

A few years ago, I began to experience pain in my stomach. Or at least I thought it was my stomach. The pain happened under my ribs. And it felt like it moved. It seemed to travel across my body. It lasted for a few minutes after eating and then went away. I noticed it was especially worse after I drank orange juice or ate something that had grease in it. So I went to see my doctor. He sent me to get an x-ray and ultrasound. These revealed stones in my gall bladder.

The gall bladder shoots out this deadly stuff onto food as it travels through your body. This stuff or gall helps the body break the food down so it can be absorbed. Well, when I drank orange juice or ate greasy foods, the gall bladder would squeeze hard to get that gall out. But as it squeezed, it pushed on the stones and that caused the pain.

So I was sent to a surgeon. He told me about the need to remove the gall bladder and how they did it. Then I waited for a surgery date which came one year later. It was good experience for a pastor. On that day, I was the one prepped for the surgery by various medical teams. I was the one rolled into the surgery theater. I was the one who crawled onto the surgery table. And the last thing I remember was the surgeon above me with a raised kitchen knife ready to plunge it into my belly. (Well, maybe it wasn't quite a kitchen knife). I woke up later and began the process of recovery; which included a drink of orange juice. And for the first time in 3 years, I could drink orange juice without subsequent pain.

Many of you have had similar experiences. Though you'd rather not have to see a doctor or get some tests, in the end, it can be a good thing to correct something wrong inside of us. Seeing a doctor who diagnoses our health can lead to longer term health. The same is truly spiritually. We all need regular checkups to determine the state of our spiritual hearts. It is good we can keep going. But if there's something wrong it can be addressed. All of us have this recurring problem of sin in our hearts.

If we neglect spiritual checkup, our hearts can drift far from God. Today, we are going to discover symptoms of a heart far from God. We've got the best doctor to come and examine us today. His name is Jesus. We're going to see him go to work as He diagnoses the Pharisees heart. Through His work, we will discover symptoms of a heart far from God and the prescription necessary to address those symptoms.

This picks up the account of Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew 12. Today we are looking at verses 38-50. I pray that God will use this time to help reveal our heart state and then show us any need we have to turn to Him for His healing work.

Matthew 12:38-50 (ESV)

³⁸Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." ³⁹But 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. ⁴⁰For 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. ⁴¹The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. ⁴²The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

⁴³"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. ⁴⁴Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. ⁴⁵Then 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."

⁴⁶While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. ⁴⁸But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Symptoms of a heart far from God

This account begins with the Pharisees joined by some scribes to speak to Jesus. The scribes were not only people who could read and write. They were also called teachers of the law. They knew God's law inside and out. They would teach the people about it. (CHECK THIS OUT). They were part of the religious leadership in 1st century Judaism. So this group of scribes and Pharisees come to Jesus with a request.

"Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." A sign would be some kind of mark or act that communicates a very clear message. A sign post today points to something or points the way to get somewhere. The sign these leaders request would point to or prove that Jesus is the Messiah. It may seem like they sincerely desire to discover Jesus' identity. A sign would prove it once for all.

But there are several problems with this. First, Jesus had already performed or displayed countless signs. Jesus healed diseases and sicknesses with a touch of hand or a spoken command. Jesus has demonstrated His authority

through His teaching, quieting the storm and command over demons. Last week, we saw him release a man oppressed by a demon. Were these signs not enough to prove Jesus was unlike anyone else they'd ever met?

Their motivation presents another problem. The Pharisees have already decided that Jesus is not the Messiah. They ask questions or make requests to trap Jesus or prove He's a fraud. So if Jesus were to perform a sign for them, they would only use it to further their own purposes.

Yet there's an even more serious problem. If we give the Pharisee's the benefit of the doubt and conclude they asked sincerely to see a sign proving Jesus as Messiah, who do they think they are demanding God perform a sign for them? Is God a trained seal that exists to do tricks when we call on him? Does God bow to us and move according to our command? Such a request seems more like Pharaoh's demand of Moses for God to show a sign to prove His existence. Or it's like Satan's temptation that Jesus throw himself off the temple to test if God would really send his angels to catch him.

This reveals the first symptom of a heart far from God.

