

Matthew 12

Overview

Recall Matthew’s structure (chart, Figure 1). We are in the Proclamation of our Lord. The last chapter (Matt 11) concluded three calls: first to the four, then to the twelve, and then to whoever labors and is heavy laden (chart, Figure 2). Now we see the response to this invitation.

This chapter has six episodes, ABAAB (chart, Figure 3). In the A episodes, the Pharisees challenge the Lord. The other two (B) show the priority of spiritual relations over physical ones, opening the door to the Gentiles. Thus the chapter marks the shift from Jew to Gentile receptivity.

In the first two episodes, the Pharisees accuse the Lord of breaking the Sabbath, a continual source of tension.¹ Matthew places these two episodes immediately after our Lord’s gracious offer of rest to those who labor and are heavy laden. The whole

point of the Sabbath is rest, yet our Lord’s view of rest and that of the Pharisees are very different. For them, rest consisted in an extra set of regulations that did not apply on other days. He will not burden himself or his followers with these superficial and unbiblical restrictions. In these two episodes he cuts to the heart of what the Sabbath, and the believer’s rest, is all about.

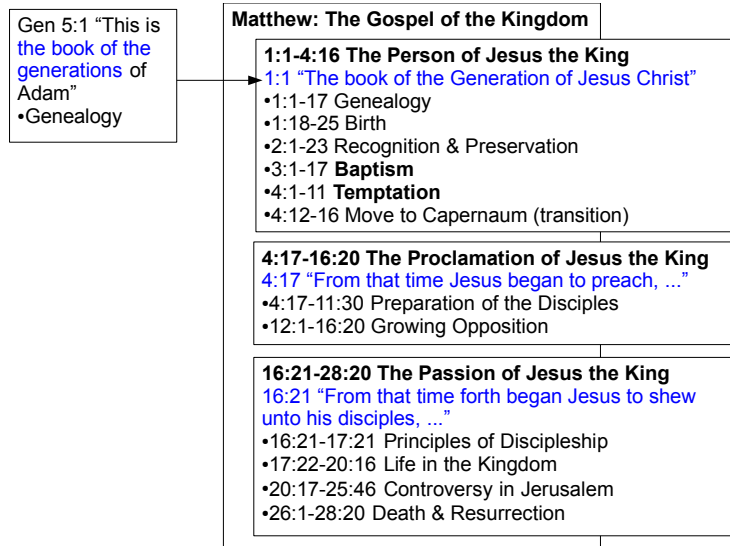


Figure 1: Structure of Matthew's Gospel

Calling Disciples	4:18-22 the Four	9:36-10:4 the Twelve	11:2-30 Broader Invitation (v. 28)
Summary	4:23 And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people.	9:35 And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people.	Mat 11:1 And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities.
Detail	ch. 5-7 Content for Teaching	ch. 8-9 Examples of Healing	10:5-42 Exhortations for Preaching

Figure 2: Calling and Preparing Disciples

¹ Trench (*Notes on the Miracles of Our Lord* (15th Edition), London: Kegan Paul, p. 335) notes in connection with the second of our episodes: “The sabbatical cures recorded in the Gospels are seven in number, namely, that of the demoniac in the Synagogue of Capernaum (Mark i. 21); of Simon's wife's mother (Mark i. 29); of the impotent man at Bethesda (John v. 9) ; of this man with a withered hand [Matt 12]; of the man born blind (John ix. 14); of the woman with a spirit of infirmity (Luke xiii. 14); of the man who had a dropsy (Luke xiv. 1).”

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1-8, Pharisees: Harvesting on the Sabbath

1 At that time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were an hungred, and began to pluck the ears of corn, and to eat.--We should not think of new world “corn”; in the KJV, the word simply refers to grain. Deut 23:25

2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.--There are two ways to parse this criticism.

We may think that the problem is unlawful abuse of the property of another. The disciples didn't own these fields, but they took the liberty of eating the grain. “Thy disciples do on the Sabbath day what it is not lawful to do” (chart, Figure 4). That this is not the case we learn from Deuteronomy,

Rejection by Pharisees	His True People
<p><i>1-8 Picking grain on the Sabbath</i> 2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.</p> <p><i>9-14 Healing on the Sabbath</i> 14 Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.</p> <p><i>22-37 Casting out a Demon</i> 24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.</p> <p><i>38-45 Seeking a Sign</i> 38 Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee.</p>	<p><i>15-21 Healing great multitudes</i> 18 he shall shew judgment to the Gentiles. 21 And in his name shall the Gentiles trust.</p> <p><i>46-50 His true family</i> 50 For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.</p>

Figure 3: Overview of Matthew 12

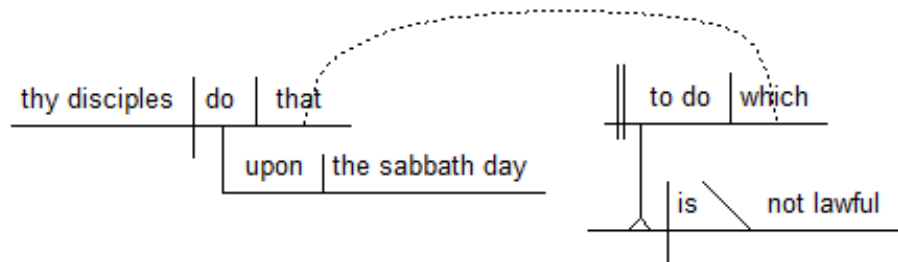


Figure 4: One parsing of 12:2

Deut. 23: 25 When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbour, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbour's standing corn.

The problem was not that the deed was unlawful, and they happened to do it on the Sabbath (Figure 5). The deed itself was lawful; the offense was doing it on the Sabbath. Labor is

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forbidden on the Sabbath; reaping is labor; picking grain might be construed as labor (even though Deut 23:25 clearly distinguishes the two); therefore picking grain on the Sabbath is wrong.²

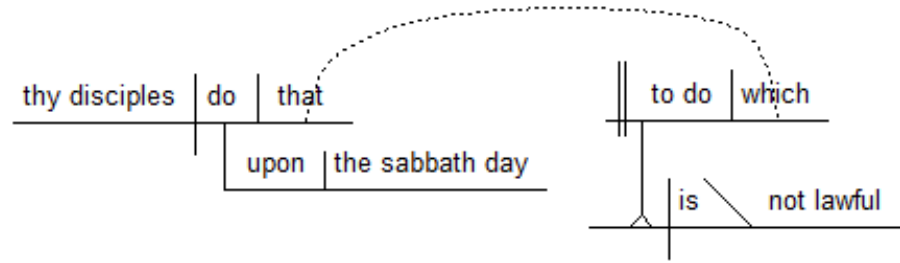


Figure 5: Another parsing of 12:2

3 But he said unto them,--The Lord's response takes the form of an alternation, ABAB: A = OT evidence, followed by B = an assertion of his authority (chart, Table 1). The first presentation of OT evidence is doubled.

OT Evidence	Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; 4 How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests? 5 Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?	7 But if ye had known what <i>this</i> meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice [Hos 6:6], ye would not have condemned the guiltless.
Personal Authority	6 But I say unto you, That in this place is <i>one</i> greater than the temple.	8 For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day.

Table 1: Our Lord responds to the Pharisees about the Sabbath

The two sequences differ in their focus (Trench). The first justifies what the disciples have done, while the second condemns the Pharisees for their own shortcoming.

Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; 4 How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread,--The first argument is to cite the example of David in 1 Sam 21. Fleeing from Saul, he comes to Ahimelech the high priest at the tabernacle at Nob, and asks for five loaves of bread to feed his men. The priest gives him the shewbread from the previous week.

which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?--The Law provided that the old showbread was the priests' portion (chart):

Lev. 24:5 And thou shalt take fine flour, and bake twelve cakes thereof: two tenth deals shall be in one cake. 6 And thou shalt set them in two rows, six on a row, upon the pure table before the LORD. 7 And thou shalt put pure frankincense upon *each* row, that it may be on the bread for a memorial, *even* an offering made by fire unto the LORD. 8

2 Philo, a Jewish writer of the first century, shows how extensive the prohibition was, invoking another principle (De vita Mosis 2:22): for there is no shoot, and no branch, and no leaf even which it is allowed to cut or to pluck on that day, nor any fruit which it is lawful to gather; but everything is at liberty and in safety on that day, and enjoys, as it were, perfect freedom, no one ever touching them, in obedience to a universal proclamation.

