Putting the Lord to the test

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Date: 08 May 2022

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[0:00] I'm going to read from Matthew 12, verse 38 to 50. Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.

But he answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.
The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.
The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.
When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, I'll return to my house from which I came.
[1:26] And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there.

And the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation.
While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside asking to speak to him.
But he replied to the man who told him, Who's my mother and who are my brothers? And stretching out his hands towards 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.
Well, sometimes I put my wife, Emma, to the test. Not a memory test or an academic test, because I know how that would end.
And I've got her permission, by the way, to tell you this, just in case you're wondering. I sometimes set up a test for Emma to prove that she loves me.
[2:46] But I don't ruin it by telling her that I'm testing her. She doesn't need to know that. Here's how it works. I decide it's time for another test.

She needs to prove she cares about me, she loves me. Then in my mind I set up the expectation, the particular expectation, to see if she passes or fails.
It might be something as simple as this. If Emma cared how busy and stressed I am today, as we both smell that unpleasant smell coming from Sam's nappy, she would volunteer to take pressure off my day to change that nappy.
She would do that. And if she does it, well, she loves me. She cares about me. I can get on happily with my day until the next test. But if she fails, then she doesn't care about me, obviously, and I can be just annoyed and bitter.
Do you see what's wrong with creating these little tests? It's not only unfair, like it's completely unfair. I'm setting up all the parameters of this test, not even telling her what's at stake.
[4:02] It's not only self-centred and inconsiderate of what's going on for Emma in that moment. Like I'm not even thinking about her. It's just totally about me. I think the worst thing about it is that I'm being willfully blind to everything else she's done.

It's dismissing out of the equation the years, the mountains of evidence that Emma does indeed care for me. It's ignoring all that and demanding that she proves it in this particular way right now that I've come up with.
It's so ridiculous. And I have a feeling I'm not alone in setting up these kind of little tests in our relationships, our friendships. Do you create tests for God to prove himself and his love for you?

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If God loves me, he will enable me to be successful in my work. People will appreciate me. If that happens, he's obviously blessing me.
If that doesn't happen, he's not behind me. He's not for me. If I raise my children to go to church and be good Christians, then God will bless my kids with success in their studies, a good, stable job, a family, grandkids.
[5:34] If God really wants me to thrive, he will take away that illness from my body, from my mind, if he really loves me. If I really belong at church, God will give me a few close friends I enjoy being with.

I'm just plucking a few examples from the air. I suspect we do a lot more of these particular tests of God, whether he actually cares for us or not.
But in setting up these tests for God to prove himself to us, we dismiss the mountains of evidence that he loves us all in Jesus, what he's given us in Jesus.
So we pick up the story today with the religious experts asking Jesus for a sign. So it sounds respectful. Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.
So why the response from Jesus, an evil, an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign? And that's a pretty harsh response.
[6:44] Well, first, let's make sure we understand what a sign is. There's plenty of occasions in the Old Testament of a sign. Signs are fine if the Lord initiates a sign.

There's a few occasions where God provides a sign. They're not inherently wrong. Or the Lord can be really patient and gracious with people.
They should just take him at his word, but sometimes he provides a sign to back up the word, like in the case of Gideon. I think Gideon is probably one of the most well-known examples, where Gideon is told, defend my people.
Go out. I'll give you victory. Defend my people. And Gideon's like, oh, I'm not sure. Is this really from God? Am I assured of victory?
And so he puts out the wool fleece outside. With the condensation in the morning, if the wool fleece is dry, then that would be impossible. Like, that must be God doing that.
[7:47] Therefore, I can trust his word. Then God does it, and then he flips the sign around. He needs it three times, I think. Now, God graciously provided that sign.

