

Introduction

Our concern this morning is with the closing section of Matthew 12. These verses (38-50) as a unit give us a picture of the family of God in the language of adultery (v. 39) and the reference to brothers, sisters, and mother (v. 49). We might call this the family of God in the OT versus the family of God in the NT, or we might call it the old Israel in contrast to the new Israel. Accordingly, my title is “The Family of God: Old and New.”

1A. The Old Israel (12.38-45)

Listen to these words that give us another look at “this generation” (cf. 11.16-24, “to what shall I compare this generation?”):

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." ³⁹ 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. 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. 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. ⁴³ "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. ⁴⁴ Then 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. ⁴⁵ Then 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" (38-45).

The Pharisees ask for a sign, and Jesus answers them with a rebuke that gives us a sobering view of the old Jewish family of God. By old, I simply mean the OT family of God descended from Abraham that made up the contemporary generation of Jesus' day.

The tone of our Lord's answer arises from the nature of the request. These religious leaders ask for a sign (from heaven, Lk 11.16), but what they really seek is to fault the Lord (cf. Lk 11.16, “others, to test him, kept seeking a sign from him”). What do they want? Apparently, they want something spectacular and extraordinary that goes beyond the amazing miracles of Christ that were signs of the gospel galore!

In this opposition to Christ, we have further insult and blasphemy against the Spirit because they obviously claim that the miracles that He did by the power of the Spirit are insufficient, insignificant, and unimpressive. In fact, as we have already seen, the miracles of Christ have another explanation for the Pharisees in the Beelzebul theme (12.24).

They are asking for something that they can use as a charge against Christ, something that either follows the theme of the demonic or that tries to expose some inability of Christ. Whatever they want precisely, what they actually want is some way to test and fault the Lord.

In His answer, Jesus gives a specific reply and then He continues with a scorching rebuke of old Israel.

1B. The specific reply

The leaders represent the people in more ways than one. They mediate the things of God to the national family as religious representatives of God, but they also represent the people in another way: they demonstrate the acute emptiness of the religion of the Jews of this time. Because the Pharisees are part of a larger whole, Jesus speaks about the vast majority when He says, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign” (12.39). Their sinfulness includes spiritual

adultery; they are unfaithful to the Lord of the covenant and their unfaithfulness is cast in marital terms as was done so often in the OT. For example, Hosea takes “a wife of whoredom” and has “children of whoredom” because “the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord” (1.2; cf. 3.1 where the Lord expresses His covenant keeping love).

Thus, the reply of our Lord is that He will give them no sign but one, namely, the sign of Jonah: **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** (12.39-40). Jesus is not saying that His miracles were not signs (though it sounds like that is His meaning). Clearly, they were signs; signs of the presence of the kingdom (cf. Jn 12.37 w/ Mat 12.28). He taught the gospel in both word and deed (cf. Mat 11.1-2 w/Jn 12.37-38). We have another example here of our Lord’s use of exaggeration to make a point. In one sense, He gives no sign to the nation, but in another sense, He will give them a sign. On one hand, He will give them no sign according to their cravings and demands that arise from hypocrisy with a veneer of piety and self-righteousness. He refuses to go along with their games by which they ignore the signs and seek some spectacular sign or some way to use His miracles against Him (per the day if on the Sabbath or per their nature as in the casting out of demons). On the other hand, He will give them something spectacular, something greater than the marvelous healing miracles. The greater sign is the experience of the Son of Man for three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (v. 40). This sign, Jesus says, bears analogy with the experience of Jonah who spent three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish (v. 40), and it gives a cryptic proclamation of His resurrection.

How is Jonah’s experience a sign of the resurrection of Christ? We ask this question because Jesus calls it a sign that points to His resurrection. How does this significance emerge in OT theology? If you blocked the NT out from your memory (as if you could), would you be able to read the book of Jonah and find there a prophecy of the resurrection of Christ? I dare say that all of us would say “no” to this question. However, if we approach the OT with a sense that it is full of hints regarding many details about the coming of the Messiah, then, with the fact of the resurrection in our minds, we can go back to the OT and find things there that Jesus encourages us to find. Whenever our Lord gives us strands of teaching from the OT, we have to go back to the fabric from which these strands come, and by not being ignorant of the OT, we can find many things that deepen our understanding of His gospel (from the OT).

To understand the hints in the OT regarding the resurrection, we need to remember the big story regarding the coming of the Messiah that goes back to the very time of man’s fall into sin. The backdrop of Jonah’s experience is the promise of the Messiah as a descendent of Eve (Gen 3.15) and a son, the Son of Abraham (Gen 12.1-3; 15.4; 17.19). Notably, the way of redemption from the fall includes the death of Abraham’s son, but it is a death that Abraham knows will be followed by His resurrection (Gen 22.5, 8 w/ Heb 11.18-19). Abraham’s greater Son is the suffering servant of the book of Isaiah, the one who will bring good news to the nations (Isa 42.1-3) and He is God’s covenant embodied (cf. Gen 17.9-12; 18-19 w/ Isa 42.6-7).

