

June 11, 2017

## “The Dangers of a Stubborn Skepticism”

Matthew 12:38-45

**FCF:** The difficulty of hearing hard things

**PROPOSITION:** (magnet) Jesus warns us of the dangers of skepticism.

(anchor) We must take heed of this and turn from it.

### SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

We have a difficulty hearing hard things. We’re distracted. We have no time or ability to focus or process. So we’re distracted. And we dislike it. Hard things are hard. Like an accurate but negative report card. The teacher relays the news. The parents and the child are unhappy. But, if the grades have been tallied right, this is something that needs to be said and addressed.

So there can be a difficulty in hearing hard things. But also a necessity. And the higher the stakes, the greater the need for us to hear. Part of Jesus’ message in this passage includes this dynamic of a difficult but necessary reality to hear - not for our harm but for our deepest good.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** [Matthew 12:38-45](#)

### PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

### SERMON INTRODUCTION:

William Carney is considered to be the first African American to receive the Medal of Honor. He was born in February 1840 as a slave in Norfolk, VA. It’s not clear how he gained his freedom. But in March 1863, he joined the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. In July 1863, he was part of the assault on Ft. Wagner, GA. This is the battle in the film “Glory”. It was in this attack that Carney’s actions ultimately earned him the Medal of Honor ([READ quote](#)):

When the color guard was fatally wounded, Carney retrieved the American flag from his comrade and marched forward with it, despite suffering multiple serious wounds. When the Union troops were forced to retreat under fire, Carney struggled back across the battlefield. He eventually made his way back to his own lines and turned over the colors to another survivor of the 54th, modestly saying, "Boys, I only did my duty; the old flag never touched the ground!"

Sometimes, in the face of danger, the only thing to do is to go straight on towards it just like William Carney. But, at other times, the best thing to do in the face of danger is to turn from it.

The nature and severity of the danger we read of in our text is far beyond withering gunfire on a beachhead. This is speaking of the great danger of a stubborn skepticism - our own. Jesus is warning us here of such skepticism. And we must take heed of this and turn from it.

There are three facets to this danger, to this stubborn skepticism. First, in how it presents itself. Second, in what ultimately lies behind it. And then, third, in what finally lies ahead for it.

### I. HOW IT PRESENTS ITSELF

So, first, how does such skepticism present itself? What does it look like? How would we recognize it? Well, it’s not entirely rational. It’s strangely insistent ([READ Matthew 12:38](#)).

#### A) *Wanting More Proof*

What we see here is a continual demand for evidence, always wanting more proof.

#### 1. Not just a miracle

These men want to see not just a miracle. They want something going beyond a human subject.

2. But something more

They want something more. They want a sign - something greater, grander. At least, so they say.

*B) But Unwilling to See*

For all their insistence on more proof, more evidence, they are actually unwilling to see.

1. Deeply rooted

Enough has been shown already. They want not to inquire but to entrap. It's deeply rooted.

2. But Jesus sees

But not deeply hidden. For though they cannot see, Jesus can. And He will not be manipulated.

So there is, in terms of how this skepticism can present itself, this strange insistence.

*Application:*

The frightening reality is that, despite all the claims to the contrary, sometimes the heart simply does not want to believe. So though someone may press with a torrent of questions, they are not really interested in the answers. That's the position of these men opposing Jesus.

Before we go any further, we need to stop and ask ourselves, "Is that me? Could I be doing the same thing?" Certainly, there is a place for questions and the real need to take them seriously. But is it possible there is something else behind our hesitation to embrace the gospel?

Jesus warns us of the dangers of skepticism. We must take heed of this and turn from it.

## **II. WHAT LIES BEHIND IT**

That leads us into the second point. What lies behind this? Let's consider two images.

*A) The Spoiled Child*

The first is that of a spoiled child. Jesus used this earlier ([READ Matthew 11:16-17](#)).

1. The games

The big events in village life were weddings and funerals. So it's hardly surprising that children would pick up on this and include it in their games. One group says, "Let's play wedding!" The other says, "No, let's play funeral!" Neither is willing to budge so they sit down and sulk.

2. The point

The point? Jesus sees the hearts of His opponents and says, "You are like children in a snit. You are never satisfied." Why? Because of something deeper. Because they want something else.

*B) The Wayward Spouse*

And so, to our text and the image of the wayward spouse ([READ Matthew 12:39-40](#)).

1. Sobering reply

A sobering reply. "This is evil," basically of Satan. "You are adulterous," spiritually wayward. This is the heart-wrenching tear-stained language of the Old Testament prophets, speaking of a treacherous unfaithfulness to the One who had a true claim upon the hearts of His people.

