

Jesus is rejected by the Jewish leaders

Matthew 12

This chapter marks the end of Jesus' presentation of the kingdom to Israel. The rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders did not begin with the crucifixion, but in Matthew 12. After this chapter Jesus will only speak to the public in parables, and will restrict his plain teaching to a small group of disciples...

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, and a man with a withered hand (Matthew 12 v 1 to 14)

To the Pharisees the issue here was the keeping of the Sabbath, not stealing. The law of Moses allowed travellers to 'glean' enough grain for a meal from the fields (Deuteronomy 23 v 25, Ruth 2 v 2). The disciples' action was a violation of the scribes' traditions, which said that to pluck grain was to 'harvest'. Jesus defends his disciples by reminding the Pharisees of the story of David and his hungry followers in 1 Samuel 21 v 1 to 6, showing that human need is more important than observing ceremonial rituals...

- What other principles about the Sabbath does Jesus present in v 5 to 8 (including his reference to Hosea 6 v 6)? By calling himself the 'Son of Man' (v 8), who is he actually claiming to be? See Daniel 7 v 13. Is it surprising that the Pharisees were eventually so upset (v 14)?
- At best the religious leaders saw the man with the withered hand as a test case – this miracle would have been highly conspicuous. More likely they saw him as bait for a Sabbath-controversy trap. Notice how Jesus deals with the man with compassion. What lessons does Jesus teach here?

God's chosen servant (Matthew 12 v 15 to 21)

- In contrast to his treatment by the Jewish leaders (v 14), how did Jesus interact with the general crowds (v 15)? How does the 'servant passage' from Isaiah 42 v 1 to 4 describe Jesus' character, and in particular his ministry to the 'Gentiles'?

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and a tree is known by its fruit (Matthew 12 v 22 to 37)

Jewish procedures for exorcism required the demon to identify himself – which was impossible if the demon-possessed person was dumb. But Jesus displays his authority over such a demon (v 22). The crowds react to this healing miracle with Messianic expectation (v 23), but the religious leaders respond by attributing Jesus' power to the prince of demons (and this was not the first time this had happened, see Matthew 9 v 32 to 34).

- How does Jesus answer the accusation that he is operating by Satan's power (v 25 to 29)? Who is the "strong man" and what is the "house"? Hint: who is the 'ruler of this world' in John 14 v 30?

In v 31 and 32 Jesus solemnly warns the religious leaders against completely rejecting the Holy Spirit's testimony of Jesus – the unforgivable sin. The Spirit's prime ministry is to testify of Jesus (John 15 v 26), and when that testimony is rejected, one has committed "blasphemy against the Spirit", essentially calling the Holy Spirit a liar.

- How does Jesus stress the importance of words (v 33 to 37)? See also Romans 10 v 9.

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The sign of Jonah, and the return of an unclean spirit (Matthew 12 v 38 to 45)

- Jesus condemned the Pharisees' seeking after a sign, especially when so many signs had already been given. What is the significance of the "sign of the prophet Jonah", and the behaviour of the people of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba? What are the dire consequences of rejecting Jesus (v 43 to 45)?

Jesus' mother and brothers (Matthew 12 v 46 to 50)

- How are those who do the Father's will described (v 50)? Note the contrast with the "brood of vipers" (v 34) and the "evil and adulterous generation" (v 39) represented by the religious leaders.