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4/16/06

Matthew 12:38-42 “Would You Believe If...”

Intro. Today we celebrate the most fantastic proclamation of the Christian faith: Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. That statement requires that you believe in a miracle. People who are truly dead do not come back to life. Yet I am convinced that on that first Easter morning, Jesus Christ miraculously arose from the dead.

But do you personally know someone who is rather obstinate in their unbelief regarding Jesus Christ? In spite of all the evidence for the resurrection, they still rather smugly affirm that it never happened! Perhaps that person is you!

Well in our text of Scripture today, some Pharisees approached Jesus. They cast a serious charge against Jesus in v.24, but this time they were accompanied by some scribes. They were the scholars of the Old Testament law. And this time, they spoke with hypocritical respect. They said, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You” (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22). It seems from a parallel passage found in Luke 11:16 that Luke adds an additional detail. They asked for a sign “from heaven.” In that day a “sign” commonly referred to a miracle or something extraordinary which proved that God had sent a person (Ex. 3:12). They wanted something different from anything done previously. It had to be thrilling, exciting, sensational. I wonder what kind of sign would have satisfied them? What if Jesus made the sun stand still? Or what if He turned the moon to blood-red? Did they desire to see lightning & thunder from heaven, as when God called Moses up on the mountain and gave him the law? Did they want to see manna from heaven, or total darkness fall on the land? Hey, what if Jesus wrote His name in white letters against the background of the blue sky, like the exhaust of a jet?

Now these people had no intention of believing, even if He produced a sign. They were just trying to trap Him. They felt sure that Christ would either refuse to produce a sign, or He would be unable to produce such a sign. Then, they would attribute His refusal to inability, and they would smugly conclude that Jesus is not the Messiah.

So this morning, I am going to deal with the problem of unbelief. In light of Easter, unbelief is a difficult position to maintain. But many remain in unbelief. So I want to help you understand the true nature of unbelief. Then I’m going to warn you of the serious problem that unbelief poses for a person. And finally, if you realize that you are still in the clutches of unbelief, I will share with you what you must do to overcome this serious spiritual problem. So first of all, I want to ask you to:

I. RECOGNIZE THE TRUE NATURE OF UNBELIEF

The kind of unbelief that I am primarily talking about is obstinate unbelief. Many people have not placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Savior & Lord, and many of those people simply haven’t heard enough to make a faith commitment. Or they are still in the process of honestly considering the claims of Christ. But others have heard and seen plenty enough to believe in Christ. Yet they just refuse to believe. Why is that?

Well I believe we can glean 2 important truths about unbelief from this text of Scripture.
First:

A. Obstinate Unbelief Ignores Credible Evidence that Already Exists – These religious leaders wanted more proof to believe that He was the Messiah. But they already had enough proof. Had they searched their own Scriptures, and sincerely examined His life, they would have concluded, “This is the Son of God!” The multitudes insisted that the teaching of Christ was with such authority that they had not known before. But they ignored that evidence. Furthermore, the Jews completely ignored all of the miracles that Jesus had already performed. Indeed, Jesus had already given many signs. Just recently they witnessed the healing of the blind and dumb demon-possessed man. Was that not enough? No! They demanded more. Besides, they had already received a sign from heaven. Some of those very people were old enough to remember an unusual star that appeared at the time of the birth of Jesus. They probably heard the stories of wise men who came from the east looking for the King of the Jews, for they had seen His star. But they were not interested in the truth. They were not interested in knowing whether or not He was really their Messiah.

If you are not yet a believer in Christ, is it because you have not found enough evidence to convince you, or is the real reason due to the fact that you have ignored the abundance evidence that already exists? You haven’t seen the miracles of Jesus, but you have access to the historical eyewitness accounts. You know of some people whose lives have been transformed by the resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

Why is it that so many unbelievers ignore the evidence regarding the resurrection of Christ? Well I see another truth about unbelief.

B. Unbelief Is Due to a Sinful Heart - Like a masterful physician, He diagnoses the condition of the heart of these Scribes & Pharisees. He exposes why they asked such a question. Their request for a sign not arise out of a sincere desire to know whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. No, Jesus said in v.39, “An evil and adulterous generation¹ seeks after a sign...” Jesus noted that their request arose out of an “evil” heart. He had already accused them of being evil in v.34. “Evil” describes the natural disposition of the unregenerate heart. Jer 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?” Well, their motives were evil, as I have already noted. And back in v.14 we see that they had already planned to kill Jesus. The event of our text was part of the process of attempting to destroy Jesus. They had evil hearts indeed!

