

Recognising the Signs

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0:00] We are surrounded by signs in our world, aren't we? And by and large, these are good things because signs are useful. They offer valuable information or else they warn us of dangers.

So I've put up a few signs on the slides tonight. I want to see whether you can recognize them. Some of them are very simple. You should be able to recognize them. So first one, no smoking.

Yes, I hope you realize that. Yep. Next one, slippery and wet. If you're a driver, you should know that. Next one. So there's radiation, yes.

Mostly in hospitals. Is that right? Somewhere? Okay. This one I like. I've actually been in Sydney where this thing has actually happened, but Sydney does not have these signs.

I was standing too close to the curb and a bus came through and just in the nick of time. Otherwise, my handsome face will be no more. Well, our passage tonight is about signs as well.

[1:04] And if you recall from last week, Jesus drove out a mute demon. And some people claimed that he was doing it by Beelzebub, but others wanted a sign from heaven. And so I think this is where Jesus now picks that up and turns his attention.

And as we can see from what he says, he's not pleased with it, is he? Now, you may think, oh, what's wrong with signs? After all, we've just looked at a few signs and they're all helpful.

Well, signs are not necessarily wrong. But as Luke has already shown us in verse 16 of this same chapter, the people were asking for a sign for the wrong reason.

They were doing it in order to test Jesus. In other words, they weren't asking because they genuinely wanted to believe. They were asking to trip Jesus up.

And so Jesus condemns it. But he does so for another reason. And that's because they already have been given a sign. The sign that they're asking for, well, Jesus is the answer.

[2:04] He's the only sign that matters, as I put it in my first bullet point or first heading. So we read in verse 29, as the crowds increase, Jesus said, this is a wicked generation.

It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was assigned to the Ninevites, so also will be the Son of Man to this generation.

Now, imagine if two lovers lived at either ends of Australia. Maybe Perth and Sydney, say. Let's call them Harry and Sally.

I wanted to say Harry and Helen, so I said Harry and Sally. This long-distance relationship had been going on for a while. Things are going well, except for the distance. So one day, Harry decides to quit his job, sell his house, pack his bag, and flies all the way from Sydney to Perth.

Now, when he gets to the airport, he tells Sally that he's moved to Perth to be with her. Now, imagine if Sally then said, you know, Harry, it's nice of you to move to Perth, but I'm still not sure you're committed to this relationship.

[3 :19] Can you give me a sign that you are? I mean, how do you think Harry would react? Probably catch the next flight home, wouldn't he? And that's the same thing here.

The people are asking for a sign when God has already shown them his love for them by sending his son, Jesus. And everything that Jesus says and does validates who he is.

He is the fulfillment of all that has been promised in the Old Testament. He ticks all the boxes. And yet, they're asking for more. I mean, what more can God give, really?

Further, Jesus calls himself the sign of Jonah. And this is a reference, as many of you will know, to his death and resurrection. Jonah, if you've read the Old Testament, went to a place of death, which was in the belly of the fish, for three days.

And then he got vomited out, packed to dry land, to the land of the living. So Jesus will be buried for three days, and then raised and returned to the land of the living.

[4 :24] That's why he's the sign of Jonah. And that sign will be proof of who he is. It will be proof that his preaching is true, that life in God's kingdom can be found through faith in him.

And so for the people to ask for more than that, shows just how wicked they are. Especially when now Jesus compares their response to that of the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba, who is called the Queen of South by Jesus.

So verse 31, The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them. For she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

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.

Now from our Old Testament reading today, we know the Queen of Sheba to be a powerful and rich woman. And what we know of her is that she came a long way to hear Solomon and to hear his wisdom.

[5 :37] So I've got a map of where Sheba is. It's actually down right in the south, in modern day Yemen. Yes, as the scripture says, as the text says, she came to test Solomon.

But when Solomon gave her all the answers she wanted, she believed. She praised God for it. She gave Solomon gifts to pay homage to him.

And we know that she lauded Solomon to say that he was a man of great wisdom. Likewise, the Ninevites, when Jonah finally went to the city to preach to them, they repented.

If you read the prophecy, it says that the greatest to the smallest, the smallest, all repented. Even the mighty king of Nineveh, he put on sackcloth as a sign of mourning.

And then he issued this decree, which I've got on the slide. He said, do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything. Do not let them eat or drink. That's a sign of mourning.

[6 :37] But let people, and animals even, are to be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows?

God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish. Let's look at that. The mighty king humbling himself in the face of Jonah's preaching.

But by contrast, Jesus is actually greater than both Solomon and Jonah in wisdom and power because he's the son of God.

