

## ***“Just Give Me A Sign, God”***

*Matthew 12:38-45*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • August 18, 2013

There are some people who see all kinds of things as signs from God. This past spring, a woman in Florida was convinced that she had received a divine sign in a most unlikely place. It came in her box of goldfish crackers. Patti Burke says that when she picked up this goldfish cracker she could tell it was different. It had some markings on it. One looked like a cross with a circle around it and the other one, near the head, she says represents a golden crown. She says that at first she thought she had won some special promotion from Pepperidge Farms. But when she called they assured her that they had no such contest going. That's when she decided that the marks on her cracker must be a sign from God. She sees this as divine confirmation that God loves her and is involved in the world.

I think every one of us would like to have a sign from God. Maybe some indication of his will for your life, for your future. Maybe a sign about whether to take a new job or to move to a different city. Life would be so much easier if God would just show up and give us a clear sign, right? I don't know about you but I rarely get that kind of clear sign from God, but we keep hoping.

There are some people, however, who *demand* a sign from God. I'm talking primarily about people who would consider themselves skeptics. They say something like, "I'll believe that God exists when he rips open the skies, comes down and says, 'hey, I'm real.'" That's like saying, "I refuse to believe in God unless he does what *I* want him to do."

That's exactly what we find the scribes and Pharisees doing with Jesus. At first glance their request seems reasonable and respectful. The scribes and Pharisees say, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." Teacher, or rabbi, was usually a term of respect. But this comes in the context of the

conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees increasing. They were upset because Jesus' disciples were plucking grain and eating it on the Sabbath. They began to plot Jesus' death because he healed a man's withered hand on the Sabbath. They called him demonic when he healed someone who was demon-possessed. Now they come and ask for a sign.

The question, then, is what kind of sign are they looking for? What would be a convincing sign? Jennifer Fulwiler lives in Austin and writes about this desire for a sign from God on her website. She tells about her conversion from a committed atheist to a committed Christian. At one point she was beginning to wrestle with the idea of faith but wasn't yet convinced. She writes, "I wondered, if God's so all-powerful and wants us to believe in him and can do whatever he wants, why doesn't he just give me one big sign and get this over with?" That led her to wonder what kind of sign she would accept. A bolt of lightning? A chorus of angels? As she thought about the possibilities she realized that she would in all likelihood rationalize each one, finding some reason to dismiss it.

The irony is that Jesus has been performing signs all over the place. What kind of sign would convince the Pharisees? Healing an incurable disease like leprosy? Restoring sight to the blind? Raising someone from the dead? Casting out demons? Matthew has shown us that Jesus did each one of these, most of them in public. His miracles weren't a secret. But the Pharisees still didn't believe in Jesus. The truth is that there is no sign that would have been sufficient for them because they didn't want to believe. They refused to believe in spite of all the evidence.

Atheists today do the same thing. They are confronted with an incredible amount of

evidence for the existence of God. The more science explores the complexity of the created world, the more it becomes obvious that it's not merely accidental. The universe didn't just happen. The most convincing science points to intelligent design. But the atheist rejects the overwhelming evidence and says, "I need a better sign. Prove it."

In addition to the physical world we have historical accounts of the supernatural things Jesus did. We have four distinct books in the Bible, the gospels, written by different people, telling us the things Jesus did. There are also other ancient books that describe the kinds of things Jesus did.

Jesus sees through the Pharisees words and so he answers 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." This is one of those cryptic-sounding sayings of Jesus that just don't make sense apart from their context. What exactly is the sign of Jonah? When we read the account of Jonah we find that he didn't perform any signs or supernatural acts. But instead the sign was his being alive, preaching in Nineveh after he was as good as dead. So Jonah himself is the sign that Jesus is referring to.

Matthew goes on to explain what he means. "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." Jesus, of course, is referring to his death and burial and then his resurrection on the third day. The only sign that will be given will not be a sign that Jesus performs. The sign will be Jesus alive again. That's the greatest sign ever given. It's the proof of everything Jesus said. It's the proof that he is alive and working in the world.

Jesus points out that when Jonah finally preached in Nineveh, the people repented. They saw the evidence and believed. But, he says, the Pharisees and scribes saw better

evidence from the one who is greater than Jonah and they refused to believe. So on judgment day the people of Nineveh will be witnesses against the scribes and Pharisees because of their unbelief. In the same way, the Queen of Sheba, who travelled from Ethiopia to speak with Solomon, will testify against the Pharisees.

In the last section of our passage Matthew seems to shift his attention to demon possession. Here again we can't look at this out of context. This is not so much about how demons operate as it is a warning against unbelief. Jesus says that the unclean spirit goes out seeking rest but doesn't find any. Apart from Christ, you and I won't find any rest either. So the spirit decides to return to the same person. When it arrives it finds everything tidied up and so it moves back in with seven others more evil than itself.

The point is that it's not enough to remove the evil from your life, you have to replace it with something else. Evil cannot exist in the presence of God. R.C. Sproul puts it this way: "When we are converted, the Spirit of God comes to live inside of us. Every believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and where the Spirit of God dwells, no demon can take up residence." The person who fills his life with Jesus is not at risk from evil spirits. Matthew then brings this back to the situation with the scribes and Pharisees. As one commentator wrote, "Israel has had the opportunity to see and hear one greater than Jonah and one greater than Solomon. All to no avail. Therefore her judgment will be harsher. The last state will be worse than the first.

So what about us? Is it wrong for us to ask for signs from God? Not necessarily. And sometimes God does grant us signs. But we don't have the right to demand them or expect them and there are a couple of principles we need to remember. First, we should never ask for a sign that makes it alright to act in a way that contradicts God's

Word. For example, it would be wrong to say, "Lord, if you want me to rob this bank, let a blue Chevy drive by in the next 2 minutes." God is clear in his Word that it's wrong to steal. Second, God has already given us the only sign we need: Jesus raised from the dead. That's the only evidence we need to believe that Jesus really is God.

James Boice says, "there is far more evidence for the truth of Jesus' claims today, including his bodily resurrection, than there was in the first Christian century. Lives have

been changed. History has been altered. Good has been done. All because of Jesus. You and I have been presented with overwhelming evidence. If we still refuse to believe then the people of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba will testify against us. And our last state will be worse than the first. The truth is that if we want a sign, all we really have to do is open our Bibles.

*Amen*