

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL REFUSAL **(Matthew 12:38-50)**

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INTRODUCTION

One of my favorite episodes of the TV show “M*A*S*H” is one that took place in their very first season. Called “Dear Dad . . . Again,” it’s a letter from Hawkeye (the Alan Alda character) to his father recounting some of the weird things he is seeing at the 4077 MASH while serving with the US Army in the Korean War. One of the things he describes in this particular letter is the arrival of a new surgeon, Capt. Adam Casey who, Hawkeye notes, “is really a fine surgeon, every bit as good as I am . . . and I’ll get him for it.” It turns out, however, that Capt. Casey is a fraud; he’s not a real surgeon at all and, in fact, has never even been to medical school. Oops! As he explains to Hawkeye after he’s been found out, “I can do it all. I just never had the patience to do it by the numbers. I guess I never had the drive, to get the diploma, the permit, whatever.” Hawkeye encourages him to try it once because he’ll be great. He thanks Hawkeye for the encouragement but, of course, winds up leaving the unit pretending to be a chaplain.

We call such a person an “imposter.” The dictionary defines an imposter as “a person who pretends to be someone else in order to deceive others.” They’ve been an interesting and ongoing part of history: There was Frank Abagnale, the inspiration for the Steven Spielberg movie, “Catch Me If You Can,” who impersonated a Pan-Am pilot for two years, a pediatrician in a Georgia hospital for 11 months, and a lawyer in the Louisiana state attorney general’s office (even legitimately passing the Louisiana bar exam). I actually had a chance to meet him several years ago. He completely turned his life around; he now works to prevent bank fraud, identity theft, and some of the other such things that he actually did; in fact, he has used his expertise to work for the FBI as a fraud protection expert.

Then there was Ferdinand Demara, a twentieth-century American imposter master. Over the course of his 40-year “career,” he presented himself as a doctor of applied psychology, a civil engineer, a sheriff’s deputy, a Baptist pastor, an assistant prison warden, a hospital orderly, a lawyer, a child-care expert, a Catholic monk (in two different orders), an editor, a cancer researcher and a teacher. His most famous escapade was impersonating a trauma surgeon aboard a Canadian naval vessel during the Korean War, ultimately performing many major operations, including once removing a bullet from within a half inch of a patient’s heart, and also successfully removing a lung. None of his patients died. So how did he do it? Well, he was reportedly blessed with a photographic memory so, while the patients were being prepped for surgery, he would go into his quarters and speed-read the appropriate procedure from a book on general surgery. He was so good that, when initially found out (by the mother of the doctor he was impersonating), no one believed that he wasn’t an actual surgeon. This is thought to be the inspiration of the MASH episode we just talked about. He died in 1982 at the same hospital at which he had served as a visiting chaplain.

Well, in this story of the “Radical Rabbi,” we will be watching the scribes and Pharisees continue to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is an “imposter.” Last week they thought He might be in league with the devil but His answers quickly shot down that idea. Now today, they’re going to try out another plan in an attempt to expose the imposter they believe Him to be. But first, let’s join together **in a moment of prayer.**

TEXT & ANALYSIS (Matthew 12:38-50)

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You” — Matthew 12:38.

So, what are they asking for? According to the Greek, not just something mundane or simple, but rather some kind of miraculous, supernatural, even cosmic event — something so awesome that it could only be credited to the divine and done at their beckoning.

Now, first of all, this is an ironic twist. The same people who had just said a bit ago that Jesus was in league with the devil (what we talked about last week) are now asking for a sign that could prove that He has come from heaven. I can almost hear Christ saying: “OK, so you guys want Me to provide you with a sign that will allow you to validate Me as being the Messiah — pending your approval, of course!”

And second, talk about the heights of arrogance — and blindness as well — their attitudes reminding of the attitudes Jeremiah confronted some 600+ years before this: ***You struck them, but they felt no pain; You crushed them, but they refused correction. They made their faces harder than stone and refused to repent — Jeremiah 5:3.*** Jesus had already been presenting words that had people besides themselves as they heard them, and in addition He had been displaying the power behind His words in His works — the miracles that had been happening since His ministry began. Now if He had done as they asked, He would have both been serving their unbelief and, worse, allowing them to be the ones to set the standards for what to believe about Him. So, does Jesus refuse their request? Yes, at least to what they’re demanding. Already radical — you simply did not refuse a Pharaonic request. But after a moment’s pause, He actually agrees: He will provide them with a sign — but just not anything like what they’re asking for, and not before identifying the kind of people who would even be asking such a thing.