2. Clear refusal

A sobering reply and then a clear refusal. Such a sign was not for them to demand. It was only for them to receive and believe the sign He would give - the sign of Jonah. Not one Jonah had given but his return from a watery grave. Just so - even more so - Jesus would die and rise again.

What was behind this was a heart issue. And the heart always drives the response.

*Illustration:*

Think of the testimony last week by former FBI Director, James Comey, to Congress. I'm not going to analyze it but make an observation. Here are some headlines ([READ quotes](#)):

*Huffington Post*: "Lying Trump White House Defamed Me". *National Review*: "Again, Pressure Is Not Obstruction".

*Buzzfeed*: "Lies, Plain and Simple". *The Blaze*: "Comey: Lynch Directed Me to Downplay Clinton Email Probe"

Yes, there's more to say. But the prior bent of each news outlet is clearly driving the reporting.

*Application:*

Do you see? The heart always drives the response. Your grid determines the conclusion. Your filtering forms your reflections. That's the very thing we see playing out in our text.

And all around us all the time. Look, you might present the most winsome argument and case for the Christian faith. You relay how the very things we would expect to see if Christianity was true can be seen in the real world. The universe had a beginning. There are clear signs of order and design all around us. There is a nagging universal longing for God. There is a moral fabric to the universe. And then clear accounts of the God of the Bible interacting in history. You put it all out there. And...nothing. For, ultimately, evidence is not the issue. Ultimately, arguments win no one. Why? The reception is formed by our affections. The heart drives the response. Now that should give us pause, all of us. It should give us pause and a call to prayer.

Jesus warns us of the dangers of skepticism. We must take heed and take it seriously.

### **III. WHAT LIES AHEAD**

Which brings us to our third point. We see how this skepticism presents itself. We see what lies behind it. Now we see what lies ahead. These strong words are about to get stronger.

*A) Just Condemnation*

Jesus speaks of a just condemnation. He makes appeals to their heritage and history.

1. Places of the past

Earlier, Jesus spoke of places of the past ([READ Matthew 11:20-24](#)). These were places that had clearly seen Jesus' works and heard His words. And He then contrasts their response to pagan peoples in their history. "Had they seen and heard what you have, they would have believed."

2. Persons in the past

Moving from places in their past to persons ([READ Matthew 12:41-42](#)). Mention of Jonah leads to mention of the Ninevites and their response. And then to the Queen of Sheba from SW Arabia and her response to the wisdom of King Solomon. "See how they responded to the good news of the living God. And you, who are so much more privileged than they were, have rejected Him."

*B) Terrible Warning*

Pressing harder, Jesus moves then to a terrible warning (**READ Matthew 12:43-45**).

1. The story

The story assumes the reality of demons in the world. We're not clear of the details, like why this demon left its host. But it returns and this man ends up under worse control than before.

2. The lesson

The point is that everything was put in order, cleaned and swept. Good moral reform had taken place. But that's not enough. In fact, it is not just insufficient. It is deceptive and dangerous.

And that is Jesus' message and warning. That's what awaits such stubborn skepticism. Which is a reminder of something made clear before. Neutrality with Jesus is not an option.

*Illustration:*

The election this past week in Great Britain got me thinking of another Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. That is, his treaties with Hitler, his naive stance towards the Nazi war machine in the 1930's, and his foolish idea of "peace in our time". There's a time to declare.

*Application:*

Neutrality with Jesus is not an option. Put another way, belief in God is not enough. Think of the conversion stories we hear. I fear many of those are but half way. Polite theism is deceptive and dangerous. Cleaning up your act, sweeping the house clean, without faith, without repentance, without an earnest turning to Christ - is all so socially acceptable. And a terrible place to be. Think with me. Why the coming of the Son? Why the sending of the Spirit?

Jesus warns us of the dangers of skepticism and neutrality. We must turn from this.

**CONCLUSION:**

As clear as all that may be in this text, we must confess our hesitation. It reminds me of the studies done on the psychology of ignoring storm warnings. Think of tornados in TN. We hear the siren. We see the scrolling letters on the TV screen. The alert goes off on our weather radios or smart phones. We hear the plea to "get to your safe space". Yet, we hesitate. Why?

Part of it is that we've become desensitized. We've heard all this before. It's too much trouble to be bothered with. Besides, it can't happen to us. And surely it can't be that bad.

How does this fit with Jesus' warnings? Here too there is a tendency to be desensitized and to deny. No doubt no few of us have been put off by the red faced preacher and his fire and brimstone. But think with me. So he was boorish. Does it necessarily follow he was wrong?

We need to be wary of the tendency to be desensitized. And the temptation to downplay the stakes. Again, think with me here. Why would Jesus say such things unless He knew them to be true? Put another way, why the cross? To spare us of the thing He is warning us of here.

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