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Every sabbath he shall set it in order before the LORD continually, *being taken* from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant. 9 **And it shall be Aaron's and his sons';** and they shall eat it in the holy place: for it *is* most holy unto him of the offerings of the LORD made by fire by a perpetual statute.

Yet the high priest allowed David and his men to eat it. Now the Pharisees are denying something much less hallowed to David's greater son and those who accompany him.

Of course, the Pharisees might object that the Sabbath is more holy than expired showbread. So the next OT example deals directly with the Sabbath.

5 Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?--Certain ministries could be conducted on the Sabbath. One example comes from 1 Sam 21. v. 6 records,

1 Sam. 21:6 So the priest gave him hallowed *bread*: for there was no bread there but the shewbread, that was taken from before the LORD, to put hot bread in the day when it was taken away.

We know from Lev 24:8 that the bread was changed on the Sabbath. If the new bread was hot at that time, that means that somebody was in the kitchen on the Sabbath, an observation that occasioned great discussion among the Jewish scholars.³

A second example comes in the instructions for the daily sacrifice, which was not suspended on the Sabbath, but rather intensified (chart):

Num. 28:9 And on the sabbath day two lambs of the first year without spot, and two tenth deals of flour *for* a meat offering, mingled with oil, and the drink offering thereof:
10 *This is* the burnt offering of every sabbath, beside the continual burnt offering, and his drink offering.

A third example is circumcision, of which he reminds them in John 7, without challenge.

Jn. 7:22 Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers;) and ye on the sabbath day circumcise a man.

In each case, some greater good was being done that justified the labor. What greater good is in view here? The Lord continues with the second kind of argument, based on his personal authority:

6 But I say unto you, That in this place is *one* greater than the temple.⁴-- The Messiah has

3 Gill on 1 Sam 21:6: "...here arises a difficulty, how they could be put hot there, when it was not lawful to bake on a sabbath day. About this the Jews are divided; some say they were baked on the sabbath day, but the greater part say that baking did not drive away the sabbath, or it was lawful on the sabbath day; but others say that they were baked on the evening of the sabbath, and kept in the oven until the time of their being set upon the table; and, as Abarbinel observes, the mouth of the oven might be stopped up till that time to keep in the heat; but others say this heat was miraculous, or that a miracle was wrought for the sake of it; which is not probable."

4 This is a place where the the majority text differs from the TR. The TR reads the masculine *μειζον* "one greater," while MT reads *μειζον* "something greater," referring not only to the person of the Messiah, but to the whole

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come, bringing in the kingdom of God. His disciples have been so busy serving him that they have not had time to prepare the Sabbath food a day early, as the custom required, so now they are hungry. Like priests in the temple, their labor is justified because it serves him.⁵

Thus far he has been justifying the disciples. Now he turns to condemning the Pharisees.

7 But if ye had known what *this* meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless.--In this panel, the Scriptural example comes from Hosea (chart).

Hos. 6:4 O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness *is* as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away. 5 Therefore have I hewed *them* by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth: and thy judgments *are as* the light *that* goeth forth. 6 For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. 7 But they like men have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me.

This is the second time the Lord has challenged the Pharisees with this verse. The first was in 9:13, when they criticized him for eating with publicans and sinner.

The Pharisees can scarcely have missed the context of the verse that the Lord cites. The verse is not an isolated statement of the superiority of mercy over sacrifice. The passage is a thoroughgoing condemnation of the hypocrisy of the northern kingdom. The people of Ephraim were not irreligious. They had their forms of worship, their sacrifices and burnt offerings. But their goodness is transient, and they have broken God's covenant rather than showing mercy $\kappa\alpha\iota$ covenant love. The Pharisees' focus on the form of religion over the needs of God's people shows that they are kindred spirits with those whom the Lord condemned in Hosea.

8 For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day.--Like the first panel, the second closes with an assertion that combines human and divine prerogatives.

As we have seen, the title "Son of Man" emphasizes the Lord's humanity, his place as the one representative of the race who will achieve man's purpose of dominion over the earth.

Most commentators interpret "lord of the sabbath day" to mean simply that Jesus has authority over the Sabbath, taking "lord" in the common secular sense of "master, authority." But the expression recalls a host of passages in the OT that relate the Lord Jehovah to this special day. God is the one who instituted the Seventh day, based on his own rest (chart):

Gen. 2:2 And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. 3 And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.

The very first mention of the word "sabbath" in the OT clearly associates it with the Lord:

order that he has come to bring in. But compare 12:41, 42, where the neuter is again used and clearly the person of Messiah is in view.

5 The argument is due to Trench.

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Exod. 16:23-29 And he said unto them, This *is that* which the **LORD** hath said, To morrow *is* the rest of the **holy sabbath unto the LORD**: ... 25 And Moses said, Eat that to day; for to day *is* a **sabbath unto the LORD**: to day ye shall not find it in the field. ... 29 See, for that **the LORD hath given you the sabbath**, therefore he giveth you on the sixth day the bread of two days; abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.

Eight times, including the Decalog, it is ליהוה ... שבת, “a Sabbath for the Lord” (Exod 16:23, 25; 20:10; 35:2; Lev 23:3; 25:2, 4; Deut 5:14), the preposition indicating possession, “the Lord’s Sabbath.” Fifteen times, from Exodus through Ezekiel, the Lord speaks of “my sabbaths.” In Isaiah, the Lord insists, recalling how in Gen 2:3 he “sanctified” the seventh day,

Isa. 58:13 If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, *from* doing thy pleasure on **my holy day**; and call the sabbath a delight, **the holy of the LORD**,

The OT teaches that the Sabbath belongs to the Lord, and in that light, there is only one person who could possibly be thought of as “Lord of the Sabbath,” the one whose Sabbath it is and to whom it belongs. Our Lord’s claim to be that person is a direct claim to equality with Jehovah.⁶

9-14, Pharisees: Healing on the Sabbath

The second episode of rejection by the Pharisees (Figure 3) also concerns the Sabbath.

9 And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue:--Matthew says much less about synagogues (2x) than the other gospels (Mark 8x, Luke 9x, John 4x), and both times he calls it “their synagogue.”⁷ The pronoun is telling. In the OT, the temple was “God’s house,” but after the opposition in the first paragraph, Matthew is suggesting to us that their form of religion is not the same as God’s.

This principle is critical to understanding the Lord’s teaching. Already in the Sermon on the Mount, he taught (chart, Figure 6),

Matt. 7:13 Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide *is* the gate, and broad *is* the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: 14 Because strait *is* the gate, and narrow *is* the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there

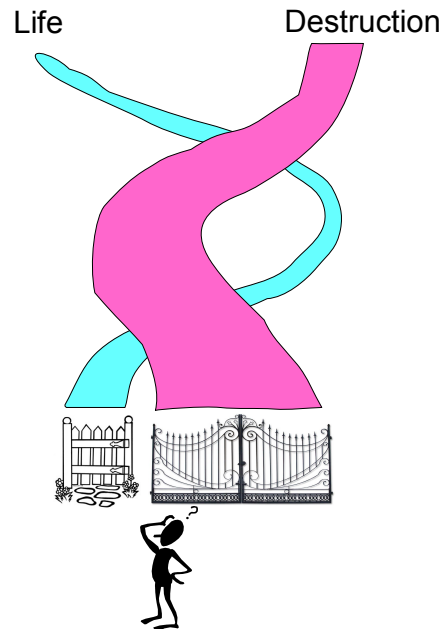


Figure 6: The two gates and the two ways from Matthew 7

6 The lack of the article on κυριος argues for rather than against this interpretation, since κυριος in the OT as a translation of יהוה is regularly anarthrous.