And what's more, the Jews and the Pharisees, they actually had God's word beforehand. The Pharisees particularly, they knew God's law and prophecies inside out, unlike the queen of Sheba and the Ninevites.

And yet, when Jesus, the one they're waiting for, finally comes, and it's clear that he's come with God's authority, they reject him. They wouldn't repent. No wonder Jesus says that even these seemingly inferior Gentiles, you know, because the Jews always thought that they were better than the Gentiles, these inferior, so to speak, Gentiles, like the Ninevites and the queen, will rise up on the day of judgment and condemn their failure to repent.

[8 : 00] And so I just want to pause here to say that if anyone here wants to know where God is to be found, then Jesus is the sign that God has given us.

He's the only sign that matters. What he says is wiser than Solomon. We have to take on board his words in the Bible. You know, there's no need to, you know, read the Bible and then say to God, God, I need more signs, you know, whether it's more visions or another word, extra word, no.

His death and resurrection as recorded for us in the Bible of a historical fact is proof enough. We need to look to that and repent and believe.

And then God will forgive every wrong that we've done in him and then we can start afresh in God's kingdom. Now for the rest of the passage, what Jesus then does is give us tangible signs, firstly, of what true repentance and belief looks like and then secondly, conversely, what rejection of him looks like.

So signs of life and blessing verses 33 to 36 and then signs of war and coming judgment verses 37 and onwards. So let's begin with verse 33 where Jesus shows us what the people who hear God's word and truly take it to heart look like.

[9 : 25] So he says, verse 33, no one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will stand hidden or under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand so that those who come in may see the light.

Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are healthy, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are unhealthy, your body also is full of darkness. Now, I used to be quite confused with Jesus' analogy here, but I think the first reference to the lamp is primarily to Jesus himself.

He's the lamp on the stand. He's the light of the world and so those who come in, come to him, can see because his teaching brings light to the darkness in the world, into their lives.

But then, he moves on to us when he speaks of the eye or our eye. The analogy then becomes us. The eye or our eyes are our lamp because we all need an external source to bring light to the moral and spiritual darkness in our lives.

You see, try as we might, we cannot generate light from within. Without Christ, all we are inside is darkness. So I know nowadays there's a lot of talk about just looking within yourself to find the answers to life.

[10 : 45] Well, I have to say that that's actually wrong and false. instead, only Christ can reveal who we truly are and more importantly, only Christ reveals who God is and how we need to relate to him.

And in verse 34, as we open ourselves to his teaching, then our eyes are healthy. That's a sign of healthy eyes. And as a result, our body is full of light too because when we let the light of Christ in, we become wise through his teaching and we become like him as a result of the work of the Spirit.

So verse 35, see to it then that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore, if your whole body is full of light and no part of it dark, it will be just as full of light as when a lamp shines its light on you.

In other words, as we are transformed to be like Jesus, we begin to shine like Jesus from within, as it were, from the character that God changes us into. It's as though just as good as it were with Christ shining the light directly on us.

Now, genuine faith, I think, is hard to fake. When a person's goodness emanates from their character, you can see, can't you, that they're not putting up a show. It comes from the heart, whatever they say and whatever they do.

[12:12] And so the question is, how do we become like that? How do we practice what Jesus teaches us here? Well, if you've been coming for the last few weeks, I haven't got a new answer for you.

The answer is still the same. We keep hearing God's word humbly and allowing ourselves to be soaked in his word so that it seeps out, as it were, through our pores.

It's like, what happens when you eat too much garlic and then it comes through in your body odor? It's a sort of a, I know it's a bit of a gross analogy, but that's the way it is.

When we keep feeding on God's word, you can't help but allow the aroma of the word, of God's word, to seep out from us. It so seeps out that everything we do in every situation in life, we bring God's word to bear on it.

His word is constantly in our minds, resonating and prompting and challenging us to do the right thing. So for example, when you're about to lose your temper with someone, the spirit uses God's word to remind you to be patient instead.

[13:23] If at school, everyone's competitive and you don't want to share their knowledge and then you've just found this super useful book in the library and you're tempted to take it off the reserve shelf and put it somewhere else so no one else can find it, that's when God's word will prompt you to say, no, that's wrong, that's being selfish.

Each time as we respond to God's word, what that does is we internalize God's word within us and then we shine with our actions and our words like Jesus.

Well, let me give you one more example. Let me take the example of being welcoming at church. I raise this because today the 5pm welcome leaders have just met to talk about welcoming. Now, if we're truly gripped by the gospel, then being welcoming should just flow from that, shouldn't it?

