

Title: The Mercy of Darkness
Text: Matthew 12.38-42
Theme: The rejection of Christ
Series: Matthew #69
Prop Stmtnt: Greater rejection brings greater judgment.

Read Text:

In Luke 16, Jesus tells the story of the rich man who died and went to Hell. There in his torment, he was able to see in the distance a poor beggar, named Lazarus, whom he used to give a few crumbs too. Lazarus, however, was not in hell, but was rather in paradise. In fact, he was next to Abraham. The rich man cried out and pleaded with Abraham to give him some water. Abraham tells him that he is unable to fulfill that request. The condition of this man is truly pitiful. He then makes another request. Would you please send someone to tell my brothers about this place? He wants his brothers to know of the reality of hell. He wants them to know of the consequences of rejecting God. Abraham responds by saying that it won't do any good. They already have God's Word. They already have the warnings of judgment and the appeals to follow God. They have the promises of God for those who trust Him and the judgments of those who reject him all laid in the Word. It is theirs to believe. Abraham says that if they will not believe the Word that they already have, they won't believe someone, even if he would rise again from the dead.

That is difficult for us to grasp, isn't it? We assume that the impact, that is the overwhelming evidence of a firsthand witness to the afterlife would compel even the hardest skeptic to believe. But it is not true. If a person flat out refuses to believe the Word, which is superior to any sign and wonder, they will refuse to believe any sign or wonder. This truth is illustrated literally when Jesus brought Lazarus (brother of Mary and Martha, not the beggar) back from the dead. The resurrection of Lazarus was a confirmation to those who believed and a condemnation to those who did not.

Let me explain. Studying the Bible, learning about Jesus, understanding the truths about God is not like computer science, mechanical engineering, biology, history or philosophy. When you pursue an academic discipline, you are learning, assimilating information and seeking to reproduce it on quizzes, exams, projects and papers. You can study any one of those disciplines and never be confronted about the condition of your soul. In fact, you can study those fields without ever really grappling with the ultimate questions of life. But you cannot study the Bible that way. You cannot listen to Jesus that way. You cannot treat these truths like you would math. This is not just an intellectual pursuit; there is an enormous spiritual dynamic that is at the heart of studying the Bible and learning about Jesus. You are more than flesh and bone. You are more than a body with hormones and glands. You are a person who has a soul. You are a spiritual being with a body. You can lose a finger in an accident, and not be less of a person because your personhood cannot be defined merely by a body. In order for you to understand yourself you have to understand that you have a soul. Your soul is the essence of who you are. Your being, (body and soul) was made by God and like a boat was made for water, your being was made for God. This is what distinguishes you from an animal. You

were made in the image of God. You were made with a sense of self. You have an image of yourself. You have an intuitive sense of right and wrong, of love and hate, of jealousy and compassion, of guilt and dread. You even have a sense of eternity and a sense of God; none of which can be accounted for by evolution. You are a spiritual and physical being. Therefore, when you learn about God, these truths do more than simply take up some data space in your brain. Learning about God is intended to engage your mind, your affections, and your will. When you hear the Bible, when you study the Bible, when you think about the Bible, you are engaging spiritually. God's Word can do for you what no mechanical engineering textbook can do. God's Word is designed to awaken you, to fascinate you, to delight you, to confront you, to change you, to engage you and to arrest you with wonder and worship. God's Word is compelling, captivating and convicting because it is dealing with issues of our very essence. God's Word engages us as whole beings. There is no greater joy than to hear the Word and receive the Word with whole-hearted belief, because there is nothing in all of creation that has the capacity to get down into the very core of our being, like the Word of God. But, there is another edge to that sword. If you refuse to believe the Word, there is no greater judgment. The entrance of the Word of God raises the stakes beyond any bar.

Here in Matthew 12, the leaders of Israel (scribes and Pharisees) have sinfully, arrogantly, foolishly and incredulously believed that they have the right to sit in judgment of Jesus. They listen to his words, not so that they might learn, but so they might mock him. They have heard his words, but have rejected them. They have observed undeniable evidences of his authority, but obstinately ignore it. But that rejection comes with a cost. Their unbelief results in darkness. The more they reject, the darker their minds. The more they reject, the harder their hearts. The more they reject, the deeper their pride. All of which means, the more they reject, the greater their judgment. In this text Jesus is saying that because you have rejected the ultimate revelation, you are bringing upon yourself, the ultimate judgment. Matthew 12 is a dark chapter, and it is getting even darker. Here Jesus is laying out the consequences of rejecting him. These words are somber. They were not spoken in haste, or in a fit of rage at being ridiculed and toyed with. Jesus knows what is at stake. He knows what they have done. He knows their mocking and their scorn will soon be replaced by a terror that will never go away.

