

Matthew 12:38 - 45

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[0 : 00] Tonight we are looking at Matthew chapter 12, the chapter that we've just read, and we're looking at verses 38 to 45.

So you can keep your Bible open as we go through the chapter. Now, with any book that's set in a different culture, or a different place, or time, to the one that you live in, there will always be things that you'll miss out on as you read it.

Just because you won't be looking for them, even if they're staring you in the face. You know, events, social occasions, turns of phrase, there's lots of different things. But unless you have someone who knows that culture point them out to you, you just won't get.

Last summer, I read the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* for the first time, and I enjoyed it, thought it was a good book. And after I read it, I was speaking to a friend who comes from South Carolina, from the deep south in the States, from the place where *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set, roughly, from the same culture.

And I said to her, I enjoyed reading the book. And then she said, oh, did you pick up on this? And she gave an example of something that was very southern. I had no idea, I didn't notice it. Or what about when this happens?

[1 : 25] Did you notice what she said here, and why it's significant? I had no idea. So I thought I'd enjoyed the book, but so many things that you have to understand the culture, have someone point out to you, I missed out on.

And I think it's exactly the same with the Gospels, with the four narrative accounts of Jesus' life. They were written in a culture that is really far removed from our own.

They were written 2,000 years ago in the ancient Near East. They were written in a different language. They were spoken in Aramaic and written down in Greek.

They're full of turns of phrase, social events that are alien to us. And because we come from a different culture, as we read the Gospels, we gloss over so many things that are huge.

And unless we have someone tell us about them, we don't get the big picture at all. Well, one thing that the Gospels are full of, that we usually just skim right over and don't get, they're full of confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees.

[2 : 42] We've read one of these confrontations tonight in Matthew 12, and we're going to be looking at it. But when we read these confrontations, we probably think, well, you know, they're arguing, and they're, you know, just there together, and that's it.

You know, they met on the streets, and they had a dispute, and then they walked off. And we don't actually understand the context that this is and what's happening here. You see, in the world that Jesus lived in, they didn't have all the things that we have, that we'd regard as normal for entertainment, for things you do with your time.

You know, when we have spare time, we'll, you know, read a novel, or watch TV, or go to the cinema, or watch football, or something like that. But in Jesus' world, they didn't have any of these things.

And what you did was, you gathered together in crowds, and you would listen to debates. You would listen to confrontations, usually between religious leaders, between people who had something to say about God, and who He is, and who you are in relation to Him.

Because, again, the culture is really different from ours. We live in a secular society, where, you know, you have society which is formed without reference to God, and you keep your religion private to yourself.

[4 : 08] Whereas in Jesus' world, it was not like that. Religion was at the forefront of everything. You know, your views on theology shaped your views on politics in a really open way.

So that's the kind of world Jesus was living in. And for people to work out, what do I think about topic X, Y, or Z, what you did was gather in a crowd and listen to two religious teachers slugging it out on one of these topics.

And in these debates, you have two people giving opposing opinions. And it's before a crowd, and what they're trying to do is convince the crowd that they are right, and that the opponent is wrong.

And the way that they would do that in their culture was to prove that they are honourable, and the opponent is shameful. Again, that's different from our culture, because we don't really place a big emphasis on concepts like honour and shame, because everything is so relativistic in our culture.

You know, what's right is basically what feels good for you, and that's how people make a lot of their decisions. But in Jesus' day, it was different. Who is right is the one who's honourable.

[5 : 24] Who is wrong is the one who's shameful. And all these debates took place trying to prove that, that one person is honourable, another is shameful. And the honourable one is the one who convinces you to side with him.

And whoever can prove the shame of the opponent is also proving you to you. Follow me, listen to me, not to my opponent. And it's knowing that that we look at the debate that Jesus has here with the Pharisees in Matthew 12.

You have this debate. The principal characters are Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees are the antagonists. They're against Jesus. And Jesus is standing for his corner.

And those are the principal characters. And then you have the crowd who are looking on. And if we're asking, where do we fit into this picture? That's us. We are the crowd. And the debate is happening in front of us.

