

The Church of the Servant King
Survey of the Bible Series
The Gospel of Matthew
(Lesson SB-MT12A)
Matthew 12:1-37

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (12:1-8)

Opposition to Jesus had already surfaced (9:3 – accused of blasphemy when He healed the paralytic; 9:11cf. 11:19 – questioned accusingly when He ate with tax collectors and sinners; 9:34 cf. 10:25 – accused of casting out demons by the ruler of demons). However, the Pharisee’s perception that Jesus violated the Sabbath generated enough hatred to lead Jesus’ enemies to contemplate murder (12:14). Jesus’ treatment of the Sabbath with a focus upon one’s true attitude and relationship toward the heavenly Father was one of the primary points of contention between Him and the Pharisees. Every Jew recognized the Sabbath as the sign of the Mosaic covenant (Ex 20:8-11; 31:12-18). To do anything on the Sabbath that might be considered a desecration of the Sabbath was tantamount to flaunting one’s disobedience to the entire Law of Moses (Num 15:30-36). Israel took this very seriously since obedience to the laws concerning the Sabbath was the basis for blessing in Israel. However, the problem became the distorted perception of the Law and its purpose by non-spiritual Israel. Matthew does a masterful job under the leadership of the Holy Spirit of tying together Jesus’ teaching on this very issue (11:28-30) with a practical illustration from Jesus’ life.

The Law forbid reaping for profit on the Sabbath (Ex 34:21), but it allowed for grain to be picked to eat immediately (Deut 23:25). Therefore, the disciples were not breaking God’s law.

The event to which Jesus refers in verses 3-4 is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6 and the regulations concerning the consecrated bread are found in Leviticus 24:5-9. It is very likely that David and his men ate the shewbread on the Sabbath since 1 Samuel 21:5-6 sounds as if the consecrated bread had just been changed. Both David and his men ate what should only have been eaten by the priests and did so after lying to the priest about their mission. Note that Jesus makes nothing of David’s deceit. Jesus’ point is that the Scriptures did not condemn David for his action; therefore the legalism of the Pharisees is not consistent with Scripture. Also, Jesus uses this example of an apparent or perceived violation of the Sabbath in the life of David as if to say that He is at least as special as David.

The phrase “profane the Sabbath” in verse 5 refers to the work of the priests in carrying out their ministry and official duties on the Sabbath. These duties required more labor and physical effort than allowed by the Pharisees in the other 39 categories of actions that they listed as forbidden. They had to change the consecrated bread (Lev 24:8) and offer a doubled burnt offering (Num 28:9-10). Their official service had priority over the normal Sabbath observance. So, Jesus is offering an a-fortiori argument (from the greater to the lesser) in a reverse fashion. However, such an argument is only valid if “One greater than the temple” existed. So Jesus’ point is that if it is acceptable for the priests to violate the Pharisaic restrictions every week, then it is certainly acceptable for Jesus Who is the embodiment of the Temple (Jn 2:20-21) and the kingdom itself to violate Pharisaic restrictions.

Jesus concludes His reprimand of the Pharisees with a quote from Hosea 6:6 just as He had done on a previous occasion in Matthew 9:13 where Jesus had been criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners. The principle in this setting is the same as in Matthew 9:13, i.e. when mercy is lacking, then religious formalities are meaningless.

Healing on the Sabbath (12:9-14)

Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees in effect was asking the Pharisees if the Sabbath was a day for evil activity – like their evil intentions in questioning Him – or for honoring God – like His healing which pointed to Who He was. No mention is made of the faith of the man who experienced the healing. That is not the issue in this healing. The issue is the Pharisee’s distortion of the purpose of the Law as illustrated by the distortions regarding the Sabbath. In the gospel narratives, the Sabbath-controversy pericopes have

a coherent theme, i.e. the dispute is not over the legality of various Sabbath activities but over Jesus' authority. The Sabbath conflicts are not the cause of the plotting but its occasion. Therefore Sabbath disputes were not mentioned at Jesus' trials since in themselves they were never the real issue. The real issue at Jesus' trial was His claim to be the Sabbath's Lord.

Jesus Withdraws to Minister to the Multitudes (12:15-21)

Until His appointed hour, Jesus withdrew from opposition on many occasions (e.g. 4:12; 14:13; 15:21; 16:5). Jesus knew there is a time for everything and that He could lose the war even though He would win battles. At this stage in Jesus' public ministry, He was still reconnoitering the nation. (A reconnaissance team is not tasked with the mission of engaging the enemy. A reconnaissance team is simply an intelligence-gathering unit). Jesus was still assessing the volitional temperature of the nation of Israel, so to speak. He was providing the nation with an opportunity to make a decision for Him and the kingdom or to reject Him and the kingdom.