It should in one sense be second nature to us. We want to be welcoming of others because we've been touched, we've been welcomed by God into Christ's body.

And so we don't come to church thinking, you know, today I'm not on welcoming, I'm not rostered, so, you know, I'm not going to be welcoming. Rather, being welcoming is just who we are.

[14:35] whether we're officially on duty or not. Now, in verse 37 and onwards, Jesus deals with the converse, signs of war and judgment because as a result of people not taking God's word to heart.

Now, you might think initially that the opposite of sort of people who take God's word to heart are evil, blatantly evil people, sinners, real sinners. But as you look at who Jesus condemns here, it's rather surprising, isn't it?

Because it's not the so-called sinners that Jesus has a go at. Who does he have a go at? He has a go at those who are self-righteous. People like the Pharisees and experts of the law.

You see, if you don't look to Jesus or to God for your righteousness, then you have to find it somewhere else, don't you? And where do you end up finding it? Well, you have to turn to yourself, don't you?

That's the only other place. And once you've convinced yourself that you're good enough, then the next thing you try and do is convince others that you are as well. And sometimes, even when you're not sure that you're righteous yourself, you still try and convince others that you are, don't you?

[15:50] But the problem is, if what's inside is darkness, then that doesn't work, does it? If there's no light in there, how can it really shine out? So let's look at verse 37 where we read, When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him.

So he went in and reclined at the table, but the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal. Then the Lord said to him, Now then, you Pharisees, clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.

You foolish people, did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But now, as for what is inside, be generous to the poor and everything will be clean for you.

Now this is a rather long passage, so we're not going to look at the rest verse by verse, but in your outline, I've picked out three things that Jesus condemns here. First, he judges those who look good only on the outside.

You see, as I said earlier, the Pharisees know God's law inside out, but what's so damning for them is that their righteousness is only skin deep. So if you go back to my garlic analogy, it's like what they've done is rub garlic-infused oil on their body and try and pass off as if they've eaten garlic.

[17:11] I don't know if he would ever do that, but that's the analogy. They know what God requires of them, and yet, because they don't take it to heart, everything is just done for show.

And so Jesus challenges them to be generous, because you can't fake generosity. When you're being generous, you're not calculative. You ask them in verse 42 not to neglect justice and love of God, because again, these things are costly.

You can't fake true love and true justice. Instead, the Pharisees are content just to obey the letter of the law and no more. So he actually, I love this analogy, Jesus mocks them for tithing their mint and herbs.

Nowadays, if you go to the supermarket, herbs are pretty expensive, aren't they? I paid three or four dollars for a few sprigs of thyme the other day. It's ridiculous. But back then, it was probably cheaper, and they probably grew it in the gardens.

And the analogy here is that the tithe is meant to be a tenth of what you've earned or grown, right? So most people would have offered a tenth of their cash crops, the money making ones, the wheat, the barley, and those kind of things.

[18:25] But the Pharisees would be so precise in their tithing that they'll bring a tenth of their herb garden as well. Stuff that they're growing in the back of their house, they would go back there and take the mint, a tenth of it, I don't know how you do that, take a tenth of the roux and whatever else, and then bring it to tithe it.

And most likely what they did was that they did it in such a way that everyone knew, which is how Jesus knew that they were tithing their mint. And they were doing all this, why?

Well, verse 43, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplace. They were doing it, in other words, to earn other people's praise and respect.

So the idea was, everyone would look at them and go, wow, you're such a righteous person, you even tithe the mint, surely we need to make you the chairman of the synagogue or whatever it is, or you need to come and be the ribbon cutter for this house of God that we're opening.

They did all these things so that they became respectable and then people would say, you take all these places of honor. It's what I call ancient virtue signaling, which is still alive and well today.

[19:45] And so we must take care not to do the same, right? It's easy, for example, to sign petitions on change.org, for example, to get people off Nauru, asylum seekers, even throw Bible verses to shame others.

But then if asylum seekers come into our midst, into our community, into our city, do we do anything to welcome them? Do we help them integrate into our community? Or I could stand up here and preach against abortion and then when a pregnant teenager comes in and asks me to help her keep her baby, I don't lift the finger but just turn her away.

If we think about it, there are plenty of examples, aren't there, of how we can be saying one thing and yet doing another in secret. And I think the key is to always ask this, do we do this just to impress others?

Is what we're doing for the purpose of signaling how good we are? So, ask yourself, are you upset if no one knows the good that you've done?

