

Life Group Questions

October 23th, 2022

Requests Leading to Treasure – Pastor Ray Harms-Wiebe – [Matthew 12:38-45](#)

To the Life Group leader: thank you for your ministry leading this Life Group. **Take time to review the questions, selecting those you believe will be most helpful for your group study.** You will not have time to use all the questions. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you lead, as you select questions, and as you guide the discussion.

Reconnect

Come together with these preliminary questions:

- How has God gifted you to serve Him?
- How will you serve Him this fall at Willingdon Church?
- Where has God placed you in the city? What is your role there?

Open in Prayer

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through the text, the questions, and each other.

Message Recap Questions

Review the message using these questions

1. What stood out to you most in this week's message?
2. What was the most meaningful thing you heard in the message? Why?
3. What questions are still lingering?

Questions

1. What request did the scribes and the Pharisees make (Matthew 12:38-39)? How did Jesus answer?
2. Had these people seen signs from Jesus (give evidence from the context)? How does this explain Jesus response? (Did Jesus refuse all requests to do miracles?)
3. Explain the significance of the sign of the prophet Jonah (Matthew 12:40). How would this confirm Jesus' claims? (Did Jesus give people adequate proof to confirm His claims?)
4. Who did Jesus say would give evidence against the people of His generation (Matthew 12:41-42)? Explain the point. (How did Jesus view the story of Jonah?)
5. How did Jesus describe the relationship of an unclean spirit with a man in Matthew 12:43-45? What would be the application to the people of Jesus' generation?

6. What can we learn from the illustration of the demon? How do people today sometimes make a similar mistake?

Choose Your Next Step

What next step will you commit to for the upcoming week (and beyond)?

Closing Prayer

A closing prayer is an effective way to point people back to our Loving Father as they seek to apply their new learnings throughout the week. Ask group members to share what they sense God calling them to. Pray for each other and commit to continue to do so during the week as people step out in obedience to God's leading.

Commentary

1. What request did the scribes and the Pharisees make (Matthew 12:38-39)? How did Jesus answer?

It is curious that after the miracles that Matthew has just recorded (Matthew 12: 13, 22–23) people should be asking Jesus for a sign. But since both Mark and Luke tell us that they were “testing” (or “tempting”) him, we should not take this to be a sincere request. It leads Jesus to point out their failings as a generation; compared with even some Gentiles from earlier days they were found wanting. Perhaps they held that a sign “was a divine credential. It was proof or documentation that a person truly spoke for God.” He goes on, “The difference between a sign and a miracle was that signs were believed to be delivered immediately from heaven, while miracles were done here on earth, mediately, through people and things ... a sign appeared in or from the sky; a miracle happened on earth”. There may be something in this, but “the sign of Jonah” does not fit the definition, nor do the “signs” done.

38. *Then* is often used in Matthew without any great precision, indicating simply that something happened at a later time (see on Matthew 2:7), but it is not unlikely that on this occasion it points to something that followed pretty closely. Although the verb *answered* may be used somewhat loosely, the fact that these men *answered* Jesus seems to indicate a response to what he had just said. The *scribes* were the experts in the law, scholars whose field was the study of Scripture; here as often they are linked with the *Pharisees*. As Matthew speaks of some of them, it seems that this was an informal group, and not anything in the way of an official delegation. This little group addressed Jesus courteously as *Teacher* (it corresponded to the title “Rabbi”), and said that they wanted to see *a sign* from him. They do not explain what they mean by *a sign*, but it is clear that they were asking him to accredit himself by doing some striking miracle; apparently they did not regard his miracles of healing as meeting their need. After all, in antiquity there were many “healers” who did things that ordinary folk could not understand but who in the end proved to be no more than charlatans. The Pharisees had already ascribed some of Jesus’ work to Beelzeboul (Matthew 12:24). They were asking him now for something that unmistakably came from God. In the Old Testament sometimes such signs were given (Exod. 4:8–9; Isa. 7:11), but they were God’s good gift, not the result of a demand from unbelieving sceptics. The Pharisees evidently saw a “sign” as a miraculous happening produced on demand to prove that God was with a person. Could Jesus produce evidence that it was God who was enabling him and not some unusual human power or some demonic force? In that they were testing him out (Mark 8:11), it is plain that they did not expect him to come up with anything that would satisfy them. The kind of miracle they were demanding Jesus consistently refused to perform. His miracles were always directed toward the fulfilling of a need felt by those for whom the miracle was performed. Jesus was no circus performer, gratifying the appetite for wonders on the part of people who were not serious about spiritual things. From the beginning he refused to demand that God should do miraculous things for him (Matthew 4:5–7).