He should have just taken him at his word, but he did graciously reassure Gideon. Now, I think we take a wrong step as Christians today to try and treat our decisions in life like Gideon.
Please understand, that was an expression of lack of faith, to ask for that sign. He should have taken him at his word. But anyway, talking about guidance is a topic for another day.
Where am I? I had an experience of someone asking for a blatant sign when I was a scripture teacher, teaching scripture to high school students.
So I was teaching a lesson on how God had created the world, and this little boy wasn't, he was about the same height as me, but this 12-year-old boy hiked up and said, yeah, we'll prove it.
[8:57] If God is real, then he can make a bird come and land on that branch. We were in the second story of the school and there was a tree just outside. He can make a bird come and land on that branch.

Prove it. And I was really conflicted. I'm like, oh, I know God could easily do that. I just want to shut this boy down. I was like, no, he's putting God to the test.
And so I decided instead, I scrapped the rest of the lesson plan. And I go, I'm just going to read Mark's gospel, the early chapters, see how far we get. That's the proof you need. Look at Jesus and what he's done.
And so I start reading. I think we get four chapters in, and I kid you not, at the end of the lesson, a bird landed on that branch. And, yeah, I didn't ask for that to happen, but God was gracious there.
But a sign is something observable. It is unusual. And it's told ahead of time so that only God could tell the future and make that happen.
[10:03] So that it's trying to work out, is the source of this message really from God, is to back up whatever message or the messenger that it's attached to.

So asking for a sign presumes that you have a sincere doubt that you want clarified. And it presumes you'll go where the evidence takes you. If the sign succeeds, you'll believe, fails, then obviously it's not from God.

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That doesn't sound so bad. Like, it even appears godly on the surface for the Pharisees to ask for a sign. Jesus, show that you're from God.
But let's not forget the setting here. They had just witnessed with their own eyes a man who is blind and mute suddenly, immediately open his eyes and speak.
Glorifying God, no doubt. They had just witnessed that. And remember their accusation against him. They are already convinced that he is an agent of evil to deceive people.
[11:18] This request for a sign, they are expecting a negative result. They want Jesus to fail the test. And look, he doesn't produce a sign.

They might be saying. Jesus caused their request evil because it is so unbelieving.
It totally dismisses all of his ministry and even the testimony of the Old Testament as well. I think we see five things that the Pharisees are totally dismissing from the equation.
The first thing, they have witnessed and they have heard many reports of the miracles Jesus has done. The full restoration he is bringing to people's lives.
Like the cleansing of the leper. The calming of the storm. The casting out of demons. The healing of the paralytic to show that he's got authority to forgive sins. The woman bleeding for 12 years.
[12:23] The 12-year-old girl who was dead brought back to life and restored to her family. The healing of the blind and the mute and the man with the withered hand. The vast amounts of healing wherever he went.

The second thing they're dismissing is Jesus offering the ultimate sign that he has the full backing of God to bring in this kingdom.
So that's what I think the sign of Jonah is about. No sign will be given to this generation except the sign of the prophet Jonah.
For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. If you want rock solid, observable proof told ahead of time, completely unusual event to know that Jesus has authority of God to give you the kingdom, then look at him going into death and on the third day rising again.
That's the only proof you need. It is the ultimate sign. The resurrection is all you need to be sure Jesus is worthy of all your trust.
[14:03] So can I pause for a moment? If you were genuinely searching Christianity at the moment, I would encourage you, keep reading the story of Jesus.

I would encourage you, keep asking hard and scrutinising questions. That's fine. But most of all, look into the resurrection. Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection.
It is the sign, the proof we need that Jesus has all authority to give us the kingdom, to give us eternal life. The third thing this demand for a sign dismisses is that it's they who have the problem and need to repent.
So Jesus says, The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.
Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and they were known for their violence and brutality. And Jonah came preaching, I think in 40 days, God's going to demolish this city.
[15:23] He's going to judge this city. And it's possible that they heard what happened to Jonah himself, that he was cast overboard into the sea, but God delivered him. So maybe he was a walking sign.

