



Group Discussion Guide

For group meetings from November 22 afternoon through November 29 morning

Matthew 12:1-14

In Matthew 12, the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel continues to escalate. This chapter opens with Jesus proclaiming he is “lord of the Sabbath,” (v. 8). As Jesus and his disciples walked through fields of grain on the Sabbath, his disciples plucked the heads of grain and ate them because they were hungry. Some of the Pharisees were apparently watching them (perhaps following them to observe their actions) and took issue with what they deemed as work on a day that was set aside for rest. Was it truly “work”? Only according to an interpretation of Jewish Law.

The Pharisees’ charge that the disciples were breaking the law was based, not on their picking grain in someone else’s field, but on the fact that picking grain—i.e. “reaping” (cf. j. Shabbath 7.2,9.c)—was one of thirty-nine kinds of work forbidden on the Sabbath (M Shabbath 7:2) under prevailing Halakah.

D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 280.

... Halakah rests upon all the rabbinic legislation and decisions handed down through the ages by great Jewish scholars. All these things, then, taken together provide the basis for making religious-legal decisions in the orthodox Jewish community. All these things, the written and oral Law plus the history of Jewish legal scholarship, provide us with Halakah.

Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Halakah,” Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 918.

In response to the accusation of the Pharisees, Jesus referenced an event in the life of King David recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. David was fleeing from Saul and he and his men were in need of nourishment. The bread in the tabernacle was set aside as an offering to the Lord and could only be eaten by priests, and yet David and his men ate of this bread to help them survive on their journey. Jesus added to this the truth that priests in the temple do “work” on the Sabbath and so according to the interpretation of the law they would be in violation of Sabbath practices. He described himself as “greater than the temple” and admonished the Pharisees with Hosea 6:6 ... the second time in Matthew that Jesus had used this passage to correct the religious leaders (Matthew 9:13). In proclaiming himself as “lord of the Sabbath,” he had the authority to interpret and apply Jewish law regarding the Sabbath.

After this confrontation, Jesus chose to go to the area synagogue where he encountered a man who had a crippled hand. The Pharisees tried to use this man and his disability to trap Jesus, and they asked him if it was lawful to heal someone on the Sabbath. Jesus referenced laws given in Exodus 23:4-5 and Deuteronomy 22:4, which directed the Israelites to rescue animals that were lost or in distress. He stated that even on the Sabbath, animals should be rescued. Therefore, because people were more valuable than animals, they should be rescued on the Sabbath as well. Jesus then healed the man's hand and the Pharisees left to plan how they could orchestrate the killing of Jesus.

Matthew 12:15-32

Jesus knew what the Pharisees were doing and chose to leave. People continued to follow him and he healed all who were in need of healing. He also told them not to draw attention to what he had done, most likely because it was not yet time for the majority of the nation to recognize his power. Matthew indicates this ministry fulfilled Isaiah 42:1-3, which describes a gentle servant chosen by God to be the hope for the Gentiles. While Jesus spent his earthly ministry in Israel around mostly Jewish people, the scope of his rescue mission reached all the people of the world. The gentle nature of Jesus matched up with Isaiah's prophecy, and yet the Jewish people expected a much more assertive and violent savior who would break the chains of Roman bondage and bring Israel back to her place of prominence in the world.

The next confrontation with the Pharisees comes as a result of Jesus' healing a man who was blind and mute as the result of demonic possession. While some were amazed and asked if Jesus could be "the son of David" (the Messiah), the Pharisees instead continued their attack on Jesus by claiming he could only cast out demons because he had power given to him by Satan (referenced by Jesus in Matthew 10:25). Although the Pharisees spoke in private, Jesus knew their thoughts and chose to confront them. He said it would be impossible for Satan to give the power to cast out his own demons because this would divide his kingdom and destroy it. Jesus also compared his work to that of Jewish exorcists and told the Pharisees that those men were more qualified to determine the source of his power (Jewish exorcists are mentioned in Acts 19:13). The power given to Jesus by the God the Father allowed him to subdue Satan and then remove his demons from people. Jesus said the Pharisees stood against him and as a result they would be scattered. He then taught about the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. And yet, Jesus also said those who speak against him would be forgiven! This commentary reference will lend some insight into this passage that has confused some over the years:

The distinction between blasphemy against the Son of Man and blasphemy against the Spirit is not that the Son of Man is less important than the Spirit, or that the first sin is prebaptismal and the second postbaptismal, still less that the first is against the Son of Man and the second rejects the authority of Christian prophets. Instead, within the context of the larger argument the first sin is rejection of the truth of the gospel (but there may be repentance and forgiveness for that), whereas the second sin is rejection of the same truth in full awareness that that is exactly what one is doing—thoughtfully, willfully, and self-consciously rejecting the work of the Spirit even though there can be no

other explanation of Jesus' exorcisms than that. For such a sin there is no forgiveness, "either in this age or the age to come" (cf. 13:22; 25:46)—a dramatic way of saying "never" (as in Mark 3:29).

D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 291–292.

Matthew 12:33-50

Jesus continued to rebuke the Pharisees and told them that their words only revealed what was in their hearts. This section of Christ's teaching underscores the importance of words. What is present in a person's heart will come out in their words, and all people will give an account for their words on the day of judgment. While Jesus was here specifically speaking to the Pharisees, this truth also is important for us to consider personally as it helps us to examine our hearts by reflecting on the words we speak.

After hearing the scribes and Pharisees demand a sign from Jesus to prove his identity as the Son of Man, Jesus again rebuked these men. He said those who ask for a sign are part of "an evil and adulterous generation." The only sign he would give would be the sign of Jonah, which Jesus explained would take him to "the heart of the earth" for three days and three nights. This of course was a prediction of his death, burial and resurrection. He told the Pharisees that the people of Nineveh and the queen of the south (1 Kings 10) would condemn them. These Old Testament Gentiles responded to God's work through Jonah and Solomon, respectively, and Jesus described himself as greater than both the prophet and the king. His message to the Pharisees was this: they had received ample proof that Jesus was who he claimed to be, and their rejection to this point indicated no additional sign would convince them.

Jesus compared the religious leaders to a man who, after having a demon cast out of him, was inflicted with multiple demons. This note offers an explanation of this comparison:

The Pharisees and other religious leaders were in danger of that happening to them for their attempts at reformation, without the power of God, were sterile. They clearly did not understand God's power, for they had just confused the power of the Spirit with the power of Satan (vv. 24–28). Thus they were wide-open targets for Satan.

Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 47–48.

This chapter closes with Jesus sharing the identity of his true family. A man came to tell Jesus that his mother and his brothers were asking to speak to him, and Jesus took this opportunity to explain that his disciples and all others who do the will of the Father were to be considered as his mother and brothers. Heritage was not to be considered the means to enter into the kingdom of God; only obedience to God through faith in Jesus would allow a person to be welcomed into the kingdom.

Discussion Questions

1. Chances are, we can all find Pharisaical tendencies in ourselves if we look hard enough. Why do you think those of us who follow Jesus still struggle with this? How can we avoid these tendencies?
2. What do we learn about Jesus from his approach to the traditional interpretations of Sabbath laws? What do we learn about him from his confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees?
3. In your own words, how would you describe Jesus as characterized in verses 18-21, which are quoted from Isaiah 42? Do you need to make changes in your life to follow his example? If so, what changes do you need to make?
4. What is your understanding of “blasphemy against the Spirit” (v. 31)? How do the Pharisees demonstrate this sin?
5. If your words display what it is in your heart, what has been the state of your heart recently?
6. Sometimes it would be nice to have a sign from God. What does Jesus teach about asking for signs (vs. 38-42)? Do you think this applies to us today? Why or why not?
7. According to verses 43-45, what is the difference between religious conformity and true conversion?