

## **Lessons from history – Matthew 12:38-45**

### **14<sup>th</sup> November 2010 at 10am**

#### **Introduction**

A very good morning to you all, on this very special Sunday

In the eighteenth century, the Irish philosopher, author, and statesman, Edmund Burke, famously stated: “Those who ignore history are destined to repeat it”.

Today on Remembrance Sunday we remember both the heroes of war and the horror of war.

We remember because we don't want to forget those who so bravely fought and died in the service of our nation.

We remember because we don't want their sacrifices to be in vain.

We remember because by knowing the past, we can better avoid the same mistakes in the future.

Towards the end of the service we'll be having our formal Act of Remembrance

And as we listen to the 69 names on the Roll of Honour, we'll each, no doubt, be reflecting on the pain that those deaths caused to their families and friends

And we'll be praying that their precious memory will help to avoid more blood being shed in wars in the future

The causes of most wars are complex. But included in almost all of them, are two failures:

- a failure to learn from history
- a failure of trust in the relationships between the parties

Now these failings aren't confined only to the causes of war. In our passage today in Matthew 12, we see Jesus warning the Pharisees to learn from two incidents in Israel's history and using them to talk about the central role of trust, in the most important relationship of all, our relationship with God

So Remembrance Sunday is a very good time to look at this passage.

We'll be looking at the nature of trust, the problem when trust is absent, the need for trust, and the relationship between trust and doubt.

Got that? The nature of trust, the problem when it's absent, the need for it, and the relationship between it and doubt

Now would be a good moment to open your pew Bibles on page 978

#### **The nature of trust**

Okay let's get started by looking at the nature of trust

And I'm going to give you two simple examples of it:

Okay, first example:

I've got a hockey stick up here with me in the pulpit. Do you believe me? The answer is probably yes, although you couldn't be certain. How much trust is involved in your belief? Not a lot but definitely some

What would it take for you to definitely believe me? Well, to be sure you'd have to ask me to show it to you.

Okay here it is. But now I've shown it to you, how much trust in my word do you actually need to have now? None! There's no need for trust at all now.

Do you see that by me showing you my hockey stick removes the need for trust in our relationship over this particular issue?

Second example of trust:

We like to have all the facts available to us, when we make decisions – especially if it's a big one!

If we're about to buy a car then we'll want to know all about how it'll perform, whether it's reliable, what's its fuel efficiency.

We'll want its log book, written guarantees, inspections, servicing records, etc.

We'll take great care in making sure that as far as we possibly can, we'll have checked everything's in order before handing any money over.

Do you see what's happening here? What we're trying to do, is to remove, as far as we can, the need for any trust in our relationship with the person or organisation who's selling us the car.

Now I hope it's obvious to you that this second example isn't the way that God wants his relationship with us to work. God has created us for one thing only: to have an everlasting relationship with him based on mutual love and trust, so that he might be glorified.

Let's look at what happens when a group of humans try to have a relationship with God that isn't based on trust.

### **The problem when trust is absent (v38)**

In Matthew 12 verses 34 to 37, Jesus tells the Pharisees that they're accountable to God for the things they say about his ministry. So in verse 38, *"some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.""*

At this stage you may well be thinking: "What do these Pharisees mean *"we want to see a miraculous sign from you?"* Jesus has been doing miraculous signs the whole time! And he's only just healed a man who was blind and mute and demon-possessed. What are they thinking? Where are they coming from?"

Well, it seems that the Pharisees were saying something like this: "These earthly miracles you're doing, Jesus, can be interpreted in different ways. Maybe the people you healed weren't as sick as we originally thought, or maybe there were other contributing factors.

But if you perform a supernatural cosmic miracle, it'll confirm and validate the stuff you've been doing down here on earth."

Now there are examples in the Bible, when God has responded to requests for signs. But do you see what the Pharisees are trying to do in this case?

They're saying that if you do it our way. If you do something that meets our criteria for a sign, then we'll believe you.

In other words, rather like when we purchase a car, the Pharisees are trying to remove the need for trust from their relationship with Jesus

So, although on the surface, the Pharisees' request for a spectacular sign doesn't seem so outrageous, in fact what they're doing is undermining the whole basis on which God wants to have his relationship with us – faith and trust.