And they're both trying to convince you who to side with. The Pharisees are saying, side with us. Jesus is saying, side with me. So you have to use your imagination a bit as we look at this chapter.

[6 : 36] We're sitting 2,000 years ago on a hot, dry, dusty day in the ancient Near East. You're in this crowd gathered to watch a debate.

And you're trying to choose who you'll side with. And the reason that you'll side with one is because someone is honourable rather than shameful. Now the big issue in this debate is whether or not Jesus is sent by God.

We know the backdrops of the debate because we've just read through the chapter. Jesus has been going around doing miracles, making hugely bold claims.

You know when he said, the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. That is political dynamite in Jesus' culture. Because he's speaking these words to people who know the Old Testament.

Who know Genesis. That Yahweh, the Lord God, this one true God, set aside the Sabbath. And made it holy.

[7 : 40] And Jesus comes along saying about himself, I am the Lord of the Sabbath. It's a massive claim. And it's controversial. And the immediate backdrop is this part in verses 15 to 21.

God's chosen servant. Jesus is doing what he's doing. Claiming he's Lord of the Sabbath. Healing people because he's God's chosen servant. He's fulfilling everything that was said about him in Isaiah.

And because of this, the crowd, the people, the people that we line ourselves up with, they are seriously considering the possibility that Jesus is God's promised Savior.

Look at verse 23. All the people were astonished and said, could this be the Son of David? So, this isn't a very low-tempo, lukewarm, secondary school debate over some irrelevant topic.

That you're just given by the debate organizers. This is huge stuff. This is about whether or not Jesus is the Savior, is the Son of God.

[9 : 03] This is just massive. And the Pharisees, they reject Jesus. And the way that they justify that is to say, no, he isn't sent by God.

And in fact, he's working for the devil rather than God. They're trying to shame him. So, as we're looking, as we're going into the debate, that's the kind of dispute that's happening.

All the crowd are drawn in around to work out this massive claim by Jesus. Is it true? Is he the Lord of the Sabbath? Has he been sent by God? Or is it true what the Pharisees are saying?

That he's actually casting out demons on behalf of the devil? And his response to that, Jesus' response, is to say, and this is where we go into verses 39 onwards, A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign.

There's this stereotype of Jesus that we have in popular culture and in society, that he was very gentle in the sense that he would never say anything that might upset people or that people would regard as offensive.

[10 : 18] That's not the Jesus of the Bible. What he's saying here is an explosive thing. It's an Old Testament metaphor.

Wicked and adulterous is what he's calling them. And that is the language that the Old Testament prophets used to speak about Israel when Israel as a nation wandered from God.

So that's the kind of temple of the debate. This is not dull. This is not any kind of a flat debate that doesn't have any spirit or oomph in it. Because Jesus' opening salvo is explosive.

It's really strong. There's not much stronger that he could have said to start off shaming them than to use this Old Testament language, to say that you are wicked.

You are adulterous. That's what he's saying about his opponents. And as we go into the debate, I want us to take away three points that Jesus himself raises as we're asking ourselves, well, who will I side with?

[11 : 24] Because, you know, we're in the crowd and the whole purpose of the debate is so that we can work out, do I side with Jesus or do I go with the Pharisees? And these are points that Jesus himself makes.

The first is this, that Jesus is greater than Jonah. We're looking at verses 39 to 41.

The tension here, you can feel it. Something huge is about to happen. This is not a gentle, sparring match. This is full on.

He slates the Pharisees as wicked and adulterous, basically saying at the start of the debate, you are saying that I'm not God, but you are so far away from God that you don't have a clue what God is like.

Who are you to say that I have not come from God? You know nothing. That's basically what he's saying to them. And then he says, basically, if you want a sign from me, because you've just asked for it, there's only one sign that will be given, and that's the sign of Jonah.

[12 : 33] He says that, but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. Now this is another thing that we won't get unless we know the background to what's happening here.

If you were here this morning, you will know who Jonah is because we were looking at Jonah. He was a prophet in the Old Testament, called by God to go and preach to a big pagan city called Nineveh.