[Jesus] answered, “A wicked [a maliciously evil] and adulterous [unfaithful] generation asks for a sign!” — Matthew 12:39a.

Their question was not only underscoring their lack of belief in Christ as the Messiah, but it also reflected the inherent depths of their own wickedness and their complete unfaithfulness to the covenant relationship instituted by God Himself.

Jesus continued: ***“But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:39b.***

In other words, “You guys aren’t going to decide what kind of sign I should show to prove Myself. I will decide what sign I will show. In fact, that sign has already been decided — the sign of the prophet Jonah. By that sign I will validate that I am who I have said I am, and who My words and works have proclaimed that I am.”

And then Christ explains what “the sign of the prophet Jonah” means: ***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*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:40.***

Jonah was an OT prophet who had been called by God to minister to the people of Nineveh, the capitol city of the Assyrian Empire. But instead, Jonah headed in the opposite direction, attempting to flee God’s command by taking a ship west from the city of Joppa, possibly intending to go as far as the Atlantic coast of Spain — in other words, as far away from God’s intentions as was physically possible. But God intervened in his plans, sending a storm that resulted in Jonah’s being thrown overboard by the ship’s crew in an attempt to appease God’s anger; he winds up being swallowed by a “huge fish.” But, while in the belly of that monster fish, Jonah realizes his sin, and begs for God’s forgiveness, resulting in the fish’s spitting Jonah out onto dry land. When God’s command is repeated, Jonah obeys.

Jesus is using Jonah’s description of his experience as a “type” of what Jesus Himself would soon be undergoing: death, burial and resurrection. Jonah’s death? Being thrown into the sea. His burial? Being swallowed by the huge fish. And his resurrection? Being spit out onto dry land, alive and actually ready to minister as God had commanded him. Of course, Jonah’s experience is just a faint shadow of what Christ would endure, but it still presents a “sign,” a picture, of how Jesus would forever validate Himself as the Son of Almighty God, His Chosen One, His Messiah — by death (on the cross), by burial (in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea) and by resurrection (***“He is not here; He has risen, just as He said”*** — ***an angel, Matthew 28:6a.*** And the “three days and three nights” is simply a Jewish expression meaning parts of three consecutive days.

And now Jesus uses Jewish history to continue His response: ***“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 Christ, Matthew 12:41.***

Our Bible (and their Scriptures) tell us what the scribes and Pharisees themselves would have doubtlessly known; upon God’s moving through Jonah’s preaching: ***The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth*** — ***Jonah 3:5.*** As the repentant king proclaimed to his subjects: ***“[L]et people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence”*** — ***Jonah 3:8.*** As Christ pointed out, “They responded in repentance to the preaching of a man — Jonah — and now Somebody far greater than Jonah is here.”

And then Jesus goes on, continuing to draw from their own history and their Scriptures: ***“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”*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:42.***

Christ is referencing the Queen of Sheba, who famously journeyed from her distant kingdom (possibly from as far away as Ethiopia) all the way to Jerusalem simply to listen

to the wisdom of King Solomon. As He points out: “She came literally from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of a man — Solomon — and now Somebody far greater than Solomon is here — standing right in front of you.”

Also, I’m not sure if you heard it, but that was quite an insult that Jesus delivered to His audience: He was holding up Gentiles — the hated Assyrians (of which Nineveh was their capitol city), who had conquered and exiled the ten northern tribes of Israel, and then a foreign ruler, and a woman at that — as examples to Jews. That already would have been a huge offense to any Jew, but to a scribe or Pharisee, who saw themselves as the epitome of a Jew pleasing to God? That was a whopper, a very public slap in the face. But what was Christ’s very simple point? “Gentile or not, those people responded to God — through preaching and through wisdom — coming from mere human beings. So, if they would respond like that to Jonah and to Solomon, why won’t you respond to Me?”

