

A Turning Point

Matthew 12

The last section of our homework included a reference to Matthew 12:14, which says, "*But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.*" What is the cause of this intense reaction on the part of the Pharisees? Let's go back and quickly review a couple of events in the beginning of this chapter.

Verses 1-8 record an incident where Jesus and his disciples are rebuked for picking grain to eat on the Sabbath. According to the Pharisees, picking wheat was "harvesting" and not permitted on the day of rest, a regulation of the *oral* (or Pharisaic) Law, not defined in the written law, or Torah. Jesus and the disciples were picking wheat not to harvest (and thereby work on the Sabbath), they picked the wheat in order to eat it because they were hungry. Jesus' response to the Pharisees points out that God's love, compassion and provision are of higher importance to God than adherence to man-made oral tradition. He is pointedly taking a stand against the oppressive oral traditions of the Pharisees, in this case, condemning Jesus and his followers according to the letter of the law, not the intent of the law. The intent of the law, as designed by God, was to provide rest for the people of Israel and prevent oppression. The Pharisees had taken God's Commandment further than God's intention by restricting the notion of "work" to the point it caused harm and oppression.. Jesus always focused on and championed the intent of the law; and objected strenuously to the overburdening enforcement of the letter of the law when it subverted the original intention set forth by God. God's commandments were set in place for the good of Israel; many of the pharisaic traditions increased the restrictions of God's law to the detriment of the people of Israel.

Notice what Jesus said back in verse 8, "*For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.*" Jesus' statement that he is Lord of the Sabbath is a claim that *He* is greater than the law and above the law. To the Pharisees, this was sacrilegious, only God Almighty was above the Law. They did not understand, or could not even conceive of, the idea that Jesus is the divine Son of God and had *created* the Sabbath.¹ The Creator is always greater than the creation; thus Jesus had the authority to overrule their traditions and regulations.

The next passage (v. 9-13) follows on the heels of the previous. Jesus and the disciples, along with the Pharisees have arrived at the synagogue. While the last passage was somewhat of a private interchange, this next event is more public. There is the crowd in the synagogue as well as Jesus, his disciples and the Pharisees who will all be witnesses to Jesus' actions and words. The Pharisees are setting a trap for Jesus. If Jesus heals the crippled man on the Sabbath, he is (in their minds) again and publicly breaking the Sabbath law prohibiting work on the Sabbath. According to the Pharisaic tradition a person could be helped or healed on the Sabbath only if his or her life was in immediate danger. The Gospels tell us that Jesus healed on the Sabbath many times, none of

¹ Life Application Bible Notes

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which were in response to an emergency and likely to illustrate that the Pharisaic tradition flies in the face of God's intention for the law.

The scene in the synagogue begins with the Pharisees' question, *"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"* (v. 10) Jesus answered their question, as He often did, with his own question, *"If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out even though this might be interpreted as work?"* If an act of mercy toward an animal on the Sabbath is acceptable, how much more so is an act of mercy towards a man? If people are **much more valuable** than animals, shouldn't mercy be given them even on a Sabbath as well? Jesus' logic removes any possible objection to what He was doing, for Scripture does not forbid mercy.

Jesus' timing also teaches a lesson. If Jesus had healed this man on any other day he would have been submitting to the authority of the Pharisee's tradition and give credence to the Pharisee's mistaken belief that their harmful traditions were of equal importance to God's law. Instead Jesus focused on the immediate need of the man before him. Jesus' action of healing the man reveals that compassion and mercy ought to be extended when the need arises, not when it is convenient or dictated by law. God is more concerned with his people than with the traditions of man. The Pharisees attempted to claim that Jesus' healing power was not from God. But who else but God can restore a crippled hand? Where else could that healing power have come? By performing this healing on the Sabbath, Jesus once again asserted to the Pharisees that he had the authority and the power from God to heal.

Jesus' response to both of these situations illustrates that God values compassion over ritual. The detailed regulations governing what could and could not be done on Sabbath were man's own creation. Likely created with good intentions, they were being twisted to the point of causing injury rather than compassion. Yes, it was a day of rest from work, but it was not intended to delay aid to those in need.