And he didn't obey God's command at first. He fled in the opposite direction in a boat. There was a huge storm at sea. He was cast overboard.

And he was going to drown. He would have died. But God provided a huge fish which swallowed him and kept him alive.

Barely, but it kept him alive for three days. This is the Jonah that Jesus is referring to when Jesus says, for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

[13 : 39] And this is a bit cryptic. A bit hard to understand. What does Jesus actually mean here? To shed some light on it, Luke's Gospel writes about the same incident and it says, for as Jonah was assigned to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.

Now to get this, to understand it, and you have to imagine that you're a Ninevite, that you live in this pagan city and Jonah comes preaching to you about his God.

Bear in mind that Jonah has just been as good as dead. He has just spent three days trapped inside some huge fish for a while, having no idea whether he was going to be spat out and drown in the sea or die inside the fish.

And I'm sure that if you'd asked his shipmates, the ones who threw him overboard into the sea, Jonah the Hebrew, what happened to him? You know, if you'd asked for a show of hands, all would have said, he drowned.

You know, we threw him overboard in a storm. There's no way he's alive. And yet, by the sovereignty of God, Jonah was spat up on a beach three days later and then he goes and preaches to the Ninevites.

[15 : 12] Jonah wasn't, he wasn't quite a man who had come back from the dead. But he had come back from the nearly dead, from the as good as dead.

Now, when Jesus starts speaking about Jonah like this, he's referring a bit, a bit cryptically to what will happen after his own death.

That he will be killed and then he says he'll be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. And he says, he said literally, behold, you know, look at this.

there's one who's greater than Jonah here. So he's saying, look at me, look at Jonah. I'm greater than him. Jonah came back from the almost dead after three days inside this great fish.

And he came back still alive and preached to the Ninevites as a sign to them of God and his protective power. But Jesus is greater than Jonah because he will come back from the actually dead.

[16 : 19] three days and three nights in a tomb and yet he will come back from the dead which displays God's resurrection power.

And as you, you know, as you look through the rest of the New Testament, as you, if you've ever read Acts, for example, all of their preaching is based on the fact that this happened and the fact that Jesus was still alive, that he had been raised from the dead.

If you look at, you know, Paul in 1 Corinthians, he said, if the resurrection didn't literally happen, then we're fools and we should be pitied more than anyone else because the whole of our faith rests on that Jesus came back from the dead.

So we're watching this dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees are saying that he's not sent from God, that he's not God, but he's saying I am sent from God.

And the first thing he does to prove this is to challenge their view of God. Look at what the Pharisees are saying.

[17 : 25] We want to see a miraculous sign from you. They want him to prove that he's God by doing a miracle, but by doing something that's comparatively small to what Jesus is saying he will do.

And when you look at them in comparison, you know, do a miracle, you know, turn a stone into a piece of bread in comparison with something like coming back from the dead, they're almost ridiculous by comparison in terms of how big a view that Jesus has of God.

You know, that God is the God who takes dead people and makes them alive. Something as huge as that. Whereas the Pharisees are satisfied by something tiny to prove that you're God.

It's almost, you know, do a handstand and recite the alphabet backwards and that will satisfy us. Because their view of God is so small compared to Jesus' view of God.

They have this almost petty attitude to proving that you're sent from God. And that's all based on a really small view of God.

[18 : 35] Prove that you're divinity by doing some small miracle. Jesus says, I'll prove my divinity by coming back from the dead. That's massive.

A huge high view of God. I think that there are a lot of people who know the truth about Jesus. You might have read the Bible or spent a lot of time talking with Christians about him and you know the truth.

You know that he is who he says he is and yet something holds you back from being committed to him. You know who he is but you don't act in it.

Maybe you're waiting for some kind of bolt from the blue to really convince you. Maybe you're basically saying the same thing. Teacher, I want a miraculous sign from you.

But if you are Jesus, own response to you is look at my resurrection from the dead for the only sign that I will give.

[19 : 38] And it's not a case of I only give one sign because I'm frugal. It's I only give one sign because I'm great. It's like I'm giving you one gift and only one gift because there's nothing better that could be given rather than lots of small things to try and compensate.

