The Sign of Jonah

Matthew 12:22-50

Key Verse:12:39 “He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.”

Last week we studied what God’s heart is towards sinners like us. God’s heart is mercy. God desires mercy, not sacrifice. God is a merciful God who does not break a bruised reed and snuff out a smoldering wick. By God’s mercy we are saved. By God’s mercy we become children of God. In today’s passage Jesus teaches us what our heart should be towards God and toward his work. What kind of heart does God want us to have for him? May the Holy Spirit give us a deep understanding about Jesus’ teaching today.

First, Jesus drives out demons by the Spirit of God. (22-37) In verse 22 People brought Jesus a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. We don’t say that all sicknesses and diseases are caused by demons, but in this case, the author Matthew saw demons as the cause of the man’s blindness and muteness. When Jesus drove out the demons, the man could talk and see. What a blessing to this blind and mute man! For the first time in his life he saw the face of his lovely mother. He saw the beautiful world, beautiful roses, flying cardinals, and blue sky. Jesus opened the eyes of the blind. He drove out darkness from him and brought the heavenly light into his soul. This man also talked with his friends for the first time in his life. He talked about the beauty of life, love, humanity, philosophy, music, art, and so on. Above all, he praised God and thanked Him in a loud voice. He sang, “O What a wonderful, wonderful day, Day I will never forget…” (Heaven Came Down)

Look at verse 23. “***All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David***?” Here, the Son of David indicates the Promised Messiah. The Israelites had waited for the Messiah, who would be born as the descendant of David as was written in the Scriptures. They were waiting for the Savior, who would deliver them from the power of darkness and the agony of their lives. They had heard the Sermon on the Mount. They had seen how Jesus healed the sick and proclaimed the kingdom of God. They had witnessed how Jesus drove out demons and gave new life to this mute and blind man. They saw the image and the power of the Messiah in Jesus. They had the hope of God in Jesus. They shared joy and thanks with the man who had been healed.

But, there were unhappy people about Jesus’ healing of the man. Look at verse 24. “***But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons***.” The Pharisees slandered the work of Jesus by saying that Jesus had healed the man by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons. How did Jesus defend the work of God and what did he teach them about the work of the Holy Spirit? Shortly speaking, Jesus said that he drove out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus used human logic. In verse 25 Jesus said that every kingdom, every city or every household divided against itself will not stand. There is saying, ‘United we stand. Divided we fall.’ If Jesus drives out Satan by the power of Satan, Satan is divided against himself. How then can Satan’s kingdom stand? (26) At that time some Pharisees drove out demons, too. If they drove out demons by the power of Satan, how could the Pharisees defend their friends who drove out demons? (27) Jesus’ words made the slandering Pharisees speechless.

Jesus did not condemn the Pharisees, but he wanted them to know the work of the Holy Spirit and be saved. Let us read verse 28. “***But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you***.” Here, the Spirit of God is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is one of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit is not inferior to God the Father or God the Son Jesus Christ. He is co-existent and co-equal with God the Father and God the Son. God sent the Holy Spirit in the place of Jesus. Jesus called the Holy Spirit in John 14:26, “Another Counselor”, or “the Advocate.” A counselor and an advocate is one who defends us like a defense attorney in court, defending us and testifying all things on our behalf. The Holy Spirit is “*paraclete*” in Greek, which means “the one who stands alongside.” In 10:20 Jesus encouraged his disciples not to worry about what to say on the day of trial. This is because the Spirit of the Father, the Holy Spirit, will speak on their behalf. We are weak and helpless. We often do not know how to pray. But, in Romans 8:26 Paul says, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.” The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of power. 2 Timothy 1:7 says, “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of new creation. He participated in the creation of the world (Ge 1:2) and in the regeneration of a sinner. (Jn 3:5, Ac 2:38, Ti 3:5) There was nothing but emptiness and darkness in the beginning. But the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, was hovering over the water for the creation of the world (Gen 1:2). There was only darkness and misery in the life of the blind and mute man. He was more sorrowful and miserable because he was possessed by demons. But when the Holy Spirit began to work through Jesus Christ, the darkness and misery of life disappeared and new life was given to him. New life in Jesus Christ started with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Above all the Kingdom of heaven has come to this man. The Holy Spirit opened his spiritual eyes to see Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, who leads us to Jesus Christ, who is the truth of God. The Holy Spirit will teach us all things and will remind us of everything Jesus taught us. (Jn 14:26) The Holy Spirit will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment. (Jn 16:8) So, through the work of the Holy Spirit we are convicted of our sins and are able to discern what is right and wrong and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. (Jn 16:9-11) The Holy Spirit enables us to acknowledge Jesus, accept him, and serve him. Through receiving Jesus Christ we possess the kingdom of God. Through receiving Jesus Christ we become children of God.

When the Holy Spirit drives out demons, the kingdom of God comes. God begins to rule our hearts with his peace, love, joy, and righteousness. Not only do we experience the joy of heaven, but the kingdom of heaven also grows in our hearts. We bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal 5:22,23) We are no longer under the power of demons, but we start new life as powerful witnesses of God’s love.