The Pharisees chose to believe that Jesus power was not from God. They put their own Sabbath beliefs ahead of the truth revealed in Jesus' actions. They refused to recognize that Jesus was the Chosen Servant. The miraculous healing of the man's hand did not prompt **faith** in the Pharisees. They willfully refused to see the truth contained in the miraculous sign before their eyes: Jesus publicly demonstrated the ability (or power) to heal and also the authority to set right the laws of God because He is the Lord of the Sabbath. He created the Sabbath for rest and he had the power to create or restore a man. In doing so he revealed that the Pharisees had no such authority or power. The Pharisees instead saw a threat to their own power and authority. They were entrusted with a position of power and authority to protect the people of Israel. They subverted and twisted that position to their own glorification and oppressed and harmed the very people they were entrusted to protect.

Their response was to protect their position; and therefore, *"they went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus"* (v. 14). The Pharisees plotted Jesus' death because they were outraged and jealous. Their authority and position was threatened and overruled by Jesus' actions before the crowd in the synagogue. Jesus had exposed their self-righteous and hard-hearted attitudes publicly. Jesus also revealed the Pharisees' deliberate choice to place their loyalty with their own religious system instead of with God.

Just as the Pharisees were forced to make a choice between serving God and serving themselves, all who hear Jesus' message are forced to make that choice as well. The crowds following Jesus as well as his own disciples had to make a choice. There is no sitting on the fence. Either what Jesus says is true and we have to acknowledge that he is who he claims to be, the divine Son of God; or we choose to deny it and thereby reject God. The Bible Knowledge Commentary says,

"Rejection of Christ is seldom a choice which hinges on lack of knowledge. Rather, as the issues become more and more clear, **our response to truth hinges on our will. We must choose.** For the non-Christian it becomes a choice to abandon hope in oneself and trust Jesus alone to bring him or her into a family relationship with God. For the Christian there is also a choice. A choice to follow the servant King and to adopt the lifestyle of the kingdom, or to hold onto the attitudes and values and beliefs and behaviors of the world."

What was true in Jesus' day still holds true. We all must come to a decision about Jesus. Just as he asked Peter, *"But what about you?...Who do you say I am?"* (Matt. 16:15) Jesus asks us the very same question. One day we will be required to give an answer, with eternal consequence hinging on our response.

As we return to our Scripture passage in Matthew 12:22-28 notice it is *still the Sabbath*. (Jesus had withdrawn from the synagogue and taught about the Chosen Servant, which we studied in our homework.) Now we will focus on his next confrontation with the Pharisees. People in the crowd bring forward a demon-possessed man for Jesus to heal. Upon witnessing the man's healing, the crowd is stirred in astonishment as people begin to express belief that Jesus could be the Son of David. Son of David is a title for the awaited Messiah, God's anointed servant. As the crowd becomes stirred up with speculation and exclamation as to who Jesus is, the Pharisees become alerted to what is happening. They were already angered and jealous of Jesus' actions that morning, and now again Jesus is drawing attention to himself, threatening the power of the Pharisees. Read Verses 22-28. Again, the Pharisees come to discredit Jesus in front of the crowds. They accuse him of receiving his power from Satan not God. Jesus has harsh words for the Pharisees.

Verse 25 tells us that Jesus knew what was in the mind of the Pharisee. *"He knew their thoughts"*. Jesus defended his authority and power to heal this man. He pierced their argument that his power was derived by Satan with three responses.

First, if he was casting out a demon by Satan's power, then he was working against himself. If his authority came from Satan, why would Satan permit him to free a man already ensnared in his control? Satan couldn't possibly gain anything by allowing Jesus to release this man from the chains of demonic oppression. This would only weaken Satan's dominion and bring about its destruction from within. If Jesus were an agent of Satan, he would be working to bring more souls

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under Satan's control. Jesus came to free the captives. In healing a demon possessed man he was releasing a soul held captive by Satan.

Jesus next response draws in the ability and power of Jewish exorcists of his day. If they are able to exorcise demons by the authority and power of God, then why do they not think Jesus does so by the same authority? Why would Jesus' power have to have a different origin than the Jewish exorcists?

Jesus' third response points out the heart of the matter. Jesus is offering God's Kingdom to all who will accept it. If Jesus were an agent of Satan, he could not and would not be offering the Kingdom of God. Jesus' miraculous healings are clearly works of the Spirit of God, not the power of Satan. He came to establish the Kingdom of God among God's people.

