

Test It By Its Fruit

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

- [0 : 0 0] Well, let me welcome you to this afternoon Bible talk. This is the last one in this little series, Matthew 11 and 12, the kingdom advancing and tested by its fruit.
- So we're going to first of all read the passage. You'll find it on page 817. Page 817. And we'll be reading, in spite of the fact it says on the sheet, Acts chapter 12.
- In fact, we're reading Matthew chapter 12. I'm mentioning that because somebody's bound to come to me at the end and point out mistakes. People are wonderful at pointing out mistakes.
- Anyway, it is Matthew chapter 12 and it's on page 817. And starting at verse 38, the bottom of the page.
- Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Jesus saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you. But he answered them, an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.
- [1 : 1 4] For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment of this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, someone greater than Jonah is here.
- The queen of the south will rise up at the judgment of this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon. And behold, someone greater than Solomon is here.
- When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, I'll return to my house from which I came.
- And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there.
- And the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation. While Jesus was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and brother stood outside asking to speak to him.
- [2 : 3 5] But he replied to the man who told him, Who is my mother and who are my brothers? And stretching out his hand towards his disciples, Jesus 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. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to our hearts.
- Let's pray. Lord God, we realize that the kingdom is advancing. The kingdom is advancing even when it appears not to be, even when the word is rejected, even when there is opposition.
- We thank you that the kingdom will come, that your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And we pray that as we spend some moments looking once again into this teaching about the kingdom, that you will indeed build the kingdom in our hearts and in our lives to anticipate that day when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Prejudice is a very nasty thing, especially when it's unconscious, especially when people aren't aware that they're being prejudiced.

[3 : 58] Every one of us here is prejudiced in some way or another. I'll give you one simple example. Isn't it true that the people we like and the people we approve of can do nothing wrong?

And if they do something wrong, we find excuses. And the people we don't like can do nothing right. And if they do something right, then we find reasons to discredit that.

Now, prejudice, as I say, is very deeply rooted in human beings. And part of that, of course, is because human beings, as human beings, we're extremely selfish, aren't we?

We're extremely concerned about our own interests and sometimes so concerned that we ignore others. Now, one of the signs of the kingdom coming and of fruit bearing is when we become to be aware of these prejudices and try to do something about them.

Because throughout these passages that we've looked at, in chapters 11 and 12, Jesus has been subjected to increasingly unthinking prejudice.

[5 : 10] And we're going to see this again today. It's the culmination of the responses to the king. These incidents in 11 and 12, not necessarily in chronological order, but a selection of the kind of responses that Jesus received as he came into Galilee and elsewhere, preaching the kingdom.

And as this section approaches its end, Jesus is penetrating behind the surface and getting to the real issues and the importance of a relationship with him.

Bearing fruit. That was where we ended last week in verse 33 and following. Make the tree good and its fruit good. For the tree is known by its fruit.

And John, in his gospel, talks about the branches in the vine and how by remaining in the vine, we are fruitful. So let's look at this final passage then.

First of all, an unfair question. Verses 38 to 42. Not really a question, but it's, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.

[6 : 19] It's more of a demand than a question. I notice the impossible situation here. They want to see a sign. The implication is that they'll believe.

But they've already seen many signs. They've already seen people blind eyes opened. Dumb people speaking. They've already seen the mighty works of God.

And another sign isn't really going to convince them. You see, what they're basically saying is, we don't believe that you are who you say you are.

And we want a sign to prove it. But even if we get the sign, we're not going to believe it. And that really is prejudice in a particularly virulent form.

See, a sign is only for those with eyes to see. So what is a sign then? A sign is something that points to the reality of the spoken word.

[7 : 21] They're saying to Jesus, you've spoken, you've claimed to be the Son of God. We want you to prove it. Now, notice verse 39.

An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign. Now, it's the teachers, the scribes and Pharisees who had come to him. But he knows perfectly well that they represent the people as a whole.

This generation is a phrase that Matthew uses a great deal. And I've mentioned this already. Not a particular age group, but all of the people alive at the time.

This generation, this evil and adulterous generation. I was just picking up from the Old Testament prophets. The prophets often used the word adultery for people departing from the true God.

