

Possessed by Stubbornness (12:38-45)

Good morning everyone, it's great to see all of your faces, which I will not get tired of saying. If I haven't had the chance to meet you yet, my name is Eric and I am a pastor in training here. If you've got a bible with you, go ahead and turn to Matthew chapter 12, we'll be there in just a minute. If you were here about a month and a half ago the last time I was *supposed* to teach a sermon, rest assured I plan on making it through this one. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, I wasn't feeling great but thought I could power through. "Thought" being the key word there. I told Kent right before I got on stage that I felt pretty bad, which is a less than ideal amount of time. So I introduced myself and promptly said "Kent is going to have to finish this" and I ran off stage to throw up. Pretty cool. So anyway, if you weren't here, now you know, and if you were here, you have permission to laugh because it's funny now. I didn't think it was funny then, but I can admit it now. But we won't have a repeat. Hopefully.

As a reminder or an introduction if you've just started coming around, we are coming to the end of chapter 12 in our study through the Gospel according to Matthew. Recently, we've been walking through some of the different people Jesus encountered during his ministry and some of the ways that people are responding to him. And in case you haven't noticed, several people are really not responding well. Specifically the religious leaders of the time. I mean, Kent said just a couple weeks ago that their response to him going around helping and healing people was to start a plan to kill him. Pro tip in case you were not aware, if someone decides to start a plan to murder you for something, it's a pretty good indicator they didn't really like you or what you were doing. So, at this point in Matthew, we once again see Jesus interacting with some of his biggest fans, the Pharisees and teachers of the law. I will say, at face value there are several things that come up in today's passage that can sound a little weird or random to us, but I promise it makes sense and Jesus knew what he was talking about. And he lived 2000 years ago on the other side of the world in a society and tradition that was completely different from ours. So of course some of what he says is going to seem kind of weird to us, just like how things we talk about today would seem incredibly weird to people in that context. Just imagine what someone at this time would think if you told them what you were most excited about is an *app* on a *phone* where you watch videos of people dancing. That'd be weird without some context. It's arguably weird *with* context. But what we're going to do today is read through the whole passage, then we'll go back and break down what exactly is going on. Sound good? Go ahead and look with me at Matthew chapter 12 starting in verse 38:

[38] Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." [39] He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. [40] 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. [41] The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. [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 something greater than Solomon is here.

[43] "When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. [44] 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. [45] Then it 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."

Nice and simple, right? We've got some people asking Jesus for a sign, a pretty direct denial to do so accompanied by some insults, something about Jonah and a queen, and a haunted house, you know, just to top everything off since there wasn't much going on already. Like I said, at face value this passage may seem a little jumpy or scattered, but the author of this book put them together for a reason and all of this ties together. So let's start at the beginning of our passage. We see Jesus interacting with a group of people in verse 38, who are they? *Pharisees and teachers of the law*. Basically religious leaders and bible scholars. And they come to Jesus and they ask him for *what? A sign*. So at first glance you might be thinking, "a group of religious people are asking a guy who's making some really big claims about himself for a *sign* to back it up. That feels pretty reasonable, right?" After all, Jesus has been doing signs for people fairly regularly up until this point. And what's Jesus' response there? "Sure guys, thought you'd never ask! Here you go." Not exactly. He comes right out of the gate with, "you wicked and adulterous generation." Out of context you might see that and go, "whoa, let's pump the brakes there a little bit, Jesus." But we aren't going to look at it out of context, are we? No, we've been getting context for this for several weeks now, so we know there's more going on here. This isn't Jesus' first interaction with these same Pharisees, it's not even the first interaction in this chapter. As a refresher, chapter 12 starts off with these guys following Jesus around, confronting him for his disciples picking some grain to eat on the Sabbath, watching him heal a man's withered hand, heal a blind guy who's also never spoken before, then they say he works for the devil and they start to hatch a plot to get him murdered.

If all they needed was to see a sign, they would have already accepted Jesus as the Messiah, the promised savior. But they don't accept it. They only look at what Jesus is doing and how he is doing it and they try to say he's a tool of the devil. So they don't really want a sign from Jesus to prove himself, they just want to try to find another way to accuse him of some kind of wrongdoing. That's exactly what's going on. But he knows their motivation and he refuses to walk into their intended trap. He turns to them and calls them wicked and adulterous. That's pointed. Clearly it makes sense to call them *wicked* since Jesus already knows their plan. Right? They are planning to murder a perfectly innocent person who has done nothing but help and heal. Seems pretty wicked to me. But he also calls them adulterous. Why does he say that? That's probably not how I would address a group of people I know are plotting to kill me. It doesn't seem like "do not commit adultery" is the specific command they're about to violate. But that's what he says to them. And the reason he says it is because he knows what they are doing. He knows that they have this deep resentment and anger towards him and they are going to have him killed, but they're coming up to him in public asking for a sign acting like they are eager to believe in him if they just see one more. That's adulterous behavior. It's two faced. And Jesus is very familiar with Old Testament scripture and he was echoing what many of the prophets and poets said about the nation of Israel, God's chosen people when they rebel. Time and time again they are called "adulterous" when they would turn from or reject God, so he's referencing the way Israel's rejection of God in the past was categorized in his calling out of the Pharisees. So they put up this facade of asking for a sign as if they want to believe, when in reality they just want to find something to use against him and reject him. They're being *adulterous*. They've convinced themselves that their way of thinking, their way of doing things, their expectations of Jesus are so unequivocally correct that anything that gets in the way is evil and wrong. And that is an incredibly dangerous place to be. And that's what Jesus goes on to explain next. Look with me back at the passage starting at verse 39:

[39] He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. [40] 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. [41] The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.

So Jesus is talking to the Pharisees who asked for a sign and he tells them the only sign they're getting is the "sign of the prophet Jonah." He brings up this Old Testament story that everyone would have been familiar with. We actually did a whole series through the book of Jonah a couple years ago, it's on the website and I highly encourage you to

listen to it. But the gist of it was Jonah was just a terrible prophet. Basically the worst we've seen. Kind of a strange person for Jesus to compare himself to, right? So Jonah so badly didn't want to do his job that when God told him to do it, he hopped on a boat and went the opposite direction. Long story short, he had to go overboard during a big storm, he got swallowed by a huge fish, spit up where he was originally supposed to go, and begrudgingly gave one of the shortest and worst sermons in the world. Then the people of Nineveh (very unexpectedly) humbled themselves before God, and Jonah was so mad about it, he yelled at God for being too loving and Jonah asked God to let him die. Interesting story to reference. And in case you missed it the other day, a guy was swallowed by a whale in Massachusetts in truly biblical form. Go look it up later. We'll be eagerly awaiting his arrival in Nineveh. But for now, look at the parallels Jesus is drawing. Jesus is saying that, in a way, he is like Jonah, since he already knows he will be dead for three days, similar to how Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days. But then he follows that up by saying that this wicked, pagan nation that repented at Jonah's preaching will have more to show for themselves on the last day than these Pharisees will. Because *they* repented. Think about the gravity of what Jesus is saying to these religious leaders and how they must have felt. He's talking about the Ninevites, the people group historically known as evil-embodied, and he says they repented even though all they got was a four word sermon. The Pharisees get miracles and signs and wonders, and *multiple* sermons, and yet still aren't repenting. He's saying considering what happened with Jonah, the Pharisees have no excuse whatsoever. Their hearts are so hardened towards Jesus, they refuse to repent and refuse to see him for who he is.

So the Pharisees come to Jesus and ask for a sign, which they don't actually want since they've already made up their minds about Jesus and what they're going to do to him. And Jesus sees right through their facade because he knows what's coming and he tells them, "the only sign you get is the sign of Jonah." Basically he's telling them, "the only sign you get is the fact that you've already decided to reject what I have to say and kill me." He knows this is coming and he is still pursuing his mission, he is still pursuing people, he is still teaching and healing and loving despite knowing that he is going to be killed because of it. Because he loves us. He loves his creation, so much so that he will go to the ultimate end for us. In the face of faithlessness, Jesus remains faithful. And so he says this is the only sign you get. But what's interesting to me at this point in the passage is he never says, "I am condemning you." He doesn't say that. Instead he says that their actions condemn them. And we just saw he said, "the men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it." And he goes on in verse 42, he says:

[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 something greater than Solomon is here.

Super short history lesson: this is a reference to 1 Kings chapter 10. The Queen of the South or the Queen of Sheba was a queen who was essentially a “seeker.” She didn’t worship the God of Israel, but she was definitely curious about him and the things she had heard. She had questions, and she heard King Solomon was very wise and worshipped the God of Israel, so she made this long journey over miles and miles to find him and ask him questions. And he answers her questions and we’re led to believe she begins to follow God. She was seeking out answers and the truth. And Jesus is basically telling these Pharisees who are asking him for signs, “if you were truly seeking answers or seeking to believe, you already would have.” Solomon answered her questions as she was seeking and she believed, but now something far greater than Solomon is here and you still don’t believe. And he says she will condemn you. Jesus tells them this nation of Nineveh, who didn’t have the slightest clue about the God of Israel and heard the world’s shortest and most underwhelming sermon from Jonah repented and believed. This queen who was truly seeking answers found them from Solomon and she believed. And they will condemn you because something far greater than Jonah and far greater than Solomon is here before you and you’ve already rejected it. The Pharisees are so consumed by and wrapped up in the way they think Jesus should behave or look or act, that when he actually shows up and begins his ministry how he planned, they hate him for it.

