

Introduction

Have you been keeping up with Christian Yellich this year? He already has 31 home runs so far this year and leads the league. The pitchers keep throwing, and Yellich keeps swinging and hitting the balls out of the park.

Working our way through Matthew, it would seem that the Pharisees could be likened to the pitchers who face Yellich. Very confident in themselves and scheming to bring Jesus down, they continue to put the ball over the plate with pitches they are sure Jesus cannot hit. Jesus, however, is unflappable. He swings the bat and the ball sails out of the park time after time. It happens again in our text for this morning. It seems the Pharisees will never understand how unmatched they are in trying to oppose Jesus.

[Read Text; Pray]

In this text this morning, we see yet another example of how Jesus responds to the adversarial attempts of the Pharisees to bring him down. Try as they might, they cannot shake him. In fact with every effort, not only do the Pharisees fail to bring Jesus down, they end up catching themselves in the very trap they set for him. They throw their best punch, but it lands in their own face.

The text begins with

I. The Request for a Sign.

A. The Pharisees have clearly devised a strategy. They have conspired together against Jesus, how to destroy him, and they are carrying out their plan. First, they played the "Beelzebul" card and Jesus warned them they were on the verge of committing the sin from which there is no turning back. Now they use the "sign" card. Joined by some of the scribes, they say, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." If you are like me, you are saying, "now wait a minute, what has Jesus been doing for the last 5 chapters?" He only cleansed a leper, raised a paralyzed servant without even going to his home, healed Peter's mother-in-law, calmed a storm with nothing more than a command, and cast out a multitude of demons from 2

men. And that is just in chapter 8! In chapter 9, Jesus healed a paralytic and two blind men; he raised a dead girl to life and enabled a demon oppressed man to speak. And as recently as chapter 12, Jesus restored a man's withered hand and brought sight and speech to a man oppressed by a demon. And these are the miracles that were recorded for us by Matthew. Twice he also had said that the multitudes were bringing people to Jesus with every kind of disease and he was healing them all. So now the Pharisees ask for a sign as though nothing Jesus has done to this point is a sign. Can they seriously assert that nothing to this point substantiates his claims?

B. The insinuation of the Pharisees is that Jesus should perform some miracle so stunning and so sensational that no one could deny it. By making such an insinuation, however, the Pharisees display that in fact for them there could be no such miracle. There can be no sign they will admit is stunning enough. They are so determined to reject Jesus that nothing is going to meet their criteria.

James Montgomery Boice used to say, "If God decided to give the whole world a sign about Jesus, he could arrange the stars in the sky in such a way that they would spell out the message, 'Jesus is my only begotten Son.' But if God did even that, people would simply say, 'I wonder what astronomical perturbation caused that chance alignment of the stars.'" The Pharisees and some of the scribes would be right smack in the middle of the doubters because they are determined not to believe in Jesus. Sproul says, "They do not believe because they do not want to believe."

II. The Response of the Son.

A. Jesus nails these guys. "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign," he declares. The request they have made, once again, exposes the condition of their hearts. They were morally corrupt and unfaithful to their rightful husband. This generation was no better than their ancestors, who had also been unfaithful to the God who rescued them out of Egypt, brought them to this land, and gave it to them. This outlandish request for a sign reveals not that it is the fault of God if they don't believe in his Messiah. It is their own fault because they are determined to put before him a demand so ridiculous he would not perform it. Then they could

absolutely justify their rejection of him. They are not interested in a sign. They are interested in an opportunity to display before the crowds that Jesus is an impostor. They are evil and adulterous.

B. So Jesus refuses. He refuses to grant whatever sign the Pharisees and scribes might ask him to perform. He would not agree to give them a sign according to their whims. However, he will provide a marvelous, amazing, and attesting sign. It is a sign of his own choosing. He chooses to give the sign of the prophet Jonah.

Remember the account of the prophet Jonah? The Ninevites were among the most ruthless and wicked people alive in the days of Jonah the prophet. And God called Jonah to go proclaim that God was going to destroy them. Jonah hated those people and refused to obey God. He went and bought passage on a boat going in the wrong direction. But God brought an incredible storm upon the vessel. It threatened the ship and everyone on board. Jonah knew it was his fault. He told the sailors to throw him overboard and the seas would become calm. They did and they did. Sinking in the water, Jonah was swallowed by a great fish. He remained in the fish a span of 3 days-and-nights. The fish spit Jonah out back on dry land. He went to Nineveh and preached God's message of destruction. The sign that he was to be believed was the fact he had spent 3 days and nights in the fish. No doubt he bore evidence on his body to prove it. The Ninevites believed his message and repented of their sin. God relented and did not destroy that generation.

