

The wicked demand for a sign

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[0 : 00] I don't know how you feel, like if you had great power, or if there were great miracles being done in the centre of Brighton, then surely then the gospel would be making real headway.

Maybe we're missing something, maybe we're missing that key ingredient. That's pretty normal, isn't it? As we do the kind of day-to-day of being Christians, as we stick at it, as we go on being faithful to the Lord Jesus, it can be quite hard, isn't it, to think, why isn't the gospel making more headway?

Are we missing? Are we missing out? In our passage today, Jesus encounters people who, they've seen all the evidence, they've seen all the power, they've seen all the miracles, and we don't see them repenting here.

Instead, in this passage, what Jesus shows us is the way the human heart works, and the lengths it goes to to avoid repenting when it hears Jesus' words. So, first of all, we're going to be encouraged this evening, I hope. We're going to be encouraged that Jesus doesn't call us to be supermen, or superwomen, in the church.

He was superman, and he was still rejected. Jesus calls his church to be faithful, to keep sticking to the signs he gave, ultimately, to his cross, and the resurrection.

[1 : 20] And we keep faithfully following whether God produces great gospel revival, or hard-hearted lack of repentance. So, hopefully that's going to encourage us. If we've been slogging away, like, 46 years, 50 years, hopefully we have seen encouragements during that time, but hopefully that will encourage us, even if we haven't.

And secondly, we're going to see there's going to be a challenge to our own hearts. This passage is about those who are outside of Jesus' people, but for those of us who are inside, there's a pretty strong challenge.

I don't know about you, sometimes I can think in the Christian life, I'll repent once I've got to this stage. I'll repent if God does this for me. And what this passage is just going to show us, it's Jesus challenging us to reflect, to go, why aren't we repenting when we know what we need to do?

Why are we saying, why are we holding God to ransom? And ultimately, the big point of this passage is that a failure to repent is due to the wickedness of human hearts, not a lack of power. The failure to repent is due to the wickedness of human hearts, and it's not because of a lack of power. It's wickedness, not something wrong with the gospel, not something wrong with Jesus.

[2 : 44] That's our big idea today. Hopefully that's going to encourage us and challenge us. So let's jump in. Verses 38 to 40, failure to repent shows the wickedness of our hearts.

You guys, I think, have been working through Matthew's gospel slowly, very carefully. So you'll know that Jesus has been doing signs. You'll know that Jesus has been healing people by the bucket loads, including a demon-possessed man at the beginning of this section, in front of the Jewish leaders.

But it hasn't convinced them. Verse 38, then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, teacher, we want to see a sign from you. We're almost tempted to say, what more do you want to see?

It's not a genuine inquiry. It's not saying, I need a little bit more evidence to be convinced. Instead, it's a sign of authentication. They've just said that Jesus is of the devil.

It's basically them saying, go on, Jesus, show us you're not. As if healing the sick and the demon-possessed didn't already do this.

[3 : 59] By their words, they're showing, Jesus, you're just, we've seen it all, and it's not good enough for us. There's no real desire for faith here. It's obstinate unbelief.

And Jesus calls them on it. Look at verse 39. A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign. But none will be given to 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. The words Jesus uses to accuse the Pharisees, they're strong.

The term adulterous was used of God's people in the Old Testament when they decided to go and follow idols. The book of Hosea makes this particularly clear as God tells Hosea to go marry a prostitute representative of how Israel treats him.

Under Second Temple Judaism in Jesus' time, this blatant idolatry has been cleared out. Israel looks like a pretty faithful people.

[5 : 01] But Jesus' words make it very clear here. The outward trappings might be gone, but at heart they're just as bad as God's people in the Old Testament.

The hypocrisy and wickedness spills out as they refuse to take Jesus seriously and say, go on, give us another. And then Jesus says something that is very strange.

He says they're not going to get another sign. He's not a performing monkey. He says all they're going to get is the sign of Jonah. This is really kind of the heart of the passage.

Why does Jesus talk about the sign of Jonah? It's because in Jesus' mind there's a parallel here between the experience of Jonah and his own mission.

Jonah's time in the fish for three days and three nights and Jesus' own time in the grave. It's not really a point that's going to convince the Pharisees. Imagine hearing this for the first time.

[6 : 07] I'm not going to perform a miraculous sign. You're going to get the sign of Jonah. Well, Jesus' disciples, the Pharisees, everyone would have been confused as they heard these words.