39. Jesus' strong reaction demonstrates his abhorrence of the showmanship his inquisitors were seeking. He castigates them as *an evil and adulterous generation*, where *generation* extends the scope of his condemnation beyond his immediate questioners to the sum total of the contemporaries they represent. They are evil, for their profession of religion is joined to a massive selfishness whereby they impose their own rules on God, and adulterous, for they have turned their proper relation of fidelity to God into spiritual adultery; their demand for a sign showed their failure to trust God and their readiness to try to impose on him a miraculous act of their own choosing where they should have been content with faithful service. People who serve God in faithfulness may indeed see signs, but sensation-seeking unbelievers will not see them. Signs are granted to faith, so how can the faithless ever see them?

"No sign will be given it," Jesus says, where *given* points to the fact that "signs" are not to be obtained by aggressive demand; if they come at all, they are the gift of God. And in this case there will be no such gift; *the sign of Jonah the prophet* is sufficient. Jesus is saying that Jonah himself is the sign, which means that it is what is recorded of the man that constitutes the marvel. It is in vain for the people who confront Jesus to look for a sign; the sign they need is there, in the book of the prophet that they value so highly.

2. Had these people seen signs from Jesus (give evidence from the context)? How does this explain Jesus response? (Did Jesus refuse all requests to do miracles?)
3. Explain the significance of the sign of the prophet Jonah (Matthew 12:40). How would this confirm Jesus' claims? (Did Jesus give people adequate proof to confirm His claims?)

Jesus explains. It was not the whole life of the prophet that was significant but the fact that he was three days *in the belly of the sea monster*. As we count time, *three days and three nights* points inexorably to three periods of twenty-four hours each; we thus have a problem with the use of this expression for the time between Jesus' death and resurrection: the period from toward the middle of the day on Friday (when he was crucified) to early on Sunday morning (when he was seen alive) comes short of what we understand by three days and three nights. But the Jews did not reckon as we do: they counted the day on which any period began as one day, and they did the same with the day on which the period ended. Thus we have Friday, Saturday, Sunday, three days; it does not matter that neither the Friday nor the Sunday was complete. According to the method of counting in use at the time, this is the period during which Jesus would be in the heart of the earth. Matthew elsewhere speaks of Jesus as rising "on the third day" (Matthew 16:21) and "after three days" (Matthew 27:63); there is no reason to think that he sees any difference between these expressions. However we understand it in detail, the expression indicates that after the crucifixion Jesus will be three days in the tomb.

It is commonly asserted that the 'sign of Jonah' is Jesus' preaching. This exegesis can be sustained only by dismissing Matthew 12:40 as a later interpolation giving a new and incompatible sense to the phrase. Jewish interest in the book of Jonah focused on the fish episode in Jonah 1–2, not on the preaching to Nineveh in Jonah 3–4 (which will be taken up in Matthew 12:41), so the 'sign of Jonah' would naturally be interpreted, as this verse demands, in

terms of Jonah's deliverance, even where, as in Luke 11:30, the parallel is not explicitly drawn out. The point is, then, that Jesus, like Jonah, will undergo an experience which will be a 'sign' of his divine commission; the preaching of the early church duly drew this conclusion from the resurrection (Acts 2:22–36; Acts 4:10–11; etc.). *Three days and three nights* was a Jewish idiom appropriate to a period covering only two nights. *The heart of the earth* probably refers to Sheol, the place of the dead ('the belly of Sheol'—Jonah was rescued from the prospect of death, Jesus from death itself).