The sign of Jonah is the 3 days and 3 nights he spent in the belly of the great fish. He was swallowed up and then released from his dark underwater prison. The consummate sign God will give even to these to confirm that Jesus is Messiah and Lord is that as with Jonah, Jesus would be swallowed up for three days and nights. He would be swallowed up by the earth, but afterward, he too would come forth. That Jesus was referring to his burial and subsequent resurrection was not entirely clear to the listeners at this point, but it became clearer and clearer. The disciples of Jesus may not have expected him to rise from the dead, but the scribes and Pharisees had no doubts about what he had promised. The day after the crucifixion the Pharisees and chief priests gathered before Pilate and

said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, "After three days I will rise." They asked for an order that soldiers guard the tomb lest the disciples steal Jesus' body away and say he had risen from the dead. So Jesus predicted his death and burial and his subsequent resurrection. And that is the sign of signs that Jesus is the Christ, that everything he said is true; that people better listen to him and heed his message.

Not only the resurrection but also the way it is reported is a sign. The disciples were not looking for Jesus to rise from the dead. He said it, but they had not grasped it. Those who did grasp it tried to preempt and disprove it. They stationed soldiers at the tomb. And when Jesus rose, they paid those soldiers to say that the disciples had come and stolen the body away while they were sleeping. The resurrection of Christ attests to who he is. It attests to the entire Bible. It is a sign of signs! The Apostle Paul preached to the Athenians, God "commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed: and of this he has given assurance by raising him from the dead."

But will people believe? Will you believe? Do you ever experience doubts and question, is this all really true? The sign of Jesus' resurrection is a gift from God to bolster your faith. The evidence for the validity of the resurrection is enormous. God has given it to us as assurance that Christ is the Savior and his word is true. It is to be believed and it is to be obeyed.

C. Jesus not only refused to give the Pharisees the sign of their choosing. He also declared their final doom. The Pharisees would be condemned at the judgment for their unbelief amid great opportunity. In fact, on the day of judgment, they will be condemned by two of the most unlikely subjects.

1. They will be condemned by the men of Nineveh. Nineveh was an Assyrian city of just incredible wickedness. They were bad of the bad, comparable to a city like Sodom. But according to Jesus, they will rise up at the judgment and condemn the wicked generation standing before Jesus.

This is not the language of it will be worse for this generation than for the Ninevites. Rather certain Ninevites will condemn Israelites in the day of judgment. When Jonah was spit out of the fish and came preaching the judgment of God, the Ninevites believed and they repented. The guilt of the Jews standing before Jesus is exacerbated by the fact that something greater than Jonah is there. In fact their outward advantages were among the richest the world has known. The Ninevites were addressed by Jonah. He was an outsider, a Jew, a minor prophet without a reputation. He was clearly a selfish, sinful man who himself rebelled against God. He preached a message of doom without any miracles to confirm his message. The people to whom he preached did not have the word of God or a heritage of his working. But they repented.

Meanwhile, those standing before Jesus were hearing from the Son of God himself. He was spotless and sinless who spoke from a heart of compassion with surpassing authority. He was a selfless man who obeyed God completely. His message was gracious and hopeful, promising forgiveness. Innumerable miracles of kindness and relief attested to him and his message. Prophecy foretells that he was to come. And the people to whom he came possessed a history of God working with them and the oracles of God themselves. But they would not believe.

2. And yet Ninevites would not be the only ones to condemn these Jews. The Queen of the South would also rise up at the judgment with this generation and judge it. She came from the ends of the earth to hear Solomon's wisdom. But they reject wisdom personified.

To all the advantages of the Jews we just listed, we could add that they received a strong and compelling invitation from Jesus to come.

The Queen of the South, meanwhile, had to endure a long and difficult journey to reach Solomon. She came without invitation but because she had heard reports. She came and marveled at one far less able to reflect the truth and glory of God. But she came all that way, probably some 1200 miles, and she came bearing gifts. The Jews bore no gifts for Jesus, only a designed determination to destroy him. So she will stand and condemn.

