

Who Are My Family? | Matthew 12:38-50

Well as we've been tracking our way through chapters 10-12 in Matthew's Gospel we've been learning about the tough and tender sides to Jesus. Learning that he is both righteous Judge and servant King.

Throughout chapter 12 so far we've seen opposition continue to mount against Jesus, lead by the religious leaders, the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Matthew focuses in today's passage on Jesus' response to them.

Jesus continues to say some surprising things. He continues to respond quite seriously and severely to the religious leaders, while at the same time redefining categories of thinking that are so ingrained in us and culturally assumed.

In today's passage Jesus reveals who is 'in' and who are 'out' when it comes to the kingdom of heaven. We are left with two contrasting scenarios: either we find ourselves in a perpetual state of searching, without Jesus, or we embrace him and find the most wonderful home of all.

1. Signs and Spirits: a home without Jesus (vv 38-45)

Today's passage begins with the Pharisees responding to Jesus. Jesus has just talked about the deadliness of rejecting Jesus Spirit-empowered ministry. Jesus has said in verse 32, 'Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.' Verse 36-37, 'But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.' In the context, Jesus is talking about the empty words of those who were rejecting him. The Pharisees at the time were speaking out against his Holy Spirit-anointed good works and calling them evil.

And their evil and empty words continue in v 38. Seemingly ignoring Jesus' condemnation they remain arrogant in their opposition, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.' 'We want you to convince us that you're really from God, on our terms.' In other words, 'We will choose to ignore all the good things you've been doing – healing every sickness, casting out demons, proclaiming forgiveness and God's justice among the people. Instead, we want you to do something we think will convince us that you're the real deal.'

Jesus' words of condemnation continue in v 39, 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign!' Jesus could not have used stronger words to condemn them. 'Wicked' meaning totally and completely morally bankrupt. 'Adulterous' reflecting their place among a people with a long history of hard-hearted rejection of the God who has been nothing but faithful to them. Marriage being the chief image of God's relationship with his people. They had rather sought to satisfy their selfish senses than remain in a faithful, committed relationship to the God who is love.

Such people ask for evidence from Jesus while choosing to ignore the blatant evidence right in front of them. No sign will be given such people 'except the sign of the prophet Jonah.'

As you may know, Jonah was a prophet of Israel. You can read about his brief ministry in the book after his own name, in the Old Testament. He was a reluctant prophet sent by God to a nation Jonah would have considered, by definition, 'wicked' – enemies of Israel. He was sent to the Assyrian city of Nineveh, in our present day Iraq. He was so reluctant that when God sent him he went in the opposite direction. It took a great storm on a boat that threw him overboard and found him washed up back on shore smelling like whale vomit, to get him to proclaim God's simple message. Eight words: 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.' To his surprise and disgust, that wicked city repented. They turned away from their wickedness and back to the Lord who created all things. And the Lord relented from destroying the great Assyrian city.

Jesus draws the connection between Jonah's experience and his, in v 40 of today's passage: 'For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man [that is, Jesus himself] will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'

Jesus here speaks of his coming death, and by implication his triumphant resurrection. Now, a keen observer might object, 'Hang on, didn't Jesus die on Friday and wasn't he raised from the dead on Sunday morning?' But 'three days and three nights' was a common way of referring to the span of time covering three days or parts thereof. A Jewish contemporary of Jesus would say: Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Three days and three nights. His coming crucifixion and resurrection will be 'the sign' given to such a generation demanding more evidence.

