

## Matthew's Gospel – Chapter 12 Lord of the Sabbath

*[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Facing opposition and criticism is never easy. In fact, it often brings out the worst in people. I can certainly think back on times when I've faced opposition or criticism and I haven't responded in ways I'm particularly proud of. Perhaps you can too?

Today we're going to continue our series in Matthew's Gospel by considering Matthew chapter 12, verses 1-37. As we do so, we'll see that the Lord Jesus faced repeated opposition. But we'll notice that it was impossible for opposition to ruffle the Lord in any way because He is without sin. How different to the reaction opposition often brings out in me! Instead, we'll see that the Lord responded wisely and graciously in each circumstance. There's a lot to admire about the Lord in Matthew chapter 12. As we work through the verses for today, we'll see Jesus opposed but defending His own followers in verses 1-8. We'll see Him opposed but blessing the needy in verses 9-13. In verses 14-21 we'll see the Lord opposed but gentle towards His critics, and in verses 22-37 we'll see the Lord opposed but triumphant over Satan.

Let's jump into the first 8 verses then. Listen carefully to what Matthew records. (All Scripture readings are from the NKJV.)

### **Opposed but defending His own followers (vv.1-8)**

“At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.””

As so often seemed to be the case, the Lord faced criticism on the Sabbath day. Keeping the Sabbath, and refraining from work was a matter of great importance to the Pharisees, and to most of the Jewish people. It was a matter of obedience to God, who had given them the 10 commandments, one of which said:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD

your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it" (Exodus 20:8-11).

So the Pharisees were quick to jump on anything they thought was breaking the Sabbath law. And here in Matthew 12, the disciples were found plucking and eating heads of grain from the field they walked through. As far as I can tell, there is no specific command in the Old Testament that the disciples were really breaking here. In fact, Deuteronomy 23:25 makes provision for plucking and eating small amounts of grain from someone else's field. What seems to have happened is that somewhere along the line, the Pharisees and leaders of the Jews had added additional rules around the laws that God had made. This was probably well-intentioned at first. It came from a sincere desire to obey God and be pleasing to Him. But it had missed the point. The prohibition of work on the Sabbath was a good law. It reminded people that not everything depended on them. God could perfectly well provide for them if they didn't work on one day each week. It provided them with time to rest and to think about God. The Sabbath day of rest was a blessing from God to the people of Israel. But whilst they weren't to go about their normal work on the Sabbath, I don't think God intended a prohibition of eating a little bit of grain.

Verse 7 says that the Pharisees had condemned the guiltless. The disciples had done nothing wrong. The Lord used two examples to make this point. In verses 3 and 4, He pointed back to a time during David's life when David and his followers were on the run from King Saul. He and his men entered the house of God and ate the showbread. This wasn't really lawful for them to do. That was a provision for the priests. But the priests and people of David's day were dishonouring God by persecuting God's anointed. The showbread was ceremonially holy, but that's worthless in God's eyes if the heart of the people is set against God, as it was in that day.

Another example is given in verses 5 and 6. The priests worked on the Sabbath offering sacrifices. They needed to do this since the people were sinners. But to the Pharisees, perhaps this seemed like work and should be prohibited. Were the priests breaking the Sabbath law? No! When there was sin amongst God's people, sacrifice was necessary.

The Pharisees thought they were being very devout and holy by their strict observance of the Sabbath. But their additional rules and regulations failed to bring about the inward change of heart that would draw them closer to God. There, right in front of them, was God's anointed, the Lord Jesus. He was a greater King than David, and a greater Priest than all those priests in the temple. And yet they couldn't recognise it. They didn't recognise that the Lord of the Sabbath was the One they were criticising! If they had, they wouldn't have condemned the guiltless disciples; and they would have been merciful towards them rather than cruelly enforcing a kind of sacrificial devotion not actually required by the law they were so keen to obey.