1 – Faithlessness –

I will believe you God if you do, show, answer, solve . . . whatever I want you to do. This is the skeptical search for tangible evidence. The demand for a sign spells the end of faith. It is a demand for proof before faith, which by definition removes faith. But what is wrong with that? Don't we demand proof before we give trust in lots of areas of life? We don't save our money in a bank that has questionable security. We don't entrust personal details about our lives unless someone has earned our trust. So why not demand proof before giving our trust to God?

Well God is unlike anyone else in the universe. And we cannot relate to Him or be in relationship with Him apart from faith. Hebrews 11:6 – And without faith, it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Faith, by definition, implies trusting or believing something that you cannot completely see or explain.

Jesus said "God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:24) God being spirit means that God is not made of any physical matter and does not have a material body. (ESVSB) But He does have a more wonderful kind of existence that is everywhere present. He also is not perceived or picked up by our bodily senses. We can't smell God or touch Him. We don't taste Him or see Him with our eyes or hear Him speak in our ears.

Yet, He is the powerful one who brought the universe into existence. He leaves lots of evidence of His work. He communicates to us through His Word and His Spirit in us.

God is transcendent meaning He is outside the boundaries of space of time. Yet God has accommodated Himself to our weakness so we can be in relationship with Him. He has made Himself known ultimately through Jesus. But we cannot know such a great and transcendent God apart from faith. This is the way God ordained for us to know Him. It is the way that is necessary to know an immaterial or spiritual being.

But the Pharisees move away from this to demand a sign, a proof, a test. We can do the same thing when we demand that God perform in a certain way or do something specific before we believe or as a condition for us to continue to follow. But according to Jesus, such faithlessness is not the sign of a wise person who ensures they are make reasonable choices. Jesus has harsh words for such a request. “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign.”

Adultery is unfaithfulness; in this context it is spiritual unfaithfulness. Jesus discerns that such a request indicates a heart in rebellion against God. Jesus never rebukes people who seek healing out of genuine need. But to seek a sign with a malicious motive reveals an evil heart. So Jesus declares that they will not be given the sign they want. But they will be given a sign they don't expect – the sign of Jonah.

This leads us to the second symptom of a heart far from God.

2 – Unrepentant. Repentance is a willingness to admit you're going the wrong way and then turning the other way. A repentant heart recognizes its distance from God and turns back to draw near to God. But these Pharisees would soon be exposed for their unrepentance. Jesus says - *But no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.* ⁴⁰ *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.* ⁴¹ *The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*

Now to understand Jesus' point, we need to quickly review the story of Jonah. It is found in the Old Testament book called Jonah. It occurred during a time when the Assyrians were the dominant world power. Their capital city was Nineveh. It was large for an ancient city – so large that it took 3 days to walk across it. God appointed Jonah to go and warn the city to repent of it's wickedness. Jonah did not want to go. He didn't want to see Israel's enemies repent and

receive God's mercy. So he fled on a boat. But God sent a storm that swamped the boat. Jonah discerned this was from God and commanded the sailors to throw him into the sea. They eventually agreed. The storm ended and Jonah was swallowed by a large fish.

God somehow sustained Jonah in the fish's body for 3 days and nights. Then the fish vomited Jonah up onto the shore. So God sends Jonah to Nineveh. He preaches that if Nineveh does not repent, it will be destroyed in 40 days. They repent. And Jonah is mad.

But Jonah himself was a sign to the Ninevites. Maybe he told them he had just been rescued from a fish's mouth. Maybe his hair was slightly discolored because he had been subject to the fish's digestive juices. Or maybe he never told them about the fish. The Ninevites experienced the effects of a divine sign they knew about.

But they repented. They responded to someone preaching who had way less revelation than Jesus would provide the Pharisees. The Ninevites repented with one sign. The Pharisees refused to repent despite having hundreds of signs. They will eventually see the same sign in a different form. Jonah was in the belly of fish for 3 days and 3 nights. Jesus would be in the belly of the earth for 3 days and 3 nights. Jonah was rescued from the possibility of death. Jesus was resurrected from death. This would be the ultimate sign.

Yet these Pharisees at this point had unrepentant hearts. They were unwilling to repent and confess the evil there. They were unwilling to admit that there was something wrong in in them that needed God's healing and forgiveness. When we resist repenting, we can drift far from God.