7 The only other instance of this phrase is Mark 1:23.

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be that find it.

As the Lord makes clear in the following verses in Matthew 7, those two paths often seem to intersect, as false prophets pretend to teach the truth, but in fact aim to destroy the flock. The Pharisees had a reputation for godliness. In fact, they reject the Messiah and the Lord who sent him.

10 And, behold, there was a man which had *his* hand withered.--This would be a tragic situation in any case, but in a culture where most work was manual, it meant he had no way to earn his bread.

And they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days?--The Jewish Sabbath laws constrained not only harvesting on the Sabbath, but also healing, unless it were a matter of life and death.

that they might accuse him.--Their purpose is not to learn his view on the Sabbath, but to attack him. Their attitude is already malicious.

The malice is evident starting in ch. 9 (chart). They took offense at his association with sinners, and he rebuked them, quoting the same verse he used in the previous paragraph, Hos 6:6.

Matt. 9:10 And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples. 11 And when the Pharisees saw *it*, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? 12 But when Jesus heard *that*, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. 13 But go ye and learn what *that* meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

As a result, they began the same line of accusation we will see in vv. 22-37, that he is in league with the devil:

Matt. 9:32 As they went out, behold, they brought to him a dumb man possessed with a devil. 33 And when the devil was cast out, the dumb spake: and the multitudes marvelled, saying, It was never so seen in Israel. 34 But the Pharisees said, He casteth out devils through the prince of the devils.

They chose their question to set our Lord up for failure, knowing that he would not pass by this needy man. "But in this they judged rightly: that Christ would not witness disease without removing it—or, as we might express it, that disease *could* not continue in the Presence of Him, Who was the Life."⁸

Their conduct shows that not all questions are created equal. Some are asked out of genuine desire to understand, while others are asked to attack. Our Lord is able to tell the difference. And if we would be effective in talking to others about the Lord, we must pray for discernment to tell

8 Edersheim, A. (1896). *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Vol. 2, p. 59). New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.

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the difference as well.

11 And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep,--

The example he envisions is not a person with many animals, but only one. This is his whole livelihood, just as the man's hand was his only way of making a living.

and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?--Surely such a person would be justified in delivering the sheep.

12 How much then is a man better than a sheep?--In a society where most work was manual, a man with only one hand was at a severe handicap. Relieving his suffering was certainly more important than pulling a sheep out of a hole.

Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days.--Here is the answer to their question, but with a twist. They asked, "Is it lawful to heal?" He answered, "It is lawful to do well." Their focus was on avoiding sin. His is on positive righteousness. The two attitudes show a very different preoccupation.

- Judaism is preoccupied with sin and how to avoid it. This is the state of mind of someone who is insecure before a holy God, and is trying to please him in their own strength.
- Our Lord is secure in his relation to his Father, and is trying to serve him and please him.

The unbeliever's view of Christianity focuses on all the things it says you can't do. It views it as a system of prohibitions. This attitude betrays the unbeliever's sense of guilt before a holy God.

The believer's view of Christianity focuses on what God enables us to do, by his Spirit.

13 Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other.--The healing is reminiscent of the earlier healing of the palsied man (chart):

Matt. 9:6 But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the **palsy**,) **Arise, take up thy bed**, and go unto thine house.

Or again, at the pool of Bethesda,

Jn. 5:7 The **impotent** man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me. 8 Jesus saith unto him, **Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.** 9 And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked:

A man with a withered hand can't stretch it out. A man with palsy can't arise. In each case, he commands an infirm person to do the very thing they cannot do. He restores them in the process of their obedience to his command.

There is a picture here of what happens in salvation. God commands us to repent of our sin and trust in Christ for salvation. We are dead in trespasses and sins, enslaved to Satan. We cannot do what God commands, but he works in our hearts by his Spirit to grant us repentance and faith, and we move from death to life. Here is how Paul describes the process:

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2 Cor. 4:3 But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: 4 In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. 5 For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This is why our responsibility in evangelism is to sow the seed, not to argue people into the kingdom. We declare the truth, and God brings salvation when and where it pleases him.

14 Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.--They asked their question seeking evidence against him. Now that he has answered as they expected, they move ahead with their predetermined plan. Mark 3:6 tells us that they joined forces with the Herodians.

We must not underestimate the animosity of “religious people” toward true faith. Religion is man’s effort to reach up to God, and that is futile. True faith is the response of our hearts when God graciously reaches down to us. Religious people are not “almost saved.” They are as far from the Lord as one can imagine.

15-21, Gentiles

15 But when Jesus knew *it*, he withdrew himself from thence:--He does not rush into controversy. His time has not yet come, and he withdraws. He follows the instruction he gave the disciples earlier:

Matt. 10:23 But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another:

The Lord does not pressure people. He presents his credentials, and if they reject him, he moves on. This is his example to us as well.

and great multitudes followed him,--Throughout the gospels, the response of the multitudes stands in contrast to that of the hierarchy.

and he healed them all;--He never rejected one who came in faith.

Jn. 6:37 All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

Isaiah’s Prophecies of the Servant

16 And charged them that they should not make him known:--Unlike many modern ministries, the Lord is reticent to promote himself. Matthew explains this behavior as fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy.

17 That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying⁹--Isaiah’s

⁹ See Archer and Chirichigno article 234 for analysis of the citation. This is one of the places where Matthew

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original oracle has three paragraphs that mention “judgment.”¹⁰ Matthew quotes the first two, but not the third. v. 21 is the end of Isa 42:4, but the first half of the verse is missing (chart, Table 2).

This passage has two central themes: judgment and the Gentiles.

The word “judgment” משפט appears three times, and divides the text into three paragraphs. The word is derived from the verb שפט, usually

translated “to judge.” However, this translation is misleading because of our modern separation of government into legislature, executive, and judiciary.¹¹ This distinction would not make sense to the ancients. In Israel’s history, the judges שפטים described in the seventh book of the OT are not just a judiciary. They exercise all the functions of government. In many cases, we can translate the word, “government.”

Isaiah only uses the word “Gentiles” גוים “nations” once, in the first paragraph. However, the word “isles” in v. 4 refers to the coastlands around the Mediterranean, which Matthew correctly interprets as Gentile lands. In addition, we will see that the bruised reed and smoking flax are images of the Gentiles. So the second theme of the passage, also repeated in each paragraph, is that the Messiah comes for the sake of the nations, not just of Israel. When Israel’s spiritual leaders, the Pharisees, have decided to destroy him (v. 14), Matthew reminds us that the promise of the Messiah was for the Gentiles as well.

We can summarize the three paragraphs in Isaiah’s original text.

1. The *agent* of God’s judgment: Back in ch. 11 Isaiah promised the coming of a descendant of David who would rule in the power and under the direction of God’s Spirit. These ancient promises are fulfilled in the Lord Jesus.
2. The *purpose* of God’s judgment: to promote the truth. He will bring forth judgment unto, or for the sake of, truth. This is very different from the objective of most governments, which is to extend their power, not to promote truth. In general, we don’t expect truth

deviates from the LXX, and is apparently translating the Hebrew directly.

¹⁰ See notes on Isa 42:1-5.

¹¹ Culver in TWOT has a very useful discussion along these lines.

	Isaiah 42	Matthew 12
Agent	1 Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, <i>in whom</i> my soul delighteth;	18 Behold my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased:
	I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles .	I will put my spirit upon him, and he shall shew judgment to the Gentiles .
Purpose	2 He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street.	19 He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets.
	3 A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth.	20 A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory.
Effect	4 He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.	21 And in his name shall the Gentiles trust.

Table 2: Matthew’s Citation of Isaiah 42

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from politicians, but our Lord's ministry promoted truth over power.

3. The *effect* of God's judgment: He will set judgment in the earth. That is, his government will be realized in the physical world. Ultimately he will destroy evil-doers and establish his rule over all. This has not yet happened, but will take place when the Lord returns.