Instead of proving his divinity by some small miracle, it's the greatest miracle that proves it. So when you're asking, well, why should I side with Jesus rather than the Pharisees?

Because Jesus came back from the dead. Because Jesus is greater than Jonah in his own words. And Jesus then says that the Ninevites, the people from the story of Jonah, they put the Pharisees to shame.

Again, look at how explosive Jesus' language is here. The Pharisees, they thought they were in God's good books. They were religious.

They were moral. And they looked down their noses at Gentiles, at non-Jews and pagans. And for Jesus to say to them that the Ninevites, who, as we saw this morning, only repented briefly and then turned back to their own ways, for Jesus to say that the Ninevites will judge them, completely puts them to shame.

[21 : 08] And as we've been saying, this all takes place before a crowd. It's kind of public entertainment in a way, but the kind of public entertainment that you use either consciously or unconsciously to build up your worldview.

And how you view life and what you think about God. And in that context, Jesus is saying, look at my opponents, the Pharisees, they're shameful. They're completely put to shame by pagan Ninevites.

So that's what Jesus first does. He puts them to shame by saying that he's greater than Jonah. The second thing that he says is that he is greater than Solomon.

We're looking at verse 42. The queen of the south will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. For she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom.

And now one greater than Solomon is here. After Jesus uses Jonah to shame the Pharisees, he continues what's basically a character assassination of them, a justified one, by reminding them and by reminding the crowd of the queen of the south.

[22 : 23] Again, you need to know the Old Testament background to what's going on to make sense of this. He's speaking about the time in the Old Testament when Solomon was the king.

He was a man of world repeat, not only for his lavish lifestyle and his opulent palace, but also for his wisdom.

He wrote the book of Proverbs. His palace, it was kind of like a university back then. He had people who studied the stars, who studied biology, who studied theology, and it was the kind of place that people would come from all around to learn from his wisdom.

It was like going to university. And one of the people who came to learn from him, kind of from Solomon University, was the queen of the south from Ethiopia.

It says that she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom. But he says that one greater than Solomon is here. Again, Jesus is trying to convince us to go with him because he's honourable and to not go with the Pharisees because they're shameful.

[23 : 36] And what he says to convince us of this is, look at the queen of the south. She was a very important person. She was royalty and she was fabulously wealthy.

She gave Solomon four and a half tons of gold as a gift when she came to visit him. That's the kind of person she was, a woman of international renown.

And yet she was humble enough to travel from Africa to Jerusalem, a big journey in that time, to come and learn from him. You know, she was the kind of person who would pay for her own plane ticket from Addis Ababa to Cambridge and pay the heavy international student fees for the privilege of a good education.

And what Jesus is implying by contrast is, look at the Pharisees. They live in the middle of Cambridge, in the middle of the university, but they insist on closing their eyes and sticking their fingers in their ears because they don't want to learn.

They want to be willfully ignorant of the truth. That's basically what he's saying about them. He's saying, I'm greater than Solomon, I'm wiser than Solomon, you can learn more from me than from him, and yet these Pharisees are around me but they don't want to learn a thing.

[24 : 59] And he puts them to shame in that way. So that's what Jesus is presenting to the crowd as they're weighing up this debate, as they're saying, who will I follow? Jesus or the Pharisees?

And he says, I'm a greater king than Solomon, I'm a greater prophet, than Jonah. And we saw in verse 6, as we read the chapter before, he also says he's greater than the temple priesthood.

Now, think of that, you know, he's the great prophet, priest, and king. And that's how honourable he's making himself out to be in comparison to these shameful losers, the Pharisees.

That's what he paints them as. So, what we're telling us to do is come to Jesus for his wisdom. He's worth walking from Ethiopia to Jerusalem for.

In the resurrection, you've got the greatest sign that you could ever want to ask for, that Jesus is who he says he is. So don't let waiting for any other vastly inferior sign hold you back from him.

[26 : 10] and let his excellence as this supremely wise warrior king attract you towards him. That's what he's challenging us to do.

The last thing that Jesus does, very much the final nail in the Pharisees coffin in this debate, is our third point, which is the consequences of rejecting Jesus.