Here in the passage it feels like things take what seem like a weird turn. We’re finally to the haunted house portion! I know you’ve all been patiently waiting. Take a look at verse 43:

[43] “When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. [44] 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. [45] Then it 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.”

So what on earth is Jesus talking about here? Well the first thing I want to point out is that Jesus is using one of his most frequently used tools in this instance. He’s not giving a brief seminar on how exorcisms work, he’s still talking about the same thing, he’s just using an illustration or a parable to do it. As an aside, in a couple weeks we’ll be talking all about parables in chapter 13 of Matthew. So for anyone who is wondering how I got

there, the last line in verse 45 highlights the fact and also brings out Jesus' main point with it. He says, "That is how it will be *with this wicked generation.*" So he's giving this parable as a warning to the same "generation" he's been talking about this whole time. He's using language and illustrations that would be understood at the time. Basically he is saying if a person, or the house in this parable, is liberated from some kind of evil, it is a good thing. Right? The house is "swept clean and put in order." That's an improvement! But if the newly emptied house remains "unoccupied," we read that the underlying evil returns, but it's worse than before and it lives in this swept up and cleaned house. And Jesus says the final condition is worse than before. Does that make sense? It's something that might seem like change on the surface, but there isn't actually any *real* change going on. It's kind of like deciding I want to be more healthy so I go and follow a bunch of work out accounts on Instagram, watch all these crazy fitness transformation videos and cooking tutorials on YouTube, and put inspirational quotes on all my mirrors, and just stop there. Then I get confused why nothing about my health has actually changed. Because I'm doing what the Pharisees are doing. Dodging any real change and just replacing it with other stuff.

I saw a pretty clear example of this at another church I was a part of in South Carolina. There was a program called "Recovery" which was specifically for people battling addictions and sin patterns they just couldn't break. There was one man there who we'll call James who was also going through AA at the same time. Throughout the process, he replaced his obsession of drinking with an obsession of how many days he could stay sober. His identity became fully defined by his own determination and willpower. He replaced his alcoholism with achievement. The idol he had in his life stayed the same, he based his life on the things within his immediate control. He never replaced his dependence on himself with Jesus so when he tried to white-knuckle his way through, he would inevitably go back to whatever he had control over. But at times he was under the impression that he was doing great, that he had left it all behind him. He was blind to the fact that he was still enslaved to his sin. He had cast out one "demon" from his life, which was alcoholism, but he hadn't replaced it with Jesus, so he actually became more susceptible to even greater "demons."

To say "no" to something that is evil or destructive, you have to say "yes" to something new and better. If you aren't filling your house with a new, better occupant, all you've done is made a more comfortable and convenient place for evil to hide. And this is exactly what Jesus is saying to his listeners. He's telling them that he is here, in the flesh, and he is pushing back on and driving out evil everywhere he goes. He is "clearing out houses" so to speak. And like he said earlier, he knows these people are going to kill him. And he knows after the resurrection that he will ascend into heaven and the houses will be left empty. And people will have to choose what to do about Jesus in their lives at

that point. People can choose to let Jesus have a surface-level, external, superficial effect on their life where they look cleaned up and put together and righteous on the outside without actually letting him create any real heart-level change, or they can invite him *into* the house. Invite him to live there, to shape the very foundation, to fill up every part of the space. We can't keep replacing idols in our lives with more things that will continue to fail us. Maybe we realize we're idolizing romance or the idea of marriage or a boyfriend or girlfriend, so we decide to pour everything into our career and it becomes our new obsession. Maybe from there we realize it's taking a toll on us, so we obsess over our mental or physical health and that becomes our idol. We constantly run full speed towards things that seem like good things, but we leave Jesus out of it and they will always let us down. I've also seen this happen in the church. Sometimes we take the idea of community and we equate it with God. Community is a great thing that should point us back to God, but it can't take the place of God in our lives. I don't know who needs to hear this today, but just because we're involved in community, that doesn't necessarily mean we're following Jesus. We can't just surround ourselves with people who have a relationship with Jesus and assume it is projected onto us. God doesn't have grandkids. If we're involved in community or LifeGroup or other things for the sole purpose of having friends or having people around us or whatever other reason other than following Jesus with our lives, we've ultimately just replaced him with something else entirely.

And this is Jesus' warning in the passage. He's talking to these Pharisees whose very lives are built on the idea of appearing righteous, following rules, having a very "clean house." But he's telling them that because they have rejected him while thinking they have achieved righteousness on their own, they're actually worse off than someone whose house is visibly in shambles. He is saying that if all you do is allow Jesus and scripture to have a superficial impact on your life instead of fully accepting him as the central part of your life, what your life is built upon, it's better if you never heard about him in the first place. See, following Jesus is not just about all the things we can abstain from or avoid. If that's all it is, our pride, our self-righteousness, our cynicism will be so much worse than when we started. Right now, there are people in the world—maybe in this room right now—who have successfully eliminated certain vices from their life. Alcoholism. Sleeping around. Drugs. Who knows what else. And they have convinced themselves that because they have cleaned themselves up, they're good. But following Jesus isn't just about the absence of sin, it's about the presence of God. And because some people don't have that, their squeaky clean lives are actually far worse than where they were to begin with. Because they'll never think they need to repent of their lives now.

