

## The Evil Inherent in Sign-Seeking

Matt. 12:38-42

**Illus.** My father was a story-teller who entertained us for hours on end. I remember his story about a young man who raised and trained an amazing bird dog. The dog would point with motionless precision and fetch a bird with speed and efficiency. Rumors spread about this extraordinary dog... rumors that aroused curiosity among other bird hunters. Some said *“he’s best dog to ever hunt bird in these parts.”* The old timers were skeptical. They’d seen a pack of dogs come and go and refused to believe this one was better than the best they’d seen. When rumors continued, they challenged the young man to meet them at the swamp and show them what the dog could do. The morning was ideal. Spotting ducks on the pond, the dog pointed perfectly. When the young man shot one that flew overhead, the dog ran across the pond, fetched it and ran back dropping the duck at his master’s feet. With pride the young man said, *“So what do you think about that? He runs on water. Look at him...he barely got wet!”* An unimpressed old timer spoke up and said, *“The dog ain’t bad kid...I’ll give you that...too bad he can’t swim.”* It didn’t matter what that dog did, their minds were made up. They’d seen a lot of retrievers and they were sure this young feller’s dog was not the best!

Do you have some friends like that?...Friends who refuse to believe in God or trust Christ regardless of the evidence? Their opinions seem set in stone. Nothing you say impresses them. Not your testimony of God’s goodness...not Creation’s marvels...not fulfilled prophecy...not alarming world events. Nothing seems convincing enough to change their minds about Christ and their need of Him. They’re satisfied with a little church-going and content with their beliefs. They respond with irritation when you suggest they need something they don’t already have.

The Pharisees and Israel’s Law teachers were like that. They had genealogies and hundreds of prophecies...prophecies literally and remarkably fulfilled by Jesus. Some may have seen the unusual star that hovered over Bethlehem the night Jesus was born. They knew all about Herod’s murderous attempt to destroy Jesus. Then John the Baptist appeared from the desert with his no-nonsense message of repentance. Malachi prophesied a forerunner would prepare the way for the Lord’s coming and John fit the bill to a tee. They’d heard that John introduced Jesus as *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* If these religious men had known God, they would have recognized Jesus. Jesus said that. The problem was...they didn’t know God. Those who should have known God best didn’t know Him at all. Instead, they felt content in their self-righteousness. They felt jealous and threatened by Jesus and His growing popularity. He was rocking the boat and disturbing the peace. Despite compelling evidence, they were certain the carpenter’s son from Nazareth (of all places) was not their Messiah. This was the official position and nothing Jesus said or did could dissuade them. Beyond not believing, they were plotting to destroy Jesus. **(12:14)**

The text this morning focuses Jesus’ response to their request that He show them some spectacular sign...as though that would make a difference. *“Show us something magnificent and we’ll believe.”* But Jesus knew these men had bad hearts. He addressed their heart condition in the previous conversation. There He exposed the relation (or the “uplink,” as we called it) between the words that came out of their mouths and the spiritual condition of their hearts. Having rejected the testimony of Scripture and the vast amount of light they’d already been given, Jesus knew that no sign, no matter how spectacular, would persuade them. So He denied their request and said they would be given one final sign which happens to be the greatest of all signs. This sign given to the entire world would be the sign of His own resurrection from the dead. Yet before this section ends, Jesus issued a stern warning. He told these men their unbelief will be condemned by others who repented and believed the Lord with far less validating evidence than Israel had been given. So their unbelief was telltale and inexcusable. So that’s the overview, let’s unpack the text itself.