He then goes on to describe the spiritual nature of the people He has found in Israel: ***When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:43-45.***

Now this isn’t going to make much sense at all unless we connect to the miracle that these people had just witnessed — the demon-possessed man who was blind and mute. Jesus had healed him, but he now goes back to that man’s situation, and uses it to describe what He is seeing in the nation as a whole. The man is obviously better off to be rid of the demon, but his life is still empty spiritually speaking. His life needs the presence of God to fill his life or that expelled demon, returning to find the man’s life still spiritually empty, may not only enter the man’s life again but bring other demons with him, making the end result so much worse than how the guy started out.

So, what’s Jesus saying? Israel had long been ensnared in the sin of idolatry; their unfaithfulness to their covenant relationship with God had caused incredible suffering, including wars and exiles. But, as a nation, by the time Jesus had arrived, they had largely been delivered from that particular sin. But that only meant that the nation had reformed; in other words, something that had been wrong had been stopped. But the nation had not allowed themselves to be filled with the spirit of God. They were still spiritually empty. Now, are they religious? No doubt: one look at the Pharisees would have told you that religion was alive and well. But that’s not what God was after, not then and not now. It is relationship God seeks, with anybody and everybody. Religion is just a man-made critter of our own invention. Only God creates the relationship He desires. And by the leadership and eventually the nation doing their own “radical refusal” by rejecting the One who could fill them to overflowing with the wonders of the relationship Christ desired for them, they were going to end up in a worse situation than they had ever experienced before. As Jesus would sum up so accurately speaking at another time to His opponents: ***“You study the***

***Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life (religion). These are the very Scriptures that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life (relationship)* — Jesus Christ, John 5:39-40.**

And now another circumstance presents itself, one in which Jesus will clarify what “family” means in His kingdom — and we’ll be using both Mark and Luke to help us tell this part of the story: ***[Now Jesus’ mother and brothers came to see Him, but they were not able to get near Him because of the crowd — Luke 8:19] While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, His mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to Him. [Standing outside, they sent someone in to call Him. A crowd was sitting around Him — Mark 3:31b-32a] Someone told Him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to You.” He replied to him, “Who is My mother, and who are My brothers?” [Then He looked at those seated in a circle around Him — Mark 3:34a] 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.” [“My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice” — Jesus Christ, Luke 8:21] — Matthew 12:46-50.***

Now is Jesus refusing to see or even disowning or disavowing His mother and brothers? No; nor is He insulting or diminishing His earthly family. But the sad fact is, some of those closest to Him had the most contrary attitudes concerning who He really was: Some thought, and even said, ***“He is out of His mind” — Mark 3:21b.*** And John 7 tells us: ***[E]ven His own brothers did not believe in Him — John 7:5.*** What Jesus is doing here is showing the supremacy of the spiritual family that He will be inviting all to join: the family of God. Our spiritual relationships will endure forever. Particularly if members of our earthly families are not believers, we will find the love and support necessary to our lives only in our spiritual brothers and sisters.

But don’t overlook how inclusive Christ’s words are here: This is at least the third time Jesus has either used the word “whoever” or a parallel phrase in describing His call to the world: (1) In His late-night conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus famously said: ***“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” — Jesus Christ, John 3:16.*** (2) In His invitation given to the crowds following His affirmation to John the Baptist, He said: ***“Come to Me, all you [literally, “whoever of you] who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 11:28,*** the Greek suggesting that the word in the Greek for “all” can also mean “whoever.” (3) And finally, here, in defining our spiritual family: ***“[W]hoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:50.*** We can never forget that Christ’s “target audience” was, and is, everybody! Nobody, for any reason, is outside the call of the kingdom of God!

APPLICATION

There are some huge lessons that get touched on in this story. Let’s look at them now.

First of all, the scribes and Pharisees were asking Jesus for a sign. Their sign was standing right in front of them but, because of spiritual blindness, they couldn’t see him. We’ve

talked about how we can see Jesus in action in this world, whether in our own lives or in the world around us. So, what does that look like? What should we be looking for? What are the “signs” that He continues “present tense” to live and work in this world? Well, how about these for starters?