D. There is one more point Jesus will make to this adulterous generation. The Pharisees are in fact overrun with evil. Their last state will be far worse than the first. Verses 43-45 are somewhat difficult, but they are clearly meant to describe a swelling evil in the hearts of the Jewish generation. It is as though they were freed from a demon and got their house in order only to have that demon return with seven other demons more evil than itself. When John the Baptist came preaching repentance, multitudes of Jews and even the Pharisees turned out to be baptized as a sign of their repentance. When the Pharisees came to John he like Jesus called out, "you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

It is as though they got their house in order for a time, but now evil has returned to their hearts in a worse way than before and it is only going to get worse as time moves forward. Yes, what can be worse than a generation who rejects its promised Messiah, who call for a heinous criminal to be released from prison and for the spotless lamb of God to be sent to the cross for crucifixion? This evil generation is full of adversaries of God. And yet by mentioning the Ninevites and the Queen of the South, Jesus issues an appeal to any who will turn back. If they will just repent of their evil and embrace the one greater than Jonah and greater than Solomon, they too will stand at the judgment rather than being condemned.

E. Last week I highlighted the fact of coming judgment. This week it is appropriate that I emphasize the fact that in the judgment many will be condemned but there will also be some who will be saved. And those who will be saved are those who respond to the word. The Ninevites responded to God's word through Jonah. He preached God's wrath and they turned. The Queen of the South responded to God's word through Solomon. He preached the wisdom of God and she believed.

Paul said, the "Jews demand signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and Christ the wisdom of God." Skeptics and hard-hearted sinners, I call you today to be like the Ninevites and like the queen. Hear the word and repent. Flee from the judgment, the wrath of God. And seek out wisdom the wisdom of God who is Jesus Christ. Call upon him for rescue. Seek him

who died for sinners, who was crucified for sins but who rose again from the dead victorious, who by his life removed the sting of death and the stain of sin.

I close this morning with . . .

III. The Reality of Spiritual Adultery.

Jesus calls the generation of the Pharisees and those gathered with them an evil and ADULTEROUS people. They had made themselves to be adversaries of God. They were unfaithful to him. Their hearts were set not on what God wanted. They were centered on themselves and gratifying themselves. This text is a warning to us all to beware the sin of spiritual adultery. It blinds. It hardens. It removes sight and replaces it with willful blindness.

James uses this term “adultery” to describe people who are ruled by their passions and fleshly desires. He asks,

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Passions are strong desires that run through our flesh, not just our body but our fleshly selves. The Greek word is the base from which we get our word hedonism—the idea that pleasure is the chief goal of life. These passionate desires carry on a bitter campaign to gain satisfaction. They come in a variety of forms. Most obvious is the passion for sexual and other sensual pleasures. But there are a number of such pleasures. They include relational pleasure, emotional pleasure, material pleasure, and even vengeful pleasure (pleasure in taking vengeance).

Looking at the Pharisees we might ask whether there is a passion to which their hearts are bowing. And the answer is, “yes.” The Pharisees love recognition. Jesus said of them, “They love the place of honor at the feasts

and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.” They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For the Pharisees there was a passion for the pleasure of being recognized, for being held in esteem, for being in a place of influence. They were guilty of spiritual adultery because they gave themselves over to passion, the passion for recognition. James asked, “What is the source of quarrels and fighting among you, is it not your passions that wage war among your members?” And because of the Pharisees’ devotion to fulfilling that passion, they would stop at nothing to quarrel with Jesus, reject Jesus, and ultimately murder him.

James’ point in his epistle was to exhort followers of Jesus to war against their passions. Do not be ruled by them but rule over them. And the reasons are several. For one thing they are the reason people argue and bicker. They are also the reason people hate each other and kill each other. Moreover, they are the reason a person’s prayers go unanswered. And most importantly being ruled by one’s passions makes one a spiritual adulterer and an enemy of God.

As we look at the Pharisees this morning, brothers and sisters, do not think this is only a message needed by those who are out-and-out rejecting Jesus. No it is a message needed by every follower of Christ that we not succumb to the lure of worldly passion to whatever worldly desire we can have. The freedom Christ brings to our hearts is a freedom from enslavement to such passions.

Conclusion

In a few weeks after I get back from my summer sabbatical, we will be back in Matthew and we will come to chapter 13 where Jesus talks about four soils. Three of those soils do not evidence saving faith. One of those fruitless soils is a soil in which the seed of the word falls and takes root. The word is believed. It is embraced. BUT in the end it is choked out by thorns which represent the cares and riches and pleasures of life. Their fruit does not mature. We must watch carefully the pleasures that wage war among our members that we ourselves do not become spiritual adulterers.