So, in these first 8 verses the Lord defends His disciples in the face of criticism. Jesus does expect obedience from His followers, and He does of us today. But He doesn't expect us to follow rules that others make that go beyond the instructions in the Bible. If I find myself criticising another believer for their behavioural choices, I must be very careful that what I'm criticising is actually prohibited by the Scriptures. Otherwise, I run the risk that I've added my own rules on top of the Bible and might find that the Lord would actually defend the believer I'm being critical of. It may be legitimate to set up safeguards in my own life that go beyond Scriptural commands. That might be wise in some situations. But I need to be careful not to think that these rules change my heart. I need to be careful not to forget to be merciful, and I need to be careful not to insist that others follow my additional rules. That's between them and the Lord.

## **Opposed but blessing the needy (vv.9-13)**

As we move into verses 9-13, we find the Lord opposed again. It's another Sabbath story. Let's read the verses.

“Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, “What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other.”

This time it's not just the disciples who, according to the Pharisees, worked on the Sabbath. It's the Lord Himself. And it's not just a question of hunger. It's a man who has a withered hand, whom the Lord healed.

I think it's interesting that Matthew wrote in verse 9 that Jesus “went into their synagogue.” This was the Pharisees territory. They were critical of the Lord. How would He respond in their place? The Pharisees might be critical, but they could do nothing to help this poor man. In fact, Mark adds in his account of this event (in Mark 3:1-6) that, rather than do anything to help this man, they watch closely to see if they will have reason to accuse the Lord. And as soon as the Lord heals the man, they plot with the Herodians to destroy Jesus. What a sad state of affairs! Unable to do anything positive for a sick man, the Pharisees instead spend their time opposing the Lord. But what does the Lord do? Shy away from opposition and just quietly go somewhere else? No! Stubbornly refuse to heal the man? After all, it was their synagogue so their problem! No! Of course, the Lord was as always so gracious and compassionate to those who were in need. He heals the man's hand so that it was restored as complete as his other hand. There were no half measures with the Lord!

The Lord highlights the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. If they had a sheep that fell into a pit, they would get it out on the Sabbath. They didn't consider that to be a violation of the Sabbath laws. But they had in front of them a man who was of much more value than a sheep. And they opposed the Lord for doing good to this man. How hard their hearts must have been in their opposition to the Lord.

What a contrast in the Lord's response! He seeks to bless. He heals. Their criticism does not stop Him doing good. I think the main point of the stories recorded in this chapter is to highlight the opposition to the Lord Jesus, and to show that the majority of the people of Israel rejected Him. But we can always learn from the Lord's example, even when the primary purpose of the chapter is not to teach us a lesson in morality. When we face opposition, are we ever tempted to refuse to do good as a result? Do we shy away from doing something we know to be right and good because we worry that critics will twist it and use it to attack us? That wasn't the Lord's way, and it shouldn't be ours if we are His followers. Where might the Lord give us an opportunity to do good to someone today? May the Lord help us to do good to all and aim to be a blessing to people as we have opportunity!

## **Opposed but gentle towards His critics (vv.14-21)**

We've seen a little bit of the Lord's protection of His disciples whilst He faced opposition. And we've seen how He responded to the needy in the midst of criticism. As we move to verses 14-21, we see the Lord again dealing with His critics. But once again, it's so different to how we might often react to opposition. Listen carefully to the verses.

“Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him. But when Jesus knew it, He withdrew from there. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them all. Yet He warned them not to make Him known, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: “Behold! My Servant whom I have chosen, My Beloved in whom My soul is well pleased! I will put My Spirit upon Him, and He will declare justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench, till He sends forth justice to victory; and in His name Gentiles will trust.””

It's clear from these verses that the Lord was aware of the plots against Him. Verse 15 says, “When Jesus knew it, He withdrew from there.” This didn't end up being a quiet retreat after a busy period of ministry though. Multitudes followed Him and He healed them all. In doing so, Jesus was giving yet more evidence that He was God's chosen Servant. He was the Messiah promised by Isaiah. He was God's Beloved. He was the One that brought pleasure to God's soul. Jesus was the One anointed with the Holy Spirit who would declare justice to the world.