Furthermore, He called them “adulterous.” It is well to keep in mind here that the relation between God and the Jews in the Old Testament is often represented as likened unto a marriage relationship (Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 31:32). When the nation Israel sinned against God, their apostasy and idolatry were referred to as adultery. They sinned against God in the spiritual realm in the way an adulterous wife sins against her husband in the carnal realm. Such a comparison to adultery was a common figure of speech in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 3:9; Ezekiel 23:27; and particularly the prophecy of Hosea). This is what Jesus is referring to here. Like their forefathers, these religious leaders were being unfaithful to their covenant with God.

Is it possible that these terms describe you? If you still have not make a faith commitment to Jesus Christ, is it possible that the real reason for your unbelief is due to sin? Is there some sin you don’t want to give up? You know that if Jesus is the risen Lord, then you will have to surrender you life to Him. The sinful hearts of men do not mind Jesus having a little part in their

¹ It is clear from the words “an evil and adulterous generation” that the Lord is addressing not only the Pharisees and scribes but also their followers.

lives, as long as it is on their terms. So in many cases unbelief is not due to lack of evidence; it is due to sin.

It is not surprising therefore that Jesus refuses to give these Pharisees and scribes the sign for which they were asking. It would have been wrong to cater to their unbelief. Furthermore, Jesus would not submit Himself to the will of sinful men instead of the will of the Heavenly Father.

II. CONSIDER THE SERIOUS PROBLEM OF UNBELIEF

Here in this text Jesus warns of the coming judgment. In fact, He mentions “the judgment” twice in vv.41-42. Clearly He is talking about the great judgment at the end of time. According to Acts 17:31 all unbelievers will stand before the Son of God some day. They will have to answer for their sin, and for their unbelief. Most of the Jews in Jesus’ day will have to answer for their unbelief. They did not receive their Messiah when He came. So one reason unbelief is a serious problem is because it makes one liable for God’s holy judgment. You may not believe in a final judgment, but your unbelief does not change the fact of it.

We saw last week that the evidence will be marshaled against every unbeliever. In vv.36-37 we see that your words will be used against you. Even every idle, unproductive sentence you have spoken will be used as evidence against you.

And in vv.41-42 it appears that witnesses could be called against you. The Lord provided two Old Testament illustrations of Gentiles who, without Israel’s light and privilege, responded when given the opportunity. When that unbelieving generation of Jesus’ day stands before Jesus, the men of Nineveh will be called as witnesses. You know the story. The city of Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and it was a very wicked city. Yet God sent the prophet Jonah to them, who marched through their streets, and his message warning of judgment echoed throughout their city. Even though no miracles accompanied his preaching, even though his message was brief, revival broke out. The historical record says that “the people of Nineveh believed God” (Jonah 3:5). They avoided God’s wrath and experienced His mercy. They received such a little spiritual light, but they responded to that light. So Jesus says in v.41 that they will “rise up” (*anistemi*). The reference is to a custom in both Jewish and Roman law courts that required a witness to stand when testifying in a criminal case. They will testify to the fact that they repented and believed with far less evidence, with far less of a preacher than Jesus. If even Ninevites repented, should not the Jews have done so? And yet most of the generation of Jesus’ day did not believe in Jesus, even though He was far greater than Jonah. He performed miracles. He was a far better preacher. He was perfect, always doing the will of God. If less enlightened people obeyed less enlightened preaching, then certainly more enlightened people should have obeyed the Light of the world! Therefore, their condemnation would be much greater, because a much greater than Jonah was present with them. I would not want to be one of those unbelieving scribes or Pharisees on Judgment Day!

Then in v.42 the queen of the South will be called to the witness stand.² She was without a doubt the queen of Sheba (2 Chron. 9:1-12). Sheba was a city of Arabia and was located south of Judaea. Other says it was located in modern day Yemen, some 1200 miles away from Jerusalem. She was not a Jew, and yet she traveled many miles to seek the God-given wisdom that Solomon had. But the generation of Jesus did not seek His greater wisdom. She had ventured

² For some reason the Greek word for “rise up” (*egeiro*) is different in v.42.

a long, tiring, and dangerous journey to sit at the feet of Solomon, but the scribes and Pharisees made no such effort.

But friend, God's judgment upon sin and unbelief is not reserved only for the end times. Judgment can certainly come in this life. God gave Nineveh 40 days to repent before judgment fell. Well in His mercy, it turned out that God gave Israel 40 years to repent. But they didn't. So around 40 years after Israel rejected Jesus, their nation was destroyed by the Romans.

What have *you* done with the message of the gospel? Do you realize that those of you who have heard the gospel of Christ over and over, who have been taught the gospel, yet reject Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead, are no better off than the scribes and Pharisees? So I want to warn you of the serious problem of unbelief. If you hold on to your unbelief in spite of the evidence to the contrary, and in spite of the great light that you have received, then you are in serious danger of the judgment of God. The men of Nineveh will rise up to condemn you as well. Unbelief is an attack upon the character of God, who has given more than adequate testimony concerning His Son Jesus.

