

# We Wish to See a Sign

Palm Sunday

**Scripture:** Matthew 12:38-49

**Sermon Series:** *Matthew*

**Topic:** Signs, God's Will

**Matthew 12:38-39 (ESV)** <sup>38</sup> Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." <sup>39</sup> 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."

## I. Introduction

- A. The scribes and Pharisees come to Jesus saying, "We wish to see a sign," but Jesus does not answer how we might at first expect him to answer.
- B. This exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees raises lots of questions.
  - 1. Why didn't Jesus show them a sign?
  - 2. Wouldn't they have believed in him if he did?
  - 3. What kind of sign are they requesting?
  - 4. Why did Jesus say this request was evil?
  - 5. Is it always evil to seek a sign from God?
  - 6. Does God ever give signs?
  - 7. If so, to whom does he give them?
  - 8. How can we be certain of God's will?
- C. If the Lord is gracious to us, hopefully we'll be able to answer these questions when we finish.
- D. **Pray.** Father, give us understanding. Holy Spirit, open the eyes of our hearts and lead us into all truth, while keeping us from error. Lord Jesus, cause us to love you more deeply.



## II. "We wish to see a Sign" (v.38)

A. **Pharisees and scribes** are those asking for a sign. Remember what Matthew has thus far told us about the Pharisees & scribes. Their animosity toward Jesus has been steadily heating up and intensifying:

1. Inward doubting (Mt 9:3-4)
2. Outward questioning 9:11
3. Direct confrontation 12:2
4. Public provocation 12:10
5. Formal accusation of blasphemy (9:3)
6. Judgment that Jesus is a servant of Satan (9:34; 12:24)

B. **What are they asking?** What is the "sign" for which they were asking?

1. In asking for a **sign**, they're asking for more than a miracle. They had already seen *many* miracles by Jesus. So far in Matthew's gospel Jesus had,
  1. cleansed lepers (8:3),
  2. healed fevers (8:14),
  3. even healing a sick servant from far away (8:5-13),
  4. cast out demons (8:16),
  5. calmed storms (8:23-27),
  6. controlled a whole clan of devils (8:28-34)
  7. raised up the paralyzed (9:1-8),
  8. healed diseased woman: issue of blood that no one else could heal (9:20-22)
  9. opened eyes of blind (9:27-31)
  10. opened ears of the deaf (11:5)
  11. loosed the tongue of mute (9:32-33)
  12. raised the dead (9:18, 23-26)
2. **Sign** (σημεῖον *sēmeion*), for which they were looking was "to be fulfilled quickly, or at once, ...performed on command."<sup>1</sup> They wanted something "produced on demand to prove that God was with a person."<sup>2</sup> They were essentially requesting that Jesus on-the-spot do something more powerful and significant than the miracles he had done. They were wanting something more "impressive than the healings and exorcisms they have seen and rejected (see v. 24).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps they were wanting "a miracle performed just for them, something that would amaze them

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 294.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 324.

<sup>3</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 216.

while presenting irrefutable evidence that his claims were true."<sup>4</sup> "They were asking him now for something that unmistakably came from God."<sup>5</sup>

- C. **Why were they asking?** Why are the Pharisees seeking a sign? Is this genuine curiosity? Would they be suddenly convinced that Jesus was Messiah if he suddenly performed some incredible sign? Would they believe him if he spelled out 'Yahweh' in the clouds? (He'd already calmed a storm!!) There are two possible answers to why:
1. Seeking to be convinced? Are they seeking evidence to be convinced of Jesus' identity? Are they confused about who he is? Are they seeking to be convinced that he is God's messiah? Was such evidence lacking in all the miracles that he had heretofore worked before their eyes?
    - a) Remember that they did not deny that he could work miracles? See Mt 12:10, 24. They already knew God was with him.
    - b) Nicodemus had confessed as much.<sup>6</sup> All they had to do was go interview the girl he raised from the dead or any of the scores of others whom he had healed.
  2. Or seeking to convict? Were they seeking evidence to condemn him of wrongdoing? Their question revealed that they were not looking for evidence, but rather an occasion "**to test him**" (Mk 8:11; Lk 11:14).
  3. "*The Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.*" **Matthew 12:14** (ESV)
  4. They had already concluded that he was working for Satan.<sup>7</sup> They were not looking to be convinced that he was from God, but rather they were seeking sufficient evidence to convict him and condemn him as serving Satan.