Matthew's Application of Isaiah 42

Matthew omits the third paragraph, except for the final reference to the "isles," the coastlands, which he uses to reinforce the initial emphasis on the Gentiles. At our Lord's first coming, he did not establish judgment, did not carry out its requirements. This will happen when he returns, but Matthew omits that paragraph because it was not fulfilled in the first advent.

18, The Agent of God's Judgment

18 Behold my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put my spirit upon him,--The Spirit is critical in enabling the Man who will exercise dominion.¹² Isaiah 11 already emphasized the role of the Spirit in Messiah's reign (chart),

Isa. 11:1 And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: 2 And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD; 3 And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD:

and Matthew reported when this happened:

Matt. 3:16 And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: 17 And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

Matthew's report of the baptism has three points of contact with Isaiah 42:1.

1. God puts his Spirit upon the Messiah.
2. God declares him to be "my Son." In the LXX, "servant" is *παῖς*, which can mean either servant or child (compare the custom of referring to a servant as "boy").
3. God says that he is "well pleased" with the one to whom he gives his Spirit.

and he shall shew judgment to the Gentiles.--Throughout the OT, God's government is focused on one nation, Israel. The Gentiles, the non-Jews, are allowed to go their own way. But the prophets always promised that one day the Messiah would come and bring Gentiles as well as Jews under God's government, and this is what both John and our Lord proclaim when they say that "the kingdom of God is at hand." This is the message that Paul carried throughout acts.

¹² See the studies on the Kingdom of God presented at Curtis Gospel Chapel on Oct 3-4, 2015.

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Listen to him speaking to the people of Lystra and Derbe, who tried to offer him sacrifice when he healed a lame man (chart):

Acts 14:15 Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein: **16 Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways.** 17 Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.

Verse 16 emphasizes the change. In time past, he let you go your own way. Now we are come to declare to you his rule. The same idea is central in his message to the pagan Greeks in Athens:

Acts 17:30 And **the times of this ignorance God winked at**; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: 31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by *that* man whom he hath ordained; *whereof* he hath given assurance unto all *men*, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

Again: previously God left you to your own ways, but now he extends his government over you.

So the fulfillment of the first of Isaiah's three promises about judgment is that the Spirit-filled Messiah has come and declared God's rule to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

19-20, The Purpose of God's Judgment

19 He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets.--We have just seen how the Lord does not contend with the Pharisees, but withdraws, and urges his followers not to make him known. Unlike modern politicians, he does not promote himself.

The next two images, in Isaiah's context, both refer to God's treatment of Gentile nations (chart). Previously, he dealt harshly with them. But now he will deal gently with them.

20 A bruised reed shall he not break,--In 2 Kings 18:21 = Isa 36:6, Rabshakeh uses this image to describe Egypt as an impotent adversary.

Isa. 36:6 Lo, thou trustest in the staff of this **broken reed**, on Egypt; whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it: so *is* Pharaoh king of Egypt to all that trust in him.

Assyria mocked Egypt's weakness, but the Lord will deal gently with them.

and smoking flax shall he not quench,--Isaiah goes on in ch. 43 to use this image of the defeat of Egypt at the Red Sea,

Isa. 43:16 Thus saith the LORD, which maketh a way in the sea, and a path in the mighty waters; 17 Which bringeth forth the chariot and horse, the army and the power; they shall lie down together, they shall not rise: they are extinct, they are **quenched as tow**.

In the Exodus, God drenched the Egyptian lamp, but now he will treat them gently.

till he send forth judgment unto victory.--Matthew's "victory" νικος is an unusual translation for Isaiah's word "truth" אמת, where the LXX has the expected αληθεια (chart). Νικος appears only once in the LXX, at 2 Sam 2:26, in this same prepositional phrase εις νικος as a translation for לנגח "to the end." In the context, there was a battle between the army of David (under Joab) and the supporters of Ishbosheth the son of Saul (under Abner). In a pause in the conflict, Abner rebukes Joab for seeking to solve problems with military force:

2 Sam. 2:26 Then Abner called to Joab, and said, Shall the sword devour for ever לנגח
εις νικος? knowest thou not that it will be bitterness in the latter end? how long shall it be
then, ere thou bid the people return from following their brethren?

The phrase literally means, "unto the end," but the LXX translators give it more than a temporal sense. In their rendering, Abner is questioning whether the sword really does hold the answer to conflicts among nations. True victory must be rooted in God's just, righteous, truthful rule at the hand of Messiah. Might does not make right.

The Lord may have this verse in Isaiah in mind in his defense before Pilate,

Jn. 18:37 Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.

Pilate, concerned about rivals to Rome's authority, asks whether he is a king. The Lord responds that the point of his ministry is not to start a political conflict, but to advance truth. This is what Isaiah promised he would do—bring forth judgment unto, for the sake of, truth.

The Effect of God's Judgment (missing in Matthew)

Matthew omits the first half of the third paragraph, which describes God's future rule "on earth, as it is in heaven," because his focus at this point is on the Lord's ministry in his first advent. The change is analogous to that which the Lord makes in his citation of Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth (chart, Table 3). It also conforms to a distinction made in John's gospel (chart),

Jn. 3:17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

Jn. 12:47 And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.

But judgment is not cancelled. It is only deferred:

Jn. 12:48 He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.

21 And in his name shall the Gentiles trust.--By retaining this last line of Isaiah's quotation, Matthew reinforces to us what is going on. The Jews are rejecting their own Messiah, but he is turning that rejection into an opportunity to shift his focus to the Gentiles.

22-37, Pharisees: Accusation of League with Beelzebub

22-24, The Context

22 Then was brought unto him one possessed with a devil, blind, and dumb: and he healed him, insomuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw.--Recalls the evidence presented to John the Baptist in 11:2-6.

We must keep in mind that the KJV “devil” is used to translate two different

words (chart). Sometimes it refers to “your adversary the Devil” (1 Pet 5:8), ο διαβολος, “the accuser,” the one called Satan in the OT. Other times (as here) it refers to a demon, δαμονιον, one of the fallen angels who followed Satan in his rebellion. Throughout this section, the word has the second sense. Satan is referred to in our text, not as “devil,” but as the “strong man.”

The miracle has two very different effects on those who observe it (chart, Figure 7).

23 And all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David?--The interrogative particle μητι expects a negative answer: “This can’t be the son of David, can it?” The Lord not the political messiah they expected from passages like Isaiah 60, and yet he satisfies the prophetic signs of Isaiah 35. They are weighing this tension honestly. The gap between the first and second advents of our Lord is not clearly revealed in the OT, and it took the church a while to figure it out. Even Peter in Acts 3:19-21 expects the Lord to return at any moment to bring “the times of refreshing,” and Paul describing the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4 speaks twice (vv. 15, 17) of “we which are alive and remain.” Their doubt, like that of John in 11:1, is honest.

24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by

Isa 61	Luke 4
	17 And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written,
1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek;	18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor;
he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,	he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,	to preach deliverance to the captives,
(LXX) and recovery of sight to the blind	and recovering of sight to the blind,
(Isa. 58:6 to let the oppressed go free)	to set at liberty them that are bruised,
2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD,	19 To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.
and the day of vengeance of our God;	
	20 And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down.

Table 3: Focus on the First Advent in Luke 4

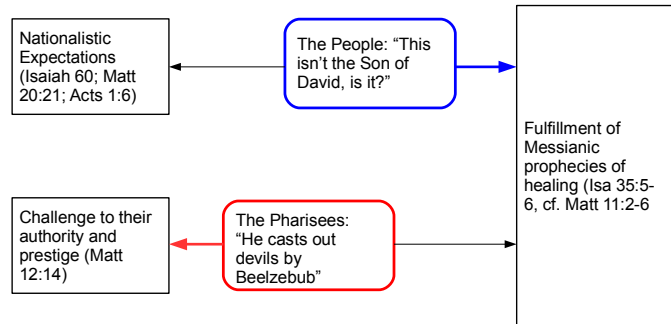


Figure 7: Two different mental conflicts

Beelzebub the prince of the devils.--The people are open to the Lord, but the Pharisees have made up their minds (v. 14) to destroy him. What draws them away from the evidence of the miracles is not a legitimate concern with other unfulfilled prophecies, but his persistent challenge to their own superficial faith: in requiring a righteousness that exceeds theirs (5:20), in risking ritual defilement to reach out to sinners (9:11), in refusing to burden his disciples (12:1-8) and defer mercy (12:9-14) because of man-made laws about the Sabbath.