**1. An Insincere Request (*show us a sign from heaven*) – v. 38 - Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." The word translated **sign** is *semeion* in Greek. A **sign** is visible and observable. It's given to signify, identify or confirm some point of fact. In many situations divine **signs** were miraculous and supernatural, like the water Jesus turned to wine. But a sign could also be as natural as a **baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger**. Here the religious leaders asked Jesus to do something really bold and spectacular...something they could see that would prove His claims. Now remember, Jesus had already performed hundreds of miracles of healing. Most recently they watched Him restore speech and eyesight to a demon possessed man. But "*seeing is not believing*." Believing is believing! Jesus actually reversed the idiom so many accept as factual. He turned it around saying, "*If you believe, then you will see*." Throughout the Bible, faith always precedes sight.**

Luke's account of this same event reads this way...**Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. - Lk.11:18.** What would a **sign from heaven** look like? What sort of sign were they asking for? What miraculous demonstration would be sufficient to change their minds? What if Jesus made the sun stand still or if He turned the moon to blood red? Did they want to see lightning bolts or darkness covering the land? What if Jesus called down fire from heaven like Elijah did at Carmel? What if Jesus wrote his name in white letters across the blue sky? Would they then believe?

No sign from heaven would have convinced these leaders because they didn't want to believe. They were trying to trap Jesus. As Luke wrote, they tested Him just as Satan did in the wilderness. They were confident Jesus would respond one of two ways. Either He would refuse their request, (which He did) or He would prove Himself incapable to do what they asked for. Either way, they felt confident Jesus would discredit Himself.

**2. An Indicting Response (*your request reveals the unbelief in your hearts*) – vs. 39, 40 - He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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.**

Mincing no words, Jesus said, "**A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign.**" In the words **wicked** and **adulterous**, Jesus exposed two reasons people refuse to believe. Conventional wisdom insists people don't believe because they lack evidence. But how does that apply in the case of evolution? There's no credible evidence to support "*from goo to you by way of the zoo*." But that doesn't stop millions from believing in evolution! Back in the day, we were told that science was searching for the "missing link" or some transitional life form that would prove evolution once and for all. Creationists responded to that lunacy by pointing out that "*all the links are missing...not just one!*" And guess what...science is still searching and the links are still missing! Even though evolution has never been observed / has never been demonstrated in a laboratory / and is known to contradict the laws of thermodynamics...it's still the majority view taught in public schools and universities. So I'm sorry...that theory about faith is not correct. Belief isn't contingent on evidence. More faith is required to believe life happened by chance than to believe the universe was created by an infinitely wise and powerful creator-God! Yet millions deny God and stake their eternal destiny on a bankrupt theory that is entirely unobserved and unproven. So unbelief isn't due to a lack of evidence.

By the adjective **wicked**, Jesus states the first reason people are unbelieving. **Wicked** (or **evil** as the KJV translates it), doesn't signify a specific crime...it describes a condition named nearly 1,000 x's in the Bible. The dictionary defines **wicked** as "*morally reprehensible, sinful, or evil*." It's used of those who are guilty of crimes and deserving of punishment. Though most are offended at the Bible's verdict, **wicked** is a term used to describe the entire human race apart from God's salvation.

Speaking through Jeremiah God put his finger on the human condition when He said. **The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jer. 17:9 KJV)** We don't need ISIS to show us what **wicked** means. The video footage of what people did in Baltimore, MD last week is evidence enough. Those scenes of protest and violence depict anger / hatred / anarchy / greed and wickedness stored up in hearts! It may be no exaggeration when advisors say *"this violence is coming to a city near you!"* **Wicked** describes a deep seated condition that resists and opposes Christ's call to repent and believe. Proof we are **wicked** is seen in the fact that we love sin and don't want to give it up. This love of sin is one reason people to refuse to believe in Christ!