Now we are ready to bring in the book of Jonah. This promised descendent that will be sacrificed and raised from the dead in order to proclaim good news to the nations is typified in the person and experience of Jonah the prophet. Jonah was three days and three nights (Jonah 1.17) in a virtual death experience followed by resurrection as he says, **“out of the belly of Sheol I cried...the waters closed in over me to take my life...I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever yet you brought up my life from the pit”** (Jonah 2.2, 5-6). Jesus is the son of Eve, the son of Abraham, the coming servant, and coming prophet who will die and spend three days and three nights in Sheol before God brings up His life from the pit and gives Him as a prophet proclaiming good news to the nations outside of the covenant people.

The specific reply of Jesus to the Pharisees is that the sign *par excellence* that He will give to the evil generation, despite their spiritual adultery, despite their covenant breaking, and despite their disobedience as the covenant family from ancient times, is the sign of the death and resurrection of the coming Messiah-prophet after three days and three nights. Jesus says, “Look back to Jonah and understand.” Jesus then goes on to give a rebuke.

2B. The rebuke (41-45)

The Lord builds His rebuke around three examples: the Ninevites, the Queen of Sheba, and the unclean spirits.

1) The Ninevites (v. 41)

Jesus speaks in somewhat veiled language when He speaks of “something” greater than Jonah. This may allude to the earlier reference He made to Himself as the place of the presence of God and the true temple (cf. 12.6). Here we learn that the true temple anticipated in the OT is the true prophet also anticipated in the OT from the time of Moses (Deu 18.15-18). In this sense, all the OT prophets anticipate the coming of the prophet-Messiah, not just in what they say or prophesy, but also in their experiences as mouthpieces of God. Regarding the coming prophet the Lord says, “**I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him**” (Deu 18.18; cf. Jn 8.28, **Jesus said...I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me**).

Therefore, the prophet of prophets, “the greater than Jonah,” is here. He is not a mere man but God (Immanuel, Mat 1.23). He is not ambivalent about serving God as Jonah was (He always does the will of the Father as a true son). He is not callous toward the nations that repent (as Jonah was); instead, He gladly becomes “a light for the nations” (Isa 42.6).

The fact that the prophet-Messiah is here becomes a key premise in another “much more” argument. “**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**” (v. 41). The argument of Jesus here is very straightforward: if the Ninevites repented at the preaching of Jonah, how much more should this generation repent at His preaching. Because the Israelites are unrepentant, then, in the judgment, the men of Nineveh will stand up and condemn them. Israel is worse than the Assyrian Gentile heathens who will judge the covenant family of God.

2) The Queen of Sheba (v. 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.

The famous queen from the South praised Solomon for his wisdom, but now something greater than Solomon is here. The place of the presence of God is here. He is not a mere man or an imperfect king. His wisdom far exceeds the insights of Solomon for He is wisdom personified; God is wisdom, God is here with us: **He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption** (1 Co 1.30).

Thus, the argument goes like this: if the queen of Sheba respected the wisdom of Solomon, how much more should you respect the wisdom of the Son of Man. The heathen Gentile queen has more grace and spiritual insight than this entire generation; therefore, she is a testimony at the judgment that will condemn old Israel.

3) Unclean Spirits (vs. 43-45)

To say that the next example is cryptic surely understates the matter. Again, the overall picture of the Bible regarding demons, evil powers, and unclean spirits is barely a sketch, and one that is dimly lit at that. It seems safe to say that there must be a great deal of poetic embellishment in the description of this spirit that leaves a person to wander through waterless desert land seeking rest but finding none (v. 43). The person is compared to a house that is clean, empty, and orderly because the unclean spirit vacated the premises. Now, he seeks to return to

the house, but when he does, he takes seven other evil spirits with him. In the end, the person who was temporarily free of the evil spirit is in worse shape than before.

Jesus states the point of this “house” analogy in verse 45, **so also will it be with this evil generation**. He may be referring to Israel’s response to John the Baptist and Jesus in the initial phases of their ministries (cf. Ridderbos, Matthew, 248). Early on, “**Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him**” [to John, Mat 3.5], and later Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (Jn 4.1-3). Then as time went on, “this generation” attributed demonism to John and gluttony to Jesus (Mat 11.16-19). At the very least, Jesus is comparing the nation to this man who goes from bad to worse. Likewise, this evil and adulterous generation is moving in a negative direction from one level of corruption to another, from bad to worse, from sin to unrighteousness.

Therefore, the old Israel is by and large composed of covenant breakers who are worse off than Gentiles who repent and respect the wisdom of God. Hence, old Israel stands under the biting condemnation that flows from the lips of pagans! We now turn to a discussion of the new Israel.

