

The Church of the Servant King
Survey of the Bible Series
The Gospel of Matthew
(Lesson SB-MT12B)
Matthew 12:38-50

The Scribes and Pharisees Ask for a Sign (12:38-42)

- Though Jesus had just performed a significant sign-miracle by healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath (12:10), the religious leaders were asking for a sign acceptable to them.
- They had seen plenty of miracles which they attributed to the power of Satan, but they wanted a “sign” to be performed immediately on command that would convince them otherwise.
- The unbelief of the Pharisees was manifest by the fact that they addressed Him as “Teacher.”
- The fact that Jesus referred to the Jews as an “adulterous generation” would have raised the ire of the Pharisees. They understood quite clearly what Jesus implied.
 - Spiritual adultery by Israel was a familiar theme of the Hebrew prophets, e.g. Is 57:1-13; Jer 3:8-10; 13:27; 31:32; Ezek 16:15ff; 23:1ff; Hos 3:1.
 - Spiritual adultery by Israel occurred whenever Israel rejected the Lord and pursued the gods and false security provided by alliances with other nations.
 - Jesus was indicating that the Pharisees were no better since they rejected the Messiah and His kingdom in favor of a false, non-spiritual religion that was protected under Roman law. Jesus was threatening the power structure these religious leaders had in place, thus their security.
 - The only sign that Jesus mentions is the sign that demonstrated their rejection of Him. By then, it would be too late for them to accept His right to rule over them.
 - Israel had largely abandoned her idolatry and syncretism after the Babylonian exile. Now Jesus insists that she was still adulterous in heart.
- The generation that Jesus addressed had an unusual privilege that was afforded to no other generation.
 - The men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of a mere man, Jonah.
 - The Queen of Sheba (1 Ki 10:1-13) traveled a great distance to listen to the wisdom of Solomon.
 - The response of the Ninevites and the Queen was commendable.
 - However, Jesus’ generation had something greater.
- The phrase in verse 41 – “a greater than” (NKJV) and “One greater than” (NIV) should be translated “something greater than” as it is in the New American Standard Version (NASV).
 - The phrase “One greater than” is the neuter (not masculine) form of the Greek word *polus*).
 - In the neuter this is a reference to the kingdom that Jesus offered.

An Unclean Spirit Returns (12:43-45)

This passage is not very clear on the surface to say the least. However, when one understands the distinction between the spiritual life that God requires and the religious life that is produced in the energy of the flesh, the point that Jesus was making can be readily seen. The following points should help.

- The background for this pericope is the Beelzebul controversy, i.e. the religious leaders accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan; Jesus’ retort in verses 25-37; and the religious leaders ask for a sign.
- As a part of His response to the religious leaders request for a sign, Jesus contrasts the response of the people of Nineveh to Jonah’s preaching and the desire for truth manifested by the Queen of Sheba.
- The religious leaders (and their followers) of Jesus’ generation have seen miracle after miracle, yet remain neutral or uncommitted to Him.

- Jesus compares them to a man who had found deliverance from a demon (perhaps through exorcism by a Pharisee), who, after being delivered, tries to clean up his life and put it in order through natural means, i.e. the religious observations and requirements of the Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees.
- The point Jesus makes in these verses is that mere religion is never satisfactory and he lacked the power to resist the onslaught from Satan and his emissaries. The nation was merely like whitewashed tombstones (23:27) – beautiful on the outside, but full of death and without spiritual life on the inside.
- This made him only more subject to Satanic influence again with even more serious ramifications. Instead of one demon possessing him (the nation), he became possessed by seven other spirits and his last condition or state was worse than the first.
- The religious leaders of Israel and their followers were in danger of that happening to them because their attempts at reformation, without the power of God, were sterile. They did not understand the power of God and confused the power of Satan with the power of God.

Jesus' Mother and Brothers Send for Him (12:46-50)

The Apostle John makes it clear that Jesus' brothers (actually half brothers) did not believe in Him before His resurrection (John 7:5). Jesus is emphasizing that mere physical relationships are not the basis for true discipleship (cf. 10:34-39; 12:30). Jesus as God represents OBJECTIVE (PURE) TRUTH that is not tainted by human bias, emotion, approbation, or any other selfish interest. While He certainly loves His mother and brothers, He objectively dissects the circumstance with the sound logic of objective spiritual truth.