### III. No sign will be given (v.39)

- A. Jesus answers their question by saying, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." **Matthew 12:39** (ESV)
- B. **An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign.** Their asking for a sign was evil. Evil lurked behind the question being asked. These words of this question revealed evil in their heart, for as we read in the previous paragraph,
1. "*For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*" **Matthew 12:34** (ESV)

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<sup>4</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 353.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 324.

<sup>6</sup> John 3:2.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 9:34; 12:24.

- C. **Pharisees and scribes.** We must remember to whom Jesus is speaking. The scribes and Pharisees represent “*an evil and adulterous generation.*” These are those who were seeking evidence to destroy him.
- D. **No sign will be given.** Evil sign-seeking receives “no sign.” Jesus gives no sign to those who demand him to prove himself to them, while in their hearts they’ve already decided he’s a fraud. *Motive of the heart matters greatly to Jesus.*
1. King Herod sought a sign from Jesus for *personal entertainment* (Lk 23:8), but Jesus refused to even speak one word to him. No sign was given to him.
  2. Simon Magus sought the sign of miraculous power for *personal fame* (Acts 8:21-22). Peter said to him, “*repent, for your heart was wicked before God.*” No sign was given to him.
  3. Pharisees sought a sign from Jesus to secure occasion to entrap him and *destroy his name*. No sign was given to them.
- E. **Is all sign-seeking evil?** Do the words of Jesus here mean that it is evil for anyone to seek a sign from God? Since Jesus is speaking these words to the scribes and Pharisees, does God make a distinction between the sign-seeking of those who love him and those who hate him? Does he respond differently to those who believe in him and those who do not?
1. We ask this because, *God does give signs.*
  2. We must ask, therefore, to whom does he give them?

#### IV. A Sign Will be given (v.39)

- A. **The sign of Jonah.** Right after saying “*no sign will be given*” to evil sign-seekers, he then says, “*except the sign of Jonah.*” So in fact a sign *will be* given, but not like the kind they were demanding. Jesus is still speaking to the same Pharisees. He is denying that he will *at that moment* do some powerful deed in order to impress them or prove himself to them. However, he *later* will do something amazing and they will *only* see it *if they have eyes to see.*
- B. **God does give signs.** A quick survey of Scripture reveals that God does give signs *to his people*. God does show his power to those who have faith in him, but not to those who do refuse to believe in him. God gives signs for at least three reasons:
1. To build faith in his promises
    - a) **Rainbow** = a sign to Noah, which points to his promise “*to never again destroy the world by a global flood*” (Gn 9:12, 15)

- b) **Circumcision** = a sign to Abraham, *"You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you"* (Gn 17:11). God promised that through Abraham's offspring he would bless "all the families of the earth," and circumcision was the sign of that promise (Gn 12:3; 18:18; 26:4).
- c) **Stones in the river** = a sign to Joshua and Israel, as they crossed the Jordan river, he commanded them to set up twelve large stones as a reminder that God kept his promise to give the land and to deliver them into it.<sup>8</sup> And he kept his promise.
2. To strengthen weak faith
- a) **Moses'** faith was weak and he doubted that Israel would follow him out of Egypt, God gave him three signs<sup>9</sup> to strengthen his courage. "They will not believe me or listen to my voice" (Ex 4:1). "If they will not believe you or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign. If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and ...it will become blood..." turn water into blood (Ex 4:8-9).
- b) **Gideon's** faith was weak and he doubted whether God would truly deliver Israel through him, so God granted him a sign of the fleece to show him that he was with him and would do what he said (Jud 6:36-40).
- c) **King Ahaz** was weak in faith in God and was trusting more in the king of Assyria than in God, in order to strengthen his faith, God invited him to, *"Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven"* (Is 7:10-11). When Ahaz refused to obey, God himself gave a sign, which was a promise that a son would one day be born to a virgin (Is 7:14).
- d) **Peter's** faith was weak and he doubted that he actually saw Jesus walking on the water, so Jesus gave Peter a sign to strengthen his weak faith by inviting him to join him on the water (Mt 14:28-30).
3. To confirm faith his will or his word
- a) **Jonathan** and his armor bearer were seeking to know if God would deliver their enemies into their hands. God gave Jonathan a sign through the response that his enemies that he would give them into his hands (1 Sam 14:6-12).

