

The Greater Than Man, Part II

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[0 : 00] All right, I realize I forgot to say welcome. Welcome. Welcome all of you uninterested in American sports. So my name is Aaron and I'm the minister for this service. It's so nice to have you here. If you're new to St. John's, I'm on staff here and I'd love to meet you.

Come and say hi afterwards if you are new, if you feel like doing that. So we're in a series and we're going through the gospel of Matthew and we hear it Matthew 12, 38 and onwards here. At this point in the gospel, Jesus is really popular. He's got these big crowds following him around and those crowds are beginning to say things like, is this the Messiah? But the opposition of Jesus is also rising up. So you have these religious leaders have started the smear campaign. You remember this from last week if you were here. They start saying things like this. Yes, Jesus can do powerful things, but his power is from the devil. So in today's passage, we have the short story of Jesus responding to these religious leaders whose aggression is growing. So let's walk through the story. So some Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign. There's nothing wrong with asking for proof for your faith. But the problem is this is not a sincere request. We know from previous miracles that Jesus had done. Nothing was going to change these guys' hearts. Early on in this chapter, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. And what was their response in verse 14 of this chapter? It was, we must destroy him. Jesus healed a man who was deaf and mute immediately before this little story here. And their response, he's working with the devil. So it doesn't seem like anything that Jesus can do can please these people. Because they had a, what you'd call like a fixed position. They had already decided what Jesus was. He was some type of sorcerer who would ruin everything and he must be stopped. And what does Jesus say in response to all of this? No sign for you. No sign for you, he says. Now why not? Because he sees through their request. He sees the heart behind it and he calls them out. And he says, you guys are evil and adulterous in verse 39, which is really strong language. But let's have a look at these two words here, evil and adulterous. Why evil? Because whilst the Pharisees were asking for a sign, sort of feigning this interest, they were planning his murder. They had no interest in obeying Jesus. They wanted Jesus to obey them. Show us some of your magic tricks, Jesus. We'll still want to kill you. But just for fun, perform. Do some of that freaky stuff that you do. That's why he calls them evil. And he calls them adulterous because they were cheating on God.

[3 : 15] The Bible frequently describes the church as one of the analogies for the relationship between the church and God as the church is like a lover. The church is God's lover.

And the Pharisees are cheating on their lover. They are more committed to their systems and more committed to their institution and more committed to their human traditions than exploring the possibility that God has come to them in this man, Jesus. Okay, so what happens next? Well, Jesus recognizes that this whole request for a sign is just a total red herring. He says, no sign for you. And he goes on and he says, no sign except the sign of Jonah who was in a fish for three days. So will the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. So Jesus is referring to the cross and being in the tomb like Jonah was in the fish for three days and then coming out alive. Of course, you probably know this. So Jesus says, I'm not going to perform for you. I'm not going to perform tricks for you. But there's a really big sign coming down the pipeline. Something big is coming down the pipeline. Although Jesus does anticipate that most of the Pharisees, not all of them, some of them come to him, but most of the Pharisees will still reject him despite going to the cross, dying and rising from the dead. And we can jump forward to chapter 27 to realize this. So you're, I don't know if you remember this, but in Matthew 27, the religious leaders, the Pharisees, they go to Pilate and they say, we're really worried that somebody is going to steal the body of Jesus and make it look like he rose from the dead. So we can't, we cannot let that happen.

So let's put a huge boulder in front of the tomb and guard it with soldiers. They were so worried about that. And then in Matthew 28, after the resurrection, the guards who saw it happen, they go to the Pharisees and explain what happens. Jesus rose from the dead. There was angels. It was amazing. And the Pharisees say, well, here's what they don't say. They don't say, oh, it turns out we're wrong. This is amazing. No, they say to the disciples, and this is quoting from Matthew 28, they say, tell the people. So they're talking to the guards. They say, I'll tell the people, his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep. So they try and cover up, this is a ridiculous situation. They try and cover up the resurrection by advancing the very story they were trying to prevent by guarding the tomb. So I'll say it again. It's all very ironic.

[5 : 58] They were so worried about someone stealing the body, they had guards watching the tomb. Then they became so worried about the resurrection, they wanted everyone to think somebody stole the body. You can't please these guys. They were very hard-hearted. Now back to Matthew 12.

Listen to what Jesus says to these religious leaders. This is verses 41 and 42. And this is where the passage, as you were going through it, you want to go, yep, I understand that. I understand that. Ooh, that's a bit odd. What does that mean? This is where we start getting to the stuff that's a bit different. Verse 41, Jesus says to them, 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, someone greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the south, so this is Sheba, all right, 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, someone, something greater than Solomon is here. Okay, what's that all about first? Jesus kind of sticks with the whole Jonah theme, but sort of makes a new but related point. So he says this, the men of Nineveh will rise in judgment. Okay, he is not saying that the dead men of this place called Nineveh will come out of the ground and start yelling judgy things at the Pharisees. Okay, that's not what he's saying. He's saying the people of Nineveh will judge them by their example, by how they responded to God's word. So I'll remind you of the story of Jonah. So Jonah was a prophet called by God to preach to these people of Nineveh. The Ninevites were terrible. They were terrible.

They hated God. They hated God's people. Jonah, remember, called by God to preach to them. Jonah did not think these people deserved the chance to repent. So Jonah jumped in a boat and ran away so if Nineveh's over there, he jumped in a boat and went in that direction when God said, go preach to them. And then, you know, out of the boat, whale, island, you know, so you know, maybe the rest of the story. And then he eventually gets to Nineveh in chapter three of Jonah. And here's what he says. And here's what happens. Jonah began to go into the city going a day's journey.

