

Several years ago Josh McDowell wrote a book called, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. The book was successful, went through multiple printings and is still in print today. The premise of the book is that the evidence for the Lordship of Christ is so compelling, all of us have to make a decision about what we'll do with it. There's really no place for neutrality. You either commit to the proposition that Jesus is who he claimed to be, or you don't. It's like in a court of law, jury members look at the evidence and must decide if a person is guilty or not. There's no in-between. A jury may not be able to come to a consensus, a mistrial might even be declared, but still each member of the jury has to cast their vote—guilty or not guilty.

In the passage we're looking at today from the gospel of Matthew, we see the same thing. When it comes to Jesus as Lord, we either chose for him or against him. To use another analogy, we can't hedge our bets. We're either all in or we fold. Like Kenny Rogers sang years ago, "You've got to know when to hold 'em; know when to fold 'em." When it comes to Jesus, you're either in or you're out.

Now, even though that's true, it's not always true on the surface. If we were to survey people here in San Mateo County about what they thought of Jesus, I'm sure we'd get a far more nuanced response.

- Certainly, some would say, "I don't buy any of it. Honestly, I think some of the things Jesus said were downright dangerous."
- But others would say, "I respect Jesus as a great teacher. He was a good man and taught good morals, but I can't buy everything he said. I'm not ready to say he's the only way to really know God."
- Still others would say, "I'm open, but I have some questions I need to get answered before I commit."
- Finally, there are those who'd say, "I'm all in! I believe! I may not always act like it, but my relationship with him is the most important thing in my life."

With this in mind, we look at this morning's passage—Matthew 12:22–50. What we'll see surrounding Jesus are three distinct groups of people, all of whom are responding differently to Jesus. There are the large crowds of people who are curious about Jesus, even enamored with him, but not exactly sure what to do with him. Then there are the religious leaders who as a whole are threatened by him; some of them even hatched a plot to kill him. And finally there are his disciples, who in their own bumbling way have committed their lives to following him.

### **Jesus Heals a Demon-Possessed Man**

It all started with the exorcism of a demon, which caused its victim to be struck dumb. Look at verse 22.

**Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. (Matthew 12:22)**

We don't know much about this man. Matthew doesn't give us a name, or tell us where he came from, or how long he'd been tormented. All we know is he was demon possessed, as a result, he was unable to talk or see. He couldn't cry out to Jesus for help, nor could he see his way to approach Jesus. Someone would have brought him to Jesus. In a matter of fact way, Matthew said Jesus healed him so he could both talk and see. It's a clear-cut miracle, and this man must have been elated. But we read nothing more about this man.

### **The Crowd Was Astonished**

Instead, Matthew focuses on the response of the crowd.

**All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?" (verse 23)**

That word "astonished" is only used in Matthew's gospel. Back in 9:33 Matthew said the crowd was "amazed" but this word "astonished" is a different word, a stronger word. And their astonishment gives rise to a question, "*Could this be the Son of David.*" In other words, "Could this be the promised Messiah?" The question is worded in a way that expresses puzzlement. It's like, "It can't be, or could it?"

Many people respond to Jesus this way. They don't commit their life to Jesus, but they are intrigued. Maybe something has happened to convince them there has to be more to life. Maybe they've even witnessed something akin to a miracle; something unexplainable. Maybe there's just this nagging sense there must be something more. As a result, they wonder, "Could it be true? Could this Jesus really be God's Son?"

C.S. Lewis once described himself as "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." He was a brilliant man, a professor at Oxford. He'd been an atheist for a long time, but gradually he became open to the idea of God. Once while riding on a bus, he said he had this sense he was "holding something at bay, or shutting something out." He could either open the door or let it stay shut. When he finally opened the door he described it this way: "You must picture me alone in that room...night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me." It was then in 1929 that he finally gave in, opened the door, admitted God was God.

Perhaps there were some in the crowd that day with Jesus who eventually opened the door. But there was another group there who came up with an entirely different explanation...