4. Who did Jesus say would give evidence against the people of His generation (Matthew 12:41-42)? Explain the point. (How did Jesus view the story of Jonah?)

Jesus turns to those associated with Jonah, and refers to the inhabitants of Nineveh, who, he says, *will rise up in the judgment*. The verb is often used of a literal rising (Matthew 26:62), and is not uncommonly used of rising from the dead (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:16), but here it seems to refer to initiating a process of judgment (perhaps standing up to make an accusation in court?). Jesus speaks of *the judgment*, that is, the judgment at the end of the world, the judgment that counts. In that judgment the Ninevites will confront *this generation* (i.e., the people living at the time Jesus was speaking) *and will condemn it*. This does not mean that they will issue edicts in the manner of judges, but long ago their conduct had set a standard that the current generation should have attained but did not. Jesus further explains that this condemnation will arise from the fact that the Ninevites *repented* because of Jonah's preaching. The word Jesus uses for *preaching* means strictly the proclamation of a herald. The point of the word is that a herald was not given latitude to vary the proclamation in any way; it was not for him to improve on it by substituting what he regarded as better words or better news. His task was simple—to say what he was told to say. This formed a good word for the message God gave to his preachers, and it is used in this sense here: Jonah did not compose a message of his own, but he told the Ninevites what God told him to say. Confronted with the word of God, the Ninevites responded with wholehearted repentance. The people of Jesus' day should likewise have responded to his message with repentance, but they did not. And their guilt was all the more serious because *something greater* than Jonah is here. We might have expected the masculine "someone greater," but the neuter points to God's whole work in Jesus, the sending of his Son, the decisive provision for the salvation of repentant sinners, the bringing in of the kingdom. All this represents something far greater than the coming of a Jewish prophet to the ancient city of Nineveh. We should notice two contrasts: the Ninevites repented and the people of Jesus' day did not; and again, the Ninevites were confronted with Jonah, these Jews with someone far greater.

The same construction is repeated with an appeal to another Gentile. Jesus cites Scripture to show that on a second occasion, in strong contrast to the Jews of his day, a Gentile responded to the teaching of a Hebrew man of God. *The queen of the South* is not defined more closely, but clearly Jesus is referring to the Queen of Sheba, who came from a distant land to listen to Solomon (1 Kings 10:1–10). The verb for *rise up* is changed from that used of the Ninevites in the preceding verse, but the sense appears to be much the same. Like the conduct of the Ninevites, what she did will form a condemnation of the current generation, for she went to great lengths to hear the wisdom of a mere mortal and they refused to be impressed when confronted with

something greater than Solomon. *The ends of the earth* means that she came a long way to meet Solomon; it is generally agreed that Sheba was in the region we now call Yemen, and with conditions of travel in King Solomon's day that meant a long and difficult journey. In some ways she forms a more impressive example than the Ninevites, for they responded to a man who came and preached to them on their own home turf, whereas she embarked on a lengthy journey to hear Solomon. But she made it in order to hear the wisdom she regarded as outstanding. Yet the men of Jesus' day refused to be impressed with the presence of the greatest of all. Wisdom may be used of the best human sagacity or of a good gift of God (1 Cor. 2:6–7, 13). Solomon was proverbial for wisdom, but his wisdom was not to be compared to what had happened with the coming of Jesus. And yet the people of that generation would not believe. They had merited a greater condemnation. We should notice these points of comparison: the queen came from a long distance whereas the Jews did not have to travel, she responded but they did not, and she was confronted with Solomon but they with a greater than Solomon.

5. How did Jesus describe the relationship of an unclean spirit with a man in Matthew 12:43-45? What would be the application to the people of Jesus' generation?