God's people can remain in a state of unrepentance for long periods of time. The greatest Biblical example is King David. He committed adultery with Bath Sheba and then had her husband murdered. Then he brought her into his palace as one of his wives. She gave birth to the child conceived. We know that takes at least 9 months. So maybe it's a year before the prophet Nathan comes to confront the king. David has not repented from that sin until Nathan exposes him. Then to David's credit, he immediately confesses his sin. Yet the consequences remained. The baby would die. Yet David is forgiven after a long time on unrepentance.

My brothers and sisters, please don't let unconfessed sin linger in your life. If you have some sin in your life that you have not confessed and repented from, please stop running from God or trying to justify it. It seems from Scripture that the longer anyone refuses to repent, the harder their heart becomes towards God. Please don't let it get to that

state. Repent now. Resolve, by God's strength to make it right now. Then you can begin that journey of reconnecting with and drawing near to God.

Jesus goes on with another example to expose the Pharisee's heart. This gives us the next symptom of a heart far from God.

3 – Unhearing –God – I don't have time to listen to you or I don't want to listen to you. Jesus' next example exposes the Pharisees' unwillingness to listen to Jesus wisdom. Verse 42 – The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. This account is found in 1st Kings 10.

The queen of the south was the queen of Sheba, likely the home of the Sabaeans in south western Arabia in present day Yemen. She travelled up the Arabian Peninsula to go visit Solomon, Israel's king. Solomon had become world famous for his wisdom. He was also Israel's wealthiest king and expanded Israel's borders to their furthest point in history. In one sense, he was Israel's greatest and wisest king. The queen came to visit and marveled at Solomon's wisdoms, splendor and treasure. She in some way listened to the wisdom of God's messenger.

But the Pharisees' who spoke to God in flesh, would not listen to the Son's wisdom. How attentively do we listen to God? How intentional are we to read His Word and listen to what He has to say to us through it? Tim Keller notes "contemporary people read God's Word to find things they disapprove of so they can ignore it. But God seeking Christians need to read God's Word to find things God disapproves of so they can obey it." We're about to enter into Jesus' teaching in parables. One statement Jesus' repeats often through this teaching is "he who has ears to hear let him hear." Or "be careful how you listen." We can hear all sorts of things. But listening involves taking in what we hear, pondering it and choosing to act on it. It's one thing to hear "they are handing out free one hundred dollar bills at a certain address this afternoon. It's another thing to act on the information and actually go to that address to receive that gift. We're called to hear and listen to God and discover His will and then follow it. But these Pharisees refused to listen to the wisest person in the universe who stood right in front of them.

One commentator summarizes these two examples of Jesus like this: "Neither the men of Ninevah nor the Queen of the Sheba might have been expected to take seriously the words of an Israelite. But they did. On Judgment Day, their response will sharply contrast the response of these Pharisees to the words of the ultimate Israelite. "

Another writes “Those who know little about Israel’s God are often the least arrogant and most responsive to the Gospel.”

The passage continues with verses 43-45 and this talks about an unclean spirit leaving then returning with 7 more spirits. Now what on earth does this saying have to do with anything in this passage? It at first seems like Matthew just dropped it here because he had no other place to put it. But upon closer examination, there is a connection that links it all together. Notice the end of verse 45 – This evil generation. Jesus started his response back in verse 39 by referring to “an evil and adulterous generation.” Then he talks about the men of Ninevah rising up at the judgment with this generation. The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. So he’s still talking about the Pharisees and the generation that refuses to believe in Him.

He uses the image of an unclean spirit that has departed or been driven out of a person. That spirit goes to waterless places. Why? Demons were often said to inhabit the desert because it seemed to have no blessing. There was no life or water or abundance there. Maybe the demon goes to the desert searching for an unsuspecting soul to inhabit. But it doesn’t find anyone. So it goes back to the person it left. What does the demon find? This person’s house or soul is empty, swept and put in order. So the demon sees an opportunity. It takes 7 more demons to go and reoccupy this house or person. They are suddenly worse off than they were before.

The key word is empty. If the house was full, there would be no room for the demon to return, let alone 7 more. But this life is more orderly, swept and empty than before. So there’s lots of room for the demon and his friends to move back in.