But isn't there a wealth of evidence to help us know whether Jesus is who he says he is? The sure-fire way to shortcut the search is by examining the evidence of the resurrection. The historicity of the Gospels which are eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life, teaching, death and resurrection, are unparalleled in their historicity and accuracy. There's a reason why multitudes around the world who are reading them are being converted to Christianity, as I speak, whether lawyers, doctors, scientists, or butchers, bakers or candlestick makers. We even have ample evidence external to the Gospels, written by those who rejected Jesus and thought early Christianity was nothing more than 'a cult of superstition.' In 1 Corinthians, one of the earlier New Testament letters, the apostle Paul records that, after he rose from the dead, Jesus physically and fully appeared to over 500 others who subsequently turned to trust in Jesus for themselves and would rather suffer and die than recant their true confession. Even since the time of the so-called Enlightenment era, we've have books written for every generation, detailing the evidence examined by a person who originally sought to disprove the historicity of Jesus and the Gospels, but who in the end found themselves only with a mountain more evidence for believing Jesus. Turns out, one of the shortest paths to becoming a Christian is to try and *disprove* the claims of Christ.

So our present day generation does not need more evidence. They need to examine the evidence we already have. They need patient, gracious, loving Christians to lead them through the Gospels and any other historical evidence we have to offer. Above all, they need God to open their eyes, change their hearts and transform their lives, just as he has done for us who believe today. There is ample evidence.

Jesus gives us a kind of lawcourt scenario in verses 41-42. When these Pharisees ask for more evidence from God to believe in Jesus they think they're putting Jesus in the dock, demanding he prove himself to them. But it turns out, they are the ones in the dock. Those wicked Ninevites who repented at Jonah's eight-word message will stand up and say, 'We were convinced by Jonah message that he was speaking from God.' The Queen of the South, who only heard of Solomon's fame and relationship to the Lord, will stand up and say, 'I came with my caravans of jewels and wealth to this great king Solomon because I knew he represented the Lord of heaven and earth. What more do you want from Israel's greatest king and Lord of all?'

Their issue is not that they need more evidence. They need to accept the wealth of evidence right in front of them.

Jesus then goes on to speak of the underlying issue in the form of a parable. He describes, in v 43: 'When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, "I will return to the house I left." When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order.' This describes the very work Jesus has been doing. He's been going about the land casting out demons and restoring the healing order of the kingdom. But as he does so, this does not mean people are simply left to do what they want. He's telling people to come under his protection, to accept him as their newly reigning Lord and King. If they don't, what happens? Verse 45: the impure spirit 'goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation' i.e., 'this generation who rejects me.'

The religious leaders at the time had witnessed the cleansing and restoring of order to their communities. And now that cleansing and order was being restored, what will they do? What will happen to them? By their rejection of Jesus they will essentially consign themselves over to the evil spirits who will do in them their worst and lead them along a path of no return. They will ultimately be led to cry out, 'Crucify! Crucify!' against even the pleas of a Roman governor, a man who knew very little of who Jesus is and the wonderful things he'd done.

But before we sit in judgment against the Pharisees we must see that Jesus' parable does not end with them. Whatever evidence we think they had, and however guilty we find them of rejecting Jesus despite the evidence we must reckon with our own culture and times.

Because since the gospel first came to our shores, have not communities across our great country undergone a kind of spiritual cleansing and restoration through the gospel? I'm not talking about straight up colonisation and evils that accompanied the violence and subjugation and theft of generations of children born to the first peoples of this land. But I'm talking about how wherever the gospel is preached in keeping with love, grace and truth, communities are transformed. Thus the invention of hospitals and schools, orphanages and homeless shelters. The very moral fabric of our great nation has been built upon the love, grace and truth of Jesus.

And it is this very moral fabric we are now seeing being torn apart leading to the breaking down of social fabric and loving communities of care from the family, the home, and out. As a society we have forsaken our biblical valuing of all human life created in God's image from the womb to the tomb. We have forsaken our inherent need for love, care, discipline and truth. Is it little wonder that the household of our progressive western society is starting to look more and more disordered and destructive than it once did? The house has been left empty for a long time. It's only a matter of time. We need Jesus to move in, cleanse and restore us from the heart out, and not simply so we can regain whatever morality we feel we've lost, but so we and our friends, family and neighbours can be saved from an eternity of suffering destruction and torment. We must pray for our neighbours.