Jesus underlines the impossibility of being neutral on moral issues with a little story about a man who is forsaken by an unclean spirit who has taken possession of him. But simply to be rid of the spirit results in a vacuum that in the end will be filled in an undesirable manner. The paragraph follows on from verse 32 in Luke's version, and it certainly continues to bring out the thought that the power of God is needed to defeat evil. And it hammers home the lesson that one cannot be neutral toward Jesus. The attempt at neutrality ends with the coming in of the equivalent of seven devils, so that the person finishes in a worse state than at first.

43. *When* has the meaning "whenever"; Jesus is speaking of what may be expected to happen from time to time. The spirit is described as *unclean*, an expression that originally pointed to what cultically might not be brought into contact with the deity, but that came to be used in a moral sense. Thus an "unclean" spirit was an "evil" spirit. In the Gospels such spirits are often said to reside in people, and Jesus not infrequently casts them out. The spirit in this little story leaves voluntarily and wanders about looking for rest. *Waterless places* reflects the idea that demons were wont to frequent dry and desert places (Isa. 13:20–21; 34:14). It is not clear why the spirit should seek *rest* (or "a resting-place,"), but presumably spirits, like people, may seek respite from whatever it is that spirits do. But this spirit was unable to find the rest it sought.

44. The spirit soliloquizes. It can still refer to the man it left as *my house*. No one else has taken up residence, so the man still is open for the spirit's reoccupation. The spirit returns and finds its former home *empty, swept, and tidied*, a very satisfactory situation for a homeless spirit. It is *empty*, so there is no barrier to the spirit's return. But if it is empty, it is not desolate; the man has evidently been busy on himself so that the place vacated by the spirit may now be said to be *swept and tidied*. Jesus is talking about a pleasant, moral reformation, but with the man thinking that he is still in control of himself and with no reference to the Spirit of God. The man is empty; he is open to invasion from all kinds of evil, and in fact the original spirit comes back with reinforcements.

45. *Then* takes us to the next stage in the process. The spirit goes off and takes along with it *seven other spirits*, described as *more evil than itself*. *Along with it* associates the newcomers with the original demon; the picture we get is of one of willing cooperation in taking over the empty man. That there are seven of them may be significant; seven is the number of perfection, and while that is a strange category to apply to evil spirits the point may be that the takeover is made by the most appropriate number of demons. The newcomers are worse than the first demon; the man is not simply reverting to his previous state, but has more demons and of a more evil type. The eight evil spirits go into the man and settle down; henceforth he will never be free of evil spirits. His *last state* is worse than anything earlier. It is not without its interest that when the first spirit left the man, he was better off than he had been previously. He was able to set himself in order. But there was no dynamic about the change, no new power that would enable him to escape being demon-ridden. And his lack of spiritual resources left him open to a worse fate than he had known previously.

Jesus rounds off the story by driving home the application to his hearers. So (“as it was with the spirit-ridden man”) *will it be* with those before him. They had seen him cast out a demon, he had refuted the suggestion that he did this by Beelzeboul and had pointed out that the Spirit of God was at work in him, he had pointed out that it is unforgivable to blaspheme the Holy Spirit, he had made it plain that they were in the presence of something greater than Jonah or Solomon, and he had told his little story about the man from whom the unclean spirit went out. In his casting out of the evil spirit that started this chain of events (Matthew 12:22) Jesus had bound the strong man. Clearly he was now pointing out the danger in which his conversation partners stood. They had been confronted with divine power, and if they tried to live empty lives, lives that did not replace evil by the presence of the Holy Spirit, there was nothing before them but the grimmest of prospects. If it continued on its self-opinionated way, the generation that refused the opportunity presented to it by the appearance in its midst of the very Son of God, the generation already characterized as “evil and adulterous,” faced a future that was bleak indeed.

6. What can we learn from the illustration of the demon? How do people today sometimes make a similar mistake?