Because the picture in the Old Testament of the relationship with the Lord is the marriage relationship. When they go after other gods, when they go after other faiths, that is described as adultery or even prostitution.

[8 : 30] And Jesus sees the heart. And he says, well, there is a sign, the sign of the prophet Jonah. Now, Jonah is a story which is well known.

I imagine everybody here knows the story of Jonah. And I think the sign is Jonah himself and what happened to him. If you read the book of Jonah, you'll find very little about what Jonah said because a great deal of emphasis on what happened to Jonah.

Verse 40, as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Jesus is saying, what happened to Jonah is a picture of what's going to happen to me. The experience of death and resurrection, the experience that will prove that I am who I say I am.

But even the resurrection, of course, didn't prove because if we read the resurrection accounts at the end of Matthew and the other gospels, we find that many people still did not believe.

[9 : 45] The old gospel hymn says, you ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart. That's not good enough. That's fine when my heart is rejoicing, but when my heart is grieving and depressed, that's no help at all.

We need to know not that he lives within my heart, important as that is, but that he lives and reigns in heaven and earth and will come again.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. That's what the gospel is. Whatever my feelings about it may be at any given time.

And yet, there's a huge contrast between Jonah and the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment and condemn it for they repented at the preaching of Jonah.

I mean, Jonah's an astonishing story. Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown. Presumably, Jonah said a little bit more than that. Presumably, he talked to them about the greatness of God and the need to repent and so on.

[10 : 52] But that's the essence. And it worked. It worked tremendously. Jonah didn't say, you've got to come to seven classes in a non-threatening environment.

And after that, if you still feel you want, you can do something. By the way, I'm not doing that down. Methods are different for different generations. All I'm saying is that it is the word of God which convicts.

However it's presented, whether it's presented like Billy Graham used to do, or whether it's presented in a small group sitting around in a room, it is the word of God.

And basically, unlike this generation, which had seen nothing of what Nineveh had seen, Nineveh had not seen people raised from the dead. They had not seen the blind healed.

They had not seen the lame cured. And also it refers to the incident of the Queen of Sheba, the Queen of the South, who will rise up at this judgment of this generation and condemn it because she was impressed by Solomon.

[11 : 57] By the way, this suggests, among other things, that Jesus regarded Jonah as a historical account, which I'm pretty certain it is, because Jonah is a real figure, just as the Queen of the South and Solomon were real figures.

Jesus is greater than the prophet. Jesus is greater than the king, and yet he is rejected. And they will rise up with this generation and condemn it.

He's saying, when you stand before the judgment seat, the Queen of Sheba will come striding into the audience chamber and condemn you. The people of Nineveh who repented, knowing far, far less than you do, will also come in at judgment of nothing to say.

So, as I say, we have an unfair question. They've made up their minds. Nothing is going to convince them, and yet they expect to be convinced.

Now, the next section, verses 43 to 45, I'm going to call it a dangerous indifference. Now, you see, the crowd were as guilty as the Pharisees.

[13 : 12] The crowd has seen all these things as well. But, they're not particularly hostile like the Pharisees. They're just indifferent. I imagine that applies to very many people in this country today.

They're not anti-gospel. They're not hostile. They just are indifferent. And that is dangerous. Because the danger of neutrality, reminder of Jesus' power over demons.

Remember what another sign Jesus shows? When an unclean spirit when a demon has passed through waterless days finds none. A little parable, warning of the danger of neutrality.

Warning of getting rid of what's bad and putting nothing in its place. The devil is always ready to fill a vacuum. And, it's also reminding the Pharisees that it's not a question of rules and regulations either.

Because, you could fulfill all these rules and regulations and your heart be totally unchanged. That is the problem with legalism. That's why legalism is attractive to many people.

[14 : 22] Because, you don't have to make any decisions. Everything is mapped out. And that's why I see many people like it. And, Jesus is saying, if you have experienced the power of the kingdom and ignored it, something worse will follow.

And, once again, so it will be with this evil generation. Now, in the next chapter, chapter 13, Jesus is going on to give a cluster of parables.