That's possible. Either way, these very violent people, they stop eating and drinking. They pray. They beg God for mercy.
And God has compassion on them. He doesn't judge them. He saves them. They listened to the message of Jonah.
Jonah. They repented. Likewise with Solomon, you've got the Queen of Sheba, which is somewhere kind of Saudi Arabia, Yemen way.
Again, a non-Israelite example here. She heard of the kingdom that Solomon was establishing by his wisdom. If you read those chapters, it is the pinnacle of the Jewish kingdom being established, the promised kingdom in the Old Testament.
[16:32] The temple in all its glory is set up. You've got enormous prosperity. You've got joy and peace among the people. You've got peace from enemies around.

It is the pinnacle. We're told that when the queen comes and sees it and listens to Solomon's wisdom, she's without breath.

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She's just flabbergasted by how amazing this kingdom is, this wisdom of Solomon is. It was the preaching of Jonah.
It was the wisdom of Solomon that caused these people who were outside the kingdom to come to acknowledge that God is God. That's all they needed.
It was the message that they responded to. By dismissing that the problem was with them and not with Jesus, the Pharisees are forfeiting the forgiveness and the peace that is on offer in Jesus' message.
[17:37] If only they listened, they could have had, they could be part of Jesus' kingdom. The fourth thing they're dismissing is Jesus' teaching.

They're dismissing the life-giving words of his teaching. So I suppose I just want to remind us of the Sermon on the Mount.
We spent a few weeks in the Sermon on the Mount. Could you imagine how it would change your life if we believed and lived the Sermon on the Mount? It would make a radical difference to our lives.
Blessed are the meek, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. It's yours now by being meek.
Instead of external laws, Jesus goes, no, the kingdom is an inside reality. It convicts us of sin.
Murder isn't only judgeable, but when you hate your brother, that would convict us of sin and make us meek and look to Jesus for a better righteousness.
[18:51] It motivates us from the heart to obey, not because we have to obey some external rules.
Imagine if we practice our prayers to God and our giving in secret, only for God's eyes only, not so that others see us to get the glory from them.

Imagine we had that kind of integrity in our religion. Imagine if we trusted Jesus when he said that we don't have to chase after what the world chases with food and clothing.
That's what the world chases after. But God is a good father. He'll give you what you need. Seek first the kingdom. Imagine the peace we would have if we believed that.
And then we told him, don't condemn one another. Take the plank out of your own eye so that then you can deal with the speck in your brother's eye.
Imagine if we practiced that. If we built our house on Jesus' teaching, our life would be solid. It would be on firm foundation.
[19:57] Now, that's just a few examples of his teaching to remind us. They are life-giving words. He is the ultimate prophet.

He is speaking a greater revelation. He is the ultimate wisdom from God, setting up the kingdom of God. His teaching is self-authenticating because it is so good and rich.
But this isn't the kind of kingdom that the Pharisees want, and so they dismiss it. They're dismissing his teaching. It's not life-giving. That's not the kind of kingdom they are looking for.
The last thing that they're dismissing is that they claim to be experts in the Old Testament when they're actually dismissing the fact that the Old Testament was preparing for Jesus.
Jesus has already said, something greater than King David is here. A faithful king who won't use his people but lay down his life for his people.
[21:09] Something greater than the temple is here. Not a building but a person to be the meeting place with God. Something greater than the prophet Jonah is here.

A greater revelation of what God is like and what belonging to him is like. Something greater than the wisdom of Solomon is here. A better wisdom to establish a better kingdom.
A dismissing the Old Testament and how it helps us understand Jesus. So his miracles give us a glimpse of the full restoration to come.
His resurrection is all the proof we need that he does have authority to give us eternal life. We know that he has authority to forgive sins and to give us peace with the Father if only we repent.
And his teaching and his wisdom are life-giving. They're self-authenticating. And the Old Testament helps us understand all the riches we have in Jesus. They're dismissing all of that.
[22:22] The religious experts should have been the first to say, here he is. Here it is. Everyone, come. This is it. This is where life is found.