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<sup>8</sup> Joshua 4:1-7.

<sup>9</sup> He was given the ability to turn his staff into a snake, his hand from healthy to leprous and back again, and the ability to turn water into blood (Exodus 4:2-9).

- b) **Hezekiah** sought a sign. When Hezekiah was sick and thought he would die, God gave him a sign<sup>10</sup> that he would recover and worship him in the temple (2 Kg 20:8-11).
  - c) **Zechariah**, heard the word of God through the angel Gabriel that he would in his old age become a father, but he did not believe God's word and he asked for a sign of how he could know this word was true. Therefore, to confirm the word of God, Gabriel gave him a sign, which was him being silent until the day that God's word was fulfilled (Lk 1:18-25).
4. God gives signs 1) to build faith in his promises, 2) to strengthen weak faith, and 3) to confirm faith in his will and his word.
- C. **Not all sign-seeking is evil.** There is a right way and a wrong way to seek signs from God. *Motive of the heart is the decisive matter.*
- 1. Wrong sign-seeking
    - a) King Herod wanted to be entertained.
    - b) Simon Magus wanted to increase personal fame.
    - c) Pharisees wanted destroy Jesus' name.
    - d) Seeking signs for purposes of entertainment, personal fame, or to deny Christ is evil and will be ignored by God.
    - e) None of these people had a spiritual relationship with God.
  - 2. Right sign-seeking
    - a) Moses sought sign from God to know that the people would follow him out of Egypt. God answered and gave him a sign.
    - b) Gideon sought sign from God to know that He would deliver Israel through him. God answered and gave him a sign.
    - c) Hezekiah sought sign to know that he would recover from his sickness. God answered and gave him a sign.
    - d) Jonathan sought sign from God to know if he should attack his enemies. God answered and gave him a sign.
    - e) Peter sought sign to know that it was actually Jesus walking on the water. Jesus answered and gave him a sign.
    - f) Each of these DID have a spiritual relationship with God. Each of these were believers in God. These were the children of God.

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<sup>10</sup> The shadow going backward by ten steps (2 Kings 20:10).

- g) None of these children of God sought the sign itself, but rather they sought to know better and more clearly the One *to whom the sign pointed*, that is, to God himself and the way that he would bless. To each of these men the sign was simply a means to understanding and knowing better the way and will of God.
- (1) It is evil to desire the signs of God more than the person of God. If this is the motivation of the heart, then there will be no sign given.
- (2) It is not evil to desire that God give signs that point to ways in which he can be known more clearly, loved more deeply, and glorified more fully. If these are the motivations of the heart, then sometimes God will give to those who love him signs that will magnify his name and his glory.
3. It is not wrong for the children<sup>11</sup> of God to seek signs from God that will deepen your love and devotion to the Lord or that will more mightily magnify his glory in the world. *As one of his children, it is not wrong to seek from the Father clear confirmation and direction in which way he would have you to go.*
- a) This seeking is *not the constant deciphering of hidden codes*. The life that is pleasing to God is not one of constant looking for hidden messages in the clouds, repeated numbers on license plates, or secret shapes and faces concealed in the burn patterns of your grilled cheese sandwich. These kinds of things requires no real relationship with God.
- b) *Seeking signs is exceptional and not the normal way the Lord leads his children, thus, we should not be overly preoccupied with it.*
- c) The regular way the Lord leads his children is through *daily submitting to the loving leadership of the indwelling Holy Spirit of Jesus*. "All who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons<sup>12</sup> of God" (Romans 8:14). Being led by the Spirit involves at least five things.
- (1) **Persistent prayer.** Jesus taught his disciples that they "ought always to pray and never lose heart" (Lk 18:1). Paul taught the same saying simply, "pray without ceasing" (1 Thes 5:17). Jesus prayed alone with God, in the presence of crowds, and often with his disciples. While communing with God in prayer, he will direct and lead his children.
- (2) **Regular reading.** David says it best, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119:105). It is by communing with God through the regular reading of the Word of God that he most often leads and directs his children.

