

# The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

### MATTHEW 12:38-45

IN this paragraph we have the last phase of this particular conflict of our Lord with the rulers. Concerning the Sabbath He had assumed the defensive attitude, claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath and Possessor of men. In the second phase of the controversy, when His power was under discussion, He defended Himself against the charge they made of complicity with Satan, and then in some of the most solemn words that ever fell from His lips, warned them of the awful peril that threatened them when they made such a charge and thus revealed their inability to distinguish between good and bad.

The time-note “**Then**” with which this section begins shows us that this demand for a sign followed immediately upon the King’s solemn words of warning. That is in itself significant and partly accounts for the answer they received. That answer was a positive and emphatic refusal to give them a sign such as they asked, followed by words of direct and searching denunciation and condemnation.

In Matthew’s account of this event we have first the request of the Scribes and Pharisees; and secondly the careful and revealing answer of the King; both of which demand our very careful consideration in the light of the whole of the surroundings, and especially that process of controversy which we have been considering. The tone and temper of these men is revealed in all that has gone before, and we must take time to consider this if we are to understand their request, and the King’s answer.

If we glance back in the chapter to the fourteenth verse, we have at once a revelation of their underlying motive. Then Matthew tells us that after Jesus had answered their question as to the legality of healing a man on the Sabbath, by appeal to them, and by healing the man with the withered hand; “**Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.**”

That purpose was still in their heart when they accused Him of casting out demons by Beelzebub; and after His stern rebuke and solemn warning, it was the inspiration of this request. They were not honestly seeking for a sign, as men who really desired to know the truth about Him. The request was in itself malicious. They had come to definite conclusion as to what their line of action toward Him should be. They were set upon His destruction; and their request was inspired by their malice.

Its tone was that of satire, “**Master, we would see a sign from thee.**”

This is self-evident in the light of the record of what they had already said concerning Him which we find in the twenty-fourth verse, “**This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.**”

If that statement did not express honest conviction, it certainly revealed their attitude toward Him personally, and out of such an attitude the request for a sign could not be honest. They were not really prepared to receive a sign. If they had been, the casting out of the demons was in itself sufficient to have proved His co-operation with the Spirit of God, as He had declared. Thus when a sufficient sign had been given they had refused it by attempting to account for it in the most terrible way.

Yet these men, already hardened against convincing signs, asked for one; and the asking was satirical, the asking of men who were not prepared to accept as sufficient any sign He could give, because of their personal hatred of Him.

That is exactly what He meant when He declared in words of the sternest, “**O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.**”

Their use of the word “**Master**” was in itself an insult, as they refused to accept Him or His teaching. Their spirit was exactly that of the men who mocked at Isaiah, saying, “**Whom shall He teach knowledge?**” (28:9). They despised and rejected the Master and were determined not to accept His teaching; yet they called Him “**Master**”!

They came to Him with this request, while they were filled with willful and wicked unbelief. They had seen many of His mighty works, but under the impulse of a deep and growing hatred they discounted them all; and their demand now was for a sensual and spectacular proof, such as He never gave, and such as, even had He given, they would no more have yielded to as proving the divinity of His mission than they had done in the case of the signs of His beneficent and mighty operations in the relief of human suffering both physical and mental.

The paragraph is occupied mainly with the King’s answer. This answer is remarkable in every way, but the first matter which is impressive is that, refusing definitely and in so many words, to give them the sign they asked, He lifted the matter out of the then present surroundings, and spoke wholly of the future.

For the purpose of careful consideration we may divide this answer into three parts.

- The first had to do with the Last Sign which would be given; and suggested another opportunity which would be created for that generation (39-40).
- The second dealt with the Last Judgment; and solemnly declared the nature of the verdict which would be found concerning the generation (41-42).
- The third described the Last State of the generation, and was of the nature of a sentence pronounced (43-45).