What Jesus is saying to the Pharisees here though is that because of their wickedness they're not going to get another miraculous sign. He's not going to do a magic trick for them. They're not going to get anything else except his death and resurrection.

And they're going to have to wait until then to see if they will trust in the Son of Man. They had Jesus' words. They had his miracles. They'd get no more until he was vindicated in his passion. As Peter says at the beginning of Acts, God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. That's what vindicates Jesus. It's a parallel with Jonah.

Are they going to believe in the one who was brought back from the dead? As the Ninevites believed in the one who was figuratively brought back from the dead out of the ocean.

[7 : 11] They've ignored every other sign except for the one in front of their eyes. Are they going to believe when this happens? And unfortunately if you know Matthew's gospel, you know that there's a unique little story at the end of the gospel which is tragic.

In Matthew chapter 28 verses 11 to 15. After the women have seen Jesus as he's risen from the tomb. As they've heard the angel declare and they've seen the empty tomb and the soldiers were there.

The soldiers go and report to the Jewish leaders. And they hear the witnesses. They hear the great display of power. They hear that there is no body in the tomb. And tragically they bribe the soldiers. And they say, tell everybody that his disciples stole the body in the middle of the night. Faced with that evidence, the sign of Jonah, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

They still refuse to believe. They stick their fingers in their ears and do everything they can to not repent. No matter what they face, they just won't do it.

[8 : 24] Because it's not the weight of the evidence that's lacking. It's not that they haven't seen power work. It's the wickedness of their own hearts.

You might not know this. But back in the 1980s, McDonald's tried to drum up more business.

They had already dominated breakfast and lunchtime. But this wasn't enough for them. They wanted to take on dinner time as well. And so in the 80s, McDonald's apparently tried to introduce a family-sized pepperoni pizza to its American stores.

They were going to take on Pizza Hut. They went all in. Massive marketing campaign. And it was well received due to its quality. People were pretty appreciative of it.

But they didn't appreciate the fact that they went to McDonald's for a fast meal and had to wait an hour for a pizza. That's not what people go to McDonald's for. You go for two cheeseburgers and a fries that can be eaten in two minutes.

[9 : 29] They'd completely missed the point of what made their business model work. And so as they tried to take on dinner, they missed the point that people sat down for dinner, but they don't like sitting down at McDonald's.

It's amazing, particularly in a secular world, where we're faced with constant tension and pressure as Christians, how often we miss the point of what we're about.

Almost like we miss the business model, as it were. The church doesn't compete with the world by being flashy or competitive.

The problem is never that the church is not being powerful enough. Jesus' own ministry and his rejection show us that. The church is a place where grace and weakness and forgiveness of the sinner and acceptance of the broken flourish but how often do we try and do a McDonald's, trying to move away from what makes the church the church?

Oh, if we could just do this, if we could just do that. And even if we don't do it actively, we want that. We think what we've got in our Christian life just isn't enough.

[10 : 48] What we've got to recognise when we're tempted to think this way is that a refusal to repent, a refusal to follow the Lord Jesus, it's not showing that the gospel's failed.

It shows that the human heart will reject all evidence put in front of it. I'm a firm believer in rational arguments, mighty acts of the Spirit's power and miracles, the spiritual force of people encountering grace and community.

Yes and amen to all of those things. I love those things. We make a massive effort at Grace Church to try and welcome and be hospitable. We don't just chuck the gospel at people in a package.

But we could have the most perfect church on paper and yet people could still not repent and believe. The Pharisees chose not to.

And that should encourage us to stick with the sign that Jesus gives. As these people reject him, he says, it's the cross and the resurrection which vindicate me.

[11 : 58] It's the cross and the resurrection which form the foundation of the gospel. It's the cross and the resurrection upon which the church is built. When people don't respond or we feel like we need to look more like that church down the street or a church with a particular ministry, we remember that Jesus didn't do another trick.

He pointed his opponents to his death and his resurrection and that is what he left them with.

Because ultimately, if that doesn't convince them, what will? That the Lord Jesus would die in their place and rise to give them new life.

That they could be so loved by God. And this happened in history, it is true. If that doesn't convince people, then a smoke machine and a roaring youth ministry won't either. Which brings us to our second point.