- 1) He continues to draw people into the kingdom. People being saved is a wonderful sign of His presence, as only He can make that happen. People can no more be saved on their own than Lazarus could have risen from the dead on his own. But, just as Jesus’ call brought him to life physically, so His calling into the world continues to bring spiritual life in God through Him.
- 2) Through His Holy Spirit, He continues to mold people into His image — the only image that is pleasing to God. It’s a question we’ve brought up before, but how have you been changed since you first surrendered to Christ? Everything that has taught you and matured you is a sign of His active presence and working in the world.
- 3) He continues to shape world events to prepare for the end of human history. All leaders, all elections, all trends, all pandemics, all natural disasters — all everything — is at His direction, and completely for His purposes and completely for His glory. He has an eternal kingdom on the way, which we are all commanded to be preparing for. Remember: All human history is, ultimately, His story.

Second, someone greater than [FILL IN THE BLANK] is here! We always stand in awe (so to speak) of the greatest actor, the greatest musician, the greatest athlete, the greatest politician, the greatest speaker, the greatest whatever. How many of us would be able to keep quiet about having met Tom Hanks or Steven Spielberg or Michael W. Smith or Michael Jordan or Donald Trump? No chance — we’d wear our mouths out! That’s what we do when we encounter somebody like that: We don’t “shut up” about it. We tell everybody! Especially if it’s somebody we really admire, to be able to connect with them — well, that’s about as good as it gets! Folks, as Christians, we have met and are in relationship with the greatest being of all time — Jesus Christ. He blows away any and all of those people — or anybody else, for that matter. And not as a 2,000 year old legend but as an ever present, up-to-the-minute real person! There will never be anybody like Him. Do we believe that? Are we so sold on the greatness of Jesus Christ, so overwhelmed by the wonders of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior that we can’t “shut up” about Him? Is He the greatest encounter we have ever had? Then our lives, our church, our worship, our prayers, our devotions, our church family — all those things should reflect that. Not because of duty or religion, but because we’ve never known a love such as the love He has shown for us. Our talking about Him every chance we get is simply a way to respond in love to Him for all the love He’s shown us.

Third, there are multiple families that many of us can claim — our family of origin, then maybe the family we married into (making us “in-laws” or “outlaws” as the case may be), and finally our spiritual family — our brothers and sisters in Christ. As important as those first two families are, it is our spiritual family that is important in a way that those first two may not be able to be, in that our spiritual family can come alongside us — to accompany, to mentor, to support, to pray for, to cheer for, to remind, to hold accountable — in ways

that an earthly family will never be able to do outside of Christ. And this is also the family that we will share throughout all eternity — praising and worshiping God together as we enjoy His kingdom together. That makes this family eternally important. Look around; look at everybody here this morning. How do you value them, how do you show them how valuable they are to you as brothers and sisters in Christ? Think about that; it's one of the most precious ways that we can bless, as the old hymn says, “the ties that bind.”

CONCLUSION

And last, as we close this morning, a final point from this story: Jesus had demonstrated and then used as an example to Israel the idea that to be cleansed or rescued from sin or something as dark and severe as even demonic possession is great — obviously. But to be cleansed or reformed is only half the tale. Now that your life is empty of the bad, what are you going to fill up your life with?

The point? Folks, what are you filling your lives up with? What are your priorities? Is it the things of this world, things that are temporary? Or are you filling your lives with the best things, the eternal things, the things that this world can never take away? The apostle Paul said it this way: ***Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory — Paul, Colossians 3:1-4.***

What does that mean? Draw your life's fill from God — His precious word, His perfect perspectives, His complete joy. That's why Jesus came, as He Himself said: ***“I came so that they would have life, and have it abundantly” — Jesus Christ, John 10:10b (NASB2020).*** Seek to find your abundance, your complete and total satisfaction, from Him — from His everlasting abundance that will never, ever run out. That's where the blessings, the eternal blessings, are — when our lives are filled by the only one who can give life!

What an awesome God we serve! He deserves all we have, all we are. So, let's allow Him to take us over, to conquer us completely, that our lives may be completely pleasing to Him. Let's pray!