It's interesting to see how accurately Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled. The Lord didn't quarrel with the Pharisees. They seemed to take any opportunity to criticise and oppose Him. But He didn't quarrel with them. Instead, He carried on obeying His Father's will. In this instance, He healed those who came to Him. But how did He deal with those who opposed Him? He did not bruise those bruised reeds. He did not quench the smoking flax. Justice would come. Opposition to Jesus would ultimately be judged and punished. But not at that time. At that time, He was gentle towards those who opposed Him. Bruised reeds and smoking flaxes are not worth much. They are not good for much. The Pharisees were like both of these, but the Lord would deal gently with them until the time came for judgement. How gracious of the Lord to withhold the judgement the Pharisees deserved for the opposition they gave Him. It reminds me that the Lord is longsuffering and not willing that any should perish. Thanks to this gentle approach from the Lord some Pharisees were saved! Think of Nicodemus and the apostle Paul! There were others as well. Once again, it's good to learn from the Lord's example and to see how gently He dealt with those who opposed Him. I wonder who we might think of when we consider those who oppose us because of our faith? What if we were to deal gently with them as the Lord did with these Pharisees? What if we left judgement to God in His own time? What if the Lord were to use our gentleness in the face of opposition to lead one of our opponents to Himself?

### **Opposed but triumphant over Satan (vv.22-37)**

We've come now to our last section for today. Let's read verses 22-37 of Matthew 12.

“Then one was brought to Him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute; and He healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. And all the multitudes were amazed and said, “Could this be the Son of David?” Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.” But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who

is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad. Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come. Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.””

In this final section, I've said that we see the Lord opposed but triumphant over Satan. Perhaps that will take a little explaining. The Lord healed a demon possessed man. Some of the people were amazed by this and wonder if Jesus could be the Messiah, the Son of David. But instead of being impressed by this and accepting the Lord, the Pharisees again oppose the Lord. This time they go further. They say that the Lord must be acting with Satanic power. Jesus clearly refutes this and exposes the foolishness of their position. If the Lord was acting with Satanic power, and had healed this demon possessed man, then effectively Satan would be destroying Satan's kingdom. It would be divided. Why would Satan do such a thing?

Of course, it was a nonsense position. Worse than that, I think it was an example of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that the Lord says is unforgiveable here. These verses are admittedly tricky, but I think that this instance of attributing a work of the Lord to Satanic influence is an example of the rejection of Christ that would lead to their doom.

But away from the Pharisees, and back to the Lord. Once again, the Lord had healed this demon possessed, blind, and mute man. He had won a victory over Satan. The devil is described in Ephesians 2:2 as the prince of the power of the air. In some limited sense, the world is Satan's sphere. He was the tempter that caused Adam and Eve to sin and brought so much sadness into the world as a result. Not all sickness is a direct result of a particular sin. The Bible makes that clear. But the Bible does make clear that because of sin, death entered the world. Sickness is a result of the Fall in a general sense at least. So, every time that the Lord healed someone, He was winning a victory over the effects of sin. He was triumphing in each individual circumstance. We might say He was rolling back the effects of the curse. Each miracle was a victory in Satan's domain. In the verses we've read He cast out this demon. He showed He had power over the demonic world. Satan's kingdom could not stand. Our Lord is victorious. We know that the Lord would later go to the cross, and through His death and resurrection, win a total victory and triumph over Satan. Here the victories are smaller, but they still show that despite opposition, our Lord triumphs.

Today we've considered the first 37 verses of Matthew 12. We've seen the Lord face a lot of opposition. The chapter shows the seriousness of rejecting and opposing Christ. We've seen that in each case the Lord carries on doing good and acts so wisely. From it, we've drawn a few lessons about our conduct when we're opposed. As always, we should aim to live and act like the Lord did. He's the perfect example for us to follow. But perhaps the main response from this section is to admire and worship the Lord more. He's the One who defends His own. He's the One who cares for the needy. He's the one who deals so gently with those who oppose Him. And He's the One who triumphs over Satan. May the Lord bless these simple reflections on His word.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Matthew 12:1-37, "Lord of the Sabbath", talk T1307.

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