Verses 41 and 42. Failure to repent is not because of a lack of power. I wonder if you've ever had one of those conversations. They're becoming rarer and rarer for me as I realise what an idiot I am. You feel like you've had the gospel explained perfectly to the person sitting in front of you. You've even bought them the right coffee so they feel perfectly comfortable. You've gone to their coffee shop of choice. I like Nero's, everyone else likes Costa.

[13 : 15] It's a sacrifice. You kind of think to yourself, how did you not get this? As they stare at you. Blank-eyed. Asking what time the football starts.

What we see in Jesus' words is the answer. Some people have repented at far less than the Pharisees got. But some people keep pushing for greater signs. Look down at verse 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 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.

There are Old Testament Gentiles who have repented at far less. And Jewish Pharisees who have repented with far more. I mean the soft-hearted repentance of these Gentiles from the Old Testament.

[14 : 17] It's a stark contrast. The Ninevites were the deadly enemies of the Jewish people. They butchered nations. And yet when they were confronted with the preaching of Jonah.

Which in the book of Jonah is a five-word sermon in Hebrew. About judgment. Which doesn't mention God. Doesn't mention what they've done. And doesn't mention what they could do to get

better.

These violent pagans convert. They'd possibly heard that Jonah had just been vomited up by a fish. That's all they had. This guy came out of the ocean.

Five Hebrew words. Which maybe they didn't even speak. And they repented. As for the Queen of the South. She comes to Israel based on a rumour.

That Solomon happens to be very wise. She brings a massive train of gifts and servants. To meet the King of Israel. Simply because she hears on the grapevine.

[15:19] That God is blessing Israel through him. A short sermon of judgment and a rumour. And the Old Testament Gentile outsiders.

Were brought to repentance. By the Lord God. Revivals. They happen today as well. They're not just in the book of Acts.

The church in China is exploding. By 2030. It's expected that there will be more Christians in China. Than the USA. In a context of a totalitarian.

Atheist government. That persecutes the church. I was once up in Durham. Where I studied. And we went up a couple of weeks early. To meet international students. To invite them to the Christian Union.

And we met this Chinese girl. Named Pearl. We told her we were Christians. And we were inviting people to lunch. She said. Oh my goodness me. My roommate. Back at university.

[16:18] Was a Christian. She had a Bible. She told me about Jesus. Isn't that amazing? The gospel has flourished so much in that country.

That this girl could travel half the world away. To meet Christians. A religion which is not. Anything to do really with China. And yet say. I've met someone like you.

My housemate. There are loads of them. Great. I mean this is happening today. These things do still happen.

We do see the unlikely repenting. And we also see those who have all the religious trappings. Steadfastly refusing.

These revivals. They show us. That it is God. Who gives. The growth. God who gives. Repentance. There's condemnation here.

[17:23] For those who are religious. Because. The greater one. Is here. Verse 41. Now something greater than Jonah is here. Verse 42. Now something greater than Solomon.

Is here. Jonah was a disobedient prophet. Who ran away from God. Jesus. Jesus is the word of God. Incarnate. The prophet. Exemplar. Solomon indeed.

Was a wise king. Who sinned. Due to women. And pride. Jesus is the wisdom of God. Through whom. And for whom. All things. Were made.

And who has been tempted. In every way as we are. And yet has not sinned. Earlier in the chapter. Jesus says that something greater than the temple. Is here. As he stands in front of them.

The incarnate son of God. Emmanuel. God. With us. The perfect sacrifice. The perfect. High priest. Prophet.

[18:17] Priest. Temple. King. Jesus is. The greater one. The one in whom. All of God's. Plans. And promises. Are fulfilled.

The one who calls the disciples. With a word. And they follow him. If we are tempted. To think the gospel. Of Jesus.

Hasn't got enough power. And the revivals. Of the past. Aren't enough. To convince us. Well. The greater one. Has come. The greatest. One has come. We do well.

To remember. All the works. And words. And promises. Of the father. Finding their fulfillment. In Jesus. And we say. Well how on earth. Could Jesus fail.

Whatever it looks like. On the ground. Whatever it looks like. With our friends. In this city. In this country. In this world. Lord. If Jesus. If Jesus.

[19:15] Is the one. In whom. All of God's promises. Are yes and amen. Then how could he. Fail. The Jews. Here. Stand fully condemned.

Because the outsiders. Repented. More than they did. And they have seen. The greater one. They still didn't repent. Repent. Failure to repent.

It's not a failure. Of power. Just as a sidebar. Maybe. If you're anything like me. And. I work in a church.

