

Intro

This morning we consider rejection and repentance. Spiritual hardness and spiritual health. The issue is how we relate to God.

Having the privilege of seeing the end from the beginning (we know who Jesus is...we know Jesus' triumphant resurrection) we're merciless on the Pharisees. We're astonished by their response to Christ. How could they be so foolish? How could they keep resisting?

But we fail to consider our own hearts. Shocked by the repeated rejection of Jesus, shocked by defiance in the face of clear evidence, we read the passage and come away with something like, "wow, the Pharisees were really bad." But there's another way to look at the passage. Do I respond to God's Word like the Pharisees? Do I dismiss certain truths offhand? Is there evidence of hardness in my life? Let's consider our own hearts this morning as Jesus interacts with the Pharisees once again.

BIG QUESTION: how do I relate to God?

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

Jesus encounters the scribes, the Pharisees, and his family, using the opportunity to instruct the crowds and his disciples.

FCF: rejection of the king...failure to repent

Grace given: warning...spiritual insight

Gospel connection: resurrection hope and Christian obedience...contrasting responses to God...the nature of faith

Point 1: Don't place demands on God (12:38-42)

Explanation

Then = after the incident where the Pharisees said Jesus' power over demons came from Satanic powers.

The scribes and Pharisees desire a sign. What kind of sign? They've already seen demons cast out, numerous healings, and Jesus has raised the dead. What more could they ask for? Evidently Jesus wasn't the only one who was casting out demons (see 12:27). And God used the prophet Elijah's prayer to raise the dead (1 Kgs 17:17-24). So maybe they thought Jesus' miracles weren't impressive enough? Maybe they wanted direct judgments on Rome like God inflicted on Egypt? After all, their theology expected the Messiah to overturn Roman oppression. Since their rejection was already settled and they were conspiring to kill Jesus, it was likely a challenge they thought he couldn't meet (see 12:14). Whatever the case, they requested a sign.

Jesus responds to the request with an indictment: you're an "*evil and adulterous generation.*" [= the scribes, Pharisees, and unbelieving Israel] Seeking a sign gives them away. Israel should have recognized Jesus was sent by the Father. They should have recognized his teachings were biblical. They should have embraced his compassion on sinners and the suffering. They should have been moved by his miracles. They should have connected the dots and recognized he was the Messiah. They should have repented. Instead, they demanded a sign. To a people hardened in rejection, no sign was granted. But a future sign would be granted.

Jesus alludes to his resurrection. As Jonah spent three days in the belly of a fish and was miraculously delivered by the Father, so also the Son of God would die and spend three days in the grave and be miraculously raised from the dead. Three days \neq a literal exact 72 hours on the dot. Three days = parts of Friday, Saturday, Sunday. The connection is deliverance from death. Jonah's past deliverance pointed to the future deliverance at the resurrection. The sign Jesus would provide is the resurrection.

Our hope centers on the resurrection. When Christ died for our sins and rose from the grave, he rose victorious over sin and death. He secured our forgiveness of sins, our eternal inheritance, and our resurrection to a glorified heavenly body that can't sin and can't die. We receive the fruits of his victory through faith and repentance. The resurrection is the greatest sign that authenticates the gospel. No other religion has signs that authenticate their claims. Jesus stands alone among all religious figures in that he rose from the dead.

Then Jesus indicts the scribes and Pharisees by contrasting their response with Gentile responses in the Old Covenant era. When Jonah preached to Ninevah, they repented. When the queen of Sheba ("queen of the south") heard about Solomon's wisdom, she came to hear Solomon's wisdom. Gentiles responded to lesser messengers whereas Israel rejected the greater messenger. As a result, the Ninevites and the queen of Sheba will condemn unbelieving Israel at the final judgment = we'll be resurrected and present at the final judgment where will affirm God's sentence.

Note Jesus refers to himself as something greater than a prophet (Jonah) and a king/wise man (Solomon). Another veiled allusion to his deity.

