

Negative Responses to Jesus, Part 6: Scepticism

Matthew 12:38-50

Halifax: 7 August 2005

Introduction:

Praise be to God for sending His Son!

- Apart from Him, there could be no salvation in this world!
 - Only bondage to sin and Satan!
 - Till Jesus came to save us, there was no one to intercede for us, no one to make an offering to God for our sins, no one to give us the Holy Spirit.
- How glad we should have been when God sent His only Son into the world to redeem us!
 - What a grand reception we should have given this glorious One who humbled Himself to come to this sin-filthy world that He might save us from our sins!
 - How the earth should have burst forth in songs of praise and adoration!
- But we did not do it.
 - For the last six weeks or so,
 - We have looked at the kind of reception Jesus was given by those whom God had chosen out of the world to receive Him...
 - The people of Israel who were the gate through which He entered this world.
 - They were the welcoming committee for the whole world.
- In Matthew chapter 11 and 12, Matthew has catalogued for us six negative responses.
 - First, we looked a doubt...
 - Then at frivolous criticism, then indifference, then rejection,
 - and last week the worst response of all: blasphemy.
 - Today we come to the sixth and final negative response Matthew has recorded for us in these chapters: Scepticism.
 - We will examine this response today...
 - But I also want you to know from the outset that this passage is not all negative.
 - Matthew also presents to us that there are those who did welcome Him!
 - That there are many who do the will of God whom He graciously regards as His mother and His brothers!

- We will come to that encouraging part later on in this message,
- but first, we will look at the sceptics.
- There are always plenty of sceptics around...
 - They were around when the prophets spoke...
 - They were around when Jesus came...
 - And without question they are around today!

I. The sceptics are presented to us here as those who demand a sign.

A. In Matthew 12:38, you see how they come to Jesus rather politely and ask for a sign.

- Matthew 12:38: Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.”
- 1. Notice that these are not nearly so impertinent as the ones we ran into last week who accused Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebub.
 - a. It is important to realise that the scribes and Pharisees are not all the same...
 - They did not all blaspheme the Holy Spirit.
 - Some of them even became Christ’s disciples in secret, and many of them believed on Him after He was raised from the dead.
 - We must always remember that in every group there are differences...
 - Surely you all know that not everyone in our Presbytery is just the same—no, neither is everyone in our congregation...
 - Just because we all belong to the same denomination does not make us all the same.
 - You will notice that our text says,
 - **“Some** of the scribes and Pharisees answered.”
 - It doesn’t say they all said this—
 - it is only some of them that said it.

TRANS> And, as I say, these seem to be of a somewhat different spirit than those who had accused the Lord of casting out demons by the power of Satan.

- b. These are even willing to call Jesus “teacher” instead of “this fellow.”
 - What’s more, I almost get the impression they are trying to help Jesus out here...
 - It is as if they are saying,

- “Teacher, you have just been accused by some in our party of casting out demons by Beelzebub...
 - We have an idea.
 - Why don’t you prove yourself to the people by some great sign?
 - Then everyone would know for sure that you are the Messiah!”
- c. Some who study this account have argued that this is a ridiculous request when Jesus has already performed so many signs among them!
- 1) He had just cast out a demon and caused a man who could not speak or see to both speak and see...
 - and just before that, He had healed a man with a withered hand.
 - Jesus was doing signs all the time!
 - What did these men mean in asking for a sign?
 - 2) But I’m not sure that these men were denying that...
 - Certainly these were wonderful works that Jesus was performing...
 - But He was being accused of doing them by the Devil’s power.
 - So they were saying, “Why not do something unmistakable...”
 - In Luke 11, we are told that they asked for “a sign **from heaven!**”
 - Jesus had been doing miracles on earth,
 - but why not do a sign **from heaven** to prove Himself?
 - Samuel made it thunder and lightening...
 - Elijah made fire come down from heaven...
 - Moses made manna come down from heaven and parted the red sea.
 - He did great signs upon Egypt before Pharaoh...
 - Such great signs even though at first the magicians of Egypt were able to imitate them by their arts...
 - By the third plague in which Moses made lice from dust, they surrendered and declared,
 - “This is the finger of God.”

TRANS> These scribes and Pharisees were sure that this was all that was needed!