The second reason people refuse to believe is that so many, like Israel are **adulterous**. The Pharisees and law teachers represented their nation...a nation that had drifted from faithful obedience to God's Word. The Lord described His relation to Israel in terms of a marriage bound by a covenant. Yet like Gomer in the book of Hosea, Israel lusted after other gods and was unfaithful to the God who had been such a loving and faithful husband to them. The Babylonian captivity cured Israel of bowing down to idols made of wood, stone, and metal. But in the place of these dumb idols, Israel substituted the idols of man-made traditions / human potential / and peaceful affluence. In **Matt. 15:8, 9** Jesus said, **"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."** But it's better to have no religion at all (like many in Galilee), than to bow to a false religion or man made philosophies! The Roman General Cicero was right when he said, *"Man is incurably religious."* Like a placebo, false religion fills the void that can only be filled by a relationship with God. Religion and self-help philosophical systems are a substitute ...a counterfeit. Those whose affections are all wrapped up in do-good philosophies are anesthetized to any sense of conviction. They feel no need to repent and believe. Their adulterous affair with their substitute god keeps them from saving faith!

So contrary to conventional wisdom, Jesus traced unbelief to two root causes. First, our fallen nature is wicked and depraved. We love our sin and refuse to let go of it and make excuses for rejecting the Bible and faith in Christ. And second, the God shaped void within us can be filled with other things. Today humanistic ideals have become a religion that replaces any need for God. We don't bow to idols like the pagans do, but we bow to human goodness and human potential. The majority of our population actually believe we can save the planet and save ourselves. So Jesus said, this is why you refuse to believe. This is why you seek signs. You are **wicked and adulterous**.

In this context, **generation** refers to a segment of humanity. We typically define a **generation** as group of people living during a 30 or 40 year period. But here Jesus used the term to describe a *class of people in a particular condition*. They are **wicked and adulterous**. The term **generation** describes a class of people in other verses like **Psa. 24:6** where those who have clean hands and pure hearts are described as **"the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob."** There **generation** means a class of people who are righteous in God's sight. Another similar example is **Psa. 122:2 - His children will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed**. So **generation** here designates a segment of humanity. Using the term this way, it includes not just the **wicked and adulterous** in Israel at that point in time, but it refers to a broad category that includes those in every nation who are wicked and adulterous then and now. So Jesus challenges every person to come to terms with the truth about unbelief. It isn't that we lack sufficient evidence to believe...the truth is, human nature doesn't want to believe, like those skeptical old bird hunters. Faith is a matter of a will stimulated by the Word of God and His Holy Spirit. But we must choose to believe.

So here Jesus responded, not to men who wanted to know and believe the truth, but to men whose request was insincere. Their wicked condition and adulterous loyalties stood in the way of faith. So Jesus said, **But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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.**

Now make a note of this...Jesus believed the prophet Jonah was literally swallowed by a great fish just as the Bible says he was. If Jonah's story was fictitious or even embellished, Jesus wouldn't have compared Jonah's 3 day voyage in the belly of a huge fish to His own resurrection. That would have been disingenuous and confusing. But Jesus affirms on the truthfulness of Jonah as well as every Bible verse He quoted or made reference to. The late Oliver B. Greene said this...*"I do not find it hard to believe that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish. The thing I have difficulty understanding is how a fish kept a backslidden preacher on his stomach three days without vomiting sooner!"*

So Jesus compared Jonah's 3 days **in the belly of a huge fish**, to His coming 3 day experience in the grave, or **heart of the earth**. But there's a striking difference between Jonah and Jesus. Did you ever catch a fish and find a smaller fish in its belly? I saw a big pike caught with a 16" walleye in its stomach! Aside from being a slow swimmer, that lower on the food chain fish is sometimes called a *"Jonah fish."* I'm sure you could live your Christian life without this description, but let me tell you what that unlucky Walleye looked like. It wasn't pretty! It was slimy, lifeless and finless. All of it's golden green color was bleached out. After three days and nights in the belly of a huge fish, I'm thinking Jonah wasn't ready for pictures either. The acids in the stomach of that huge fish (perhaps a Whale Shark) dissolved his hair and bleached his olive skin milky white. Jonah was a walking, talking billboard that advertized, *God means business! "You doubt that? Take a look at me!"* And the people of this vast Assyrian capital listened to Jonah. Jonah said, *"You have 40 days to repent or God will annihilate you!"* So they repented. The impact of his message was heightened by the fact the Ninevites worshiped Dagon, a deity that was half man, half fish. So the Lord, **who takes no delight in punishing the wicked**, provided Jonah with a platform...a sign. And Jonah's 3 day adventure in the belly of a huge fish was that sign.