Application

This hardened rejection reveals something about the human heart. It's not primarily information or proofs that move a person to repent. The Pharisees witnessed indisputable miracles. Jesus reasoned from the Scriptures they believed. Jesus appealed to their logic. The problem wasn't a lack of information. The problem wasn't a lack of proofs. The problem was sinful hearts. Romans 1:18 refers to this reality as "suppress[ing] the truth in unrighteousness." God uses Scripture and logical arguments, but apart from the Spirit working on someone's heart the words we speak will go unheeded. We need the Holy Spirit to open people's eyes to heed God's Word. This is why we pray for God to save our loved ones.

I've said **we can't place demands on God**. The scribes and Pharisees weren't satisfied with the generous revelation they received. Jesus had to act on their terms. This isn't how we relate to God. God is the Creator. We are the creation. God doesn't act at our command. We humbly submit ourselves to God's rule.

We imitate the Pharisees when we demand that God act in a certain way. The Pharisees had an expectation of how the Messiah would act. He would come in and overthrow Rome. Jesus didn't meet their expectations. So they rejected him.

We may not say Jesus isn't God. Or he's a glutton and a drunkard. Or he misapplied the Sabbath. Or he cast out demons by Satanic power. But we could place demands on God. One way we do this is through expectations. Maybe it's the belief that if God cares bad things won't happen to me. Or the belief that if I obey good enough God is obligated to ensure bad things don't happen to me. Having these expectations could lead to demands on God. God has to bless me in a certain way. God has to protect me in a certain way. If not, I'll stop going to church. Or stop reading my Bible. Or stop obeying God's commands. When we act like this, we place demands on God.

I know that many of you are going through painful circumstances. Circumstances beyond your control. Pain you don't want. Pain you never expected. And you don't understand why. I know we all have expectations. No one expects to have a cancer diagnosis or a child with brain damage.

Faith is giving up control. Not making demands. Submitting to God's will. Giving our burdens over to God. Trusting God is good even when we don't know the why (we do know Jesus' stance towards us!). Leaning on God for strength. Using the opportunity to bring glory to God. And seeing God work in us, through us, and for us. Faith is trust. Giving up control.

Point 2: Rebellion puts us in a worse place (12:43-45)

Explanation

Jesus uses a hypothetical story based on demonic realities to illustrate the condition of unbelieving Israel.

Jesus tells the story of a cast out demon. Finding no place for rest, the demon decides to go back into the person they were expelled from. When he arrives, he finds the person's house empty in order = no demons present. This time, the demon comes back with "*seven other spirits more evil than itself.*" They enter the person and take up residence, and the person is worse off than before. The person is likened to unbelieving Israel, who will be worse off after Jesus' coming. They're more hardened in their resistance to God and in 70 AD Jerusalem will be destroyed by Rome. That's what's going on in these verses.

As for repossession, I say a hypothetical story based on demonic realities because this is an illustration, not an exact depiction of what happens in every case. It's the story of one particular demon, not the case for every demon. We shouldn't take it to mean that every time a person has demons cast out, and they fail to repent, the initial demon always comes back with seven demons. It's an illustration of what could be, not an explanation of what always is. The demon can repossess the person because their house is empty and in order = the person never repented and the Holy Spirit is absent. The principle is clear: **rebellion puts us in a worse place.**

Application

To set you at ease, if we believe we are born of the Spirit we cannot be demon-possessed. Where do I get this from? Take a look at 2 Timothy 2:24-26:

2 Timothy 2:24-26 And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Paul is writing to Timothy, an apostolic delegate who functioned as a pastor = elder. As the Lord's servant, Timothy must kindly and patiently correct false teachers with gentleness. Why? Because there's the possibility God might give the false teacher a repentant heart. The point pertinent to demon-possession is that when a person repents they escape Satan's snare. With repentance comes freedom from Satan's control. How? By regeneration = being born again = the indwelling Spirit. If we're born again believers, we don't have to worry about demon-possession because we're indwelt by the Spirit. While we don't have to worry about being controlled by demons, we do need to worry about being influenced by demons. Like demonic doctrines (1 Tim 4:1) and division in the local church (Jas 3:13-18).