25-37, The Lord’s Response

The Pharisees are not announcing their skepticism openly, but reinforcing one another in their doubt. But their private discussions are not as private as they think (chart).

25 And Jesus knew their thoughts,--He shows this capability elsewhere:

Matt. 9:2 And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus **seeing their faith** said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. 3 And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This *man* blasphemeth. 4 And Jesus **knowing [seeing] their thoughts** said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts?

Matt. 16:7 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, *It is* because we have taken no bread. 8 *Which* when Jesus **perceived**, he said unto them, O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have brought no bread?

As we noted in Matthew 9, this capability is a sign of his deity,

1Sa 16:7 for *the LORD seeth* not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.

and said unto them,--He presents two arguments against their conclusion, one from the nature of the miracle itself, the other from the attitude implicit in their speech. In both cases, he organizes his argument chiastically (chart, Figure 8).

25b-30, From the nature of the miracle

31-37, From the nature of their speech

<i>A divided kingdom cannot stand</i>	25b-26, Satan’s kingdom cannot stand divided	30, Christ’s kingdom is not divided
<i>Casting out demons shows God’s power</i>	27 Jewish exorcists	28-29 “the kingdom of God is come unto you”

<i>Its content</i>	31-32, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit	36, idle words
<i>Its source</i>	33, tree and fruit; 34, snakes and their spawn; 35, heart and words	

37, Summary: judged by your speech

Figure 8: Two Chiastic Arguments

25b-30, Arguments from the nature of the miracle

First, he argues that the nature of the miracle is inconsistent with the work of Satan. The outside of the chiasm focuses on the instability of a divided kingdom—starting with Satan’s, but ending

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with his own kingdom. The center section concludes that since Satan will not oppose himself, exorcisms must be attributed to God, authenticating the Lord's ministry.

25b-26, Inconsistency of a divided kingdom

Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand:--The OT is full of tragedies resulting from division, in houses (Cain vs. Abel, of Jacob vs. Esau, of David and Absalom) and kingdoms (Rehoboam vs. Jehoshaphat, and the resulting decline of what was under Solomon the greatest kingdom in the Near East). This is a general principle, which the Lord next applies to the case at hand.

26 And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand?--If Satan is casting out demons, he is fighting himself. Satan might occasionally cast out a demon as a ruse. But the Lord cast out demons routinely and often (chart).

Matt. 4:24 And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were **possessed with devils**, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them.

Matt. 8:16 When the even was come, they brought unto him many that were **possessed with devils**: and he cast out the spirits with *his* word,

Matt. 8:28-29 And when he was come to the other side into the country of the Gergesenes, there met him two **possessed with devils**, coming out of the tombs, exceeding fierce, so that no man might pass by that way. 29 And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?

Matt. 10:8 Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, **cast out devils**:

Matt. 15:22 And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, *thou* Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a **devil**. ... 28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great *is* thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

Matt. 17:18 And Jesus rebuked the **devil**; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour.

The Lord encounters many such cases, brought to him by desperate friends and family members, and he heals every one. The demons fear him when they encounter him (8:28-29), because they know he will oppose them. If this is the work of Satan, he is tearing his own kingdom apart.

27, Jewish exorcists

If Satan is not casting out the demons, it must be the power of God. The Lord first reminds the

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Pharisees that he is not the only exorcist operating in the land at this time.

27 And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast *them* out?--We know from Acts that this was a practice among the Jews, though sometimes feigned (chart):

Acts 19:13 Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth.

If casting out demons is the work of Satan, then the Pharisees have condemned their own associates. But surely they would argue that the Jewish exorcists are showing the power of God.

therefore they shall be your judges.--In that case, they will sit in judgment on the Pharisees.

28-29, Positive evidence for the Kingdom of God

And if that argument holds for Jewish exorcists, it must surely hold for the Lord Jesus as well.

28 But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you.--

The Lord uses “kingdom of God” rather than Matthew’s more common “kingdom of heaven.” “Kingdom of Heaven” describes the kingdom from the perspective of one who belongs to it (it is the abode of our “heavenly Father”), while the “kingdom of God” emphasizes the distinction between the kingdom and the addressee.¹³ The use of this term here is significant in two ways.

First, it is indeed the appropriate term to describe the conquest of the forces of darkness by the power of God. In casting out demons, he is demonstrating the defeat of the usurper, Satan.¹⁴

Second, by choosing this term, the Lord emphasizes the Pharisees’ unbelief. Following John’s example, he invites hungry sinners, “Repent, for the kingdom of **heaven** is at hand,” inviting the listener to come into the heavenly family. But the Pharisees are confronting, not the kingdom of the *heaven* (as potential members), but the kingdom of *God* (as outsiders).

29 Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house.--He describes his conquest over Satan in terms that emphasize that he is fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy (chart),

Isa. 49:24 Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful captive delivered? 25 But thus saith the LORD, Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered: for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children.

30, The Divided House again

Now he returns to the theme of a divided kingdom again. This time, the division contemplated is

¹³ See the discussion in Robert Foster (2002). Why on Earth Use ‘Kingdom of Heaven’?: Matthew’s Terminology Revisited. *New Testament Studies*, 48, pp 487-499

¹⁴ This insight also applies to 6:33, where the command is not to ensure our individual entrance into the kingdom, but rather to promote the spread of God’s rule over all the world, believer and unbeliever alike.

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not in Satan’s kingdom. It is in his own kingdom.

30 He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.--So which side do the Pharisees take in this conflict? He turns their accusation back on themselves. They are the one who are really in league with Satan. A divided house will not stand, and if they oppose Jesus, they are not of his house.

This verse invites comparison with a similar, yet distinct verse in Mark, spoken some time before this event (Luke records both sayings: 9:50 = Mark 9:40, and later 11:23 = Matt 12:30) (chart, Table 4).

The circumstances are parallel. In both cases

- Someone casts out a demon
- Someone else disapproves
- The Lord rejects the disapproval.

The difference is that in Matthew the Lord is casting out and his opponents are disapproving, while in Mark someone outside the circle of the disciples is casting out, and the disciples disapprove. In both cases, one group of people claims a monopoly over the work of God, and rejects a miracle that does not come from their hands. Satan opposes God, and any action against him advances the kingdom of God. So whoever opposes the casting out of demons, whether the disciples in Mark 9 or the Pharisees at a later time in Matthew 12, is hindering the kingdom, and the Lord rebukes them.

Note the change in grammatical number of the first person pronouns in the two statements (plural in Mark 9, singular in Matthew 12).

- In Mark 9, he is addressing the disciples’ attitude toward an outsider, and his instruction teaches how a community of believers should regard those who are doing the Lord’s work but are not part of themselves. The assumption should be that they are “for us” unless they give explicit evidence of disobedience to the Lord.
- In Matthew 12, the question is not the relation of the community to an outsider, but rather of people to the Lord himself. Here the default assumption must be that people are lost and at enmity with God, until they receive him.

We have two examples of this charitable attitude later in the NT. The first is from Gamaliel, who counsels the Sanhedrin at the trial of the apostles,

Mark 9:38-40	Matt 12:22-37
9:38 And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name,	12:22 Then was brought unto him one possessed with a devil , blind, and dumb: and he healed him, insomuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw.
and he followeth not us: and we forbad him , because he followeth not us.	24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.
39 But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. 40 For he that is not against us is on our part.	30 He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.

Table 4: The Correspondence between Matt 12:30 and Mark 9:40

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Acts 5:38 And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: 39 But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.