So if we realize that we have failed to believe in Christ, what should we do? Don't stubbornly hold on to your unbelief. Instead, the first step is to:

III. REPENT OF YOUR UNBELIEF

I hope that I have shown you that unbelief and sin go hand-in-hand. Sin produces unbelief, and we hold to our unbelief as an apparent excuse for not letting go of our sin. So the first step in solving the problem of unbelief is repentance of sin. In v.41 Jesus mentioned that the men of Nineveh "repented at the preaching of Jonah." They had been living a sinful life. But they believed Jonah's preaching about the judgment of God. Therefore, they repented. That word means to change your mind. They decided to stop thinking of sin as something good, and acceptable, and begin to view sin as something evil, and unacceptable. Another common picture of repentance is to turn. It is to realize that the road that you are on leads to destruction. So you turn around, and start going the pathway of faith and obedience.

But the problem that our text addresses is the fact that the scribes and Pharisees refused to repent. They probably did not think they needed to repent. They were "good" Jews. But Jesus points out in our text the fact that unbelief regarding Jesus is one of the greatest sins of all!

So I encourage you to search your heart. If you have anything less than full faith and confidence in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then repent of your unbelief. Repent of any sin that is causing you to make excuses for your unbelief. Then, and only then, will you be willing to take the next step:

IV. PLACE YOUR FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST

Our text gives some solid reasons for placing your full faith and confidence in Jesus Christ.

A. Because He Is the Greatest of the Prophets – As already noted, the people of that wicked city of Nineveh repented at the preaching of a prophet who was far inferior to Jesus. For Jesus boldly proclaimed in v.41, "...and indeed [or behold] a greater than Jonah is here." What a bold claim! He claimed to be greater than Jonah. I've never had the success of Jonah. But was

this just insane arrogance, or it was a sober truth? I believe the evidence supports the belief that Jesus is indeed far greater than Jonah. Therefore, we should listen to Him, and believe in Him.

It would not be too hard to be an improvement on Jonah! God had called Jonah to preach to the wicked city of Nineveh, but instead of obeying, he went in the other direction—fleeing “from the presence of the Lord.” He boarded a ship headed for Tarshish. He was getting as far away as he could from Nineveh. But you can’t get away from God. He sent a storm. Realizing that the storm had come on his account, Jonah told the ship’s crew to throw him overboard. Then God sent a great fish to swallow him, and bring him back to do his missions. By the way, I don’t have any problem believing *this* fish story. If God spoke this earth into existence—and He did—I do not think it would be very difficult for Him to speak and a great fish appear. There is nothing too hard from God. I like what Oliver B. Greene said, “I do not find it difficult to believe that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish. The thing that I have difficulty understanding is how a fish kept a backslidden preacher on his stomach three days without vomiting! One of the most sickening things on earth is a backslidden preacher.”

By the way, by referring to Jonah, the Lord was also putting His authoritative stamp on the Scriptures. He did this consistently, never questioning their accuracy. It is clear that Jesus accepts this Old Testament account as the record of a historical fact.

Jesus is greater than Jonah in many ways. He is greater in His person, for Jonah was a mere sinful man, but Jesus was the Son of God. He was greater in His obedience, for Jonah disobeyed God and was chastened, but Jesus always obeyed His Heavenly Father. Here was one life in which there was no blot. He says of Himself in John 8:29, “...I always do those things that please Him.” In Him was no trace of shrinking even when the grimness of the Cross weighed most on His heart. Certainly Jesus was greater in His love, for Jonah did not love the people of Nineveh—he wanted them to die. But Jesus never failed in His mission through lack of pity for lost sinners. Jonah was an unusual Hebrew prophet, for he ministered to a Gentile city. But Jesus is greater than Jonah or any prophet in this respect, for He died for the whole world. And Christ was not only greater than Jonah, but surely He was greater than all of the other prophets. His voice is sweetest, tenderest, clearest and fullest of all that have ever sounded in men’s ears. Remember the prophet Elijah? He was one of the greatest prophets. He appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, and yet he was ultimately lost in the radiant light of Jesus, the Son of God.

It is hard to imagine anyone not believing that Jesus was the greatest of the prophets. So listen to Him. Believe in Him.

Furthermore, we should believe in Jesus:

B. Because He Is the Greatest of the Wise Men – Solomon was probably at one time the wisest man of his day. Many came to hear his God-given wisdom. And yet, Jesus boldly proclaimed in v.42, “...and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.” Christ was indeed greater than Solomon. Solomon’s divinely inspired wisdom was in the end spoiled by his worldliness, carnality, and extravagance. The Lord Jesus, far wiser than Solomon, not only preached a higher ethic and called for a holier life; He also lived an impeccable life.