### **The Pharisees Accused Him of Sorcery**

**But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons." (verse 24)**

Have you ever heard of “the big lie?” The big lie means if you repeat a line loudly enough and often enough, people will begin to believe you. Today, we tweet big lies. I read this week it takes the truth about six times as long as a lie to reach 1,500 people. Big lies are usually perpetrated by people in positions of power. Nero used it when he blamed the Christians for the fire that destroyed Rome. Hitler used it when he blamed Germany’s post World War I depression on the Jews. And here, the Pharisees, another powerful group, use it against Jesus. They couldn’t deny a miracle had taken place, but they attributed it not to God but to Beelzebul, which is another term for Satan. So they were accusing Jesus of sorcery, which in their book, was a capital offense.

Here was a very different response to Jesus. There were those who harden their hearts to the reality right in front of them. They shut the door and locked it with a deadbolt. Jesus didn’t fit into their paradigm of what the Messiah would look and act like, so instead of rethinking their paradigm, they wrote him off. In the face of a clear, God-like miracle they perpetrated the big lie, and I’m sure many people in the crowd bought it.

### **Jesus Gives a Lengthy Rebuttal**

Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he offers a rather lengthy rebuttal to their big lie. And the first thing he wanted them to know is, this is absurd. And he communicated this by way of two metaphors.

### **Two Metaphors Showing the Absurdity of the Pharisees Accusation**

The first metaphor is of a divided kingdom, house or city.

**Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you (verses 25–28)**

He said, “Who willingly and knowingly shoots himself in the foot? Satan may be evil but he’s not stupid! Why would Satan cast out Satan? If Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Not only is this unreasonable; it’s absurd! And by the way, your own people perform exorcisms. What does that say about them?” It seems even some Pharisees did exorcisms, which they attributed to God.

With that, Jesus presented a far more logical possibility, “What if I’m doing this by the Spirit of God? What does that say about me? If that’s the case, the Kingdom of God is here, right in front of your face.” Notice there are two kingdoms at work here—the Kingdom of Satan and the Kingdom of God. With the coming of King Jesus, there’s a massive clash of these two kingdoms!

The second metaphor makes this even clearer.

**“Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house. (verse 29)**

Here, Jesus pictured Satan as a strong man whose house contained treasures. These treasures are picturing people; people held captive

by Satan. But if another man comes and ties him up and plunders his house, what does that say about that other man? What does that say about Jesus? Jesus said, “Here I am, kicking down the devil’s door and setting people free like this demon-possessed man. What does that say about me? And what does it say about you that you’d attribute this to Satan?”

So Jesus showed how their accusation of sorcery was absurd. Then he went on and issued a stern warning. Just as he gave two metaphors, he now gives two warnings.

### **Two Warnings Showing the Impossibility of Neutrality**

The first comes in verses 30–32.

**“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. (verses 30–32)**

Jesus began by declaring the impossibility of neutrality when it comes to him. There’s no wiggle room. Certainly, there were some people in the crowd that day and even some Pharisees who thought they could straddle the fence; that they could wait and see before deciding about Jesus; that there’s some middle ground you can take. But there isn’t. The Lord shakes the fence of neutrality. Every man, woman, and child through history has fallen on one side or the other. Nobody’s life is neutral in its effects. If we’re not part of the gathering process we’re really contributing to the scattering. Nothing has changed—we’re either for Christ or against Him.

And this, of course, meant these Pharisees were against him. Their heels were dug in. So Jesus warned them about the consequences of this. Their accusation could lead to an unforgivable rejection. Jesus called it “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.” It’s quite clear what the unforgivable sin is here. It’s what the Pharisees were doing. They were saying the good work of God’s Spirit in delivering this man was demonic. That’s blasphemy against the Holy Spirit because this miracle was performed through the power of the Spirit. It’s unforgivable because it constitutes such a stubborn denial of the truth that repentance is impossible, and without repentance there’s no forgiveness. You can speak against the Son of man (Jesus), and later repent of that and find forgiveness, but when you dig your heels in so deeply in the face of obvious truth, when you harden your heart against what you know is the work of God, you’re putting yourself in position where your heart can never be softened. It’s not like these people would seek forgiveness and be denied, it’s that they’d never seek forgiveness at all. If you keep hardening yourself against the work of God’s Spirit, you reach a point of no return.

