

SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew

SERMON: **Are You Looking for Miracles, Reformation, or a Relationship?**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 12:38-50

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

DATE: January 13, 2008

Few people would argue with the assertion that we live in a thoroughly messed-up culture and society. Even the church is full of confused people. Recently religious market researcher and pollster George Barna surveyed hundreds of people with the following statement: “The idea that God helps those who help themselves is taken directly from the Bible. Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with that statement?” Among those who claimed to be born again, 34% strongly agreed that this is a quote from the Bible, while only 18% strongly disagreed. Even sadder to me is that among those who called themselves “evangelical” the percentage of agreement was higher yet—50%! (Just in case you don’t know the answer, the Bible does not say that God helps those who help themselves, but virtually the opposite. He actually helps those who can’t help themselves!).ⁱ

Barna then asked if people agreed with another idea, namely, “The Devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a *symbol* of evil.” Sixty-nine percent of Catholics agreed with that statement, 65% of those from mainline denominations, and, most discouraging to me, 47% of evangelicals agreed that Satan is not a real person.ⁱⁱ

I don’t think this kind of confusion should be too surprising to anyone who visits the average Christian bookstore. Every year it seems the shelf space reserved for serious Bible study declines. The best commentaries have to be ordered by mail because the stores can’t afford to stock books that don’t sell. On the other hand, the how-to section and the self-help books, continue to increase in sales and readership. The reason is that for the most part this is a Christian generation that is committed to reformation. I’m not speaking of *the* Reformation; frankly, it would be encouraging to me if more people followed the principles of the Protestant Reformation, which was led by Luther and Calvin and Zwingli. I’m talking about reformation with a small “r”, the notion that our greatest need is reforming our behavior—better sin management, if you will.

The Twelve-Step movement is a case in point. And believe me, this is *not* an attack on Twelve-Step programs. I am very grateful for them; they do great work as far as they go. They have enabled many people to conquer their addictions and begin to live productive lives. But Twelve-Step programs are not the answer to the deepest needs of the human heart. Knowing that there is “a higher power, whoever you perceive him or her to be,” does not produce forgiveness or necessarily lead to salvation.

Twelve Step programs are just one of many sources being used today to reform human behavior. It seems that therapists and counselors are far more likely to be consulted about lifestyle issues than are the Scriptures, even by church-going professing Christians. There are a myriad of religious gurus promising people the answers to life’s problems and showing them how to

connect with their inner self. Some are telling us the human heart is basically good and reliable, even though God tells us it is deceitful and desperately wicked.

America's pastor, *Sixty Minutes* told us a few weeks ago, is no longer Billy Graham but Joel Osteen, the leader of a mega-mega-church in Houston. Twice in one night on Christmas weekend there were extensive interviews with Osteen—one by Fox News and the other by CBS. Then the next week he and his wife Victoria were interviewed on *Larry King Live*. Osteen was challenged on all three programs as to why he doesn't talk about sin, and his answer was basically that God had called him to a ministry of encouragement and hope. Well, who could argue with that? But where is there greater hope than in the Gospel, and friends, the Gospel *presupposes* the depravity of man. Why else would God have sacrificed His one and only Son if mankind wasn't so lost that only such a drastic action could save him?

If Joel Osteen were speaking as a pop psychologist that would be one thing. In fact, I think I would prefer him to Dr. Phil. But he's preaching from a pulpit as a spokesman for God. His message is that we should reform our lives by believing in our full potential and taking a positive attitude into each day. That, friends, is not the Gospel message. So reticent is he to say anything negative about anyone that when asked if Mormonism is a legitimate branch of Christianity, he answered in the positive.

Others are telling us that the answer to the longings of the human heart is found in signs and wonders. They argue, "If God is God and if Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, then we must see the same miracle-working power today that Jesus demonstrated in the first century." And millions seem to be willing to check their intelligence at the door as they follow these flim-flam artists on TV or at major convention centers.

The interesting thing to me is that none of this is new. In Jesus' day, as in ours, religious leaders were promoting better sin management and miracle-working as answers to the deepest needs of the human heart. But Jesus denounced them! As we continue our journey through the Gospel of Matthew, our Scripture text today is a collection of three seemingly random vignettes that are actually very much related to one another. Together they challenge a wicked generation to abandon its preoccupation with miracles and self-help reformation, and to pursue a personal relationship with Jesus.

Let's read Matthew 12:38-50:

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you."

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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. 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 one greater than Jonah is here. 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 one greater than Solomon is here.

"When an evil spirit comes out of a man, 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 man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. 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?" 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."

When you first read this passage you can't help but wonder, "Why did Matthew put these three accounts back to back?" What does the sign of Jonah have to do with the evil spirit and his buddies, and what do either of those stories have to do with the strange visit of Jesus' family and the even stranger response that Jesus makes to their visit?