So the last symptom we discover of a heart far from God is

(43) Clean yet empty - Morally good yet no need for God. The Pharisees were known for their strict observance of the law. They didn’t go around and do what those nasty tax collectors or sinners did that Jesus sometimes ate with. But a morally good life is no indicator of a right relationship with God. People can clean up their lives yet do it apart from God. Jesus warns that this is a terribly dangerous state in which to live. When a person thinks they are morally good and doing just fine apart from God, they are in great danger. That’s what was happening to Israel at that moment. Jesus went around casting out demons. That generation was being released from some of its demons. But if they didn’t fill themselves with God, they left themselves open to 7 times more demons coming back into them.

Ironically, the Pharisees, who accused Jesus of ministering by the power of the devil, were themselves demonizing their own generation by living morally good lives apart from God. Don't we see this today? I can't count how many times I've heard people say about someone who does not know Christ, "but their good people." They're law abiding citizens. They've shown they care. They've done good work. They've helped in the community. Therefore, it wouldn't be unfair for God to pronounce them guilty at the Judgment. They are good people. Yes – clean, swept, orderly, empty and incredibly vulnerable. They may put faith in their own goodness or that their own good deeds earn enough favor from God. What is it that we hear at every funeral about every person who ever lived no matter their heart towards God? "They're in a better place."

Too many times I've heard about people like this. I've met people like this who are fine until they're terminal or their loved one is terminal and they wonder what's next. Where's the hope in this moment? Can my good life actually get me there? Or it turns into defiance – God better get me there - almost like He owes us. Jesus exposes this as deadly thinking that so many continue to be enslaved to today.

Don't let this describe you. If you have cleaned up your life, that's great. But don't stop there. You still need to fill your life with God. In a moment, I'll explain how you go about doing that.

But just before we get there, I want to give you 2 points of good news in this passage. The first one concerns the greatness of Jesus. I've highlighted this on the front page of the bulletin with 3 verses. Jesus makes three statements in the same form through chapter 12. Verse 6 – I tell you something greater than the temple is here. Verse 41 – Behold, something greater than Jonah is here. Verse 42 – Behold something greater than Solomon is here. The temple was Israel's greatest institution. It was the center of worship. Who ministered at the temple – the priests and the High Priest? Jonah was one of the prophets who held a high office in Israel's history. Solomon was the last king of the united kingdom of Israel. He was the greatest king in terms of wisdom, wealth and expansion of territory. But Jesus is greater than the temple; greater than the prophets; greater than the greatest king. **Jesus is the highest priest, the greatest prophet and the wisest king.** Jesus fulfills the three highest offices of the nation supremely.

Who makes up Jesus' true family?

The second bit of good news comes in the last verses with this account of Jesus' mother and brothers outside trying to get to him. Jesus uses this as a teaching opportunity to answer the question "who is part of Jesus' family?"

Jesus blood related family did not accept him or believe in him at first. If a family discovered that one of their own was doing something embarrassing, they would gather to try to stop them from doing it. It could be that they thought he was out of his mind and wanted to take him home. But Jesus instead asks “Who is my mother and who are my brothers? And it’s likely He didn’t mention father because his father wasn’t there and probably already had died.

The expected answer would be “the people outside.” But Jesus points to His disciples. “Here are my mother and brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” So **anyone who seeks and obeys the Father** can become part of Jesus’ family. You don’t have to be part of a certain ethnic group or have a certain social status or mental capacity or income. You don’t have to be going to church for a certain number of years or done a certain amount of good deeds. We need to seek Him and obey. That’s the essence of being part of Jesus’ family. That’s available to anyone here today.

How do we join Jesus’ family or draw near to Him?

Examine your heart. Ask Jesus to give you a heart diagnosis.

If Jesus reveals that you have never come to Him in faith, you need to trust Him with your life and future. You need to repent from your way of life apart from Him. You need to turn to Him and place your trust on Him. Jesus suffered, died and was resurrected to rescue us from our evil, adulterous, faithless, unrepentant, unhearing, empty hearts. Through this sacrifice, we can respond with faith, repentance, hearing and openness to God’s saving work. **Turn to Jesus in faith and trust Him with your life.**

Then if you already know Christ draw near to Him, if you’ve been far away, by doing the opposite of these symptoms. If you’ve been faithless, turn to Christ in faith. If unrepentant, then repent. If unhearing, then begin listening. If empty of God, then be filled with the Spirit. Then your next spiritual heart checkup will reveal a very different diagnosis.