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Sermon Notes

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Preaching The Sign of Jonah

Matthew 12:38-42

The Evangelist's Question to the Unbeliever:

“What would it take for you to believe?”

Some answer, “If only I could see a miracle, then I would believe!!”

You say, “If I simply proclaim to you the Scriptures, that Christ died for our sins and rose again according to prophecy, would that be enough?” Many say, “No... I want to see a sign!!”

I. A Sign Demanded; The Demand Rejected

A. Context: Jewish Hatred for Christ

1. Continuation of controversy of Matthew 12
2. “Unforgiveable sin”: Deep-seated hatred for Christ, ascribing miracles to Beelzebub
3. The approach sarcastic, hypocritical, self-serving... in front of the large crowd

Term of respect: “Teacher”

B. “Jews Demand a Sign” from Every Great Prophet

1. Moses the first to give a sign... but it was God's idea

Two signs: Moses' staff into a serpent, and Moses' hand becoming leprous and then healed in cloak

Exodus 4:8 Then the LORD said, "If they do not believe you or pay attention to the first miraculous sign, they may believe the second.

2. Samuel, the last of the Judges, performed a great sign before the people

1 Samuel 12:18 Then Samuel called upon the LORD, and that same day the LORD sent thunder and rain. So all the people stood in awe of the LORD and of Samuel.

3. Elijah did great signs and wonders to show the validity of his message
4. When Elishah performed the same miracle with Elijah's cloak, the band of prophets realized that the Spirit of Elijah was now resting on Elishah

2 Kings 2:14-15 Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.

5. Apocryphal fables of the rabbis between Old and New Testaments

MacArthur: Rabbi Eliezar was challenged about the authority of his teaching... to prove his genuineness, he supposedly made a locust tree move backward 300 cubits, and a stream of water flow backwards. He caused the wall of a building to lean forward, and only by the bidding of another rabbi was it made to stand upright again!! Finally Rabbi Eliezar exclaimed, "If the law is as I teach, let it be proved from heaven." At that moment (so the story goes) a voice came from heaven and said "What have you to do with Rabbi Eliezar? The instruction is as he teaches!"

C. This Demand a Test: Designed to Expose Christ

1. Matthew 16: "A sign from heaven"
 2. Not merely healings that perhaps could be counterfeited
 3. Something immense, in the heavenly realms... something "only God could do"
- Causing sun to stand still in the heavens
 - Making the stars of a constellation rearrange or perhaps explode on command
 - Causing a visible phenomenon to appear in the clouds... perhaps writing His name in the sky

D. Instead, Christ Exposes Them

1. Generation: privileged with extraordinary advantages
 - a. Scribes and Pharisees represented their whole race
 - b. physically descended from Abraham; gifted with the Scriptures and patriarchs
 - c. even more specifically, gifted with a display of miraculous power such as the world had never seen before and would never see again

d. YET hard-hearted rebels... haters of Christ

Christ could see their hearts... and He exposed it for all to see

He hated their hypocrisy, their smooth approach... calling Him “teacher” when they actually believed He was a false teacher leading the people astray

2. Wicked

a. strong word... meaning morally corrupt, of the Devil, evil, sinful

Matthew 12:34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

b. actually stands for the whole human race... we as a race as wicked in the sight of a perfectly holy God

Matthew 7:11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

Colossians 1:21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.

Paul even uses this concept (though not the same word) to allude to Abraham... even Abraham was wicked, ungodly in God's sight... needing cleansing from sin

Romans 4:5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Christ strips these religionists bare and calls them “wicked”... they must accept His diagnosis if they are ever to be saved:

Matthew 9:12 On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

3. Adulterous

a. long-standing understanding: the Jews were God's covenant partner, God's wife... God was Israel's spouse, her spiritual husband

Jeremiah 2:2 "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown.

Jeremiah 3:6-10 During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. 7 I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. 8 I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. 9 Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. 10 In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the LORD.

- b. many prophets made use of this analogy: unbelief, idolatry, rebellion: this was spiritual adultery

Clearest example: Hosea... told to marry a prostitute in order to put on display God's assessment of His marriage to Israel. Hosea's wife Gomer was constantly straying and wandering after her lovers.

- c. deeper issue: God made our hearts for Himself... to wander restlessly after something else is to commit adultery against Him

Augustine: You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and the heart of man is restless till it finds its rest in you.

BUT if, after hearing about God's love and committing ourselves to Him by covenant, we are still restlessly seeking the fulfillment of our souls apart from Him, we have become spiritual adulterers

Piper: Heart is a desire factory... created by God to set its desire on Him

He is to be the lover of our souls, the deepest desire of our hearts

To satisfy our souls' deepest desire with anything other than God is to commit adultery against God

- d. issue central for the church today

James 4:4 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

- e. applied to Jesus' opponents:

fallen in love with self-righteousness, worldly praise, material possessions

These Scribes and Pharisees proved their spiritual adultery by hating Christ

John 8:42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me.