I believe the key to understanding this passage is to recognize that the tendency of the human heart is always to deal with its spiritual bankruptcy in human terms rather than God's terms. First-century Pharisees demanded proof before they would exercise faith (which, of course, renders faith superfluous), and the proof they wanted was miraculous signs. They were also deeply committed to better sin management. Their entire emphasis on legalism was geared toward reforming sinners by making sure they kept a long list of rules and regulations. Our generation, if anything, is even more inclined to deal with its spiritual bankruptcy in just such human terms.

Please follow with me as we examine the first of these three encounters.

Miraculous signs are not the answer to spiritual bankruptcy. (38-42)

Some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law demand of Jesus, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." Now mind you, in the earlier parts of this very chapter Jesus had performed some amazing miracles. He healed a man with a shriveled hand in verse 13. In the next paragraph we read that "Many followed him, and he healed all their sick." And in the passage we examined two Sundays ago He healed a man who was demon-possessed, blind, and mute, generating the teaching on the unpardonable sin. Still they have the nerve to ask for a miraculous sign! What's going on here?

The term "miraculous sign" was sometimes used to refer to a spectacular, sensational sign from heaven—a strange alignment of stars, or an eclipse, or some such phenomenon. I wonder whether they are in reality saying, "Maybe you can do miracles here on earth, but we want to see you do a miracle in the heavens; then maybe we'll accept you as Messiah." This is clearly a response of

skepticism, and what is perfectly clear is that they are not seeking a miraculous sign for any noble purpose but only in order to trip Jesus up. After all, we have already been told that these same religious leaders are plotting to kill Him.

In His response to the Pharisees and religious leaders Jesus reveals that . . .

God doesn't do miracles to tickle the fancy of religious skeptics or thrill seekers. Sometimes we wish He would. We have a tendency to believe it would stop them in their tracks and make them eat their words. But in fact it probably wouldn't. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus Jesus alleged that "if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." And, sure enough, when a few months later Someone did indeed rise from the dead, namely Himself, they still were not convinced. I suspect the same would be true today.

You know, miracles were not common events even when Jesus and the disciples were ministering. The impression I get from the Gospels is that Jesus rarely did miracles out in the public square, especially around the skeptics. Moreover, miracles were more often used to reward faith than to generate it. I suspect the average person in Israel never saw a miracle during the entire time Jesus and His disciples were here on earth. By the same token, I don't think *we* should be surprised and disappointed that we don't see more miracles today, especially here in the western world, with its skepticism and agnosticism about spiritual things.

But some people absolutely crave signs and wonders, because they are spiritual thrill seekers. By the tens of thousands they follow the Benny Hinn and the Kenneth Hagins of contemporary Christianity, and their gullibility is rewarded with phony miracles and theological heresy, but their spiritual bankruptcy remains.

Instead of doing miracles to tickle the fancy of religious skeptics or thrill seekers,

The only miraculous sign Jesus promises is the sign of Jonah. And what is that? Verse 40: "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." It is the sign of the resurrection, for just as Jonah didn't stay in the belly of the fish, so neither did Jesus stay in the tomb. This is the only sign Jesus promises to the skeptics (but of course, it is infinitely more miraculous and wonderful than what they demanded—a mere realignment of the stars!).ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus' response must have cut the Pharisees like a knife, but then He twists the knife by telling them they will be condemned by pagans. You can't imagine how this must have angered these orthodox Jews!

1. The pagan Ninevites will condemn them. You recall the story of how Jonah refused to go to Ninevah and preach God's judgment. His excuse was that God is too merciful. He knew God would forgive them if the Ninevites repented, and he didn't want them to be forgiven because they were Israel's enemies. But after the very unpleasant experience of being swallowed by a

great fish, Jonah decided that obedience was the wiser path, and he went and preached in Ninevah. Sure enough, they repented and God spared them.

But here is Jesus' point: if pagan Ninevah repented after hearing a simple message of judgment from one foreign prophet (who actually hated them and performed no miracles in their presence), how much more should this generation repent when God has sent them His very Son, the one who is "greater than Jonah." And furthermore, He loved them and did many miracles before them.

Then Jesus twists the knife again with a second example.

2. The pagan Queen of the South will condemn them. He says, "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 one greater than Solomon is here." The reference here is to the Queen of Sheba, whose visit to Solomon is talked about in 1 Kings 10:1-13. She was a Gentile, a woman and a pagan, and she lived at the southern end of the Arabian peninsula (which seemed like the ends of the earth to Jews of that day), but she was attracted to God's wisdom and came to pay homage to His servant Solomon. Jesus contrasts her search for truth to that of the rebellious leaders who rejected Him, though He is far greater than Solomon (and they didn't even have to travel beyond their home towns to hear His wisdom).