So Jesus, in classic Jesus form, has some pretty harsh words for the Pharisees. But here's what I want to make sure we see today. He's not *only* talking to the Pharisees. It can be easy to read passages like this through our modern lens and previous exposure to scripture and think of the Pharisees as the pinnacle of evil or self-righteousness and think "you foolish Pharisees, how could you not understand?!" It's easy to remove ourselves from the picture entirely. We think things like, "I would never act like the Pharisees," or, "I can't believe the Pharisees would think something like that," or, "I'm really glad I'm not like those nasty Pharisees." Does that language sound familiar? Can you think of anyone Jesus interacts with in scripture who says things like that? If we're all honest, I bet we could insert ourselves into some very similar situations or mindsets. And all the rest of you are in denial.

As much as we don't want to admit it, the mentality of the Pharisees shows up all the time in our lives. Now, it probably comes out in different ways; I'm fairly confident in saying I don't think anyone listening to this had a direct hand in plotting to murder Jesus. But it certainly shows up. And just like Jesus said, it can be so dangerous and it can be so sneaky. We so often do this thing where, whether we would come right out and say it or not, we essentially put Jesus on the witness stand in our lives. We *demand* that he do something in us or for us or around us exactly how we want or expect in order for us to faithfully follow him. In moments of doubt or difficult circumstances or times of struggle, we functionally reserve the right to not actually be committed to him until he comes through on whatever the "thing" is. Or maybe it isn't what we are asking him to do, maybe it's our response to what's already happening. It's our resistance to Jesus because he isn't doing what we expect or isn't doing things the way we expect and we get mad at him. Just like the Pharisees, we have all these expectations for who Jesus is and what he "should be" doing in our lives. But then we have what scripture actually says about the *real* Jesus and his plans for the world and what he's all about, and at some point we have to decide if the real Jesus is enough for us to follow him even when we have to reorient our expectations. And the biggest thing I want you to hear from me and from scripture today is *yes*. Yes, it is worth it. Nothing has ever been or will ever be more worth it. The work of Jesus and the sacrifice he made for you, for me, for all of us is worth *everything*. The transformative power of the Holy Spirit offered to us is so unbelievably worth it. So instead of constantly putting the God of the universe on trial based on our temporary circumstances and constantly asking him for a sign, we should be looking at the sign that he already gave us, the *sign of the cross* where Jesus gave up his life for you because of how much he loved you in order for us to be reconciled to him and filled by his Spirit regardless of our circumstances! We shouldn't be demanding constant signs from God, we should be viewing our circumstances and our lives through the sign we've already been given and with the hope that we've received. We don't need more signs, we need to decide if we're going to live in light of the perfect and complete

sign we already have. So what I want us to do as we close today is to take some time praying and reflecting and thinking. So go ahead and close your eyes and the musicians are going to come up and I want us to take time to respond. I want us to pray and be open and honest about where we are and the things we may be looking to in our lives that are just cheap replacements for other idols. And as we're doing that, I want to bring everyone back to something. I know a lot of what we've talked about today can feel heavy or weighty or defeating. And if you're anything like me, you might even feel stuck at times not knowing what to do or where to go. But just like Jeff talked about last week, I want to remind you that if the Spirit is convicting you, that means he's moving in you! It means he is present and working to reveal the ways we've tried to look to idols instead of to Jesus. The Pharisees had Jesus in the flesh right in front of them, they saw the signs, they heard him teach, and their hearts were still hardened. But the Holy Spirit has transformative power for your life and he can move in and fill the house. And if that's not where you are yet, my encouragement for you is that the Holy Spirit can soften hearts too. We can pray and ask the Holy Spirit to fill up all that space, and we can pray and ask for that to be revealed to us, maybe for the first time today. Maybe today is the first time you've realized you've been filling up your house with things that could never actually fill it. And this is where the community we talked about earlier can be so incredibly helpful. We don't want to replace Jesus with social outlets, but we also shouldn't fall into the trap of ignoring the voice of the Holy Spirit through other followers of Jesus. So I think it would be incredibly helpful to pray through these things and the ways we might be adding more idols to our lives and pushing Jesus to the wayside and invite other followers of Jesus to speak into it. Invite the people in your LifeGroup to speak into your life and your habits and the foundations of your life to help you see where you may be resisting the transformative work and power of the Holy Spirit.