

## Lessons from Matthew 12

By Clinton Wahlen

**M**atthew 12, through miraculous healings and several scenes of conflict, brings to the forefront the issue of Jesus' identity as the messianic "son of David." The first two conflict scenes, arising from Pharisaic scruples, reveal what constitutes true and lawful Sabbath observance (Matt 12:1–14). This is followed by the longest of Matthew's twelve Old Testament fulfillment quotations, applying the first of Isaiah's Servant Songs to Jesus (Matt 12:15–21; cf. Isa 42:1–4). The largest part of the chapter revolves around the charge the Pharisees level against Jesus: that He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons (Matt 12:22–37; cf. 9:34). This is followed by Jesus' reply to the demand for a sign by the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 12:38–45). The chapter includes sayings of Jesus that imply that His person and His work are greater than the temple (Matt 12:6), Jonah (Matt 12:41), and Solomon (Matt 12:42), and concludes with Jesus identifying those who do the will of the Father as the members of His spiritual family (Matt 12:46–50).

### Interpretation of the Chapter

#### 1. Verses 1–14 (Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath)

- The Pharisees were especially concerned with the correct observance of the law, as we learn from rabbinic traditions that descended from them. They classified work into thirty-nine separate categories (*m. Shab. 7.2*; cf. CD X.14–XI.18), several of which the disciples violated (reaping, threshing, winnowing, and segregating).
- In all three Synoptic Gospels, these Sabbath incidents are paired, but only in Matthew is the grain field episode the Sabbath's first mention. This placement shows that the controversies over Sabbath observance do not concern *whether* the day should be kept but *how* and that the Pharisaic traditions actually hindered rather than helped one's obedience to God.
- Matthew's note that the disciples were hungry makes the connection with the hunger of David and his men to which Jesus referred in order to demonstrate that eating to sustain life does not infringe on the holiness of the Sab-

bath, just as the eating of showbread by David and his men did not compromise the temple's holiness (cf. 1 Sam 21:1–6).

- Although harvesting was forbidden on the Sabbath (Exod 34:21; cf. 31:15; 35:2), the civil laws of Israel provided for satisfying one's hunger by picking grapes or plucking heads of grain, but the quantity was limited to what one could eat at the time (Deut 23:25). So this was not harvesting—not "work" as such—and therefore could not be considered a Sabbath violation. The disciples were "guiltless" (Matt 12:7) and the Pharisees should have known that.
- The ceremonial law specified that the showbread was only to be eaten by priests (Exod 29:32; Lev 8:31). The bread itself was holy (1 Sam 21:4)—not common, despite David's rationalization to the contrary (1 Sam 21:5)—which is why it was to be eaten in a holy place (Lev 24:9). But physical sustenance is also necessary and need not conflict with the priestly obligation to preserve the holiness of the temple, as Ahimelech, the high priest, recognized.
- Jesus' assertion in Matthew 12:5 that the priests "profane" (*bebêlousin*) the Sabbath is based on the fact that they have more work on that day, not less. In addition, they circumcise infants on the eighth day regardless of whether it falls on a Sabbath or not (Lev 12:3; cf. John 7:22). Thus the priests treat the Sabbath in the same way as other days for the purpose of circumcision, and it is treated as even more important for the purpose of worship and offering sacrifice. Jesus in no way suggests that by doing such work they break the Sabbath, as many translations claim (e.g., CSB, GNT, NAS95, NRSV). Similarly, the work of preaching and kingdom ministry by Jesus and the disciples had to be carried forward every day, and especially on Sabbath. Reconnecting people with God points to the original purpose of the sanctuary (Exod 25:8) and of the Sabbath itself as God's Edenic gift to humanity (Gen 2:1–3; Exod 20:8–11).