God will deal with those with false motives. The second example is Gamaliel's student, Paul. During his Roman imprisonment, many were stepping up to preach Christ, some perhaps hoping to take over the position of prominence that Paul had been given. He writes to the Philippians,

Phil. 1:15 Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: 16 The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds: 17 But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel. 18 What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.

This should be our attitude toward those who name the name of Christ and who are not part of our fellowship. Unless they oppose us and what we teach, we are to "forbid them not," but rejoice that we are not alone in seeking the kingdom of God.

31-37, Arguments from the nature of speech

Vv. 31-36 are again chiasmic: they begin and end by condemning the *content* of the speech, but in the center consider its *source*. In this section he elevates his condemnation. Now it applies to any criticism that they bring against him, not just this particular event.

31-32, *Its content*

31 Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.--What is this blasphemy against the HS? In the context, it must be something exemplified by what the Pharisees have done in accusing the Lord of being in league with Satan.

Sometimes the phrase is understood of speaking ill of the HS, as opposed to the Father or the Son. But a) the Pharisees haven't done this, and b) it's not clear why speaking ill of the Spirit should be a more serious sin, and less forgivable, than blaspheming the Father or the Son.

Throughout the Scriptures, the Spirit is the agent by which God works with the heart of man (chart). The first reference is when God explains the need for the flood:

Gen. 6:3 And the LORD said, **My spirit** shall not always strive¹⁵ with man, for that he also *is* flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.

Isa 63 and Neh 9 look back to the Spirit's work in the past repeated cycles of God's grace, Israel's disobedience, God's chastisement, and Israel's repentance(see study on Isaiah 63:7-14):

Isa. 63:10 But they rebelled, and **vexed his holy Spirit**: therefore he was turned to be

15 The meaning of the verb translated "strive" is disputed here, but his work in rebuking man's sin certainly seems to be the sense implied in Peter's recollection of this period (1 Pet 3:18).

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their enemy, *and* he fought against them.

Neh. 9:30 Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them **by thy spirit** in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear:

Zechariah anticipates that the Spirit will turning Israel back to the Lord in the end times:¹⁶

Zech. 12:10 And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the **spirit** of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for *his* only *son*, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for *his* firstborn.

John gives him this role toward the world in general:

Jn. 16:7 Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the **Comforter** will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. 8 And when he is come, **he will reprove** the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment:

If this ministry of the Spirit is in our Lord's mind, then "blaspheming the HS" (v. 31), "speaking against the Holy Spirit" (v. 32), might refer to hardening one's heart to his convicting work, and persuading others not to heed his urgings. The Pharisees have made up their minds. They completely reject any evidence that goes against their preconceptions, and so they are immune to any work of the Spirit. The reason that such conduct is unforgivable is that it blocks repentance and faith, which are the means by which we must receive God's salvation.

32 And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.--We naturally understand v. 24 as attacking *the Son of Man*. But he focuses on what they are trying to do in one another's minds. They seek to stifle the convicting work of the *Spirit* and prevent their associates from receiving the Lord.¹⁷

Those who have hardened their hearts to the point that they not only reject the convicting voice of the Spirit but seek to dissuade others have no hope.

33-35, Its source

He has condemned their speech. Now he reasons back from the speech to their own character, moving from the *content* of their speech to comment on its *source*.

The argument moves from plants (trees) to animals (vipers), and then to the heart. The sequence is not arbitrary. It recalls the early history of our race.

33 Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his

¹⁶ Recall the role of the Spirit under the new covenant, in causing God's people to obey him (Isa 59:21; Ezek 36:27). But the emphasis here is on his work with unbelievers.

¹⁷ They were not always successful. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, believed, and Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Sanhedrin, and may have been a Pharisee. Compare the condemnation here with another warning: Matt 18:6.

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fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit.--Compare the Lord's warning against false prophets in the Sermon on the Mount (chart):

Matt. 7:16 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? 17 Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither *can* a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

A tree brings forth fruit appropriate to its character because of the law of creation.

Gen. 1:11 And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, *and* the fruit tree yielding fruit **after his kind**, whose seed *is* in itself,

Having drawn our minds back to the creation, he now moves from Genesis 1 to Genesis 3 with the image of serpents.

34 O generation of vipers,--He learned this characterization from John the Baptist:

Matt. 3:7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Later, he will repeat it in the Olivet Discourse:

Matt. 23:33 *Ye* serpents, *ye* generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?¹⁸

This word γεννημα¹⁹ for "generation" means "offspring, descendants." The meaning of this expression is rooted in Genesis 3, where Satan appeared to Eve as a serpent. Made in the image and likeness of God, our parents chose to serve Satan instead. In declaring the consequences, God said to the satanic serpent,

Gen. 3:15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between **thy seed** and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

God predicts that both the Serpent and the woman will have a seed (offspring). We all recognize in the seed of the Woman a promise of the Messiah. But like Isaiah's Servant of the Lord, the image goes beyond the Messiah to his followers, as Paul makes clear:

Rom 16:20 And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

Here the "seed" who bruises Satan is the body of Christ, the church. So it makes sense to ask whether the seed of the Serpent can also refer to a group of people. In calling the Pharisees the "offspring of vipers," he characterizes them (and their parents) as descended from the Satanic

18 The only other use of γεννημα with reference to serpents is in Luke's citation of the Baptist at Luke 3:7. It is notable that John, for a more Gentile audience, speaks directly of the "children of the devil" (8:44; 1 John 3:8-12).

19 Not to be confused with γενεα, also translated "generation" in the AV, and referring to a family or period of time

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Serpent. He also speaks directly of people being “the children of the wicked one”:

Mat 13:38 The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the **children of the wicked one**;

Similarly, in John 8, the Lord tells the Pharisees,

Jn 8:44 Ye are of *your* **father the devil**, and the lusts of your father ye will do.

John’s first epistle gives us a commentary on the events in Genesis. Like Genesis 3, John sees the conflict at two levels. He begins by reminding us that it is possible for people to be related to the devil (chart):

1 Jn. 3:8a He that committeth sin is **of the devil** [related to the devil]; for the devil sinneth from the beginning.

To explain this comment, he takes us back to Gen 3:15. First he describes the two individuals envisioned in the prophecy.

1 John 3:8b For this purpose the **Son of God** was manifested, that he might destroy the works of **the devil**.

Genesis speaks of the “seed of the woman” destroying the serpent, while John speaks of the “Son of God.” The two have more in common than we might think at first. Throughout the OT, it is common to attribute offspring to the father, not the mother. We read of the seed of Aaron (Lev 21:21), David (1 Kings 11:39), Abraham (Ps 105:6), Israel (2 Kings 17:20), Jacob (Isa 45:25), Ephraim (Jer 7:15), or Zadok (Ezek 43:19). Of our Lord alone could it be said that he was “the seed of the woman,” because he had no human father; his father was God.

But as in Gen 3:15, John teaches that the “seed” goes beyond the individual to encompass others.

1 John 3:9 Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. 10 In this the **children of God** are manifest, and the **children of the devil**: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother.

Note that we are called here, not the children of the woman, but the children of God. Of course, we are the children of Eve (and when John sees a vision based on this prophecy in Revelation 12, he once again describes believers as “her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ,” Rev 12:17). But if our only parents are human, we cannot do righteousness, and we still count as the seed of the serpent, like our parents before us. All unbelievers belong to the “generation of vipers,” a family that began with Eve’s first son:

1 John 3:11 For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. 12 Not as Cain, *who* was **of that wicked one** [related to the wicked one], and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.

But when we are “born of God” (1 John 3:9), so that we are both sons of men and sons of God,

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we cease to belong to the “generation of vipers,” and we can join our Savior, *the* Son of Man and *the* Son of God, in crushing Satan.

how can ye, being evil, speak good things?--It is impossible for them to speak good, since they are intrinsically, organically wicked. This is the fallen state of all who have not been born again.

for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.--Now he moves to the literal truth implied by the examples of the tree and the serpents, with a proverbial citation from the LXX of Eccl 2:15,

Eccl. 2:15 διότι ἄφρων ἐκ περισσεύματος λαλεῖ “Because the fool speaks of his abundance”

35 A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things.--Here he expands the proverb. If the mouth speaks from the abundance of the heart, then one can judge the heart by the speech. The offspring of Satan have hearts that are “deceitful and desperately wicked” (Jer 17:9), and show this condition by their speech.