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<sup>11</sup> Those indwell by his Holy Spirit.

<sup>12</sup> The here in the Greek refers to all siblings in the family and so could be translated 'children,' since it includes both sons and daughters.

- (3) **Obvious obedience.** Obey the clear commands of God in his word. Obey where his will is clear and he will lead you in areas that are unclear.
- (a) Sexual holiness. **1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 (ESV)** <sup>3</sup> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup> that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, <sup>5</sup> not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;
- i) 'Sexual immorality' is any sex activity outside of marriage.
- ii) Is it God's will for me to move in with my girlfriend and start having sex before we are married. This verse clearly answers "no."
- iii) This includes watching pornography.
- (b) Holy speaking. "Do not bear false witness..." (Ex 20:16). Do "not spread a false report" (Ex 23:1). Is God ok with me lying just a bit on my taxes since the government has so much money anyway
- (c) If you will not obey what God has clearly said, then why would say more to you? If you ignore the signs he has already given, then why would he show you more?
- (4) **Sweet surrender.** While you rid your life of all rebellion, you praying continually, "*Lord, not my will, but yours be done.*" It is by this pattern of prayerful obedience that our minds are transformed more and more to be aware of and confirmed in the will of God for our lives.
- (a) "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." **Romans 12:2 (ESV)**
- (5) **Welcoming wisdom.** James tells us that God invites us to seek wisdom from him when we sense that we lack it (See Jam 1:5). This is asking God for wisdom involves both praying for it and seeking out other godly persons who are wise and talking it through with them.
- (a) **James 1:5 (ESV)** If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.
- (b) Prov 11:14; 15:22 both point to the wisdom that comes from "abundance of counselors" and "many advisors."
- (6) Summary on normal means of guidance?

#### D. A word of caution.

1. Do not mistake God's merciful accommodation of weak faith as permission to remain weak in your faith.



- a) Gideon's request for the sign in the fleece is nowhere held up as an example to be emulated. The book of Judges is a record of a very bleak period in the history of Israel. The banner over the whole book is found in the phrase "everyone did what was right in his own eyes."<sup>13</sup> No one should look to the book of Judges as proper foundation for any abiding Christian practice.
  - b) Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, failed to believe the word of God spoken through the angel Gabriel, that a son would be born to him, and God gave him a sign that His word was true and it was nine months of silence.
  - c) Consider how many times in Scripture that Jesus reprimanded his disciples for their "little faith"<sup>14</sup> and for being "slow of heart to believe"<sup>15</sup> God's true word.
2. **Do not think that God owes you proof of anything.** He does not. God always speaks the truth, always keeps his promises, never fails to be faithful, and always does what is good. He is not indebted in any way to fallen, sinful humans. We are indebted to him. God is not obligated to show signs of his power any more than king of England is obligated to produce his financial statements simply because a stranger on the street loudly proclaims that he believes the king to be poor.
3. **Do not think that God is the only one who can do signs.** Satan works signs too.
- a) Pharaoh's satanic magicians were able to duplicate the first three signs that Moses performed in the presence of Pharaoh.
  - b) Simon the sorcerer amazed people with his magic power (Acts 8:9-11).
  - c) Slave girl in Philippi "brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling" (Acts 16:16). If her fortune-telling yielded no actual results, then no one would have paid for her services. But people paid a lot.
  - d) False signs will increase in frequency the closer we get to the end of time.
    - (1) **2 Thessalonians 2:9-10 (ESV)** <sup>9</sup> The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, <sup>10</sup> and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.
    - (2) **Revelation 13:13-15 (ESV)** The beast "performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, <sup>14</sup> and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. <sup>15</sup> And it was allowed to give breath to the image of