Thus, in the presence of men who represented their generation, the King now spoke as One Whose testimony was rejected, and Whose signs had been ignored; and dealt with the future, *foretelling an opportunity, a verdict, and a sentence.*

While refusing a sign He promised a sign; and thus in the presence of their malicious hostility foretold the new opportunity which would be created for them by the carrying out to completeness of His divine work in the world. His purpose was that of saving and redeeming. Therefore He refused the sign they asked, which would have had no effect; and promised them the only sign that could by any means arrest and constrain them, that namely of His own Resurrection from the dead after their malice had encompassed that death. The giving of that sign would afford them a new and final opportunity.

The awful solemnity of the occasion is revealed in the words in which the King uttered His estimate of these men, and of the generation which they represented in their hostility to Him. That estimate is revealed in the two words which He employed, “**evil**,” and “**adulterous**.”

- The first described what they were in themselves.
- The second described their failure in relationship to God.

The word “**evil**” really means harmful, hurtful; and thus was two-edged as the King used it. It described the influence these men were exerting, and thus revealed their true character. In spite of all their external observances of religion they were essentially evil, wicked of heart; and therefore in spite of all their teaching of the formulae of religion and morality, they were exerting and influence that was hurtful; and thus the generation which they influenced was as evil as they were in themselves.

The word “**adulterous**” is a terribly searching one, and the more so in that here it is certain that the King used it, not in its material or physical sense, but in its spiritual significance.

This was a method of use not unfamiliar to these men, in that they knew at least the letter of their own Sacred Scriptures. The figure implicated is that most sacred one of the Old Testament in which the Lord speaks of His people as betrothed to Him; and the sin described is that most terrible sin of spiritual harlotry which Hosea had dealt with.

The word, as the King used it, was a charge made against these men of disloyalty, infidelity to the sacred and holy covenant between them and the Lord. They were adulterous, unfaithful to their vows. The one burning word was a condensation of the complaint of Hosea:

“**The Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land;**” which was the prophet’s interpretation of his figure of adultery and harlotry in the spiritual realm.

Such was the King’s estimate of these men, and of the generation of which they were the spokesmen when they requested a sign. And in this hour of their malicious, satirical unbelief, He told them of the one full and final sign which would presently be given to them.

That sign would in all essentials be similar to one with which they were perfectly familiar. They knew how Jonah had been a sign to Nineveh in its sin by virtue of the fact that he had appeared in the city a preacher of the Lord, after he had been cast out to death. That is the only possible solution of the words of the King here, for in that is the only parallel between Jonah and Jesus. In every other way they stand in contrast. That throws some light upon the book of Jonah, but that is not now our subject.

Thus our Lord declared to these men that His final sign would be that after their hatred had encompassed His death, He would return out of death, and the demonstration of the truth of His teaching, and the divinity of His mission would be found in that return.

How all this was verified we know full well. To men in evil mood asking a sign, the King spoke of the only sign which would be sufficient for such demonstration, the sign which would be the last possible. They had refused every other sign possible. They must now wait for that.

From that foretelling of a last sign, the King passed to the uttering of His last verdict on these men and their generation. This He did illustratively by instituting two comparisons, and uttering a two-fold condemnation.

*His first comparison was between the men of Nineveh and the men and generation with which He was personally dealing.*

The men of Nineveh were honest. They received the sign, heard the preaching and yielded to it in repentance. The men of His own generation would fail in that particular. The accuracy of the prediction we know.

After the resurrection the truth was proclaimed with all the signs of Pentecostal power following therefrom, and with what results we know.

*His second comparison was between the Queen of the South and the generation.*

She had come from the ends of the earth in diligent determination to hear the wisdom of Solomon, while their diligence had been that of persistent determination to silence the speech of the King.

The condemnation which the King announced was the result of the comparisons He made. He claimed to be greater than Jonah under whose preaching Nineveh had repented, and greater than Solomon to receive whose teaching the Queen of the South had shown such diligence.

The comparison has another application also.

They were children of the Covenant, familiar with the Divine Economy, versed in the great prophetic Scriptures; while Nineveh was a city outside the Covenant, and without the advantages which Israel had possessed, and the Queen of the South was of another nation and people, and so had not the privileges of the chosen and peculiar people.