- Present among them (Matt 12:6) was something (the gospel of the kingdom) and Someone greater than the temple (cf. John 1:14)—the “Desire of All Nations,” whose glory would exceed that of Solomon’s Temple (Hag 2:7–9)—but their cultural and religious prejudices blinded their eyes (cf. Isa 8:9–10; 29:9–10).
  - Jesus’ quotation of Hosea 6:6 points to the similarity between Pharisaic legalism and the pretended holiness of Israel and Judah: in both cases a true knowledge of God was missing, which would understand that divine love and compassion is the source of life from which faithfulness springs.
  - At the center of these two Sabbath incidents is Jesus’ own statement of His relation to the Sabbath. Since He is Lord (*kyrios*)—that is, the God of the Old Testament (cf. 1:20, 22, 24; 2:13, 15, 19; 3:3; 4:7, 10; 5:33), He is the Law-giver (cf. Isa 33:22) and the One best able to interpret and apply the law.
  - Matthew links both incidents by referring to “their” (i.e., the Pharisees’) synagogue. In the time of Jesus, this Jewish institution tended to expound traditions that the Pharisees had ensconced over Scripture—traditions Jesus rejected and removed—which led to the issue of whether it was lawful to heal a man’s hand on the Sabbath (Matt 12:10).
  - Although most first-century Jews would agree that rescuing an animal from a pit would not contravene the Sabbath, those in Qumran taught that “no one should help an animal give birth on the Sabbath; and if it falls into a well or a pit, he may not lift it out on the Sabbath” (CD XI.13–14). But just as saving life was permissible on the Sabbath (cf. Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9), so doing good (a point recorded only by Matthew) was in harmony with its intent.
2. **Verses 15–21 (Jesus is the Servant of God)**
- Jesus, recognizing that the Pharisees were plotting to destroy Him (Matt 12:14), as He similarly observes elsewhere (John 7:19; 8:37, 40), “withdrew” (*anachōreō*) to safety (Matt 12:15). The word is used previously of the wise men’s hasty departure (Matt 2:12), Joseph and Mary’s flight with the baby Jesus to Egypt (Matt 2:13–14), the family’s departure to Nazareth to avoid Archelaus (Matt 2:24), and Jesus’ withdrawal to Galilee after John the Baptist’s arrest (Matt 4:12).
  - Jesus’ attempt to avoid publicity so as not to aggravate the authorities even more and thus threaten His mission is the occasion for Matthew’s longest Old Testament quotation, taken from Isaiah 42:1, which begins the first of Isaiah’s four Servant Songs (Isa 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12).
- Since Jesus has already been identified as this Servant by the voice from Heaven (Matt 3:17; cf. 12:18) and as the one who brings the Holy Spirit by John the Baptist (Matt 3:11), and His ministry to the Gentile centurion has also been noted (Matt 8:5–13), it is the meek manner of Jesus’ ministry (cf. Matt 11:29) that is the focus here (Matt 12:19–20), though these other elements also fulfill this prophecy.
3. **Verses 22–37 (Jesus and the Kingdom of God)**
- The controversy has four parts: the miracle and reactions to it (Matt 12:22–24), Jesus’ refutation of His opponents’ arguments (Matt 12:25–30), His warning about blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31–32), and His assertion that God’s judgment will reveal the “treasure” of each individual’s heart (Matt 12:33–37).
  - Healing blindness characterized Jesus’ messianic ministry (Matt 9:27–31; 15:30–31; 20:30–34; 21:14–15; cf. John 9:1–6), signifying His ability to give sight to the spiritually blind (cf. Rev 3:17–18). The added difficulty of muteness recalls the demon previously cast out by Jesus when the Pharisees’ leveled the same charge against Him of partnering with the ruler of the demons (12:24; cf. 9:32–34).
  - The Greek form of the question, “Could this be [*mēti houtos estin*] the Son of David?” reveals some hesitancy by the crowds about making an identification with potentially explosive religio-political consequences (cf. 22:42). Yet Matthew from the beginning has made clear that Jesus is the messianic Son of David (Matt 1:1, 16–17), a fact that even the blind recognize (Matt 9:27; 20:30–34).
  - Beelzebul (derived from *Ba’al*, “lord, master”) refers to Satan (see Matt 12: 26–27) as the ruler of the demons (cf. John 12:31; 16:11) and of this present world (John 14:30; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2).
  - Matthew highlights the clash of kingdoms: that of Satan/Beelzebul (Matt 12:26) now being confronted by the kingdom of God (Matt 12:28), and the crucial question as to whether Jesus is the Son of David or the agent of Beelzebul (Matt 12:23–24). Jesus cannot be advancing Satan’s kingdom; otherwise, His casting out demons would prove that the devil’s kingdom was divided and that it would collapse on its own. But if it is by the Spirit of God that Jesus casts out demons, then the power of God’s kingdom has dawned and the threefold gospel proclamation of John, Jesus, and the disciples is true (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7).
  - The effects of these two kingdoms are also in opposition: the kingdom of heaven gathers; the kingdom of this world scatters (Matt 12:30). To not join Jesus’ work of gathering Israel back to God is to join Satan’s efforts