The principle I've identified is **rebellion puts us in a worse place.** The Pharisees were in a worse place spiritually after they encountered Jesus. Encountering Jesus intensified their hardness of heart. They were at the point of committing the unforgivable sin if they hadn't committed it already. The point for us is that we don't want to be in a worse place after hearing God's Word. Whether reading your Bible or hearing a sermon, you put yourself in a worse place when you reject what God is saying.

Illustration

Let's revisit Ephesians 4:29, which I used several weeks back:

Ephesians 4:29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Previous to encountering God's Word maybe you told dirty jokes. Or gossiped. Or said mean things. Prior to finding this verse your speech was sin, but they were sins of ignorance. When you're confronted with Ephesians 4:29 you have two options: turn from sinful speech or reject God's Word and continue speaking sinfully. How you respond determines whether God's Word puts you in a better place or a worse place. Obedience brings ourselves joy and blessing to others. Refusing to repent makes us susceptible to a hardened heart. As a believer born of the Spirit not hardened to the point of committing the unforgivable sin, but hardened to the point where sinful patterns increase and we distance ourselves from the God we are rejecting.

Caution: there's a place between perfect obedience and hardened rebellion. A difference between struggling to overcome sin and disregarding God's commands. Repentance is engaging the fight. Changing your mind and resolving certain speech is contrary to God's Word. Confessing your sin to God and people. Pleading with God for help. Having fellow Christians hold you accountable. Transforming your thought life by increasing Bible consumption. Entering the battle against sinful speech rather than excusing it. Perfection may not come immediately. There may be a struggle. But entering the battle is repentance. If we fight sin, we won't be a worse place.

Beware of reaching a point where hearing God's Word leaves you worse off!

Point 3: Jesus' family is identified by obedience (12:46-50)

Explanation

In the course of Jesus' interaction with the scribes, Pharisees, and crowds he had gone inside. His mother and brothers are outside and wish to speak to him, so a man goes inside where Jesus is teaching, and alerts Jesus that his family is outside and wishes to speak with him. Jesus uses the opportunity to discuss who his true spiritual family is.

Jesus says his mother and his brothers are his disciples. He's not disowning his physical relatives. He's simply stating that his followers are his family. And how we can determine who is Jesus' family:

"For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Straightforward. To the point. Jesus' criteria for who is a Christian = do they obey the Father's will? Unbelieving Israel fails the test. But Jesus' disciples turn from their sin and obey the Father. Just two thoughts I've shared repeatedly as we've worked through James and Matthew.

First, faith is the mechanism that produces works. “Faith” that doesn’t produce works doesn’t save according to James (Jas 2:14). When faith is operative, works follow (Jas 2:22).

Illustrations: trust creates action

If I trust a GPS, I follow its directions.

If I trust a doctor’s diagnosis, I take their prescription.

If I trust that a car’s price is a good deal, I sign the contract.

Trust drives us to act. Trust drives obedience.

Second, the Spirit’s presence in a person inevitably results in works. The stark difference between being a slave to sin and becoming a slave to righteousness (Rom 6:18) has radical effects, because God is at work in us to accomplish his desires (Phil 2:13). In the words of Neal Pottle, “the Holy Spirit has a product.” It’s called obedience. But we don’t obey perfectly because mingled with trust and the Spirit’s work there are sinful dispositions and habits that remain.

Application

Note the familial nature of Christianity. Jesus died to make us his family and to make us family with one another. We look out for one another. We bear with one another. We remain committed to one another. We care for one another when physical family isn’t present. We provide a safe family for those from broken families. We need each other. God willed to establish local churches and bring diverse people into community with each other. Jesus didn’t die to simply save individuals from hell. Jesus died to make individuals at odds with God family with one another. A people who trust God and do his will together.

We’ll highlight the connection between faith and fruit (obedience) in greater depth next week when we discuss the parable of the soils...

Conclusion

We’ve learned three things today. First, **Don’t place demands on God.** Our proper stance is submission. Humbling receiving God’s truth and following Jesus. Second, **rebellion puts us in a worse place.** Resolve to obey God in the strength God supplies. Be cautious about hardening your heart. Third, **Jesus’ family is identified by obedience.** Jesus saved us to become family. We know we’re his because we obey him. We trust him and he’s transformed our hearts.