2. If you have been a Christian for very long, I am sure you have run into such persons before!

- a. There are even unbelievers who seem interested and inclined to help the cause of Christ...
 - and they say, “Why doesn’t God just show us a great sign and then we would all know that He is true?”
 - b. And it is not just unbelievers who say this!
 - Sometimes believers say it too!
 - “Why doesn’t Jesus just make Himself plain and then everyone would believe?”
 - It seems like a pretty reasonable request, doesn’t it?
 - Perhaps you have even said this yourself!
- B. But Jesus’ response shows that He has no hopes in such a request...
1. He puts His finger on the real problem:
 - He says, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign!”
 - a. The word “seeks” is a very strong word...
 - It could be translated “demands.”
 - “An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign.”
 - 1) The idea is, the evil generation says:
 - “we will believe as soon as God gives us enough evidence to believe.”
 - They are demanding a sign as a condition of their faith.
 - They are saying that God has not given us enough revelation to be convincing.
 - 2) But there is a lie in this statement!
 - They make it sound like they want to believe if only God would make it clear, but that is a lie!
 - They don’t really want to believe at all.
 - 3) Jesus knows that no matter how many signs are given them, they will not believe...
 - They are just using a lack of evidence as an excuse to justify their unbelief!
 - They will always need more proof before they will be ready to wholeheartedly give themselves to the Lord!

- As Abraham is quoted in Luke 16, when the rich man asks if he can return from Hell to warn his brothers so that they will not come to this place:
 - “They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them!”
 - And the rich man said, “No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”
 - But Abraham replied: “If they do not hear Moses and prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.”
- b. In our text, Jesus is pointing out that the real problem is not a lack of signs,
- the real problem is with the character of the people to whom He is ministering!
- 1) They are both an evil and an adulterous generation.
 - The problem is with their evil heart that causes them to despise God who is holy and pure...
 - It is with their adulterous heart that causes them to devote themselves to all sorts of idols when they ought to be devoted to God, their husband...
 - By all sorts of idols, I mean everything from false gods and false religions to materialism and self-esteem!
 - It is not a lack of signs, but an evil and adulterous heart that is the problem!
 - 2) Brethren, what we need in the world today is not more signs but more purified hearts!
 - Those who are pure in heart have no trouble discerning the Lord!
 - As soon as rebellion is removed, the truth of God is self-evident—even when that truth is presented in great weakness...
 - You see, the power is not in the presentation, but in the Holy Spirit who goes before the Word and purifies the hearts of those who hear it.
 - The reason we have trouble recognising the truth even when it stands before us and slaps us in the head is because of our corruption and rebellion,
 - not because we need more signs.
 - 3) Do we not have proof of this with Israel?
 - Did they not see all sorts of signs and wonders when God brought them out of Egypt?

- But what are we told?
 - That they hardened their hearts and did not believe!
 - Do not suppose people would be any different today!
 - Just look at the wonder God has wrought in creating the heavens and the earth!
 - Everybody has that glorious sign from heaven!
 - Yet, do men worship God and honour Him as Creator?
 - No, they do not!
 - If our hearts were not corrupted by sin, we would all believe and doubt not!
2. But having said all this, I still don't think you need to totally write off the scribes and Pharisees who ask Jesus to do a sign as totally reprobate!
- a. If you do, you have to write off everyone else who ever thought it might be a good idea for God to perform a great sign so people would believe.
 - Jesus is not commenting so much on the men who asked Him for a sign as He is on the whole generation of sceptical Israelites that required a sign before they would believe!
 - Sometimes, the one's who ask for a sign are actually the ones who are on their way to a solid faith.
 - b. And in fact, God often does give signs to help them along.
 - 1) I have already commented on all the signs He gave through Moses...
 - And the Old Testament tells us how God gave a sign to Abraham to confirm his faith—a covenant presented in a vision...
 - And how He accommodated Gideon when He asked for a sign before he would lead the way against the Mideonites...
 - And how Hezekiah asked God to make the Sun go backwards when God told him that he would recover from his sickness...
 - 2) And there are many accounts of signs given to persons of weak faith or of young faith or distressed faith that we hear about today...
 - I don't have reason to doubt many of these accounts...
 - except I would point out that there are many who do great harm to the cause of Christ by placing too much emphasis on these signs...
 - who act as if signs are the only thing that is needed...
 - And who are always looking for signs to present to unbelievers...