I. **The demand for a sign.** (38)

Jesus just warned them about careless words and it is obvious that they do not take Christ seriously at all, do they? The scribes and Pharisees *answered* him. They are responding to his claim of being sent by God (v.28) and totally ignore his warning. Besides, what is the obvious reason from this account that clearly reveals that their request is completely disingenuous? Jesus had already given them a sign. Jesus healed a man who was demon-possessed and in so doing, he restored the man's sight and speech. They had plenty of revelation. They had plenty of evidence. That was not the issue. What was the issue? They did not want to believe, plain and simple. No sign or wonder will ever convince any person who does not want to believe.

What are they doing? They are treating Jesus as if he is on the end of their string. They can yank the leash and make him do their bidding. “We wish to see a sign from you.” Does that sound familiar? It should. They are asking Jesus to basically do the same thing that Satan challenged Jesus to do back in Matthew 4.5. “Do a trick for me. Show me what you’ve got.” We will let you know if it passes muster. They treat him as if they would be doing him a huge favor if they would actually believe in him. “We wish to see a sign from you.” You perform one of your tricks for us, and we will set up a court and we will be the judge and jury and will evaluate whether or not your trick measures up to our standard. The bottom line is this: They arrogantly and falsely believe that they are the judges of Christ. They assume that Jesus would be really lucky to get them on his side. They are so blind and so stupid to believe that their approval would be so valuable to Jesus, that he must do their bidding in order to gain their endorsement. In their minds, Jesus needs them. Jesus is dependent on them. Jesus needs their help and they hold the power of their approval as leverage. So, show us a sign and we will let you know if we think you measure up to our standards.

Whenever we hear stories of guys who turn down opportunities to pursue professional sports, or who walk away from prominent positions as media personalities, in order to devote themselves full-time to the gospel ministry, we are tempted to think that they are doing God a huge favor. Look at what they are giving up! But many of them do not see it that way, and should not see it that way. The advancement of the gospel is not dependent upon popular personalities to advance the cause. We are not doing God a favor by believing in him. God is the one who blesses us and graces us and has mercy upon us by granting us the faith to believe.

II. **Mercy and judgment** (39-41)

A. **The mercy of saying no.** (39a)

Jesus will not play their game. He refuses to pretend as if they are in the driver’s seat and have the authority to call the shots. He says that an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign. Their demand reveals that they are spiritually unfaithful. They are spiritual adulterers. Instead of being satisfied and faithful, they are looking elsewhere. They are seeking a sign. The verb tense of the word “seeks” suggests that they are on a pursuit that will never be satisfied. Jesus never did signs, wonders or miracles just for the awe factor. These were done in order to establish his authority so people would listen to his word.

The last miracle that Jesus performed was the occasion for these men to accuse him of utilizing Satan’s power. In rejecting the obvious evidence of his authority, these men were only heaping more judgment upon themselves. Back in chapter 11 Jesus denounced the cities where most of his mighty works had been performed and told them that on the day of judgment that it would be more tolerable for the people of Sodom than for them. If more revelation, more signs, and more miracles were going to be met with more rebellion and unbelief, which would only bring them more judgment, then Christ was being merciful not to give them what they demanded. It was merciful for Christ to say “no.”

B. The judgment of the resurrection (39b-40)

This is a fascinating statement by Christ. He is referencing the ministry of the OT prophet Jonah and is saying that Jonah's life and ministry was in some respects, a preview of the life and ministry of Jesus. Keep in mind that Jesus is answering their demand for a sign by telling them that they already have one in Jonah which will be fulfilled by him. Let's review for a second. Jonah was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel. His ministry took place about 30-40 years before the northern kingdom was wiped out by the Assyrians. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to them.

Imagine that God told you to go to Raqqa, Syria (the functional headquarters of ISIS) in order to call them to repentance. I doubt that you would be real excited to go, and I doubt that you would get too many mission agencies to agree to send you. That mission, would be suicide because these people obviously have no care for human life and will torture and destroy anyone who gets in their way. That was the same reputation of the Assyrians. It is amazing how 2700 years later some things have not changed. In fact, Raqqa is only about 270 miles west of Mosul, which is where Nineveh used to be. Instead of going east, to Nineveh, Jonah books a cruise ship for Spain and attempts to head west. God sends a storm. Jonah gets thrown overboard and instead of drowning is swallowed by a great fish, in which he survives for 3 days. Eventually the fish (how should I put this?) regurgitates (barfs) him up and Jonah is back on land. This time he treks east toward Nineveh where he eventually arrived and began to preach. Instead of getting tortured and killed, the people of Nineveh, did what the people of Israel refused to do, they repented. The whole thing is astounding. That is an amazing act of God. That is a miracle. There were people in Nineveh that God was determined to save and he was going to save them even if he had to hijack a prophet in order to do it. So, Jonah ends up in the belly of this fish for three days. Now Jonah did not exactly die, although he certainly thought he was going to die. He was obviously on the edge of death and spoke of his condition as being in the depths of Sheol. Jesus says, the reason he was in the fish for 3 days and nights was because he was a sign of something else. Just as Jonah went into the tomb of a fish, Jesus is going to go into a tomb in the earth for the same time. (By the way, 3 days and 3 nights is a Jewish idiom for 3 days) Jesus is saying that what happened to Jonah was a preview of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. The death, burial and resurrection was the pivotal event in the life of Christ and in all of history. Christ died on the cross as the payment for your sins. Only by faith in Christ alone can you be forgiven of your sins and counted righteous by God. The reason why we know that the death of Christ was sufficient to pay for our sins was because the Father raised the Son up from the grave which signified that the payment for your sin was made and accepted. Jesus is telling these men about that event that is going to happen. And just as Jonah came out, so will Christ. His resurrection will be a sign, but for those who have refused to believe, it will be a sign of judgment. When the person you hate, reject, mock, falsely accuse, torture and kill rises from the dead and is discovered to be God, your doom is sealed.