Principle: We must know when to engage our spiritual opposition and when to allow them to go their own way. Otherwise, we risk losing spiritual focus and constantly being distracted by every opportunity to engage spiritual error.

In Jesus' case, His conduct was the fulfillment of Scripture. Even though the Pharisees plotted to kill Him (v. 14), He did not quarrel or cry out (v. 19) in an arrogant or brash manner. In these verses, Matthew is showing the servant side of the Messianic King of the Jews Who had the legal right to the throne of David.

Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1-4. In doing so, Matthew begins to tie the rejection of Jesus by Israel to the blessing that will come to the Gentiles. This is not a prediction of the Church since Gentiles will be blessed with Israel during the Messianic reign of Christ. However, it is possible that as Matthew wrote his gospel account after the Church Age had begun, he saw certain parallels between the blessings to the Gentiles in the newly inaugurated Church Age and the fact that Gentiles will be blessed in the Millennium. Even so, while we acknowledge the similarities, we can't ignore the differences.

"A bruised reed" refers to the weak, the poor, and the needy. Christ would not break, but He would mend and restore (see Mt 11:5 cf. Is 41:17 and 42:7). "Smoking flax" is a reference to a smoldering wick as used in an oil lamp. This analogy represents those who were on the verge of losing their faith and hope of a coming Messiah. Jesus would fulfill that hope.

A House Divided Cannot Stand (12:22-30)

In this section, Jesus acknowledges that some of the religious leaders of the Jews cast out demons (v. 27). They no doubt claimed that it was accomplished by the power of God. However, if Jesus cast out demons in such a decisive way by the power of Satan, how could Satan's kingdom stand? The conclusion that Jesus wanted His hearers to reach was that He cast out demons because He was the Son of God, whereas the religious leaders (who were unbelievers) cast out demons via the power of Satan. Jesus was a threat to the kingdom of Satan; however, the religious leaders were not a threat, but as unbelievers, they advanced the kingdom.

Principle: Satan can and does use unbelievers to do "good" things that on the surface seem to work against his kingdom, e.g. casting out demons and performing miracles. Today these manifestations of power can even be done in the name of Jesus. It is a case of sacrificing a battle in an attempt to win the war.

The Unpardonable Sin and Jesus' Teaching Related Thereto (12:31-37)

The multitude of problems that have resulted from faulty interpretations and applications of this passage are numerous. This passage is a good illustration of the principal that Bible doctrine is organic in nature, i.e. the position taken on one doctrine influences conclusions drawn in other areas of Scripture. In

this passage, if one fails to properly interpret its context in view of the purpose of Jesus' public ministry in the last days of the Age of Israel, one will see application to the Christian of this Age. However, the following points are critical to a proper interpretation and application of this passage:

- Setting – Matthew has documented that Jesus has been performing miracle after miracle up to this point in His public ministry
- These miracles were for the purpose of authenticating the messenger and His message
- John the Baptist's message and Jesus' message (and of His disciples) was the gospel of the kingdom (e.g. 3:2; 4:17, 23; 9:35; 10:7).
- Jesus' teaching up to this point in His ministry has related exclusively to the kingdom of heaven (e.g. chps. 5-7; 8:11; 11:11-19)
- To this point in His ministry, Jesus has not even uttered a single word of prophecy, much less direct instruction, related to the Church

Therefore, this passage must be interpreted in this context. Jesus has just been accused by the religious leaders of performing these miracles in the power of Satan and not the power of God. Jesus is simply stating the principle to these religious leaders that to reject the convincing ministry of the Holy Spirit with regard to the source of these miracles is unforgivable, i.e. to attribute the power behind Christ's miracles to Satan was tantamount to rejection of Him as the Messiah and unbelief. Since Jesus is not present today, this sin cannot be committed.

This interpretation of verses 31 – 32 helps us to **organically** connect to the interpretation of the following verses (33-37 as well as other passages) in a consistent and non-contradictory manner. In verse 33, Jesus is instructing His hearers to be consistent in the manner in which they interpret His works. They should either make Him (the tree) good by recognizing His miracles (the fruit) as good or they should make Him (the tree) evil by concluding that His miracles (the fruit) were evil. Of course, they would not be able to legitimately reach the latter conclusion since no one was claiming His works to be evil. Then in verse 34, Jesus affirms the principle that even an apparently good thing done by an evil person is evil. Verses 36 and 37 bring to mind the judgment of unbelievers at the Great White Throne Judgment. At the GWTJ, unbelievers will be judged by their deeds written in the "books" (plural). See Revelation 20:11-15.