It's the last thing he makes out. What he does here is tells the Pharisees and spells out to the crowd the consequences for the Pharisees of their having rejected him.

And he points out that because they have rejected him, ultimately the Pharisees are doomed. And the warning to the crowd is that the same fate stands for all those in the crowd who will do the same.

Remember what he has already said in verse 30, whoever is not for me is against me. It's impossible for the crowd to be neutral about Jesus.

[27 : 21] This is a debate where you can't go away being apathetic, saying, oh, I don't know, maybe Jesus, maybe the Pharisees think about it later. It's the kind of debate where there's no middle ground, there's no fence to sit on.

You have to be on one side or the other. And what Jesus is doing is strongly pressing home to the crowd that even though he's been doing miracles among them, if they reject him, ultimately the consequences will be very serious.

And he hammers this point home by telling a parable. It's a slightly unusual one, but it's a highly effective one nonetheless. And remember in the context the Pharisees have just accused Jesus of being in league with the devil.

So, what Jesus does is this. He tells the story of an evil spirit and a house. He says the house represents the wicked generation that he's debating with, the Pharisees.

And the house is inhabited by an evil spirit. The evil spirit leaves the house. Presumably it's been exorcised from the context because Jesus was conducting exorcisms, casting out demons, when the Pharisees said you're working with the devil.

[28 : 42] So, let's say the demon was exorcised by Jesus. So, the house no longer has a demon in it. And the demon goes away, flies around, but it doesn't find anywhere else to live.

So, it comes back to the house and it finds that the house is completely empty. An empty space, a vacuum. hasn't been refilled by anything since the demon left.

So, the demon capitalises on the situation by coming back with seven other spirits more wicked than itself. And the house ends up far worse off in the end than in the beginning, even though something good happened to it, like the original demon being cast out.

And I think that what Jesus is getting at here is something like this. he's saying words to the effect of, I can come to you, the crowd, and I can cast out your demons now, but if you still don't believe in me, if you ultimately reject me, if you keep on asking for a sign which proves that fundamentally you don't believe in me, you don't take me at my word, even though there's some benefit that you gain from my being around you just now, like I've cast out your demons, I've cast out the first demon, but because you still ultimately reject me, you'll end up far worse off than before.

It's a serious, a solemn way for him to end this debate. It's kind of like the advice you give when someone's trying to give up hard drugs or alcohol as in cold turkey.

[30 : 30] If someone decides that's it, I'm never going to inject heroin again, what they need to do is fill the void that's left by the old addiction.

If you have gone to meet your heroin dealer at 7pm every Friday night for the last five years and you decide today that's it, it's stopping, you better make sure that next Friday night at 7pm, you're doing something else.

That you're not sitting in an empty room with nothing to fill the void because you will end up going back and buying five times more heroin than you ever had before because you haven't filled the void.

It's the same kind of advice that Jesus is giving to the crowd. He's saying, I ripped the first demon off your back today, but if you don't fill the void of sin with me, if you don't let me fill you in place of the sin that I've cast out, you will end up far worse off and you're choosing to bring that upon yourself.

That's the kind of advice that Jesus gives. It's a high tempo debate. Jesus doesn't hold anything back against the Pharisees when he puts them to shame, but as he leaves us at the end to decide, who do I go with?

[31 : 55] Do I go with Jesus in all the honour that he portrays of himself? Or do I go with the Pharisees in all the shame that Jesus has shown them to have?

This is what's a way in the balance as we decide. So there we have it. We've been sitting in a crowd of people in dry, dusty Palestine.

We've watched the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees and none of us can go away indifferent. None of us can go away apathetic because the tone of the debate is whoever is not for me is against me.

Jesus has honour and truth and wisdom as a prophet, a priest and a king. He can forgive your sins. And he puts the Pharisees to shame.

You know what's really telling in this passage is that the traffic is all one way. The Pharisees have nothing to say in response. No defence to make.

[33 : 02] So the question for us, if whoever is not for Jesus is against him, is are we for him or against him?

Amen. men of were até yield.