To know God is to love God's Son... to hate God's Son is to be a wicked spiritual adulterer, no matter how moral or religious you may look on the outside!

Jesus strips them bare!!

If they really loved God they would recognize Him as God's Son by the witness of the Spirit... Simeon did, Anna did, John the Baptist did, Simon Peter did

4. Demand rejected

"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given..."

- a. Christ is not going to do some religious freak show
- b. He's not a circus act, doing miracles on demand

King Herod wanted this kind of display... and He would NEVER do it

Luke 23:8 When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle.

To do miracles on demand as evidence for unbelievers reverses the entire order of things. Christ is a King, and as such He takes initiative, He decides what He will do and when.

- c. Christ's miracles all were designed to meet a specific need, to restore God's original intention in the face of the wreckage which sin has brought into this creation
 - To restore a withered hand and make it as sound as the other
 - To rebuke a violent killing storm and restore peaceful tranquility to the lake
 - To smear a blind man's eyes with mud so that his eyes would fulfill their intended purpose
 - To speak to the corpse of a friend and raise him from the tomb

So, Christ will not do their spectacle... their sign from heaven. But He will give them enough to believe

He will send them the Sign of Jonah... preachers who stand and proclaim a resurrection!!

II. The Final Sign: The Sign of Jonah

A. Jonah: Reluctant Preacher to Nineveh

B. What is the “Sign of Jonah”? Preaching, Substantiated by a Resurrection

1. The “Sign of Jonah” is not merely the resurrection, although that was foundational
2. It was a preached message SUBSTANTIATED by the resurrection that was the sign
3. Christ linked the two

vs. 40-41 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. 41 The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.

C. The Literal Physical Resurrection the Foundation of The Apostle’s Preaching

1. Clarence Darrow and the Scopes Monkey Trial

Clarence Darrow, a celebrated ACLU attorney from Chicago... avowed agnostic and lampooner of Biblical truth

Darrow grilled William Jennings Bryan on the issue of Jonah being swallowed by a whale or great fish

While listening to testimonies in court, Darrow would frequently say things like “I could as easily believe that Jonah was swallowed by a whale as to believe that fabrication!”

2. Because of the difficulty of believing this story, even some Christian commentators have said that Jonah is an allegory and Jesus merely accommodated Himself to first century understandings

3. However, Christ linked His own bodily resurrection to this Old Testament account

vs. 40 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Note: “Three days and three nights”: in Jewish reckoning, any part of a day is called “a day and a night”. Christ was crucified on Friday and raised on the third day, on Saturday

Illus: Just like a Rent-a-Car company... if you bring the car back one hour late, you’re charged for a whole day and a night!!

The “heart of the earth” simply means physically dead in the tomb. It may refer to a descent to Hades... but it is not necessarily so

4. Jonah was a typical prophecy of Christ... living out physically but also symbolically what Christ would one day live out as well... bodily resurrection from the dead

5. The Apostles banked their whole appeal on the powerful evidence of the resurrection

Peter at Pentecost:

Acts 2:23-24 This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Acts 2:32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.

Peter's central message: Christ has suffered and died for sins... God has given evidence concerning Christ by raising Him from the dead

Peter's application: REPENT! (Just like Jonah)

Acts 2:37-38 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. "

This is how the sign of Jonah worked!!! Evidence proclaimed of a physical resurrection, coupled with a call to repent. Just like Jonah!!

Consistently: the Apostles preached the Cross, the Empty Tomb and the need for Repentance and Faith for forgiveness of sins

This is the sign of Jonah

6. If this resurrection did not occur, the gospel is dead

1 Corinthians 15:14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

III. The Warning: Gentile Faith Will Condemn You on Judgment Day

vs. 41-42 The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. 42 The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this

generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.

A. They Will Get the Sign of Jonah: But They Will NOT Repent!!

1. If they ascribe the works they've already seen to Beelzebub, nothing Christ will do will matter
2. Root issue: unbelief, specifically of the Scriptures
3. Illustration: The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:27-31 "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' 29 "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 30 "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' 31 "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

B. Gentiles Repented at Less... Gentiles Yearned for Less Wisdom

1. Men of Nineveh: Assyrians, among the most vicious and despicable conquerors in history
 - a. Jonah appeared from the mouth of a huge fish, preached a simple message: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!"
 - b. Their repentance was extraordinary
 - c. BUT it was ONLY Jonah... the sinful, reluctant, rebellious prophet of the Lord
 - d. Christ is GREATER than Jonah!!