Now, if you have been following the news at all, you know that the ISIS terrorists blew up the gravesite of Jonah in Mosul a few weeks ago. I do not believe the story of Jonah

because there is (or was) a grave in the ancient city of Nineveh that marks it. I believe the whole story because it is in the Bible, which is only underscored by the fact that Jesus believed it and he tied the authenticity of his resurrection to the authenticity of Jonah's account. But there is more.

C. The judgment of darkness on unbelief. (41)

Jesus is telling these men of the judgment that they will be facing. Christ is referring to the time when these men will stand before God and their fate will be sealed. The evidence against them will be overwhelming. Their own words will condemn them (37). In other words, the way that they talk will be evidence of the fact that they really do not believe Christ. But then Jesus says that the men of Nineveh will be called as witnesses against them. The men of Nineveh had one prophet, Jonah, who began to call upon them to repent, and they did. Obviously Jonah experienced a miracle, but there is no evidence that Jonah performed any miracles in Nineveh. He simply preached and the people responded with repentance and belief. Jesus says that these men will be witnesses against you because they had very limited light and yet they believed, while you have an embarrassing amount of light and you refuse to humble yourself and believe.

Who had more revelation, the Jews or the Ninevites? Who has more accountability? When revelation is not met with belief, then darkness sets in. Eventually, there comes a point where the person crosses a line and the darkness is permanent.

D. The mercy of light on believers. (41)

Northern Israel refused the word of the Lord, so God sent his word to their enemies. 750 years later, the Jews refused the Word, incarnate, so God sent his word to the Gentiles. We risk making the same fatal mistake that the scribes and Pharisees did. We can presume upon the fact that we have been the gracious recipients of God's Word. We have a history. We have churches, colleges, seminaries, mission agencies, associations and relief ministries. Look at all that we are doing for God. Beloved, do you realize that God used the occasion of Israel's unbelief to open the door for us? God does not owe us a thing. He has been merciful to us. We dare not presume upon that and treat his truth as if we are the ones who can sit in judgment on it. After all, one greater than Jonah has come.

If Jonah's preaching could produce repentance among the Ninevites, what would the preaching of Jesus produce? And that is the point that Jesus is driving towards. Being raised by parents who took you to church so that you could hear the gospel is an enormous blessing, if you accept it. If you reject it, it is an enormous curse. But, the fault is not with your parents. You cannot blame them for exposing you to the truth. But just because you heard the truth and for many of you, you have heard it well, exposure to the gospel does not save you. You must respond to the truth that you hear with repentance and belief.

III. To whom much is given, much is expected. (42)

In v.42, Jesus refers to the Queen of Sheba who heard about Solomon's amazing wisdom and wealth. She came interested. She came asking questions. She came looking for answers and wisdom. She, a queen, a queen of a powerful African empire came in humility to Solomon. She did not have the Temple, nor the prophets or the Pentateuch. She heard rumors of God and she acted upon them. She was moved to search for the truth and she did. Her faith-driven quest resulted in her heart being captured by God.

And now, Solomon's Creator has come. They did not have to search for him; the Creator came to them. His wisdom is irrefutable. His power is undeniable. And yet, he is rejected. It is astounding. It is grievous. They, who had so much to gain, now have so much to lose. And they will lose it all. In less than 40 years, the nation will be wiped out by the Romans. Jerusalem will be destroyed, again. The last holdouts will die at Masada by killing themselves. It will not end well. And all of it was completely unnecessary. Christ is called the "man of sorrows" and we can see why. He lives with the weight of rejection upon his shoulders and with the knowledge of what that will bring to these people.

Conclusion:

To those who have never professed faith in Christ please recognize that you cannot be neutral with Christ. If you seriously need more information about the gospel and what it means to be a follower of Christ, then by all means set your mind and heart on gathering that information so that you can come to faith with a well-informed faith. The gospel of Jesus Christ makes sense. We are here to help you with that.

To those who have professed faith in Christ, but do not really take it seriously, I want you to be aware that there is a calling upon your life. Christ demands all of you because he is worth all of you.