

"What Makes Jesus so Special"

Matthew 12:38-42

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We are now one month into the year 2026. Why do we call it that? Where do those numbers come from on our calendar? Most of you know it means 2000 and 26 years since Jesus was born. 2026 A.D. doesn't mean "after death" as some think, but anno domini, which is Latin for "the year of our Lord." A few people will say it is the year 2026 CE, in the common era. The common era is still based on the birth of Jesus.

But why? Why does our calendar measure years from the time Jesus was born, rather than from the birth of Moses, Plato, Muhammad, Galileo, Abraham Lincoln, or Tom Brady? Historians may say, "Well, it is because Christianity has been the dominant religion in Western civilization. Christians were in charge of the calendar so the birth of Christ was given the spotlight.

But why did that happen? How could a carpenter from an obscure village in Northern Israel start a religion that, within a few decades, would have followers in almost every part of the known world? Well, come Christians respond, "It is because Jesus is the Son of God. He is the true Lord and Savior of the human race." Yes, I am convinced that is true, but why do we believe that? How do we know He is who He says He is? What makes Jesus so special?

Folks, we find an important answer to these types of questions in our text today. We are continuing our journey through Matthew and we come to chapter 12:38-42. Here Jesus is essentially asked, "What makes you so special?"

"Why should anyone believe you are not just a religious fraud out there trying to gain people's loyalty and get their money?" We are going to look at Jesus' answer to that question, and I believe it will help us understand why 2000 + years after His birth, Jesus Christ is worthy of our trust, love and devotion. Let's pause and pray God would help our minds and hearts grasp the truth today.

Our text records a continued confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, Jewish religious leaders of His day. Back in verse 24, these men

had accused Jesus of doing the devil's work. And in verse 34, that we looked at last week, Jesus referred to them as a "brood of vipers," or in our vernacular, a "bunch of snakes." The **Matthew 12:38 (Then) some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."** Scribes are religious teachers, experts on the Old Testament law. Their respectful tone probably does not reflect a sincere desire for truth, but a political strategy. There is a crowd gathered and the Pharisees' goal is to turn these people against Jesus.

Things had started back in **Matthew 12:22 Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him (Jesus), and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw.** When that happened people started asking: "Could this be the Messiah? Could this be the Savior God promised, the one for whom we have waited so long?" That is when the Pharisees say, "No way. This fellow can only do this miracle because He is empowered by Satan himself."

Verses 25-37 record Jesus' compelling rebuttal of this charge, and so the Pharisees change their tactic. What they are implying in verse 38 is something like this, "Okay, Jesus. We will concede there is some ambiguity about what happened today. Some say you received your power from the devil, others say from God. Who's to know? But you can answer everyone's questions right here and now. If you are the Messiah, then perform a great miracle right now that will prove to everyone you really are the Messiah."

I can see why these guys are sometimes called "lawyers." I'm not sure whether they believed Jesus could not or simply would not perform this miracle on demand, but they are pretty confident Jesus is not going to meet their challenge. At least they sure hope He doesn't. Their goal is to convince people Jesus is *not* the Messiah, but rather a fraud of some type.

Now, if I were Jesus, I might have said, "Okay, you guys want a miraculous sign? I will give you one."

And then I would have snapped my fingers and turned the guys who challenged me into a bunch of pigs, or maybe a brood of vipers. But Jesus doesn't do that, though He certainly could have. Instead, He gives this response, **Matthew 12:39a** **But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign."** Jesus is not referring to sexual immorality, thought that likely was going on. Instead, He means that these religious people have been unfaithful to the Lord. They have committed spiritual adultery. Oh, they may not have engaged in pagan idol worship as some had done in the Old Testament, but they were worshippers of self.

Though they claimed to be loyal only to the true God, they were really only loyal to themselves. **Matthew 12:39b, 40** **But no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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.**

The scribes, Pharisees, and the crowd would not get their sign that day, but there would be proof that Jesus is the Messiah: the sign of Jonah. Many of you remember the story. God tells the Prophet Jonah to go the Nineveh, but he tries to run away. Eventually Jonah is thrown overboard from the ship he was on and is then swallowed by a great fish. After spending three days inside the fish, he is vomited back onto dry land, and from there, Jonah obeys the Lord and goes to Nineveh.

Now it is unlikely that the Pharisees, the crowd or even Jesus' disciples understood with any clarity what Jesus meant by "the sign of Jonah," even though they all knew the story. With the benefit of hindsight, we know Jesus was speaking of His resurrection from the dead.