But by demanding a sign, they're really showing that they're willfully blind. So the asking for a sign is just plain evil.
It is coming from a place of rejecting the kingdom of heaven that Jesus is clearly ushering in.
Although it sounds pious, it is just blatant unbelief.

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But Jesus also suggests that there's a deeper cause of their unbelief. Did you notice the word adulterous? An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign.
Why adulterous? It can't be talking about sexual adultery. There's nothing in the context that fits that. It must be talking about spiritual adultery.
[23:30] In the Old Testament, this picture is used a lot, where Israel again and again and again go after the gods of the other nations.

They're meant to be in covenant with Yahweh that Yahweh will give them life, but they always turn to other gods as if those gods will protect them and nourish them and give them the good life.
They keep giving their loyalty, their devotion, their trust to other things other than Yahweh. These scribes and Pharisees claim they love God.
And yet, if Jesus is clearly bringing in the kingdom, here is the kingdom. And they say, that's not enough. The only reason they could come to that is if their love is for other things.
Their devotion isn't directed towards God. I think we get a hint of what they're really in love with in the Sermon on the Mount.
[24:34] And we hear this a lot in John's Gospel as well. What the Pharisees are really, what they really love is their own glory. They love the praise of people. That's the hindrance to belief.

They're not willing to give that up. They're not willing to be meek. Or consider the crowds. Think of John chapter 6. Jesus has just fed the 5,000 people with bread and fish.
And the crowd's like, free bread, make him king. Let's make him king right now. But as soon as Jesus starts talking, well, that's just a picture of me being the source of life.
I am the bread of heaven. By the end of the chapter, most people have given up on him. They don't want it. Why? Because they love their comfort.
They want the food that spoils. They don't want the bread of eternal life. It's their spiritual adultery for other things that causes their unbelief.
[25:39] When we put God to the test for him to prove his love for us, it dismisses everything he's given us in Jesus, every spiritual blessing.

To demand what God hasn't promised reveals that some other idol is causing us to place this test on God. It's actually an opportunity to test our own hearts.
What we are in love with. And then to come to Christ and find the real satisfaction for the craving. In the final two paragraphs, they're kind of odd paragraphs in this section.
I think what's happening here is we're presented with what it looks like to either not embrace Jesus as all sufficient, all you need for all the eternal blessings God has to offer.
If you want everything God has to offer in Jesus, what does it look like to not embrace him? And what does it look like to embrace him? I think that's what is going on here.
[26:57] So we get this parable of the unclean spirit going out, returning to find the house empty. And then he gets the gang together, all seven spirits, which seven maybe it's completion, like it's just full occupation.

And the final condition of the person is worse than the first. It would be strange for Jesus to suddenly be talking about how spirit possession works. And his conclusion ties it back with, so also will it be with this evil generation.
So I think it's better to take this as a parable. Instead of farming metaphors to create some greater, so we get some greater point. He's talking about spirit possession so that we get a greater point.
So what is the point he's driving at? I think the key is in the description of the house being empty. Totally empty, swept, put in order.
The reason why they could enter the person is that the place was unoccupied. It should have been occupied by Jesus himself. Or we might say today by Jesus' Holy Spirit.
[28:15] It should be occupied by Jesus. But to reject Jesus and his kingdom, however clean you think your inner landscape is, is actually a very dangerous condition of unbelief.

The Pharisees considered themselves clean, put in order. They were leading the way in returning to the Torah, in preparing for the coming Messiah.
The idolatry of Israel of the past that led to their exile. The Pharisees weren't going to be like that. They're going to be devoted to God's law. They thought they were clean.
That would have been a wonderful preparation for Jesus coming if they had embraced him. But they haven't.

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They haven't embraced the kingdom when it rocks up. And so now they are in a much, much worse state of unbelief. They're hardened in their unbelief.
[29:17] To not embrace Jesus as the one who's bringing all heaven's blessings is to be in a very dangerous condition of unbelief.