So Jesus said, **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.** But listen...there's a huge difference between the **sign of Jonah** and the **sign of Jesus**. Even though Jesus really died and was buried and Jonah died or was as good as dead (I can't decide)...Jesus came out of the grave looking very much alive. But Jonah came out of that fish looking like death warmed over! His message warned of destruction and death. When the people of Nineveh saw him and heard his message, they repented in what may have been the greatest spiritual awakening in history. But Jesus came preaching a message of life. He and His disciples preached, **Repent, the Kingdom of heaven is near.** In **Jn.10:10b** - Jesus said, **I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.** But despite Good News that leads to life and blessing...despite the confirmation given by countless miracles of healing...Israel refused to repent and believe even after Jesus rose from the dead.

Listen to the reply Abraham gave the rich man in **Lk. 16**. In these verses Abraham speaks across the chasm that separates the righteous dead from the unrighteous dead. He speaks to a rich man in torment. The rich man asked him to send the beggar named Lazarus to warn his five unbelieving brothers. He felt his brothers would surely believe if only someone came to them from the grave. In **Lk.16:31** Abraham said, **"If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."** The truthfulness of Abraham's response was affirmed after Jesus was crucified, buried and raised the third day! Though this last and most spectacular miracle was impossible to ignore or deny, Israel refused to believe and embrace Jesus! The same continues to be true of many people today. Christ's resurrection has been called, *"the most attested fact in history."* Many who have investigated evidence for the resurrection have come away believers. Aside from the resurrection, millions of changed lives exhibit the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. The existence of the Christian Church around the world can only be explained by our risen and living Savior who promised He would build His Church.

Os Guinness of L'Abri Fellowship recently said "an ABC climate has settled over America." ABC stands for Anything But Christ. Americans will buy into Anything But Christ.

To a **wicked and adulterous generation** like our own today...Jesus promised one final miracle...His resurrection. Yet in the aftermath of His resurrection, millions have continued to refuse to believe and be saved. Like these religious leaders, some may be waiting for some sort of sign from heaven. But according to Jesus, no other signs will be given! None! In **Acts 17:30, 31** Paul preached to the men of Athens and said, **In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed** (Jesus Christ). **He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.**" So no one should wait for a sign! Believers should expect to hear a sound, not see a sign. When this sign appears, it will be too late to repent and believe!

**I Thess. 4:16, 17 - For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.** Heaven's final **sign** has already been given. Jesus rose from the dead! The next **sign** will be the sign of the Son of Man at the end of the Great Tribulation. **Matt. 24:30 - "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.**

**3. An Inescapable Reality** (*two witnesses will testify against you for your unbelief*) – v. 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. 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.**

The phrase, **stand up at the judgment** shows this to be a courtroom scene. Rising to testify first is the men of Nineveh who repented of their sins when Jonah was sent to them. Yet now they appear as witnesses against **this generation**, or the class of people who have heard about Jesus and refused to believe in Him and be saved. The crux of their testimony is that Jesus is **greater** than Jonah in every respect. Jesus came in fulfillment of many OT prophecies...Jonah didn't. Jonah was a sinful man, but Jesus is the perfect Son of Man. Jonah went west to Tarshish when the Lord sent him east to Nineveh, but Jesus always did His Father's will! Jonah hated the Ninevites and didn't want them spared. But the Son of God loves all mankind and wants no one to perish. Serious disciplinary measures persuaded Jonah to do what God sent Him to do, but Jesus delighted to do His Father's will. Jesus performed many miracles, but Jonah did none. Jonah spoke God's Word, but Jesus is the Incarnate Word. So in every way you can think of, Jesus is **greater** than Jonah. But get this...Nineveh repented in a wholesale way and Israel didn't. **Jonah 3:5, 6 - The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.** Despite the unprecedented privileges and signs Israel was given, they rejected the Messiah sent to them. They didn't believe God as the Ninevites had done centuries earlier. When the men of Nineveh take the witness stand, a loud gasp of horror will be heard in God's courtroom, but it will be too late.