*The Pharisees were being a bit like the child sitting at the dinner table glaring at the perfectly reasonable food on offer from his mother and snarling, "What else have you got? Where's the ice-cream"*

But even as we join in with condemning the Pharisees, we need to look at ourselves

Have we never done something like this in our relationship with God?

Have we never tried to strike a bargain with God?

You know the sort of thing I'm talking about here:

You do this one thing for me, God, and I'll believe in you for ever

If you just make sure that I get this job, I'll never again doubt you exist

God, if you just make this really bad situation I'm in, go away, I promise I'll always put you first in my life from here on in

Have you never done something like that?

Tried to bargain with God, as though you've got something he needs?

I know I have

The reason why the Pharisees' apparently reasonable request gets such short shrift from Jesus is that he knows their motivation.

Jesus knows that they're looking to get something out of him, rather than build a relationship with him

He knows that they're more interested in testing him than trusting him

And that's the complete opposite of what he wants

Jesus wants people, including us, to put their trust in him

Jesus wants people to believe what he's saying

Jesus wants people to build relationships with him that are based on trust and love

You remember my illustration of the hockey stick? The moment you saw I actually had it, any trust on your part wasn't necessary.

The reason why Jesus made such a big thing of all this is that there's a key issue at stake here. And it's this: What's the nature of our relationship with God?

Is it based on us trusting and loving him as he reveals himself to us?

Or is it based on us trying to mould God into the shape we want and expect him to be?

The demand by the Pharisees for a miraculous sign, was all about them trying to maintain control of their relationship with God

They said that Jesus had to meet their standards of proof

They weren't interested in a relationship based on trust, if they had to do the trusting!

In fact they didn't want a trusting relationship at all – they wanted a controlling relationship

### **The need for trust (vv39-42)**

So we've seen the problem when trust is absent: a loving relationship can't function properly.

Now let's look some more at the need for trust in a relationship with God

As I've already mentioned, wanting a sign from God is not always evil. It's not always wrong.

But it becomes evil when you're already surrounded by compelling evidence you're not willing to consider because in reality you're trying to manipulate God. And this is the situation with the Pharisees and their supporters.

So in verse 39 Jesus replies: *"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."*

You can almost hear the incredulity in his voice as he says to them "You want yet another miraculous sign? How many more do you want? No! You're not going to get one, because your reasons for wanting another miraculous sign are motivated by the wrong things: by evil, envy, and stubbornness. So, your request for a miracle on demand is denied!"

*I'm sure you've all come across that dinner menu that's only got only two choices on it: 'Take it or leave it'!*

Jesus must have been very tempted to adopt the same principle. But in his love for them, he decides to have one more go. He says "Look I'm not going to give you the sort of sign that you want, but I will give you one more. Look back in your history to the example of the prophet Jonah."

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."*

Jesus is saying "Just as Jonah showed himself to the Ninevites after 3 days of being in the belly of a huge fish, I'm going to show myself to the world after three days of being in the belly of the earth! It's going to be the greatest sign that's ever been seen!"

But he goes on in verse 41: “But there’s a huge difference between you and the Ninevites. They responded to the message that God gave them and repented, but you’re rejecting the message God’s giving you!”

*US comedian Mike Warnke says “Imagine you’re a Ninevite fisherman standing on the lake shore, casting your net out into the water. You look up and see a man coming up out of the water walking toward you. As he gets closer, you notice that his clothing is in rags; he’s covered in seaweed; and his skin is bleached white by fishy juices. What would you do if he commanded you in a hoarse voice “Repent”? I bet you would!”*

Jesus goes on in verse 42: While we’re on the subject *“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.”*

Jesus is saying “This Gentile woman travelled halfway around the world to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, but you’ve got something far greater than Solomon right here! You’ve been exposed to more wisdom than anyone else has ever heard, and yet you’re still rejecting it!

The Queen of Sheba and the men of Nineveh are going to testify against you if you don’t repent and make me the Lord of your life.”

Jesus is telling the Pharisees that there are godless gentiles who’ve had less revelation than them and yet still responded to it appropriately.