Argument of shame for these Jews: If Gentiles repented at that preaching, how guilty will you be on Judgment Day: Literally SOMETHING greater than Jonah is here

- A greater message: not merely survival from the earthly wrath of God, but survival eternally in heaven
- A greater messenger: not merely a sinful human prophet, but the Incarnate Son of God
- A greater salvation: total forgiveness of all sins by the power of the Eternal God
- A greater sign: bodily resurrection from the dead, not merely emergence from a fish

2. Queen of the South:

- a. Queen of Sheba: probably from modern Yemen
- b. wealthy trading port, lucrative trade to India
- c. YET had heard Solomon's reputation... even from what the Jews called "the ends of the earth"
- d. made the 1200 mile trek across desert territory with a huge caravan laden with huge quantities of riches... gold, precious stones, spices,
- e. came to test Solomon with hard questions... ranging possibly from biology, botany, zoology (the study of all living things) to perhaps astronomy, certainly practical daily wisdom, and above all, theology
- f. nothing too hard for Solomon... he answered all her questions; she was overwhelmed and praised the Lord, the God of Israel

Yet **SOMETHING** greater than Solomon was here

- Solomon studied and described plant and animal life: Jesus made them, and rules over them
- Solomon's kingdom was wealthy beyond anything the Queen of Sheba had seen: Jesus owns the entire universe
- Solomon's wisdom penetrated great mysteries; Jesus is omniscient
- Solomon's glory was great but temporary; Jesus' glory is ultimate and eternal
- Solomon worked his people close to death; Jesus' yoke is easy and His burden light... He gives His people eternal life
- Solomon became an idolator and committed spiritual adultery against the living God; Christ died for Solomon's sins
- Solomon died and was buried, and His Kingdom shrank little by little until it was gone; Jesus died and rose again on the third day, and His Kingdom will continue to increase eternally.

Truly something greater than Solomon was there!!

C. Gentiles Will Condemn Jewish Unbelief on Judgment Day

1. Both the men of Ninveh and the Queen of the South were Gentiles
2. Recurring theme: Gentile openness to the Word of God will condemn Jewish unbelief on Judgment Day

3. GENERAL RESURRECTION: there will be a resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous
 - a. the Men of Nineveh WILL RISE: Greek word is the technical term for resurrection
 - b. the Queen of the South WILL RISE
 - c. this generation will also rise... and be judged

John 5:28-29 "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and come out-- those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

D. Recurring Principle: The Greater the Revelation, the Greater the Wrath for Unrepentance

1. Scribes and Pharisees should be ashamed for their unbelief
2. If even men as evil as the Ninevites repented... why didn't they
3. If wisdom as small as Solomon's brought the Queen of the South from the ends of the earth, what is your excuse... the Incarnate Son of God is standing right in front of you: wisdom in the flesh
4. Their faith will condemn you on Judgment Day!!

KEY: Jesus DID rise from the dead, the tomb WAS empty... and they still did not believe:

Instead they paid off the guards they'd set in front of the tomb to keep them from telling the truth!!

IV. A Sign to Our Generation: "The Power of God and the Wisdom of God" Proclaimed

- A. The Cross and Empty Tomb Proclaimed to the End of the Earth
- B. This is the Power of God and the Wisdom of God

1 Corinthians 1:22-24 Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1. Power greater than Jonah
 2. Wisdom greater than Solomon's
 3. The eternal gospel of Jesus Christ... attracting believers all over the world
- C. The "Sign of Jonah" Continues to This Day

1. No one personally sees the resurrected Christ
2. No one personally handles the physical artifacts of the empty tomb
3. Everyone gets the same thing: proclamation of a message of repentance based on a resurrection
4. Based on your response to that proclamation, your soul's destiny will be determined

V. Application

A. To the unbeliever: Is the simple proclamation of the cross and the empty tomb enough of a sign?

B. To the Evangelist:

Preach the cross... support it with the empty tomb, and call for repentance as Jonah did

C. To Us All:

Delight in Christ as the Power of God and the Wisdom of God

Powerful enough to raise you from the dead

Wise enough to rule the universe on His eternal throne

Christ is "greater than" Jonah

Christ is "greater than" Solomon

Learn to see Christ as the "greatest" man who ever lived... He should be your hero, your pinnacle

More intelligent than all the Nobel prize winners put together

More courageous than all the war heroes who have ever given their lives for our country put together

More powerful than all the leaders of every nation on earth put together

Kinder, more gentle, more loving, more patient, more just and righteous than any human being who ever lived

D. Practical actions:

Follow the example of the Ninevites:

Repent continually: let the moment of hearing God's word be a time of repentance

Follow the example of the Queen of Sheba:

She was willing to travel over burning sands 1200 miles to hear a human King blessed by God... you have the Scriptures right in your reach

How much are you willing to sacrifice to drink at the best fountain of wisdom there is—the Bible?

Are you willing to get up early, to sacrifice some sleep time to study?

Are you willing to saturate your mind in Scripture through memorization to find the riches of true wisdom... wisdom even better than that of Solomon?