And it seems to be a particular danger for those who are religious, those who think they're clean, those who think they've got their inner self in order.
I imagine what it could look like today. You picture a person who attends church and he tries his best to say and do the right things, gets involved in the church community, volunteering and making friends.
But slowly things change over time. Friends move away. He doesn't really like the new pastor. The ministry he was involved in shuts down for some reason.
And he's not really making friends anymore, new friends. And slowly just his reason for going to church just evaporates. And then you bump into him five, ten years later and he's not even identifying as a Christian anymore.
[30:39] He's heard it all before. All the lines about Jesus, forgiveness and he's heard it all before. He thinks he knows what Christianity is. He thinks he's experienced it by being in the church.

That's a dangerous condition of being in. All because he never embraced Jesus himself for his own sake.
That the blessings of the kingdom of heaven are found in Jesus for his soul. I think there's a particular danger for religious people to become hardened to the gospel.
So have you embraced Jesus for his own sake? He gives your soul every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm.
Have you embraced him for his own sake? So if that's what not embracing him looks like, what does embracing Jesus as all sufficient for your soul look like?
[31:52] That's what I think this rather oddly placed paragraph seems to be about. Jesus' mother and brothers come to the house wanting to speak to him.

And I wonder how this response would go down on Mother's Day. Who is my mother? I don't know what tone he had. Who is my mother and who are my brothers?
I put that on a Mother's Day card. I'm finding that too funny. I didn't write that on your card, Mum. It's all right. And stretching out his hand toward his disciples who are listening to him.
Here are my mother and my brothers. Here. Here. Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.
And I don't think Jesus is downplaying the importance or appreciation of biological family. I don't think he's doing that. He's establishing a new family.
[32:55] A greater family. An everlasting family. As you picture the rather ordinary bunch of disciples sitting around him at this point.

That is doing the will of the Father. They're not listening to the Pharisees who are dismissing him. They are looking to Jesus as the source of life. That is doing the will of the Father.
To see Jesus as all sufficient to give you the kingdom of heaven. Placing your hope in him to fully restore you one day. Full restoration.
Trusting in his resurrection. That he has the ability to give you eternal life. Rejoicing in the forgiveness and peace that you have with God.
Because he has authority to forgive sins. Trusting that confessing your sin, you have this full forgiveness.
[33:55] Soaking in all his teaching. That gives you true perspective in life. It's just life giving. Soul nourishing. And increasingly grasping what this kingdom and all the blessings we now have is all about as we understand the Old Testament and how it's fulfilled in Jesus.

To see Jesus as all sufficient to give you the kingdom of heaven. That we have it right now and the best is yet to come. What happens? If you embrace Jesus like that.
He looks at you. The king looks at you. And he fully and permanently embraces you. You are my mother.
You are my sister. You are my brother. God loves and accepts and treats you and cares for you as family.
Not that this is something approaching what the biological family is like. It's the other way around.

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[35:05] That families, when they're going well, that is a picture. That is a taste of the even better family that we have in the kingdom of God. The joy of knowing that you are totally embraced by God.

Only Jesus can give you this sort of relationship. So if you have embraced Jesus as the source of all heaven's blessings, you already now know that you have, in Jesus and in God the Father, been fully and permanently embraced as family.
He has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Your future is just full of glory. So why on earth would we need to put him to the test for him to prove his love when he's embraced us so fully?
Would you pray with me? Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, I pray that you would press deep into each of our hearts that it is in Jesus that you love us fully and permanently.
Help us to appreciate that you are a good father who has fully embraced us. Please help us to look to Jesus as the source of every blessing.
[36:53] Forgive us for the times where we just dismiss all that and set up this test of our own creation and we evaluate your love based on that.

Forgive us for those times. Please keep us from that. Forgive us again when we do it tomorrow. Please push us back to Jesus again and again to know that life is found in him. In his name I pray. Amen. Amen.

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