Jesus, by driving out demons, was proof that he is greater, more powerful than demons. Jesus uses the parable of the strong man's house to illustrate the fact that he is able to enter that house (a metaphor for the demonic realm) and come away with Satan's possession -- he set the captive free. There was no realm, physical or spiritual, that Jesus did not have authority over man or demon, including Satan himself. If Jesus is able to break the bonds of Satan, then he must be sent by God, and the Kingdom of God is therefore before them in his person.

The Pharisees' argument that Jesus power comes from Satan denies the truth that Jesus power comes from the Holy Spirit. Because of their spiritual blindness, the Pharisee's accusation is actually a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This is the turning point where the Religious Leaders of the Nation of Israel turn against God. They turn their back on God fulfilling John's words in his Gospel:

John 1:11 "*He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*"

Jesus came to "his own" the Nation of Israel, the Children of God, and they rejected him. Or more specifically, the religious leaders of the nation rejected him. Jesus had very clearly demonstrated his authority through signs and miracles, and it was also abundantly clear that no other person was able to demonstrate that authority, no one among the Pharisees or the Sadducees were able to demonstrate such authority. The reaction among the religious leaders was one of immense anger, self-righteous pride, and jealousy. The more Jesus said and did the more the religious leaders resisted and persecuted him. They refused to believe, they refused to accept God's chosen servant. The people of the nation flocked around him in vast numbers, but the religious leaders condemned him as an agent of Satan.

The Nation of Israel, personified by the Religious leaders², was on the brink of rejecting Jesus. Their blasphemous actions would bring about devastating judgment upon Israel as a nation. The religious leaders of Israel were appointed by God as shepherds of his flock. It was the responsibility of the religious leaders to model and teach Israel how to live a Godly life. Instead

² The religious leaders are responsible for the nations' rejection of Jesus because it was their responsibility to lead and teach the nation to follow and obey God. Just as when world politics are discussed, a nation, the US for example, is held responsible for the choices and actions of its leaders, because they are the ones with the authority and responsibility of leading the nation.

the religious leaders were leading the flock away from God and turning the people against God's anointed Messiah and encouraging them to reject him as well.

Jesus' miracles attest to his power and authority and the presence of the Spirit of God being upon Jesus. The persistence of the Pharisee's refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the Lord's Messiah is leading them into particularly grave sin that will culminate in wrathful judgment. Their sin is blasphemy and by all appearances, unforgivable. Numbers 15:30-31 addresses knowingly flagrant, persistent and willful sin. It is called *sinning with a high hand*. "*But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, blasphemes the LORD, and that person must be cut off from his people. Because he has despised the LORD's word and broken his commands, that person must surely be cut off; his guilt remains on him.*" Matt 12:32: "*Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.*"

This marks the turning point in Matthew where the nation of Israel rejects Jesus as fulfilled in Isaiah's prophecy quoted by Jesus in Matthew 13:14-5. This point will become more significant as we follow Jesus further in his ministry. When we begin our study of some of Jesus' parables, we will see that a certain judgment is brought down upon those who *refuse* to believe Jesus. This is the result of the turning point. Jesus' ministry turns away from the disputing with the religious leaders and other skeptics and focuses on those who choose to follow Jesus.

Coming back to Matthew 12, the religious leaders then ask Jesus for *another* sign. They have just witnessed Jesus' power to heal the physical body and Jesus had just cast out a demon revealing his authority over Satan. For unexplained reasons the religious leaders demand yet another sign! Their request would appear to imply that they rejected the previous signs. They didn't believe the truth revealed by those signs. The truth being that Jesus was sent by God, and that the power and authority of God resides in him. Read Vv. 38-42.

The passage ends with Jesus telling the Pharisees that they are "a house swept clean" but no one is residing in them. Meaning they have adhered to the law, purified themselves, but have not asked God to live in their hearts. They are a "wicked generation" because their hearts are empty of God, and they are refusing to hear God speaking to them directly. They have rejected Jesus and his message despite all of the signs, miracles and teaching they have witnessed attesting to his authority, and even worse, they have done nothing to teach or lead the people of Israel into a closer relationship with God. Their laws and regulations drive a wedge deeper and deeper between God and the people of Israel. They of all people should have been the first to recognized Jesus having devoted their lives to the scriptures and the law.

Jesus would continue to teach anyone, Jewish or not, willing to hear and accept the truth he came to share. In fact there were Pharisees among his followers -Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are two. But Israel as a nation would come under judgment because its religious leaders rejected the Truth.