at blocking the Spirit's work and, if this persists, to commit the unpardonable sin (Matt 12:31–32).

- The embedded parable of the strong man's house (Matt 12:29) equates the strong man with Satan, his armor with demons, the One stronger with Jesus, and the goods plundered with those freed from demon possession. To oppose Jesus' work is to take Satan's side and, implicitly, to advance his kingdom.
- Jesus uses the image of a tree bearing fruit (whether good or bad) to explain how one's words show what he or she treasures in their heart (cf. Ps 1; Jer 17:5–8) and to contrast the two ways (of the righteous and of the ungodly) that will be on full display in the day of judgment. Since words flow from the heart, these are indicative of whether one will be finally justified or condemned (Matt 12:37).

#### 4. Verses 38–50 (Jesus' Warnings to This Generation)

- The request for a sign by "some of the scribes and Pharisees" escalates their demand for Jesus' authentication of His ministry to the level of unmistakable proof (cf. Exod 8:23; Isa 7:11; 38:7–8), whereas Jesus calls for faith on the part of His hearers. It is actually their lack of faith that proves this generation to be evil—"a perverse generation, children in whom is no faith" (Deut 32:20; cf. 32:5; Matt 17:17).
- The sign of Jonah refers to the prophet's death-like experience, buried in the fish's belly in the depths of the sea, and miraculously "brought up . . . from the pit" (Jonah 2:5–6) after "three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17), typifying Jesus' death and resurrection (Matt 12:40).
- The parable of the unclean spirit's return (Matt 12:43–45) culminates in Jesus' pronouncement of judgment on "this generation" (Matt 12:39, 41–42, 45)—a designation always negative in Matthew (see also Matt 11:16; 16:4; 17:17), pointing to their rejection of Jesus and, as a result, their doom and the doom of their capital (Matt 23:36; 24:34).
- This negative context of judgment on unbelief helps us understand that the interruption

from Jesus' mother and brothers was for no good purpose (Matt 12:46–47). "Their unbelief cast a shadow over the earthly life of Jesus. It was a part of the bitterness of that cup of woe which He drained for us."<sup>1</sup> Only a spiritual union with Christ, which enables us to do the will of God, constitutes us members of His heavenly family (Matt 12:48–50).

#### Application of the Chapter

Important lessons gleaned from this chapter include:

1. Concerns over holiness and correct observance of the law should never trump human need. Rightly understood, they support each other.
2. Our understanding of Scripture can always grow and we should be careful not to allow our preconceived ideas to blind us to its real message.
3. Knowing God is everything—it is eternal life (John 17:3)—because His Word and presence will guide us safely and guard us from falsehood and deception.
4. Our words not only have the power to heal or to harm; they also reveal our heart's treasure and the present direction of our destiny.
5. Jesus' parable of the unclean spirit's return is a graphic warning against trifling with sin, because it prevents the infilling of the Holy Spirit and our belonging to Christ.<sup>2</sup>
6. Remembering that Jesus experienced opposition from close friends and family can strengthen us when our faith is attacked or even ridiculed by those we love.



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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 325.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

*God never leads His children otherwise than they would choose to be led, if they could see the end from the beginning and discern the glory of the purpose which they are fulfilling as co-workers with Him. (MH 479)*

*All that has perplexed us in the providences of God will in the world to come be made plain. The things hard to be understood will then find explanation. The mysteries of grace will unfold before us. Where our finite minds discovered only confusion and broken promises, we shall see the most perfect and beautiful harmony. We shall know that infinite love ordered the experiences that seemed most trying (9T 286).*

Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958), 64.