- The trouble is, many times these persons end up making a fool out of themselves and cause our enemies to mock.
 - We cannot help the cause of God in the world by trying to generate signs.
 - If He wants to help someone's faith along in this way, leave that to Him.
 - He has not called us to be the ones who administer signs to get men to believe...
 - and we are surely misguided if we think signs are the principle thing that is needed!
 - An adulterous and evil generation will always demand it,
 - but the Bible clearly teaches that what they really need is a new heart!
3. In fact, Jesus makes that very clear...
- (that what we really need is a new heart)
 - in the two illustrations He gives.
- a. The first one is about Jonah.
- 1) Jesus indicates that the people of His generation will be given a special sign—even the sign of Jonah...
- What is the sign of Jonah?
 - It is that Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days.
 - that nobody thought he would come out...it seemed to be end of him.
 - But that Jonah did come out after three days and preached repentance to Nineveh!
 - So what would the Lord do as a sign for Jesus' generation?
 - Jesus would also be cut off from the land of the living for three days...
 - (Incidentally, three days and three nights is simply the Jewish way of reckoning any part of a twenty-four hour day as a night and a day...)
 - Any way, Jesus would be cut off from the land of the living for three days,
 - everyone would think He could not longer preach to the multitudes...

- But not so—
 - He would come forth preaching from the grave!
 - And He would ascend into heaven and send out His servants into the all the world to preach the gospel in His name by the power of the Holy Spirit!
 - A glorious sign would indeed be given—the sign of Jonah!

2) But don't miss the point of what Jesus is doing here...

- In verse 41, He says:
 - “The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah *is* here.”
- a) With this Jesus is showing that even though the sign of Jonah will be given to His generation,
 - it will not bring about repentance.
 - It will not bring about repentance because their problem is not that they lack signs, but that they are an evil and adulterous generation.
 - By telling us that they will be judged,
 - Jesus is showing us very clearly that the sign of Jonah will not convince them because they are an evil and adulterous generation.
- b) Brethren, this is a point you all need to get!
 - If you or anyone else believes on the Lord,
 - it is not primarily because you were finally given enough evidence or signs...
 - It is because God has given you a new heart by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

3) It is very interesting too that Jesus shows us that the men of Nineveh—at least some of them—really did repent!

- They will rise up in the day of judgement to condemn these of Jesus' generation who did not repent.
 - They had far less given to them, and yet they repented!
- Just look at the difference!
 - The men of Nineveh repented under the ministry of a foreign prophet who despised them—

- The Jews would not repent under the ministry of the Son of God who loved them and gave Himself for them.
 - The men of Nineveh repented even though they only heard a message of condemnation and were given no promise that God would be merciful to them when they did...
 - The Jews refused to repent even though they were commanded to repent and given many promises and encouragements if they would—even the promise of eternal life.
 - The men of Nineveh saw no miracles at all, yet repented under the preaching of Jonah—
 - The Jews saw many miracles including the resurrection and would not repent.
- b. The second illustration is of the Queen of the South, or the Queen of Sheba who came to seek out wisdom from Solomon.
- Let's do a similar comparison with her...
 - 1) She came and believed even though she had only heard rumours of him about which she was unsure...
 - The Jews had many promises concerning Christ and they did not come to hear His wisdom.
 - 2) The Queen of the South came and believed even though she had a long a difficult journey to make,
 - The Jews would not believe even though Christ came to them from heaven—the word of God was very near to them, and they would not heed.
 - 3) The Queen of the South believed even though Solomon could only speak God's wisdom—
 - The Jews would not come even though Christ was the wisdom of God and was able to impart wisdom to them... that is, to change their hearts and renew them.

TRANS> Do these comparisons with Nineveh and Jonah not show us very clearly what the real problem with the impenitent is?

- It is not lack evidence, but a wicked and adulterous heart!

II. Jesus therefore teaches us that unbelieving sceptics will be severely judged for their unbelief in the face of all their privileges.

- A. It was a great wickedness in man-kind to rebel against our Creator.

1. It is an offense worthy of eternal judgement, and such judgement will indeed justly fall on all who do not repent...
 - even if they have never heard the gospel!

 2. But how much worse is the offense of those who have spurned God's mercy in the gospel!
 - a. There are many people in the world today who have very limited access to the gospel...
 - they own no Bible, they have ignorant ministers who scarcely know the gospel, and they have much opposition from family and friends...
 - yet, with so little, they recognise the precious gospel and cannot be stopped...
 - They must have it!