36, Its content

Now he moves back to the content of their speech.

36 But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.--What is an idle word? Again, we have to think of the context. How would the Pharisees respond to the Lord’s disclosure of their secret thoughts? We can imagine them saying, “Oh, we were only joking. Those were only idle words. Don’t take them so seriously.”

But his last point disqualifies this defense. If speech reveals the attitude of the heart, even our jokes show what we are really thinking. Recall Paul’s warning against jesting (chart):

Eph. 5:4 Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor **jesting**, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks.

Aristotle defines this word “jesting” εὐτραπελία as “well-bred insolence,” wittiness, the ability to turn a phrase cleverly, including sarcasm and social insults. It was coveted as a social skill among the Greeks, and in much modern society. But as a hallmark of pride that tears down others even though in jest, it has no place among believers. Solomon already condemns it:

Prov. 26:18 As a mad man who casteth firebrands, arrows, and death, 19 So is the man that deceiveth his neighbour, and saith, Am not I in sport?

In other words: even in jest, the Pharisees’ accusation would be condemned. How much more wicked is it when it is intended seriously.

37, Summary of the argument from speech

37 For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.—

The shift to the singular probably marks this as a proverbial statement, emphasizing the importance of our speech as showing the state of our heart. This sentiment is confirmed throughout Scripture:

David recognizes that right speech is the first step in avoiding wickedness (chart).

Ps. 34:11 Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the LORD. 12 What man *is he that* desireth life, *and* loveth *many* days, that he may see good? 13 Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile. 14 Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.

Solomon passed on this wisdom:

Prov. 13:2 A man shall eat good by the fruit of *his* mouth: but the soul of the transgressors *shall eat* violence. 3 He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: *but* he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.

And in the NT, we are exhorted,

Jas. 3:2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same *is* a perfect man, *and* able also to bridle the whole body.

Throughout the Bible, God is characterized by speech. He creates the world with his words, and man is distinguished from all his other creatures by his ability to speak. One of our Savior's titles is "the Word of God" (John 1, Rev 19). When we abuse speech, whether by deception or by speaking unkindly, we are betraying the very core of our likeness to God.

38-45, Pharisees: Request for a Sign

38 Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying,--The previous three Pharisee episodes present the Pharisees as a unified bloc. This episode involves only some of them, who have also brought some of the scribes with them. Superficially, their request seems positive and sympathetic, rather than antagonistic as in the previous three encounters.

Master, we would see a sign from thee.--"Master" διδασκαλε means "teacher," and is the Greek translation of Rabbi (John 1:38), and a term of respect much treasured in this group (Matt 23:2-7). Their approach to him recalls that of Nicodemus in John 3 (chart, Table 5). Both approach the Lord with respect. Both are focused on his miracles, the signs of his power.

This group, like Nicodemus, feels sympathetic toward the Lord. They do not agree with the hostile attitude of most of their colleagues, but still are not persuaded of his credentials, and take what they think is a more friendly approach.

Surprisingly, in both cases the Lord rebuffs those who come respectfully to him! He told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again, and he condemns these scribes and Pharisees as "an

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evil and adulterous generation.”
Some deep principle is involved here, and we need to understand it.

The Lord’s response has three parts: critique of their request for a sign, challenge based on two OT characters, and warning about apparent reform that is not genuine.

39-40, What’s Wrong with Signs

John 3	Matthew 12
1 There was a man of the Pharisees , named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:	38 Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees ...
2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi , we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.	... answered , saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee.
3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God .	39 But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas:

Table 5: How (Not) to Win Friends

39 But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign;--This comment invites two questions.

1. What does “generation” γενεα (a different word than in “generation γεννημα of vipers”) mean?
2. Why is it wrong for them to ask for a sign?

First, what does “generation” γενεα mean? The word is related to γεννημα, but where that word means “offspring, produce,” this word emphasizes the similarity resulting from common descent or culture.²⁰ It can describe either a time period or a set of common characteristics. Its four uses in 1:17 are clearly temporal, describing a cohort, those who live at the same period of time (chart):

Mat 1:17 So all the generations from Abraham to David *are* fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon *are* fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ *are* fourteen generations.

But a cohort, because of shared experiences and culture, often share the same characteristics, so the term comes to have a qualitative meaning alongside its temporal one. The four uses in this section (vv. 39, 41, 42, 45) seem to emphasize this qualitative character (“evil and adulterous,” “wicked”). This is a usage attested in the LXX, where the word translates the Hebrew word דור:

Psa 14:4 Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge? who eat up my people *as* they eat bread, and call not upon the LORD.

5 There were they in great fear: for God *is* in **the generation of the righteous**.

Psa 24:3 Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place?

4 He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity,

²⁰ See note on ch. 11 for full discussion.

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nor sworn deceitfully.

5 He shall receive the blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

6 This *is* **the generation of them that seek him**, that seek thy face, O Jacob.

In this usage, it describes the characteristics of those who belong to the “generation of vipers.”

Second, why does asking for a sign show that they are “evil and adulterous”? Because they are presuming that they have the right to sit in judgment on whether he is or is not the Messiah. By coming to Jesus in this way, they are offering him acceptance in their club. Similarly, Nicodemus in John 3 is inviting the Lord to join the Pharisees, based on his criticism of the Sadducees’ temple market in John 2. Like the Jews in Matthew 12, he and his colleagues thought that they were the ones to decide whether Jesus was legitimate. But the creature has no right to sit in approval over the creator.

We see the same dynamic in Joshua, the night before the battle of Jericho (chart).

Jos 5:13 And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, there stood a man over against him with his sword drawn in his hand: and Joshua went unto him, and said unto him, *Art* thou for us, or for our adversaries? 14 And he said, Nay; but *as* captain of the host of the LORD am I now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What saith my lord unto his servant?

Joshua’s initial position is that he is examining and approving the one who stands before him, but the Lord rejects that position. “Joshua, the question is not which side I’m on. It’s which side you’re on.”

Paul may have our Lord’s rebukes to the Pharisees in mind when he writes to the Corinthians,

1 Cor. 1:21 For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. 22 **For the Jews require a sign**, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: 23 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; 24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

We live in an age that is more Greek than Jewish. People are more likely to ask us for “wisdom” (logical proofs of Christianity) than for “signs.” But both are inappropriate. God’s way is neither signs nor wisdom, but simple preaching—the proclamation of the truth. If his Spirit is working in a needy heart, preaching is all that is needed—and if his Spirit is not working, all the signs and arguments in the world will have no effect.

and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: 40 For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.--The only sign he offers them is not an incidental magic

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trick, but something integral to his redemptive work, his resurrection from the dead.

The idea that resurrection would be an appropriate sign of the coming kingdom is based on the OT, and in particular, the prophet Ezekiel. In chapter 36, he promises the gift of the Spirit in the new covenant, and then in chapter 37 we find this promise (chart):

Ezek 37:12 Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. 13 And ye shall know that I *am* the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, 14 And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken *it*, and performed *it*, saith the LORD.

When the Lord died and arose, many others rose with him:

Matt 27:50 Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. 51 And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; 52 **And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose,** 53 And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.

So the idea that resurrection would herald the coming of the Messiah was a very Jewish one, but using Jonah emphasized the wickedness of the people to whom the sign was given. By citing Jonah, he implicitly compares his audience with Ninevites.

Throughout the book of Acts, the resurrection is central to every presentation of the gospel. The death of Christ by itself is not good news. It simply shows the power of our sin. It is his resurrection that shows that his sacrifice is successful, and our sin is gone.