2A. The New Israel (vs. 46-50)

The reply of Jesus to the Pharisees and the biting rebuke that He gave in it (vs. 38-45) ends on a negative note. It should make us wonder if there is any hope for Israel that has Abraham as her earthly father but not her spiritual father; they do not walk in the footsteps of Abraham’s faith. What shall become of the children of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob... Israel, their children, and their children’s children?

Verse 46 shows us that the last paragraph of chapter 12 is integrally related to the rebuke of the old covenant family: **While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him**. From the Gospel of Mark (3.21-34), we know that his family came to speak to Jesus because of what the people in general were saying about Him in the charges of demonism and what the Pharisees were saying in particular. Here in Matthew, therefore, the true family of Christ stands in marked contrast to the condemned family of Israel.

What we learn is that all is not lost because there is a new Israel made up of those who do the will of God: **But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"** ⁴⁹ **And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!"** ⁵⁰ **For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother"** (48-50).

From these words of Jesus here and in this context, what do we learn about the new covenant family of God? We learn that members in the new covenant family are disciples from all nations who do the will of God. Again, Jesus is clearly laying the foundation of the Great Commission and the coming church (Mat 16.18; 28.19-20). There are three basic things that we learn about God’s new family.

1) First, it is a family of nations

That is, the old order of Jewish particularism will give way to national universalism. We know this because the brother, sister, and mother of Jesus is *whoever* does the will of God. Preparation for this expansion in the meaning of the covenant family is already present in the comparison of Jesus with Jonah. Simply put, the greater Jonah will spend three days and three nights in Sheol and after His resurrection, He will proclaim the gospel to those outside the old covenant family. Again, from Isaiah 42 (quoted by Matthew in 12.18-21), He will be a light to the nations (Isa 42.6) as He proclaims justice to the Gentiles (Mat 12.18) in order “**to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness**” (Isa 42.6-7).

2) Second, it is a family of disciples

Matthew fixes our eyes on this point by describing the body language of our Lord, namely, that He spoke these words about the new family “**stretching out his hand toward his disciples**” (12.49). In other words, the new covenant family is no longer characterized by the exclusivism of family descent from Abraham. Now, the children of Abraham are the disciples of Jesus. This text in Matthew has to underlie Paul’s words in Galatians about the new Israel: “**if you are Christ’s then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise**” (3.29). Putting the two passages together, we learn that children of Abraham of the new covenant are learners at the feet of Jesus. Discipleship is the hallmark of His family: “**stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers’**” (Mat 12.49).

3) Third, it is a family of doers

It is so typical of our Lord to incorporate doing the will of God into learning the things of God. Thus, He says, “**whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother**” (12.50). Jesus has a unique relationship to God the Father: He speaks of the Father as *my* Father, and He is *the* obedient Son. Our relationship to Him as our elder brother brings us into the family of God. This is an astounding fact; one that we cannot appreciate fully, but one that ought to send us to our knees in gratitude and praise to “our Father in heaven.” Because of His work in death and resurrection after three days, the Father receives us into His family as His precious children. Therefore, we ought to seek His face eagerly and seek His will for good understanding and for holy living.

Jesus does not exclude faith from the picture. Faith is presupposed as He taught us in the famous yoke passage (Mat 11.28-30). Learning the pleasant yoke of His law in order to do it parallels being doers of the will of the Father. The new family of God is composed of people who commit themselves to Christ as their prophet, priest, and king. They have salvation by His death and resurrection and by that work alone as the ground of their salvation, but they distinguish themselves as His people by how they do the will of the Father in heaven. Doing God’s will is the evidence of their faith and it tokens membership in the new Israel. Instead of the callous animosity, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness of the Pharisees, the brothers and sisters of Christ have the faith of Abraham, a faith that translates into faithfulness (cf. Habakkuk 2.4). Members of the Christian family submit themselves to the risen Lord Jesus as the greater than Jonah, the greater than Solomon, and the victor over the powers of darkness.

Conclusion

1) We have great encouragement in the unfolding of the purposes of God that includes the unfaithfulness of the old Israel in the formation of a new Israel. Even though the people of God break covenant and fail the Lord miserably, He still keeps covenant and from the rubble of fallen Israel, Jesus builds His church made up of Jews and Gentiles from across the face of the earth.

2) We have a special duty that flows from this encouragement. It is a duty to *be what we are* as family, especially in the context of being disciples (cf. loving learning, Jn 13.35). Our relationship to God includes the astounding fact that we are His children and as such, we are to serve Him in love, respect, and gratitude. This love, respect, and gratitude should spill over in meaningful ways in relationship to each other as brothers and sisters with Christ as our prophet, priest, and sovereign God, Sabbath Lord, and Elder Brother.

With Paul, we must conclude this kind of reflection in doxology (Rom 11.33-36):

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.