Then he called out, yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown. So that's his sermon. And the people of Nineveh believed God and they called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them. It's a great story. So Nineveh repents, the whole city, when a third-rate disobedient prophet eventually turns up. Like, it's amazing. The Pharisees have the Son of God doing these incredible miracles, preaching these amazing sermons, the Son of God right there, and the Pharisees reject him.

These are the religious experts. They reject him. Nineveh, remember, he can't just say it one more time, Nineveh gets an eight-word sermon from a grumpy old prophet who does not want to be there, who does not like them, and they repent. The Pharisees have the whole Bible. They have signs.

[9 : 41] They have miracles. And they reject Jesus. And then we have the Queen of the South, who's the Queen of Sheba. So she's like 800 years previous to Jesus here. So who's that? What are they talking about there? What's Jesus talking about there?

The Queen of Sheba, she was this woman of enormous wealth and beauty and power. But she recognized the truth and the wisdom of God. She heard about the wisdom of Solomon, and she traveled this huge distance to hear the wisdom of Solomon. This is 1 Kings 3. Awesome humility. Pharisees didn't have to go anywhere. Jesus came. He was in their neighborhood. He was just over the road. The Son of Man saying greater things than Solomon. He's in their neighborhood, and they reject him. So this is what Jesus means when he says, Sheba and the Ninevites will judge the Pharisees. Because the last people in the world you'd expect to turn it around and respond to God do.

And these guys, the religious experts, the ones that should have known, who were paid to study the Bible, rejected Jesus.

And then Jesus has this little story in verses 43 to 45. It's a really odd little story. Let me read it to you. This is what he immediately says after the sign of Jonah stuff. He says this.

[11:24] So he's again talking to the Pharisees. He says, So what's that all about?

So that's Jesus' words immediately after saying the Queen of Sheba and Ninevite stuff. It's an odd little story to our ears. Someone is exercised. They try and clean up their act. They reform their life. But the demons come back with seven mates, and their life is worse than before. Firstly, first thing I want to say about this. This is not a story from which we derive our theology around demons or evil. This is like a fable or a story or an anecdote with a single point. And here's the point. Jesus is saying, See, the Pharisees at this point in their history were making these attempts to reform their religion.

So they were doubling down on the rule keeping. And Jesus says, That's sort of the point. Because how does that play out?

[12:54] How does that play out when we think it's completely up to us as Christians to reform ourselves? There is only two results from that effort. Pride and despair.

Those are the only two places you can land if that's your strategy. Pride, because I've made myself good and better than others. God's got to love me now.

Or despair. You're just haunted by your failures. Believing someone like you, or God could never love or use.

I'm going to finish up here. Jesus is very concerned about the condition of our hearts, obviously.

The Pharisees were sitting on a mountain of evidence. But would have nothing to do with Jesus, apart from trying to kill him. And their problem was not a lack of information.

[13:56] It was inclination. They had this fixed position. They had a heart problem. Now what's all that got to do with us here today? I have four very short points of application.

The first one here is, you know, don't be like the Pharisees. Demanding some extra special sign when God was at work all around them.

God was doing stuff all around them. They just were sort of like playing with him, wanting something extra. I'll say this first of all.

Ask the Spirit to help you to see where God is at work in your life. What is God doing in your life right now? Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal that to you. Second thing I'll say, ask for the humility of the people of Nineveh and Sheba.

They responded. Sheba traveled 1,500 miles on the back of a camel to hear from Solomon. I find coming to church a hassle sometimes.

[14:59] And I'm paid to be here. Nineveh, this was a people group, the enemies of God.

And they turned themselves around. No, they didn't turn themselves around. The Holy Spirit spoke to them through his word.

They were challenged. Be like these people. Ask the Spirit to speak to you in your life and ask you, God, where in my life do I have a fixed position where you're doubling down on something?

No, no, this is the way it's got to be. Ask the Holy Spirit to soften up that position because, oh, you could be wrong. Third, remember the sign.

Actually, I've only got, I'm going to make three points actually. Remember the sign that Jesus said was the big one? The one that really mattered that was coming down the pipeline? He said, I'm going to be in the earth three nights.

[16:06] 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says these words. He says, he goes, he says, for I delivered to you as of first importance what I received. So Paul is about to say to them the primary thing, the big thing about Christianity.

And he goes on to say that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day.

This is the big thing. The Pharisees had their rules, they had their institution, and they couldn't get past these things. For you, it might be a personal morality.

It's like, I've just got to do this because this is what Christians do. They don't say these words, they don't do these things. The Pharisees had their rules, their institution, their human traditions. They couldn't get past those things and they actually missed God because the big thing wasn't the big thing.

One of our modern dangers is this, is we forget the centerpiece of our faith and sometimes focus on the results of faith. Or we forget the centerpiece of the gospel and we focus on the results of the gospel.

[17 : 11] Here is what I mean. The gospel is that Jesus died on the cross and he rose again for us so we could be reconciled with God. That is the centerpiece of the gospel. And this is why the gospel is explained as good news, that you receive and not good advice.

Now the gospel does result in a new way of living, for sure. But the gospel and the results of the gospel are connected, but they shouldn't be confused with another.

I'll say it again. The gospel and the results of the gospel are connected and linked and should be distinguished, but they shouldn't be confused with one another. One guy said it like this. The gospel is not the results of the gospel.

The gospel is not the results of the gospel, meaning because of the gospel, you might go and care for the poor. You might want to impact culture positively.

You might want to see changes and your positive changes in your community. That is wonderful.

We should do these things, but they are not the gospel.

[18 : 22] They are the results of the gospel. Keep these things distinguished, but linked. I guess I'm saying, keep the gospel the big thing.

Keep the gospel the gospel. Because when you make something else the center point, you miss God. It happened to the Pharisees. And they were very smart. They were the experts. Don't be like them.

Don't miss God. Amen.