It strikes me that Jesus describes the impure spirit as 'seeking rest'. Doesn't that describe our generation? Restless and seeking rest. Ever distracted and never able to focus on what really, ultimately matters. We return to Jesus' words in chapter 11 v 28: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.' How can we turn our backs on such an offer from such a powerful, gracious, humble and merciful King?

Whilst a 'wicked generation' will go on demanding more evidence, Jesus is calling together another generation of brothers and sisters who do the Father's will. To that we now briefly turn.

2. Certainty and Security: at home with Jesus (vv 46-50)

Turns out that, while Jesus was speaking about the seriousness of the human condition apart from him, his biological family were waiting outside wanting to 'speak to him.'

We get a few clues in the Gospels as to what Jesus' biological family thought of him and his ministry. In Mark 3 v 20-21 Mark records that Jesus' family, at least at that point, thought he was crazy and tried to remove him from a situation of miraculous healing and teaching. In John 7 v 5 we're told that 'even his own brothers didn't believe in him.' Even his mother Mary, who treasured moments of revelation in her heart, seemed to misunderstand when she basically commanded Jesus to turn water into wine despite his plea it was not yet his time. It seems that cynicism towards the wonderful things Jesus was doing was close to home as well.

Someone tells him here in v 47, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' Like a school kid being called to the principal's office. But Jesus, full of grace and truth, takes the opportunity to teach everyone a lesson about who his true family are.

Verse 48, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' That would have put his family waiting outside in their place wouldn't it? And then, 'Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."' "

While there will always be people who keep demanding more evidence from Jesus, and by their cynicism, continue in their unbelief, there are also people whom Jesus is gathering around himself. As Jesus has said in v 30, 'Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.' There is no middle ground with Jesus. Possessed by evil or brought into Jesus' family.

And who is Jesus' true family? They are his disciples. Lifelong learners of the Lord Jesus, for that is what disciple chiefly means: a learner. And that is what Jesus has invited us to come and do, back in chapter 11 v 29, 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me [or, be disciplined by me], for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.'

Dear friends, Jesus' invitation remains open today. There is still time before the risen Lord of all creation will return again to judge. To 'do the will of my Father' is to listen to Jesus. It is not some mysterious thing we need to try and figure out. God the Father has made this plain, where? Only a few chapters later in Matthew 17 v 5, God the Father communicates audibly and clearly: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!' But we might also point to Jesus' own teaching as teaching us the Father's will. When we pray 'Your kingdom come, your will be done,' we're not praying for some mysterious unknown thing to be made known to us. We're simply praying that the Father's will to send Jesus back would come soon, knowing that will bring about the perfection of his will on earth. The Lord's Prayer teaches us to long for Jesus' return.

But what does it mean to be in Jesus' family, to be a sister or brother of Jesus? It means having an older brother who would do anything for you, even suffer through hell for you, die on a cross for you, take the just punishment you deserve for your rejection against God. It means having an older brother who is gentle and humble, but who is all-powerful to protect you against all assaults of the evil one. It means knowing you are known down to your innermost thoughts, the thoughts that you wouldn't dare share with anyone else because of the shame – he knows them, but being loved through and through despite them. It means being washed clean by his precious blood and being covered in his righteousness. It means being welcomed into the eternal home of the new creation.

Conclusion | Siblings of the King

Whatever our experience of family here on earth, whether terrible or great, there is nothing like being welcomed into the family of the one greater than Jonah, the one greater than Solomon, the one more powerful than the whole company of evil and impure spirits, the one who gives us that which we've been searching for our whole lives: true rest at home with God as our heavenly Father, Christ Jesus as our brother, the Holy Spirit as our eternal bond of unbreakable love. Siblings of the servant King.

Certainty and security are the unique blessings enjoyed by a person whose older brother is Jesus.