The Pharisees were under the power of demons. They were angry, hateful, jealous, and murderous. They were in the kingdom of Satan, not in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus had compassion on them and taught them that they needed a powerful Savior, who rescues them from the hand of Satan. Jesus said in verse 29, “***Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.***” Here, ‘he’ indicates Jesus himself and the strong man, Satan. Jesus is the mighty God and wonderful Savior. He is much stronger than Satan and is able to rescue us from the hand of Satan. Many people in this world remain under the reign of Satan. They don’t even realize that they are in Satan’s house. They suffer much like hostages under ISIS militants. They need a Savior who is stronger than Satan. Jesus is the one who can save them from Satan. Jesus is the Wonderful Savior and he is mighty to save. When Jesus drives out demons by the Spirit of God, the kingdom of God will come upon them. Let us pray that God’s kingdom may come upon them by the Holy Spirit through our diligent prayer and Bible teaching. It is not you and I who can save them, but our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

In verses 30-32 Jesus warned the Pharisees to repent of their blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Let us read verses 31and 32. “***And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 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***.” How do people sin against the Holy Spirit? They blaspheme against the Holy Spirit by slandering the work of the Holy Spirit as the Pharisees did. The Pharisees saw the work of God in Jesus’ healing and teaching. They witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ ministry. Still, they did not accept Jesus, but slandered Jesus and his work. Those who speak against the work of God and criticize the work of the Holy Spirit must be very careful of what they say and talk. Jesus warned them about the consequences of their sin in verses 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 order to escape God’s divine judgment, we must have a right heart with God. We must fill our hearts with good things. This is because the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. (34) A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. (35) Those who read the Bible and pray regularly store up good things in their hearts. So they talk about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and all encouraging topics. On the contrary those who live for the things of the world store up bad things in their hearts. So they talk about money, 3 Ss (sex, sports, speed), and all kinds of discouraging words. Therefore, let us pray that God may fill our hearts with the Holy Spirit so that we may be guided by the Holy Spirit and live by the Holy Spirit. (Gal 5:16) Amen.

Second, the sign of Jonah (38-45) Jesus was challenged again. This time ***some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Jesus, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.***” (38) Jesus showed them enough signs and miracles so that they might believe in Jesus as the Promised Messiah. Still, they demanded more miracles. They are like those who deliberately refuse to believe in God by asking more evidences and proofs about the existence of God. “Show me more evidences that God exists, and I will believe.” How did Jesus answer those who seek signs and evidences? Let us read verses 39-41. “***He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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. 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***.” Jesus said that he gives them no sign but the sign of Jonah. The sign of Jonah is the message of repentance. God called the prophet Jonah to deliver the message of repentance so that the people of Nineveh might repent and be saved. But Jonah did not like God’s idea. He ran away to the opposite direction from Nineveh. As a result, he was thrown into the sea and stayed in the belly of a big fish for three days. Jonah repented in the belly of the fish. As soon as he came out of the fish, he went to Nineveh and preached the message of repentance. What the Pharisees and the teachers of the law really needed was not signs or evidences, but repentance. Just as Jonah repented, they needed repentance. As the people of Nineveh repented, they should repent. What skeptics and agnostics need is not visible or tangible evidence of God, but repentance.

What is repentance? Repentance is admitting our wrongdoings and turning to God. Repentance is accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The sign of Jonah is the preview of Jesus’ death and resurrection. As Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of a fish, so Jesus died for our sins on the cross, was buried, and rose again on the third day. As the people of Nineveh accepted the message of repentance and escaped from God’s judgment, so those who accept Jesus will escape God’s divine judgment on the last day. What will happen to those who will not repent? Look at verses 41-42. “***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. 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.***” The people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South represent the gentiles. At the last day those who repent will condemn those who don’t believe. Those who don’t believe will have no excuse for God’s punishment. Jonah was a great prophet and Solomon was a wise king. But they were mere men. Jesus is not worth comparing to them because he is the Son of God. God’s heart desire for himself is mercy. God’s heart desire for us is repentance. Let us fill our hearts with the knowledge of God. Let us fill our hearts with the Holy Spirit. If we don’t fill our hearts with the Spirit of God, what will happen to us? Our spiritual condition will become worse than before. There is no neutral zone in the spiritual world, either our heart is a space for God or a playground for demons. (43-45)

Third, who can be in Jesus’ family? (46-50) While Jesus was still speaking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. (46) According to Mark 3:21, they thought that Jesus was out of his mind. They were spiritually blind and were not ready to accept Jesus as the Son of God. What did Jesus answer? Let us read verses 48-50. “***He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? “ Pointing to his disciples, he 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.***” Here Jesus taught his disciples about a spiritual family. Those who do the will of God are the same family members in Christ. In fact, we are brothers and sisters in a big family with the one and same Father in heaven. We are all one in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit binds us to become one in heart and mind to do the will of God. Those who do the will of God share the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Those who do the will of God are united with the same goal and same purpose and the same destination, the Kingdom of heaven.

In today’s passage we learned that the kingdom of heaven comes from Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus drives out demons by the Spirit of God, we enjoy real freedom and joy of salvation. Jesus asks for our repentance so that we may be liberated from Satan and may become great men and women of faith who do the will of God in our generation. In this wicked and adulterous generation, what we can give to them is only the message of repentance and the good news of Jesus Christ. May God richly bless us when we drive out demons in the name of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.