Just so you’re not too freaked out by this, listen to what Matthew Henry wrote years ago, “Those who fear they have committed this sin give a good sign that they have not.” If you’re someone who’s committed blasphemy of the Spirit, you won’t care about the state of your soul because you’ve passed the point of no return. If you care at all, you’ve not reached that point.

But this is a warning, don't push the truth away. You walk outside at night, look up at the stars, think about the vast universe, and it hits you that there must be something more; there has to be a Creator; a Designer behind the design. But then you push that thought away and walk back in the house because The Voice is about to start. Jesus warns—be careful with that.

Do you know what is the good news about these verses? It's that Jesus says, *"Every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven."* Those words *"will be forgiven"* are repeated twice.

- What about getting a DUI? Every sin will be forgiven.
- What about getting your teenage girlfriend pregnant? Every sin will be forgiven.
- What about having an abortion? Every sin will be forgiven.
- What about gossip that ruins a person's reputation? Every sin will be forgiven.
- What about cheating on your husband? Every sin will be forgiven.
- What about murder? Every sin will be forgiven.

Yes, there's a warning here, but there's also really good news. Every sin will be forgiven. All you must do is turn from your sin and come to Jesus.

The second warning comes in verses 33–37.

**"Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."** (verses 33–37)

What we say reveals what we really are. The Pharisees verbal attack on Jesus wasn't just a passing remark they could take back, like, "Oh, just kidding. We didn't really mean that." No! It revealed their true nature as evil. It certainly showed they're not neutral, their hearts were set against Jesus. And, really, this truth applies to all of us. Our words reveal what's in our heart. It was true of the Pharisees and it's true of us. So what's needed? A new heart! Not outward reform, but inward transformation. As long as our hearts are unchanged, no matter how hard we try, words will leak out of us that show our true colors.

So that's a long and intense response to those whose hearts are hardening against Jesus. But there's still another response people have to Jesus...

### **Some Scribes and Pharisees Ask for a Sign**

**Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."** (verse 38)

It comes out in verse 38. It's not just the Pharisees this time, but also the teachers of the law (scribes). This group was different from either of the first two groups we saw. At least on the surface, this group seemed open. They paid Jesus some respect by addressing him as "Teacher." They asked for a sign. It's like, "We come to you

with an open mind. Just give us a clear-cut sign and we'll believe." It sounded reasonable. Maybe you know people like this. Maybe this is you.

By the way, a "sign" is different from a miracle like the one they'd just seen. They'd seen Jesus do many miracles, but they wanted more. They wanted incontrovertible evidence from God. They wanted God to give a sign up in the sky.

In the film *Bruce Almighty*, Jim Carrey plays a reporter who makes a fool of himself on national TV. He then loses his job, is roughed up by a street gang and has an emotional blow up with his girlfriend. With his world falling apart, he takes a midnight ride to clear his head and begins to plead with God. "Okay, God, you want me to talk with you? Then talk back. Tell me what's going on. What should I do? Give me a sign."

As he speaks these words, a road construction sign, directly in front of him flashes: "Caution Ahead." But Bruce doesn't notice.

"I need your guidance, Lord," he begs, "send me a sign."

Immediately a large truck pulls in front of him. The back of the truck is covered with street signs which say: "Stop. Dead-End. Wrong Way. Do Not Enter." He's oblivious. Instead of seeing the signs, he's agitated he's stuck behind this slow truck. So he swerves to pass the truck while grumbling, "Lord, I need a miracle. I'm desperate. I need Your help."

He loses control of the car, spins off the road and runs into a lamp post. When he jumps out of his mangled car, he flings his arms in the air and rages at God. "Fine," he shouts. "The gloves are off. Come on, let's see a little wrath. Smite me, Almighty Smiter. You're the one who should be fired. The only one around here not doing his job is you. Answer me."

I imagine most of us have asked been there. How does Jesus respond to that? In this case, Jesus sees beneath the surface and knows there's nothing he can come to them with that will convince them. Although on the surface, they seem open-minded, the reality is their hearts are calloused. And Jesus always refused to be a circus performer, satisfying the appetite of the crowd for an applause.