So where does this all leave us?

Well I think that the implications are fairly clear:

When judgment comes, as it certainly will for all of us, the big question that we’ll have to face is this: “How did we respond to the revelation that we were given?”

Did we respond with faith, believing what God said and acting on that belief?

Or did we put our hands on our hips and say, “Is that all you’ve got, God? I need more. Here’s the list of items that’ll satisfy me, if you want to bring me into a trust relationship with you.”

But, as we’ve already seen, that’s not trust. That simply leads to never-ending distrust and doubt.

Just as with the Pharisees, rejecting the revelation we’ve already been given is effectively rejecting the revealer, i.e. we’re rejecting God

If we want a saving relationship with God, we have to trust him. There’s no other way.

### **Trust and doubt (vv43-45)**

So we’ve seen the problem when trust is absent. And we’ve seen the need for trust in our relationship with God.

Ah but, you might say, are you absolutely sure there isn’t a third option here?

How about instead of choosing between trust and doubt, we just do nothing?

We simply don't choose between them.  
We stay comfortably in the middle

Well Jesus answers this possibility in our final 3 verses

Now at first sight, Jesus seems to switch subjects at verse 43. But he doesn't. Instead he takes the Pharisees back to the demon-possessed man of verse 22.

He notes that when God drives out Satan from someone, the freed person seems to have 3 choices:

He can firstly put his faith and trust in the one who's freed him  
Secondly, he can seek to be repossessed  
Or thirdly, he can just remain neutral

But verse 44 shows that there's problem with this neutrality – there's a lack of occupation. The problem is that nature hates a vacuum, and Jesus says if we're not possessed by God, then we'll end up being repossessed by Satan. And the new situation will be worse than the old!

In verse 45, Jesus applies this principle directly to the religious leaders and their followers:  
If they continue to question the evidence in front of their eyes  
If they continue to doubt and to "seek more information"  
I.e. if they don't make a choice to believe, their so-called 'neutrality' is effectively the same as choosing to be possessed by Satan.  
Jesus clearly tells them that there's no neutrality possible here  
Fence-sitting simply isn't an option

So where does this leave us?  
Well, in exactly the same position as the Pharisees!  
Fence-sitting isn't an option for us either

Ironically, much of the time, neutrality about God's revelation is disguised as hope:  
I hope I'm good enough for God  
I hope there's no hell  
I hope God just loves everybody and takes us all to heaven  
I hope what the Bible says about my sinfulness isn't true  
I hope my good works count for something  
I hope the book of Revelation is a fairy tale

Although these statements may sound as though they're neutral, they're not  
What they're actually saying is this: the reason we're relying on hope is because we don't believe.

No! These statements don't occupy some halfway point between trust and doubt  
They're actually statements of unbelief, of doubt, because they're rejecting the evidence we've already been clearly given by God in the Bible.

Real hope comes not from doubt but from trusting in our relationship with God

## **Conclusion**

So let's recap

In our passage Jesus is asking us to trust in him whether or not we see signs and wonders. He says fence-sitting is not an option for any of us. We've all been given more than enough revelation for us to decide.

The reason that God reveals himself to us, and then holds us responsible for our response, is because he's seeking to build a relationship of faith and trust, between him and us. A trust that was broken by sin and had to be repaired through the blood of Jesus being spilt on the cross for us.

If you're not yet a Christian, Jesus is saying don't rely on neutrality. It isn't possible. However, the wonderful thing is that you can make sure of your relationship with God. God's promised that anyone who searches for him will find him. Please speak to Steve or me after the service, or join us at our next Alpha course in January.

If you are already a Christian, make sure that you're working at deepening your trust in God day by day. Make sure that all the rooms in your house are open to Christ's gentle spirit. Maybe you've still got a bitterness room that you won't let Jesus deal with – where you hold onto all your grudges. Or maybe there's another part of your life that you need Jesus to deal with.

As we take part in the Act of Remembrance this morning, let's all of us commit to remembering two things:

Firstly, our need to learn lessons from history

Secondly, our need to make sure that we're looking after the most important relationship we'll ever have: our relationship with God

## **Prayer**