But, here is a little parable. The empty house. We know that very well. I mean, after all, if you tidy up your house, give a massive spring cleaning and then just leave it, the dust and the dirt will soon return.

That is the point. That's the illustration here. So, we have a totally unfair and prejudiced question. We have a danger in difference.

And, finally, we have an overriding relationship. This is verses 46 to 50. Now, this is not an attack on family and loving our family.

[15 : 30] It's an attack on the danger of making family life into an idol. Of pretending that everything is wonderful simply because it's family.

And, by the way, family doesn't suddenly become sanctified if you simply stick the word church in front of it. There's as many difficulties there as in any other family.

Indeed, George Bernard Shaw once said, God, give us our friends to make up for our families. And, there are times, maybe on Christmas afternoon, when we all feel that way.

The point is, Jesus encourages us to love our family. Jesus encourages us to show our caring and our love and our generosity, particularly in the family.

It's interesting in the book of Proverbs, that book of tremendous wisdom about daily living, that the families continually emphasize because that's where we are most vulnerable.

[16 : 36] That's where we're most accepted and yet also where we let down our guard. So, Jesus is not saying, you've got to, I mean, Luke actually uses the word hate, but it's a relative word.

Jesus is saying, if the call of family challenges the call of Christ, then we must follow Christ. That is the point. And many people have experienced that.

Many people who come from families who are not believing and they come to Christ and they find family life then very difficult. We know that. The problem is really not that we love our families too much, that we love Christ too little.

I think that is the basic problem that Jesus is drawing attention to. So, because after all, the fifth commandment says, honor, love your father and mother.

The Ephesians 5 says, husbands, love your wives. Fascinating passage is that often when that's been read at weddings, wives obey your husbands.

[17 : 47] You can see certain people bristling. And then it comes to the apparently easy bit, husbands love your wives. Then the terrifying, as Christ loved the church.

I remember once a young guy asked a very wise Christian preacher, I'm afraid I love my wife too much. And the older Christian said, read Ephesians, do you love her more than that?

As Christ loved the church. So you see, the point is, this is where it's so important to take the whole of scripture balanced together. This is saying, on the one hand, don't make family life into an idol.

Don't pretend it's all like a little house on the prairie and all this silly nonsense about everything being wonderful and we all love one another and it's all hunky dory to use a theological phrase.

On the other hand, he's not saying be cold and heartless turning your back on your families because that was not doing the will of God either.

[18 : 54] And he said, who are my mother? And he said, here are my mother and my brothers, whoever does the will of my father in heaven. Now notice, this is not the way to become a member of the family of God.

This is a sign that we belong to the family of God. Doing the will, not perfectly, but praying that your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And I think it's worth doing a Bible study sometime about what Jesus has to say about family. Family is hugely important and particularly in our society with his attack on family life and on the kind of standards we have inherited from centuries of the gospel.

But don't make it into an idol. When the voice of Christ speaks, his is the voice that must be heard, his is the voice that must be obeyed.

And we know that Jesus loved his mother. Remember that tender and beautiful scene that John alone records. John standing by the cross and Mary, Jesus' mother, said, Mother, there's your son and son, there is your mother.

[20 : 14] And we're told John took her into his home from that day. Strong, loving, Christian families are a great testimony to the grace of God.

But what's remember, it's a great testimony to the grace of God. It's not a great testimony to our niceness and adaptability and so on. Because a friend of mine said all families are dysfunctional families without the grace of God.

So Jesus is saying, my demands, my call is overriding. This is the overriding relationship. And it goes right back to the very beginning of the Bible.

Remember, the first sin happened, not when Adam and Eve fell out with each other, but when they combined together against God.

And that's a principle, I think, that continues right through the Bible and today. So Jesus is saying the kingdom is advancing. Make sure that you are part of that advancing kingdom.

[21 : 19] Make sure you don't reject it like the Pharisees or be indifferent to it. And above all, make sure that our relationship with him is the primary relationship in our lives, which will then flow over into our relationship with others in our families.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord, as we think about our own lives, the complicated people we are, the prejudices we often fall into, the way that so often we are unkind and cruel to our families and indifferent to those far away.

We ask not that we may love our families less, but we may love Christ more. And we ask this for the glory of his name. Amen.