### **Jesus Calls This a Wicked Generation Who'll Only Get the Sign of Jonah**

**He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a 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." (verses 39–40)**

So Jesus responds in a pointed manner. Jesus says the only sign from heaven that will be given to every generation is the one foreshadowed by Jonah, who was three days in the belly of a fish, and that's Good Friday and Easter. That's why we make such a big deal out of those holidays. That's why we want you to bring your friends to our Good Friday and Easter services. Because the truth of history is Jesus died and three days later the tomb was empty, and in the next 40 days he appeared to many reluctant converts and proved he was alive. That's the sign from heaven every generation gets.

**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 something 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 something greater than Solomon is here. (verses 41–42)**

Then Jesus adds something that twists the knife in a bit more. He compares these seemingly open-minded scribes and Pharisees with despised Gentiles, and they didn't come out looking very good. The wicked Ninevites repented at the preaching of Jonah and something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of Sheba traveled over 1,000 miles to hear Solomon's wisdom and something greater than Solomon is here. In other words, "These pagans repented with less evidence than you have!"

When I read this, I tremble for our own generation. We have so much evidence for the truth of Jesus' claims. There were 20 specific prophecies fulfilled in the last 24 hours of Jesus' life alone. After his death on the cross, the apostles were devastated, but something changed their minds so convincingly they took the gospel to the whole Roman world and died doing it. Since that time the gospel has come to us and lives have been transformed and society has been bettered—all because of Jesus. All because he died and rose again. What more do you need to believe?

**"When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation." (verses 43–45)**

Jesus ends his speech with a haunting little parable. He was not talking about exorcism here. This was a parable about Israel's current condition. They're the "wicked generation" he refers to. Jesus called the nation to repent and believe. Some did repent, but many didn't. Maybe they were curious about Jesus. Maybe they even tried to clean up their act a bit and live by his high morals. But soon he'd be gone and apart from repentance and faith they would be worse off than before. Their souls were clean but empty of any real faith in the Son of God. You see, an empty life, like an empty house, invites intruders. And any external efforts to change, without Jesus coming to live within us, are futile. Without Christ in our life, mere outward conformity will fade. Earlier Jesus said neutrality towards him is impossible, but now he says it's downright dangerous!

I've seen this confirmed countless times. People come to church and want to change. There's a moral crisis or void in their lives. Over

time they start cleaning themselves up. They start coming to church and even talking like a Christian. These aren't bad things, but if we never really relinquish internal control to the Lord, we've missed the point. You see, we can take the steps and make changes, but unless we surrender to Jesus we're just putting a band-aid on something requiring surgery.

## **The Right Way to Respond to Jesus: Do the Will of God**

That's why Matthew added one more paragraph to this story. He wanted to end by showing what it really looked like to follow Jesus and be changed from the inside out. Look what happens.

**While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." (verses 46–47)**

Jesus was interrupted and someone whispered in his ear, "Your mother and brothers are outside and want to have a word with you." The fact they're outside and not with him inside says something about them. In Mark's gospel, it said they came to get him because they thought maybe he was out of his mind. We know, of course, his family eventually came around and believed in him, but for now, they're not sure. He was saying some strange things and he was getting himself in some really hot water.

How will Jesus respond?

**He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (verse 48–50)**

Jesus isn't saying to disrespect your family, but rather those who are truly part of his family are those who do the will of his Father. What is the will of the Father? In John 6:40 Jesus said, **"For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."** It's that simple. The will of God is to believe in and follow his Son.

That's what this whole message boils down to: Neutrality towards Jesus is not only impossible, it's dangerous. You might be "astonished" by Jesus like the crowd was, but have you really given him your life and trusted him as your Lord and Savior? You might be hardening your heart against him, but like C.S. Lewis, you know you are "holding something at bay, or shutting something out." You might even be asking him for a sure sign that he's there. But it all boils down to one thing: Do you really believe? Have you really surrendered your life to him? Are you following him?

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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