But a second witness is called to testify. God's Law specifies, **On the testimony of two or three witnesses a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.** - **Deut. 17:6** So in keeping with Divine Law, a second witness is subpoenaed by Heaven's court. She's called the **Queen of the South**. v.42 says, **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.** This woman is the **Queen of Sheba** spoken of in **I Kings 10** and **II Chron. 9**. Listen as I read part of that passage from II Chronicles. **When the queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame, she came to Jerusalem to test him with hard questions.** (Remember, the Pharisees also came to test Jesus).

Arriving with a very great caravan--with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones--she came to Solomon and talked with him about all she had on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for him to explain to her. When the queen of Sheba saw the wisdom of Solomon, as well as the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, the cupbearers in their robes and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD, she was overwhelmed. She said to the king, "The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe what they said until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half the greatness of your wisdom was told me; you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on his throne as king to rule for the LORD your God. Because of the love of your God for Israel and his desire to uphold them forever, he has made you king over them, to maintain justice and righteousness."...Then she left and returned with her retinue to her own country.

**Sheba** was a city of Arabia located south of Judaea. Others say **Sheba** was located in modern day Yemen, some 1,200 miles away from Jerusalem. We're not sure. But this queen was a flamboyant character who emerged during Israel's golden age when King Solomon reigned in Israel. Her name lives on in the sarcasm of those poor fools who dare to poke fun at a woman all dressed up in her finest outfit. He's the guy who whispers, "*Who does she think she is, the Queen of Sheba?*" A month later, his wounds heal and he can once again open his left eyelid.

The **Queen of the South** was as Gentile and pagan as the Ninevites, but she traveled many miles to seek the wisdom God had given to King Solomon. Unlike the Pharisees, she **tested** Solomon to learn and went away praising His God. But **this generation** of Jews had no respect for the **greater** wisdom found in Jesus Christ. By the way, there's that word again...**greater**. It first appears in **Matt. 12:6**. Listen...Jesus is greater! Amen? Greater than who or what?...He's greater than anyone or anything you can think of. So the queen made a long and tiring journey to sit at the feet of Solomon. But the scribes and Pharisees despised Christ's teachings. Though Jesus answered their questions in an authoritative, mouth-stopping way, they didn't praise God for His wisdom as the Queen of Sheba did. Yet Solomon was "*small potatoes*" when compared to Jesus. Solomon's wisdom was derived...it was given to Him by God. But Jesus is Himself the very wisdom of God. (**I Cor.1:30**). Speaking of Jesus, **Col. 2:3** says, **in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge**.

We need to wrap this up. In this section, Jesus exposed the evil inherent in seeking a sign when God has already flooded the world with the light of His truth. Creation testifies of His power and majesty. The 66 books of our Inspired Bible testify of God's infinite and holy wisdom and love. Then came Jesus who fleshed out the grace and truth of God. His resurrection from the dead became the final sign and the crowning proof that Jesus is who He said He is and did what He claimed to do. Last but not least, is the Church made up of millions of changed lives...lives that can only be explained if Jesus Christ is alive today! Because the evidence already given is so abundant...no additional signs are coming. Refusing to believe is inexcusable and worthy of God's judgment. In this same context where Jesus rebuked the religious leaders for demanding a sign Jesus said this... "**Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.**" - **Lk.11:28** Down through history, God has always blessed those who simply take Him at His Word...who believe and obey because God's Word is true. **Rom. 9:33** contains this promise...**As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."** How many would raise their hand to testify this promise is true. You've trusted Jesus and never been disappointed! Amen! And you never will be.