Thus less enlightened people had obeyed less enlightening preaching and teaching; and in that fact the patent condemnation of those to whom He spoke, and who were to receive His final sign was declared.

*The last part of the answer of the King was a very remarkable and inclusive summing up of the whole situation, and pronouncement of sentence.*

This takes the form of an illustration drawn from individual experience in the matter of demon possession; and if we examine that with care we shall be prepared for the application which the King made when He said, "**Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation.**"

The illustration begins at the point of dispossession.

An unclean spirit is cast out of a man. The Lord shows the activity of that spirit. It needs some medium through which to act; it is restless and dissatisfied, unable to find what it seeks, for lack of such material medium. That in itself is a most remarkable revelation throwing light on a dark subject. It does not, however, come within the purpose of the present consideration to follow it up. For us it leads up to the return of the evil spirit to the man, and to the discovery of what condition the man was in. That condition is described in the words, "**Empty, swept, and garnished.**"

The arresting word is the first, "**empty**" The man was improved in certain ways, "**swept and garnished;**" but not possessed, empty! The result was that the improvements were of no avail. Seeing there was no indweller, possessing, holding, mastering, the unclean spirit re-entered, taking others with him, and all the improvement was swept away, and the last state of the man was worse than the first. To cast out the unclean is of no lasting value, unless there follow new possession by the clean. That is in itself a wonderful revelation of what is necessary to the remaking of a man and of society; and the King applied it immediately to His generation, that is to the men with whom He was dealing and to those whom they represented.

Thus inferentially He claimed that His presence and mission had loosed the power of evil. All His casting out of demons, which they had criticized, had but illustrated this wider fact, that while He was among them, the whole underworld of evil was within His government, and for a period He had held it in check and given men and the age an opportunity for better things. At this point human responsibility began. It was not enough that men should be loosed from the powers of evil. They must be submitted to the good.

He Who had cast out the evil spirits was Himself the King, able to possess the swept and garnished houses, so that they should be no longer empty, but held in possession by purity and power stronger than all the power of the enemy. This they had refused in their rejection of Him, and therefore the house though improved, "**swept and garnished,**" would sink to a lower level as more and worse evil spirits took possession. It was a solemn but carefully explained sentence; every word of which was fulfilled so far as that generation was concerned; and every word of which is fulfilled in the case of all men who are brought into contact with the King.

In the course of this study we have incidentally noticed, and it should now be directly recognized, that the King treated the opposition of the rulers as being the expression of the dominant spirit of the age; and therefore while dealing with those men, He constantly addressed Himself to the **“Generation.”** **“An evil and adulterous generation”** (39); **“The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation”** (41); **“The Queen of the South shall rise up in judgment with this generation”** (42). **“This wicked generation”** (45). The lessons therefore are peculiarly applicable to an age, while having, of course, an immediate application to individuals.

Our generation lives in the light of the ultimate sign.

The supreme vindication of the Christian Evangel, and demonstration of the Kingship of Jesus is that of the Resurrection; and that resurrection attested by the fact of the moral and spiritual changes wrought in the lives of countless multitudes of men and women.

The Kingship of Christ is more than that of One Who casts out unclean spirits. It is that of One Who takes possession, and holds for purity against all opposing forces. This is proven, as we have said, in all those who have proved His power.

The teaching of His verdicts is that judgment will be according to opportunity.

Therefore seeing that the Resurrection thus attested, proves Him the greatest Prophet, the greatest King, those who refuse His teaching and rebel against His rule will merit the severest condemnation.

The warning of His sentences is patent and pertinent.

Christ's presence always loosens the bonds of evil. Men always are conscious of that, whether they confess it or yield to it or no! Sometimes in the sense of that possibility we sweep and garnish our houses! We are great on cleanliness and decoration! Let us beware! Such swept and garnished houses are attractive to demons. Unless they are possessed and held by the King through His Spirit, the last state may be worse than the first.

**~ end of chapter 30 ~**

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