 - b. What will it be like in the day of judgement for those who have owned a Bible and who have had parents to teach it to them and faithful ministers to expound God's word week after week...
 - What will it be for them on the day of judgement when they are shown to have spurned the word of God and claimed that they were not given enough to believe?
 - I tell you, I doubt that even the damnation of Devil Himself will be as great as theirs!
 - Their problem is not a lack of evidence!
 - A hungry man who knows he is cut off from God will not quibble about the quality of the food—
 - He will not look upon a full plate and doubt if it is really food...
 - He will come and rejoice in whatever he can get!
 - But the one who despises eternal life will complain and quarrel about the food and question if it is good for nourishment instead of taking it and eating it.
 - Those who have rejoiced in crumbs will surely condemn them on the day of judgement.
- B. Jesus tells a parable about what will happen to the wicked generation who spurns the grace of God in this world...
1. He uses the similitude of a man who has an unclean spirit cast out in v. 43.
 - a. This is not a lesson in demonology...
 - It is not even about an individual man...

- It is rather a picture of a wicked generation who has the word of God brought to them and rejects it.
- b. That Word will always have a powerful cleansing effect upon them!
- It will have a salutary and reforming impact on the whole community!
 - Wherever the gospel flourishes, it always brings with it many blessings.
 - This is signified by the casting out of a demon.
 - This is what happened when John the Baptist came and in the early days of Jesus...
 - The people were willing to rejoice in his light for a time.
 - There was a partial reformation, but not a full repentance!
2. If the Word of God is rejected and spurned, the reformation will only be temporary!
- a. The demon will come back with seven other demons that worse than himself...
- And he will be delighted because he will find his house empty and swept!
 - This speaks of the barren soul that is devoid of the Spirit of God!
 - Here is the person who is outwardly changed, but does not truly repent and believe the gospel.
 - There are religious acts and there is religious talk,
 - But there is no new birth and true love for God!
 - Such a person is like a shell with nothing inside.
- b. The demon will rejoice and will enter with his friends so that the empty soul will be more filled with evil than ever before!
- Jesus says that
 - “the last state will be worse than the first!”
 - It is a very dangerous thing to have a mere external or superficial religion!
 - To like Christianity for its morals or for some superficial friendship with Jesus...
 - but to refuse to have the LORD as your Saviour is highly destructive!
 - The self-righteous person is seven times worse than the prostitute and the tax collector!
 - It is better to be thief and a murderer than a self-righteous churchman!

- If you are never persuaded to come to Him as your Saviour, then you are greatly to be pitied!
- There is plenty of evidence for the pure and heart because they yearn for salvation...
 - But if you are happy with sin, you will never have enough evidence.

TRANS> Scepticism!

- What a negative, wretched response to our Lord!
 - We have seen so many negative responses in this section of Matthew!
 - This is how the world welcomed Jesus when He came to earth!
 - What sorrow it gives the believer to see so many spurning the Lord...
 - But Christian, take heart!

III. Our Lord shows us here that there are many who are His true disciples!

A. He uses the occasion of an interruption to bring home the wonderful truth that there are many who are dearer to Him than His own flesh and blood!

1. In verse 26, we are told that His family comes to see Him while He is preaching...
 - a. Mark shows us that they have come because they think He is beside Himself...
 - Perhaps they have heard of the danger—that some of the Pharisees as seeking His life...
 - And there He is, spending hours and hours teaching and preaching.
 - It would seem that they have come on a mercy mission to rescue Him.
 - Its both sad and funny how often well-meaning persons will come to rescue Jesus from Himself...
 - They will try to hide some of the things He has said to make sure He does not tarnish His reputation...
 - They seem to feel that He needs their help.
 - b. They stood outside the house where Jesus was ministering because they could not get to Him on account of the crowd, as Luke tells us in his account.
 - But word is brought to Jesus that they are there, desiring to speak to Him.
2. Matthew, in his account, does not focus on some of the details such as telling us why they had come...
 - All he tells us is that they had come and were desiring to see Jesus and what Jesus said to that:

- verse 48-49 tells us what He did:
 - Matthew 12:48-49: But He answered and said to the one who told Him, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother."
- It seems that after showing us so much about how Jesus was rejected...
 - Matthew is wanting to show us through this incident that not everyone rejected Him!
 - He wants us to show us the precious relationship that the Lord Jesus has with His true disciples who come to Him with all their weakness and imperfection!