Just as Jonah was resurrected after spending three days in the fish, Jesus will be brought back to life after spending three days in the grave. That is, of course, exactly what happened. It is the most magnificent and significant event of all time, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is probably too spectacular for even His disciple to imagine at this point, but it is proof that shows Jesus is indeed the Messiah, indeed God's Son, indeed, the Lord and Savior.

Now, let me add two footnotes at this point. First, Jesus clearly believes and teaches Jonah was a real person and that this greatest of all fish stories actually happened. Skeptics over the years have contended the story is merely a fairy tale. Jesus disagrees with them, and I agree with Him. Jonah really did spend three days inside, not a whale, but a huge fish, or more literally "a great creature." And even if it were, why would Matthew include that statement?

Second, Jesus was really crucified on Thursday afternoon, which is possible, though unlikely, or, third, "three days and three nights" is a Jewish expression that can mean merely a portion of three different days. Friday afternoon, Saturday, and Sunday morning could be described that way. I think that is the case, but if you have questions we can talk later. Okay, end of footnotes.

Jesus then concludes with a warning. He talks not about signs that proves He is the Messiah, but rather of witnesses who will testify against those who oppose Him. **Matthew 12:41** **The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.**

After Jonah came out of the belly of the fish, the wicked pagan people of Nineveh believed his message, repented and turned to God. In a short time, the Pharisees and everyone else around would witness a miracle far greater than someone living in a fish for three days. Jesus would rise from the dead. They were being confronted not by a prophet like Jonah, but by the Messiah Himself. Yet they were rejecting and would continue to reject this truth. The people of Nineveh will day, "These folks had a lot more chances than we did, but they never repented. They deserve whatever punishment God chooses to give."

There will also be another witness against these folks on judgment day. **Matthew 12:42** **The queen of the South will rise up at the judgement 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 queen of the south is the Queen of Sheeba, a pagan ruler from the Arabian Peninsula, probably

from what is now Yemen. According to 1 Kings 18 she came to Jerusalem to honor and learn from King Solomon. On the day of judgment she will testify, “I simply heard about Solomon’s great wisdom and made the long journey to honor Him. These folks had the Messiah Himself in their midst. They saw Him perform miracles, and yet they wanted nothing to do with Him. They deserve whatever punishment God chooses to give them.”

The testimony of these two witnesses will affirm that Jesus is the Messiah, that the evidence clearly demonstrates He is the one God has sent, and that those who reject Him do so only because their minds and hearts are closed to the truth. This is Jesus’ solemn warning against the Pharisees and all who oppose Him.

So, what do these verses mean to folks living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? I want to highlight two important implications for us today.

#1 The resurrection of Jesus Christ, the sign of Jonah, is how we know He is Messiah and Lord. Now, the fact Jesus is the eternal Son of God is what makes Him so unique and special. That is why over 2000 years after Jesus was on earth, our calendar is still based on His birth.

However, it is the resurrection of Jesus that enables us to know this is who He is. It is the sign of Jonah that confirms Jesus was not a lunatic, liar or crafty magician, but really was who He claimed to be – the Messiah, God’s Son, our Savior. The Apostle Paul puts it this way in **Romans 1:4 and (he) was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Folks, if we took the founders of all the world’s religion, and all the great philosophers through history, and all the great scholars, scientists and political leaders who have ever lived, and then placed them in a big circle, and then placed them in a big circle. One person would stand head and shoulders above the rest. It would not be Mohammad. It would not be Aristotle or Einstein or Gandi or Donald Trump. It would be Jesus Christ.

Jesus was probably not exceptionally tall, but when we compare Him to any of these other individuals, He is like an 8 ft giant among dwarfs. He is like an 8-foot giant among dwarves, or Mt. Everest among ant hills. It is the resurrection from the dead that shows us he is different from anyone else.

A Muslim was trying to convince a Christian that Islam is a superior religion. He said, “When we go to Mecca, we at least find a coffin. But when you Christians go to Jerusalem, you find nothing but an empty grave. How do you know this Jesus ever existed.” To this, the Christian replied, “That is the key difference. Muhammad is dead and in his coffin. All other religious and political leaders are in their coffins. But Jesus is risen, and He is alive forever more.

These days people often talk about finding their own truth. Choosing a religion often comes down to what someone finds personally fulfilling or is consistent with values he/she already embraces. Sometimes a religion is chosen because a person has good feelings about being part of a particular faith community, not because of any truth claim. “The Mormons seem like nice people, that is why I am joining the leaders.”

As Christians, we need to say, “Wait a minute.” That doesn’t make any sense. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then all religions and philosophies are pretty much on equal ground, and you can then consider these other factors. But, if Jesus rose from the dead, there is no equal ground. Jesus is totally unique, totally above anyone else.

