigued by the wisdom of Solomon and sought him out. And how upon hearing the wisdom of Solomon, praised God and gave gold and resources to Solomon
- In these two OT references, Jesus highlights the following:
 - 1. Non-Jewish (pagan) people -- who were not raised, brought up or exposed to the OT scriptures, customs and traditions – responding positively to the Word and wisdom of God.
 - 2. These very same non-Jewish/pagan people responded with repentance and humility to God
 - 3. How much the Pharisees, in their self-righteousness and pride, stand in contrast to the repentance and humility of the Ninevites and the Queen of the South.
 - 4. Instead of the Pharisees judging those non-Jewish/pagan people, the roles will be reversed.
- The Pharisees while being close to God with all their knowledge of the OT Scriptures and traditions, were closed to God because they lacked repentance and humility (cf. Matthew 3:7-9; Luke 8:9-14)
- The Supremacy of Jesus
 - Parallel lesser to greater comparisons (v.41 & v.42, cf. Matthew 7:11)
 - “...something greater than Jonah/Solomon is here...” (vv.41-42)
 - Jesus is saying He is the Prophet greater than Jonah, He is the King of wisdom greater than Solomon (cf. Matthew 12:6 – Jesus as the Great High Priest) -- and we must come to Him with and through repentance and humility – not with self-righteousness and pride.

3. **The Danger of Experience Without Trust & Surrender (vv. 43-45)**

- Jesus conclude His warning to the Pharisees with an analogy or hypothetical situation – the focus of this portion of passage is not an exposition on demon possession – don’t miss the forest from the trees here:
 - An unclean spirit (demon) has been cast out of a person – the person has been freed from this spirit but notice that while the house is swept and put in order (i.e. clean, organized) – it is empty. And because it is empty, the evil spirit brings its 7 buddies (re: 7 being the number of completion or totality) and goes back to the house, throws a wild party and trashes it up. What is Jesus trying to say here?

- Quote: “Overall idea is that a great multitude of Jews have profited from Jesus healings and miracles, comparatively few have understood Jesus’ message and repented. The people, like a recently cleaned house, has had its demons removed. Yet it has done nothing to ensure itself against their more rigorous re-entrenchment”
 - Quote: “If this evil generation continues to reject Jesus, even after witnessing his divine authority over demons, their condition will be worse than if they had never seen him.”
- Here Jesus possibly pivots from speaking to the Pharisees to speaking to the crowds of people (cf. Matthew 13:46) – many who may have seen, witnessed or even personally experienced one of Jesus’ miracles.
 - And here Jesus cautions the people that while they may have experienced something of God, without trusting and surrendering their lives to God, they will end up like the house in this story.
- The caution is that some people may feel close to God because of some experience but without ever trusting and surrendering their lives to God, they are ultimately closed off to God.
- The Necessity of Jesus
 - Yes, it’s great to witness, see or experience something (miraculous) of God – but that doesn’t mean we’re a Christian if we haven’t surrendered our lives to Jesus as Lord.
 - Yes it’s a good thing to live a moral and good life (re: house which is swept and put in order), but if our lives are empty and devoid of Jesus, something else will inevitably occupy our hearts and our Lord. The house can’t stay empty – someone has to live in that house, someone has to be lord of our lives. Who is it for you?

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Reflection Questions

- What do you place your faith in (i.e. what is it based/dependent on)? Is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus sufficient for your faith and salvation -- as well as sharing with others -- why or why not?
- In what ways might you be "close" to Jesus yet still very distant (like the Pharisees)? Why can it be easy to mistake familiarity (with God) with intimacy (with God)?
- Have there been situations where you (or have seen others) experience God -- yet not follow & live life with Jesus as their Lord & Savior? Why do you think there's that disconnect?

Parent Corner

- Which of the aforementioned 3 dangers do you see as potential dangers in the spiritual life & development of your child(ren) -- and possibly yourself?
- Discuss and pray for and with your child(ren) regarding these 3 dangers.