B. Look at this precious relationship that Jesus has with all who believe!

1. First, look at how Jesus speaks of their loyalty to Him!

- a. He calls them "those who do the will of my Father in heaven!"
 - Yes, we have seen that there are many doubters and critics and rejecters and indifferent persons and blasphemers and sceptics...
 - but here we see that there are many disciples who do the will of God!
- b. What is so precious about his is that fact that Jesus calls them those who do the will of God!
 - That is what Jesus thinks of them!
 - He is not severe and unapproachable, but gentle and lowly, welcoming and to receive all who come to Him!
- c. But just look at them!
 - 1) They are not a very noble or respectable bunch...
 - Many of them are uneducated common people...
 - They are not particularly wealthy or successful in this world...
 - They do not have wonderful personalities, nor are they particularly attractive.
 - 2) And look at their behaviour toward Christ...
 - Do we not see His disciples very confused about His whole mission?
 - Sometimes impertinent, sometimes doubting, sometimes disobeying...
 - Do we not see them doing many foolish things...
 - One time trying to call fire down from heaven,

- Another time arguing about who is the greatest among them,
- And yet another time forbidding him to go to the cross?

3) How can He call them those that do the will of God?

- They are a mess, and yet He says, “these who do the will of my Father in heaven!”
- Take heart Christian!
 - The Lord Jesus does not demand perfection of His disciples!
 - If He did, these would all be rejected!
 - He did not accept the Ninevites because they were perfect,
 - but because they repented when they heard the word.
 - He did not accept the Queen of Sheba because she understood all the mysteries of the faith,
 - but because she gladly received the word with faith as it came to her.

d. Brethren, I am not telling you that your purity of life and your knowledge of the truth are irrelevant!

- That is not the point!
 - If you are sincere, you will be in God’s house, growing in grace and growing in wisdom by the power of the Spirit.
 - A living Christian will always be pressing forward, growing and learning.
- But I am saying that not everyone has the same privileges and opportunities...
 - And I am saying that it is far better to be devoted to Christ and to be receptive to Him and responsive to His calling...
 - than to have all kinds of knowledge and outward worship with rebellious scepticism!
 - The one who does the Father’s will is the One who trusts in Jesus and yearns for His word and follows where the Lord leads Him as He learns the way—even if he doesn’t know the way so well.
- It is far better to be ignorant believer in Nineveh who trusts in the Lord than a Scribe in Israel who has all knowledge and outward conformity to God’s worship without faith.
 - Those who do the will of God are not those who are perfect...

- They are those who believe on God's Son and lay down their lives to follow Him as well as they are able.
- Jesus counts these His disciples who do the will of God.
- They do not rely on their own righteousness to save them, but they give themselves to Jesus to save them.

TRANS> And so you see how the Lord graciously calls them "those who do the Father's will..."

- He counts them as loyal to Him despite all their imperfections.
 - But now I want you to see further that He not only counts them as loyal to Him...
2. He is also most loyal to them!
- a. He stretches out His hand and says, "Here is my mother and brother and sister!"
 - The Son of God actually regards those who do the Father's will as His very own flesh and blood!
 - b. Christian, you are nearest of kin to Him!
 - Christian, you have His very own name put upon you!
 - You have the same Father that Jesus has...
 - and the Father loves you even as He loves the Son whom He has loved from before the world began!
 - He nourishes you up in this glorious love with all wisdom,
 - training you to live His house as beautiful and gracious child.
 - teaching you the ways of His household as Solomon taught His servants to live in his house.
 - He cleanses you from all your sin and He comforts you with His promises and grace.
 - He brings you into His everlasting inheritance so that you are called a joint-heir with Jesus!
 - You will abide in the house of the Lord forever and ever and be filled to capacity with His glorious presence!
 - with all the goodness His sacred courts provide!
 - What an inexhaustible treasure is yours!
 - c. What unspeakable comfort this is to you who believe!
 - To know that He who loves best loves you as well as His own family!

- Let others criticise Him and opposed Him and blaspheme Him if they will...
 - Let them stand in the burning house of their own decaying lives, demanding more evidence before they will humbly reach out to accept His rescue...
 - Let them put forward all their excuses and make a thousand arguments about what must be done before they will believe...

- But for you it must not be so!
 - Do not wait for some special sign or some special prompting or some special application...
 - Respond to His call with all your heart as His call comes to you...
 - Do not wait for more knowledge and more grace,
 - but do the Father's will with whatever knowledge and whatever grace you have today!
 - He will do well enough to give you more grace...
 - It is for you to stop all the excuses and get going after Him with all that you already know...
 - I speak to you whether you are a believer or an unbeliever!
 - Do not hold back!
 - You will never be disappointed!
 - He will accept you and take you as His very own brother or sister no matter how weak your knowledge and no matter how small your strength.
 - He holds out His hand over Ninevites and over His motley little company of disciples and He says:
 - "Here are my mother and my brothers!"