The message of this first vignette is this: Miraculous signs are not the answer to skepticism and the spiritual bankruptcy that results in the human heart.

Now beginning in verse 43 we learn a second major truth:

Reformation through self-help is not the answer either. (43-45)

Jesus tells the story of a man who had an evil spirit, a demon, but the demon leaves. Now there's a lot we don't know here, but I think from the context it's safe to surmise that this man has experienced some sort of exorcism rite. He has reformed, and the outward evidences are all positive. The passage tells us this about the man: he is "unoccupied, swept clean, and put in order." This phrase tells me two important facts:

- 1. Reformation can get rid of bad habits and even addictions, and**
- 2. Reformation can improve one's behavior and appearance.**

Every one of us can probably think of individuals who used to be really messed up—on drugs, involved in promiscuous behavior, alcoholic, subject to rage and anger—but they've changed and now they're reasonably normal. Their reformation may have been motivated by fear of prison, disease, social stigma, loss of family, or financial ruin. They may have done it through a Twelve-Step program or through a rehab center or through religion, or they may have simply gutted it out.

But the question I have is this: what ultimate benefit accrues to these individuals by reforming *if*

that's as far as they go? Is it ultimately any advantage to enter a Christless eternity sober rather than drunk. Is a reformed sinner any better off in hell than an unreformed one? I don't mean to say that there's no reason to be pleased when someone reforms. They're surely more pleasant to be around, they make better neighbors, they can get off welfare, and they stop hurting the people who love them. That's all great, but that can't be the ultimate goal.

I want to tell you a story about a young man who attended First Free in St. Louis as a child, but then got into alcohol and drugs as a young teen. For over twelve years he totally screwed up his life and nearly drove his parents crazy. In and out of drug treatment, he not only acted like a druggie, he also looked like one. He couldn't hold down a job and couldn't get a degree.

I remember one night 7 or 8 years ago now when I was called to his parents' home at 2:00 in the morning because this young man, then in his mid-20's, was threatening suicide. It was frankly one of the saddest situations I have ever witnessed and my heart bled for his parents.

Then one day about five years ago I was at Home Depot when a very handsome, well-dressed young man came up and said, "Hi, Pastor Mike." I didn't know who he was. He said, "I'm _____. I work here now." I said, "You are? You do?" I couldn't believe my eyes. He was like a totally different person. What happened is that he decided he was tired of destroying his life and started a serious process of reformation. He got sober, went back to school, found this job, and had already been promoted several times. His parents were thrilled with the changes.

There was only one problem. He still refused to surrender his life to God. Two months ago I got an email from his dad telling me that his son's best friend had died and as a result his son went on a drinking binge and lost his job. He was extremely depressed and once again was threatening suicide. His parents know that if he continues to keep God at arm's length, he will never reach the potential God created him for, and he could very well end up killing himself, intentionally or unintentionally.

So reformation can sometimes get rid of bad habits and even addictions, and it can improve one's behavior and appearance.

3. But reformation alone cannot change the *inner* person; in fact, it can actually make things worse. Remember what happened to the formerly demon-possessed man in Matthew 12? Though his life was "swept clean and put in order," the demon had not been replaced with anything substantive and lasting. The man was "unoccupied," an empty shell. That allowed the demon to return with seven other demons more wicked than itself. "And," Jesus says, "the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

There is a very real sense in which a reformed person without God can be actually worse off than an unreformed person—because at least the unreformed one knows he's messed up and can't save himself, while the reformed person is often proud of the progress he made on his own. John MacArthur writes cogently,

Jesus had little trouble reaching prostitutes, thieves, extortioners, murderers, and the outcasts of society. But He had an almost impossible time reaching religious and moral people who were under the delusion that outward propriety made them acceptable to God.^{iv}

The fact is there has never been a group more committed to a demanding religious and moral code than the Pharisees, and there has never been a group so far from God.

Quickly we turn to the third account, where the message seems to be this:

A personal relationship with Jesus is what we all need. (46-50)

These five verses have long been viewed as strange and confusing to Bible readers. Let me read them once more (Matthew 12:46-50):

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. 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?" 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."

Luke's parallel account puts it a little differently: "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice," but the point is the same.

Jesus' family of origin was large. He had four half-brothers—James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon—and an unknown number of half-sisters. They are mentioned in the next chapter, Matthew 13:55-56. Roman Catholics generally hold that these half-siblings were children of Joseph from a previous marriage or that they were cousins of Jesus, because they feel compelled to uphold the doctrine of the Perpetual Virginity of Mary. But if one takes the Scripture at face value Mary had children by Joseph after Jesus was born. Joseph is not mentioned in this story, of course, which leads most scholars to assume that he had already died by the time Jesus began His earthly ministry.