Indeed, Jesus is greater and wiser than Solomon. Will you seek His wisdom? Or will be Queen of Sheba rise up and testify against you some day. Don’t foolishly ignore the warning of Jesus regarding the coming judgment. Turn to Him. Believe in Him!

C. Because He Is Greater than Death – Here is the knockout punch of unbelief. You may think you have sufficient reason for not believing in Jesus. But listen to what Jesus said in v.39, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” He did not mean that He would not work any more miracles. He meant that He would not give in to these people, granting their request for a direct miracle from heaven. But He did promise to give them one significant sign. He said in v.40, “For 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.” Some commentators (McGee, Phillips) believe that Jonah was more literally a prophetic type of Jesus Christ. They believe that Jonah was raised from the dead when he was in the fish. Our dear departed brother Ralph Burgess believed that. One reason is the fact that Jonah 2:2 says he was in “the belly of Sheol.” Regardless, Jonah was at least as good as dead in the fish’s belly until delivered by God’s power. Even so, just as Jonah came out of the belly and lived, even so Christ came forth from the grave and lived again! Our Lord rose up from the dead. Death did not have the power to keep him.

Now the fact that Christ was “three days and three nights³ in the heart of the earth” was significant. He really died, was buried, and His spirit departed His body. There was no life left in His body. So there was no swooning or fainting at the cross. He did not just appear to be dead, and then revived in the grave. The expert Roman executioners made sure that this Man was dead before giving his body over to Joseph of Arimathea. Furthermore, the bloody serum which poured forth from the pierced side of our Lord gave clear testimony that Jesus had in fact died.

The Pharisees did not forget the prophecy Jesus proclaimed here and on other occasions. When He was taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb, they visited Pilate and reminded him of what Jesus had said. In Matt. 27:63-64 they said to Pilate, “Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise.’ Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away....”

Now the main point is that the great sign promised to the Jewish nation was the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Perhaps that is why the messages in the first seven chapters of Acts center on the resurrection of Christ, not on His death on the cross. And what is amazing is that fact that Jesus declared His resurrection long before it happened!

In light of this truth of the resurrection, have you cast yourself upon Jesus Christ as your only refuge from divine judgment? The mighty event of Christ’s glorious resurrection should cause all men to repent & trust in Christ as Savior.

Yet it is not surprising that most of the religious leaders still refused to believe in Christ after this magnificent sign. Have you thought of the great trouble the religious leaders

³ I do not want to get into an argument over whether or not that expression refers to 3 full 24-hour days, and whether Christ was saying that He had to be in the grave for 3 full 24-hour days in order for His prophecy to be true. That would be missing the forest because you’re focusing on a single tree. I do believe that whereas we would say 3 days, the Jews would say “three days and three nights.” This is probably based on Gen. 1:5, “And the evening and the morning were the first day.” There are several times in Scripture where we read of 40 days & 40 nights (Gen. 7:4, 12-flood; Ex. 24:18, 28; Dt. 9:9, 11, 18, 25; 10:10-Moses in the mountain; 1 Kings 19:8-Elijah’s journey; Mt. 4:2-Jesus’ fast). In Job 2:13 we read that Job’s friends “sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights.” We also read in 1 Sam. 30:11-12 that King David’s men found an Egyptian who had not eaten for “three days and three nights.” I really doubt that those examples are intended to mean that the first & last day of that sequence were full 24-hour days. So there is no problem reconciling the statement of Jesus in v.40 with the many times when Scripture seems to point to Jesus dying on Friday (Mark 15:42, 43; Luke 23:46, 54; John 19:14, 30, 42). He was indeed in the tomb during 3 days of the week: part of Friday, Saturday, and part of Sunday.

encountered by trying to deny the resurrection of Jesus Christ? First, the guards who were at the tomb of Jesus gave clear testimony to the resurrection to the religious leaders, yet they refused to believe and ordered the guards to deny that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Then, they had to cope with the testimony of not only the disciples, but of five hundred different people who personally saw the resurrected Christ! We look at that and declare, “What foolishness!” Yet, my friend, if you have not truly repented of your sin, and placed your faith in Jesus, then you are making the same mistake. Can *you* ignore so many witnesses to the resurrection? Can you ignore the Old Testament prophecies concerning the atoning death and resurrection of Christ, written hundreds of years before it happened? Can you ignore the power of the death and resurrection of Christ to deliver someone from the darkness of their sinful life into the unexplainable life of a true Christian?

Conclusion: Because Jesus was greater than Jonah, or Solomon, or any other man, that brings a greater responsibility to all who have heard about His life, His miracles, His teaching, His sacrificial death on the cross, and His resurrection. Repent, & believe in Him today!

Sources: Oliver B. Greene, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Vol. 3, (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1971); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Philips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); sermon notes from Dr. Phil Newton, pastor of South Woods Baptist Church, Memphis, TN, dated 4/4/99; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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