I'd love to see the church. Grow more. You get a little bit. Discouraged. By how the gospel. Doesn't seem to make many. As much headway. As we'd like. Maybe.

Maybe. If Jesus. Is the greater one. Why not. Why don't more people follow. First of all. We've got to remember. That Jesus. Is the greater one. And secondly.

[20 : 16] We've got to realize. Maybe the heart. The hard answer. Surely. Has got to be. That it is Jesus. Who opens blind eyes. As he does. Throughout his ministry. It is Jesus. Who gives new birth. By his spirit. And so.

When we're tempted. To think. That maybe the gospel. Is not its power. The actual answer. We're searching for. Is no. At the moment. Jesus. Is withholding. His spirit. From some.

And giving it. To others. That the Lord. Jesus. Builds his church. And we're not. Exactly privy. To how he's going.

To do that. And so. When that coffee. Conversation. Happens. We pray. The Lord. Jesus. May open eyes. But. We also. Are aware. That it is he. Who must open eyes.

Because he is the greater one. Not us. His power doesn't go up and down. Like a yo-yo. He never fails. But he has his timing.

[21 : 11] And his purposes in the world. He can and does overcome wicked hearts. Every single day. Opening them up. To see. The cross.

And his grace. And the glorious life. That he offers. He will do it in his timing. Because he's not a God. Who jumps through hoops. Just as we come to an end.

If you're. Wouldn't. If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian here today. These are quite hard words. And they present quite a hard challenge. Jesus' ministry.

Is really clear. He vindicates himself by miraculous signs. By his words. And ultimately by. His death and resurrection. And so the question is.

What. Are you waiting for. To convince you. Have you been shown enough. And yet you still refuse. To repent. Well just look at what Jesus says.

[22 : 11] Is the root cause of that. And for the Christian. Well. We know that. Those of us who trust in the Lord Jesus.

We are called to repent and follow. Every single day aren't we. And we are. We are praying before the service. That sometimes. Christians are very good at struggling. With secret sins.

Or sins that we hang on to. Anxiety. Bitterness. And the challenge can be. Sometimes we do. Like the Pharisees. And say well. Jesus.

Show me a sign. Show me something. That will convince me. I should give this up. Then I'll repent. Jesus. If you show your power. In this way. Then I'll repent. Let's.

We've got to see the danger of that. For ourselves. We've got to see the danger. In having sin in our life. Which we know is there. Which we know we should get rid of. And yet saying. I'll wait down the line.

[23 : 07] Until Jesus does X for me. The response should be. No. The greater one is here. Hearts enlightened to see him.

Having tasted. Of something of his power. And his goodness. We repent. Yes it's hard. Yes it might bring. Shame. But we know that Jesus.

Covers all shame. And we ask for help. And we repent. We have the miracles. And the preaching of Jesus. We have the good news. Of his resurrection. We have it all.

If those are not enough for us. We surely need to ask. Why is that? That's not to be insensitive. For many of us. The struggles and sins we face.

Are very deeply rooted. Seemingly overwhelming to us. We are not. But the answer is not to test the son of God. We will wait for him.

[24 : 10] We will wait for him to come through for us. Before we will repent and follow. Because you see he already has. Totally. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. That is what he's done for us.

Instead we see the sign of Jonah. And so we stand perfectly. Totally. We are. We are. And like Jonah. Having experienced the grace of God. When he calls us.

We do. And we go. And so we say. Whatever we feel. Do we need more? No. The gospel doesn't lack power.

Jesus doesn't lack power. The wickedness of the world. of the heart. It doesn't win. The greater one is here. And so the call for us. As his people. Is to repent.

And to follow him. Let me just pray for us. Father the Pharisees.

[25 : 07] Show us something. Of the wickedness of the human heart. In refusing to repent. Before the Lord Jesus. Those who had seen. All the evidence. Were witnesses to miracles.

We could only imagine. And yet they refused. Lord. We acknowledge that our hearts. Do not naturally want to repent.

Before your son. We pray that your son. Who is the greatest one. May give us power. To repent.

And to follow him. That we may live lives.

Pleasing to him. Father we do ask. For your help here. Father we ask. That we may see. The glory and goodness.

Of the Lord Jesus more. And would we repent. In response. Father please. Be gracious to us. We pray. For your glory sake. By the power of your spirit. Amen.

[26 : 05] Amen. Amen.