(By the way, we know from John 7:5 that Jesus' brothers did not believe in Him during his ministry days; in fact, it wasn't until after the resurrection that they put their faith in Him. But once they did, they were totally committed. His brother James eventually became the head of the church in Jerusalem, and His brother Judas wrote the NT epistle called Jude).

We are not told why Jesus' mother and brothers come to speak to Him here in Matthew 12, but it seems reasonable to assume that they are concerned about His safety and welfare. The Pharisees have a contract out on his life.

Furthermore, according to Mark's Gospel, the crowds were getting so large that Jesus and His disciples were sometimes not even able to eat. Mark even tells us in 3:21, "When his family heard about this (about His failure to eat regularly), they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'" I think Jesus' mother and brothers are trying to stage an

intervention, a rescue mission.

In response Jesus uses the occasion to teach a critical truth—that the people who are His *real family* are His disciples. When he asks, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” this is not a putdown of His natural family. He loved them, and for years He had lived at home and provided for them. But He cannot allow them to dictate God’s will for Him or to control His schedule, even though they seem to be motivated by concern for His health. I think all of us can learn a lesson here—we must keep the horizontal relationships, as important as they are, subordinate to the vertical, yet in balance.

One often hears the religious debate over which is the true church. Is it the Eastern Orthodox? Is it the Roman Catholic? Is it the Reformed Church? Is it the Baptist Church? Jesus answers that question for us right here: “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” The true church—consisting of those whose ties to Jesus are closer than blood ties—crosses all denominational lines. It also leaves out many from all denominations. It consists of all those, and only those, who hear God’s Word and obey it.

Let me share several important truths that come out of this little dialogue:

1. The kind of relationship Jesus is talking about is no one’s automatic possession.

You don’t become part of Jesus’ family by joining a church, nor by being baptized, nor by being born into a Christian home, nor even by being related to Him by blood. Apart from personal faith, Jesus’ brothers, sisters, and mother were no more spiritually related to Him than anyone else.

But while that relationship may be no one’s automatic possession, it is everyone’s *potential* possession.

2. That relationship is everyone’s *potential* possession. Jesus says, “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” “Whoever” means “whoever!” Anyone is eligible to be the brother of Jesus, the sister of Jesus, or even the mother of Jesus. He said so Himself! In fact, if you know Jesus as your personal Savior, you *are* His brother, His sister, and yes, even His mother! He loves you as much as He loved His own mother, and she holds no greater place in the family of God than you do.

3. That relationship is demonstrated by obedience, not by miracles nor by reformation. Once again I read, “Whoever *does the will* of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” Obedience is the issue. Now at first glance you may be tempted to read this as some kind of works salvation, but it is not. Here’s what Jesus Himself said in John 6:29: “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” You see, the first responsibility of obedience to God is to put one’s faith in His Son.

Conclusion. Do you find yourself searching for the sensational? Are you constantly asking God for miracles, even divine healing for everyone you know who is sick? You know, God may do a

first-class miracle once in a while, but most of the time He chooses not to. He wants you to trust Him through the hard stuff of life, to lean on Him even when it looks like everything is going to hell in a handbasket, to keep your eyes focused on Him even when you can't see the evidence.

Are you in the process of reforming, i.e. trying to conquer an addiction, improve your relationships, heal your marriage, enhance your career options—but without God being the center of it all? You may succeed, in part, for a while, but ultimately your effort is destined to failure if you leave Him out. What you need more than anything in the world is to become part of the family of Jesus.

Jesus came into the world to save sinners—to transform them, not just reform them. And He's able and willing to do that for you today!

i. George Barna, *What Americans Believe*, 219. Of course, there is a “sense” in which God comes alongside those who step out in faith, but the key as to why the answer to the question should be negative is that this idea does not come *directly* from the Bible.

ii. Barna, 206.

iii. There is a difficulty here in the statement that Jesus spent three days and three nights in the tomb, because the Gospel stories seem to indicate that He died on Friday and was raised on Sunday morning. Bible scholar Leon Morris observes that the Jews counted the day on which any period began as one day, and they did the same with the day on which the period ended. Thus we have Friday, Saturday, Sunday—three days; it does not matter that neither the Friday nor the Sunday was complete. According to the method of counting in use at the time, this is the period during which Jesus would be in the grave. However, it is easier to see how this accounts for the “three days” than “three nights.” Matthew elsewhere speaks of Jesus as rising “on the third day” (16:21) and “after three days” (27:63); there is no reason to think that he sees any difference between these expressions. MacArthur adds that the Jewish Talmud held that “any part of a day is as the whole.” (MacArthur, *Matthew 8-15*, 329).

iv. John MacArthur, *Matthew 8-15*, 334.