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<sup>13</sup> Judges 17:6; 21:25.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20.

<sup>15</sup> Luke 24:25.

the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.”

(3) **Matthew 24:24** (ESV) “For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.” But leading the elect astray is not possible for Jesus two verses before tells us that God “cut those days short” in order to prevent this from happening (Mt 24:22)

e) Do not so naively believe that every “sign” is from God. Many are not. Satan is condemned and is powerless in relation to Christ and all who have the Spirit of Christ dwelling within<sup>16</sup> them, but among those who do not know Jesus, he is still “the god of this world.”

4. **Do not think that signs in themselves will be sufficient for anyone to become a believer.** It was not for lack of evidence that the Pharisees refused to believe in Jesus. Recall what how Abraham answered the rich man in hell who requested a miraculous sign begin to his brothers to keep them from going him in hell. Abraham said,

a) “But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’<sup>30</sup> And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’<sup>31</sup> He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’” **Luke 16:29-31** (ESV)

b) Signs alone are never enough to convince someone to repent of their sins and submit to God. Faith and the gracious work of the Holy Spirit is required for the transformation of the heart.

## V. Conclusion

- A. The Pharisees wanted to see a sign, but no sign was given to them that day. Jesus gives no sign to hardhearted, rebellious unbelievers who have no relationship with him.
- B. Perhaps believers also want to see a sign. Sometimes God does indeed give his children a sign. Not all sign-seeking is evil. Motive matters. For those of his children who seek to know and love him more deeply, or who are weak in their faith, or who need to be reminded of his great and precious promises, sometimes God may choose to graciously give a sign. However, this is not the normal way in which God leads and guides his children.

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<sup>16</sup> 1 John 4:4 “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

- C. The normal way that God leads and directs his children is through persistent prayer, the regular reading of his word, obeying the obvious, steady surrendering to Lord, and welcoming wisdom of His church (i.e. talking to other godly believers).
- D. While among those who know God, seeking signs is not wrong, it ought always to be kept in balance and done with caution. God is not a divine bellhop who lives to obey our every command. Rather is it us who are called to submit to his commands.
- E. **Palm Sunday.** On this day, a little more than 2,000 years ago, God gave a sign to all who had eyes to see. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus had never done this before. He did this on purpose. He did this as a sign that pointed back to Zachariah (9:9), which stated that God's king and messiah would ride into Jerusalem mounted on a donkey and not a mighty white stallion.
- F. This sign focuses all eyes on Jesus as God's messiah and the whole city shouted with joy as they welcomed him. All signs point us to Jesus as the only one who ever was great enough to fulfill all of God's promises. He alone is our hope, our messiah, our Lord, and the Great I Am.

What is the sign of Jonah? Come back next Sunday and we'll see.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why didn't Jesus show them a sign?
2. Wouldn't they have believed in him if he did?
3. What kind of sign are they requesting?
4. Why did Jesus say this request was evil?
5. Is it always evil to seek a sign from God? Why or why not?
6. Does God ever give signs? If so, to whom does he give them?
7. Are there biblical examples of people to whom God gave signs?
8. Do you agree that signs alone are insufficient to lead someone to faith in Jesus? Why or why not?
9. How can we be certain of God's will?
10. What were the five ways suggested as the normal means of knowing and discerning God's will?