Next Sunday is the Super Bowl between the Seattle Seahawks and the New England Patriots. The winner will be declared the best team in the NFL for the 2025 season. But not everyone will be convinced. Some will say the Broncos, Rams or even the Bears are really the better team. But if Jesus rose from the dead, there can be no dispute. It is proof He is who He claims to be. That is why when the apostles are proclaiming the gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and throughout all the known world, they talk about Jesus’ resurrection. It was how they *knew* Jesus was worthy of their trust, love and devotion.

#2 People today who reject Jesus as Messiah and Lord put their souls at great risk. They may be

committing sin even worse than what the Pharisees did.

It is plausible that on the day of judgement some of the Pharisees will say, "Hey, we only heard Jesus' cryptic reference to a resurrection. We didn't know it was really going to happen. We didn't have proof He was who He said He was. These folks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century know all about the resurrection of Jesus. All they have to do is pick up a Bible and they can read how three days after Jesus had been killed, He was once again alive. They have no excuses for not recognizing He is who He claimed to be, Messiah, Savior, and Lord. They deserve whatever punishment God chooses to give.

There are a couple of responses people have to this. Some say, "But I don't believe this resurrection thing really happened. It is scientifically impossible. It is a story that children and gullible people buy."

Well, if that is someone's view, my question for them is: Have you really studied the evidence concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Most people who reject the idea that Jesus rose from the dead have not really taken a serious look at the issue. The New Testament writers present this story as fact. Millions of intelligent people throughout history and today believe that it really did occur.

That includes people like Josh McDowell, who after years of study said, "There is more historical evidence that Jesus rose from the dead than there is that Julius Caesar ever existed." It included N. T. Wright, a former professor at both Oxford and Cambridge, who wrote an 817-page book entitled "The Resurrection of the Son of God." It includes Dr. Gary Habermas whose 1000+ page book entitled, "On the Resurrection: Evidences," was published last year.

If Jesus did *not* rise from the dead, it makes no sense to base our calendar on Him or to make Christianity the focus of your life. But if Jesus *did indeed rise from the dead*, then it is certainly compelling evidence that He is God's Son. Those who refuse to even look at the evidence are just as close minded and hard hearted as those Pharisees and I fear they may be in just as much trouble on the day of judgement. If someone is honestly

skeptical, fine. But refusing to consider evidence indicates an inexcusable spiritual hardness.

Let me say, if you do not think Jesus rose from the dead, but you are willing to consider the evidence, we need to chat. I would be glad to help you do that. Whether or not Jesus' resurrection really occurred is about the most important question you will ever answer.

There are other people, likely some in this room, who say or think, "Yes, I believe in the resurrection of Jesus. *I always have*. But I have more important things in my life right now. Someday, I will get sometime and then I will think about this Jesus stuff a bit more."

Folks, that attitude may be more open-minded than the Pharisees, but it is also more foolish. If you believe the resurrection of Jesus occurred, if you believe He is who He claimed to be, but think there are more important things in life, you are clearly mistaken.

The eternal Son of God coming to earth, dying on the cross in place of sinners, and rising from the dead to guarantee the salvation of all who trust in Him, is the greatest news there has ever been. To believe it is true, but to think it doesn't matter a whole lot, makes little sense.

It would be like a cure for cancer being discovered, and a cancer patient saying, "Ya, well that is great. May be after I get my remodeling project done at home, I will check into that." Waiting to turn to Jesus until after you have taken care of other things in life doesn't really work. He is too important, too special for that.

So, I close with two questions:

#1 Have you embraced Jesus as your Savior and Lord? If you have, wonderful. But if you have not, now is a great time to do so. It doesn't require a lengthy process. There are no forms to fill out.

What you need to do is admit you are not good enough the way you are and cannot save yourself, and instead, as the Holy Spirit enables, turn to the Lord Jesus, trust in Him, in His life, death and resurrection, to save you from both the penalty and power of your sin. If you are not sure what that means, make sure you talk to me or someone who can clearly explain this great news to you.

#2 If you are trusting in Jesus as Savior and Lord, are you living that way? Remember is you believe Christmas and Easter are true, if you believe that God sent His Son into this world so that we find life through His life, death and resurrection, then you cannot just put that truth on the shelf and bring it down a couple times a year.

Jesus is indeed worth of our trust, love and devotion each day. Our lives need to be focused on trusting and following Him each day. Jesus is far more than special. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. May God help us to believe and live this truth today and in all the days ahead.