Does it bother you that you've done something good and nobody knows? Or do you time your good deeds to maximize the amount of attention you get from others? You know, do it when everyone is at church, but when no one's at church, don't do it.

[21:15] Now, because the Pharisees are also teachers, their fake righteousness has an even more devastating impact because not only do they fall and stumble themselves, the second point is, they take others with them as well.

They stumble others. Jesus says in verse 44, they're like unmarked graves. So, if there's a grave, you're not meant to, in Jewish law, custom, walk over it, well, they're unmarked graves, so people stumble over it, they do the wrong thing without knowing.

Now, at this point, the experts of the law weigh in as well, so they realize that, hmm, perhaps Jesus is talking about us. So they say in verse 45, teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.

And Jesus goes, well, I'm glad you notice, because war to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourself will not lift one finger to help them.

Later on in verse 52, he says similar things, war to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourself have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.

[22:21] Ouch! If there's anything the experts of the law take pride in, it's that they had knowledge, and Jesus was accusing them of taking away knowledge from others.

God's But the problem is this, when you yourself have not experienced the grace of God's truth, then God's law becomes just a list of requirements, a checklist that you want to tick off to validate your own righteousness, and then you put that same burden on others as well.

So as parents, if you are a parent, or soon to be, or want to be one day, you tend to place unrealistic burdens on your children. You know, behave at church, have good marks, whatever it is, do all the right things, and then I'll show you approval if you're perfect.

But you never show grace or forbearance. Even when the child comes up to you and says sorry, you just keep scolding them, when what you should be doing is saying, child, I love you and I forgive you.

If we are leaders of a church or members of a church, then if we're like this, then church becomes all about rules and moral perfection. of putting up a good show.

[23:35] And then there's no room for forgiveness, of generosity. If someone slights us, well, we're going to give them the cold shoulder from there on in. What a terrible thing that would be if our church was like that, don't you think?

And thankfully, I would say that even though we're not perfect, yeah, we're not as bad as I say. But there's always the danger, isn't it? that we don't show the grace of God's truth to others because we ourselves have not experienced God's grace.

Now thirdly, what happens is that Jesus then says that when we reject God's truth, at the end of the day, something has to give. Either we submit to that truth and repent or we'll have to try to silence it because our conscience just can't take it.

We just can't keep hearing the truth and ignoring it. We have to shut it out. And just like their forefathers, this is what the experts will end up doing.

So verse 47, war to you because you built tombs for the prophets and it was your ancestors who killed them. It's ironic because they're sort of building tombs to venerate the prophets now.

[24 : 54] But actually, Jesus says, what you're doing instead is you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did. They killed the prophets and now you're building their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.

God's plan, the way God works, is to raise up messengers to bring uncomfortable truth to his people, to call them to repentance. repentance. But it's when we reject that truth that we then stand condemned by our very own actions.

And people kill and persecute and we shut out the truth because we can't bear to keep hearing it. And so the messenger has to be silenced.

And that's exactly what they did to Jesus. They ended up killing him because they couldn't bear to hear his message. And Jesus says that that generation will be held the most responsible.

Why? Because they've had the testimony of all the prophets that have gone before. Jesus says, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah. They've heard it all, they've seen it all.

[26 : 10] And until finally they've even got Jesus, the greatest of all prophets, coming and pointing this all out to them. And if they then still reject Jesus, well, Jesus says there's really no excuse.

They are the most responsible of all. Friends, when we hear God's word and we refuse to take it to heart, then what happens is that we harden our hearts against his word.

Paul says we sear our conscience or hear, as Jesus says, we shut out the light from our eyes. And sadly, I have to say that it is possible to keep coming to church week in, week out, and still be doing that.

You know, we can say the right prayers, even say the prayer of confession. We can sing the right songs, even hear the words. And yet, if our hearts are hardened, we will not take what God says to heart.

Then his word will fall on deaf ears. And then, that's the worst situation to be in, isn't it? Because on the one hand, we think ourselves righteous, when actually the reality is, God is saying to us, woe is you.

[27 : 28] Now, thankfully, I can say probably that most of us are not in that situation, because you are responding to God's word, even when sometimes it's hard, and you're being challenged to change your way.

So, thank God for that. But let us continue to live like that, to have the light of Christ shine in us through his word, take everything to heart, and live it out in obedience, and not just go through the motions of doing religion.

Well, let me pray. Father, for those of us who are searching for you today, please help us to know that Jesus is the one in whom to put our faith.

Help us to repent to turn from our old way of life and to follow Jesus. And for all of us, help us to hear your word, receive it in submission, take it to heart, and change our ways in obedience.

[28 : 36] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.