It may be useful to digress here for a moment to counter an argument that is being made by Islamic apologists who attack the notion that our Lord truly died. They cite this verse and say, “See, Jesus’ “death” was like Jonah’s, but Jonah didn’t really die. He was alive while he was in the fish. So Jesus didn’t really die, either.” Should you encounter this argument, please call people’s attention to what the book of Jonah actually says:

Jon 2:1 Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, 2 And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; **out of the belly of hell שאול** cried I, and thou heardest my voice. . . . 6 I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from **corruption שְׁחָה [the pit]**, O LORD my God.

Jonah did not pray for deliverance from the fish’s belly. His prayer is a prayer of thanksgiving, reporting an *earlier* prayer for deliverance. That prayer came not from the belly of the fish, but from Sheol, in the grave. Jonah did indeed die. We know from the history of Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom (Luke 16) that people are conscious after death, and in that state he cried to the Lord, who brought him back to life and sent a great fish to snatch him from the bottom of the sea. When he finds himself alive again, in the fish, he prays a prayer of thanksgiving and praise,

and the Lord gives him a second chance.

41-42, OT Examples

Now the Lord draws their attention to two examples from the OT of people (in fact, Gentiles) who responded positively to the Word of God, unlike the Pharisees’ rejection of it (chart, Table 6). By citing examples about Gentiles, the Lord is “provoking” the Pharisees “to jealousy,” just as Moses predicted he would:

Deu 32:21 They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation. [quoted by Paul in Rom 10:19]

from Jonah 3	from 1 Kings 10
41 The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it:	42 The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it:
because οτι they repented at the preaching of Jonas ;	for οτι she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon ;
and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.	and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here.

Table 6: Two OT Lessons

The strong parallelism between the two citations encourages us to pay attention to the differences between them as well.

41 The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it:-- This is a very harsh statement. The men of Nineveh were Gentiles, yet the Lord says that they will sit in judgment over the Jewish leaders.

because they repented at the preaching of Jonas;--The first example comes from Jon 3 (chart):

Jon 3:4 And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. 5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. [The king of Nineveh:] 8 yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that *is* in their hands. 9 Who can tell *if* God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?

Jonah went to Nineveh and declared God’s coming judgment. The response of the people was to repent, leading to God’s withdrawing the threatened judgment.

Our Lord’s reference to Jonah helps us to understand the meaning of the command in the gospel to “repent.” Some people say that it refers simply to a change in our opinion about who Jesus is. But Jonah didn’t say, “Repent.” He simply warned of God’s coming judgment, and repentance—turning from wickedness and to the Lord—was the response. Repentance is not just an intellectual turning, but fleeing from the wrath of God to the refuge that he has provided. This is

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confirmed by how Paul motivates the call to repent:

Act 17:30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: 31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by *that* man whom he hath ordained; *whereof* he hath given assurance unto all *men*, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

Why must we repent? It is because judgment is coming. He reinforces this call by asserting the resurrection of the Savior, the “sign of Jonah.”

Note the contrast between “the sign of Jonah” (v. 39, his resurrection) and “the preaching of Jonah” (the warning of God’s judgment). The men of Nineveh knew of his resurrection: Luke 11:30 says that he was “a sign unto the Ninevites.” But that is not what brought them to repentance. It was the preaching, not the sign, that turned them, and the Pharisees’ failure to turn at the preaching of the Lord Jesus makes them inferior to the Gentiles of Nineveh.

and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.--The Lord has been traveling throughout the cities of Galilee. His message has the same flavor as that of Jonah:

Mat 4:17 From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Jonah was a flawed prophet whom God used in spite of himself. He originally disobeyed his commission, and when he finally went to Nineveh and saw his message bear fruit, instead of rejoicing, he protested. The Lord is “greater than Jonah,” perfectly obedient to the Father’s commission, and rejoicing when sinners turn to him.

If the men of Nineveh, pagans with no previous knowledge of God’s revelation, could repent at the preaching of Jonah, how much more should the Jewish leaders repent when confronted with our Lord’s teaching. They have been exposed to the message even before he began his ministry, under the preaching of John the Baptist:

Mat 3:1 In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, 2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. ... 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:

Yet there is no sign of repentance. They come to him with friendly words, asking for a sign (which implies that they have the authority to validate his ministry). They have not repented.

42 The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it:--In the same language, the Lord invokes another Gentile who will sit in judgment over the Jewish leaders: the Queen of Sheba, whose visit to Solomon is recorded in 1 Kings 10 (chart).

1Ki 10:1 And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD, she came to prove him with hard questions. 2 And she came to

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Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bare spices, and very much gold, and precious stones: and when she was come to Solomon, she communed with him of all that was in her heart.

Notice two differences between here example and that of Nineveh.

for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth—First, while Jonah went to Nineveh, the Queen came to Jerusalem. Recall our earlier distinction between preaching (in which the preacher has to seek out the lost), and teaching (in which sympathetic people come to the teacher to learn). The men of Nineveh are the prototype of the unevangelized, and Jonah represents our Lord going around the cities. The Queen of Sheba is the prototype of someone who has decided to follow the Lord, and who seeks him out for teaching, as in Matt 5. The rich gifts she brings with her, and the reverence she offers him, shows her submission to him.

1 Kin 10:3 And Solomon told her all her questions: there was not *any* thing hid from the king, which he told her not. 4 And when the queen of Sheba had seen all Solomon's wisdom, and the house that he had built, 5 And the meat of his table, and the sitting of his servants, and the attendance of his ministers, and their apparel, and his cupbearers, and his ascent by which he went up unto the house of the LORD; there was no more spirit in her. 6 And she said to the king, It was a true report that I heard in mine own land of thy acts and of thy wisdom. 7 Howbeit I believed not the words, until I came, and mine eyes had seen *it*: and, behold, the half was not told me: thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard. 8 Happy *are* thy men, happy *are* these thy servants, which stand continually before thee, *and* that hear thy wisdom. 9 Blessed be the LORD thy God, which delighted in thee, to set thee on the throne of Israel: because the LORD loved Israel for ever, therefore made he thee king, to do judgment and justice. 10 And she gave the king an hundred and twenty talents of gold, and of spices very great store, and precious stones: there came no more such abundance of spices as these which the queen of Sheba gave to king Solomon.

to hear the wisdom of Solomon;--The second contrast is between “preaching,” associated with Jonah, and “wisdom,” associated with Solomon and characteristic of godly teaching.

and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here.--Solomon was a flawed teacher. He violated many of his own proverbs with his self-indulgence; Ecclesiastes contains his own condemnation of the lifestyle that he led. Our Savior lived consistently with his own teaching.

Again, the Pharisees stand condemned by the contrast with the Queen of Sheba. She came from a far land, based on rumors of his teaching and in spite of inconsistencies in his own conduct. The Pharisees had repeated opportunities to hear the Lord directly, and could observe the consistency of his life.

43-45, Danger of Fleshly Reform

We must understand this paragraph in the context of the current episode with the Pharisees. This

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story of the man freed from an unclean spirit must reflect the condition of “this wicked generation.”

43 When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man,--The scribes and Pharisees would pride themselves on being free from demonic influence, scrupulously avoiding any uncleanness and any violation of the law. The demon is not said to be “cast out,” but has simply “gone out,” perhaps because the Pharisees’ fleshly efforts to avoid outward sin make the environment uncomfortable for him.

he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. 44 Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out;--We have here an insight into the nature of evil spirits. They desire to inhabit a body. Recall the demons in Matthew 8 (chart):

Mat 8:31 So the devils besought him, saying, If thou cast us out, suffer us to go away into the herd of swine.

Similarly, humans are designed to be occupied by a spirit—ideally, God’s Spirit, but if not, then other spirits are eager to take his place. Thus Paul writes of the unsaved in general,

Eph 2:1 And you *hath he quickened*, who were dead in trespasses and sins; 2 Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh **in the children of disobedience**:

and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished.--This is the condition of the scribes and Pharisees. They have exerted great fleshly effort to conform their lives to God’s law, and to all appearances they are unusually holy. But they are “empty,” void of the Holy Spirit promised under the New Covenant and available through the gospel that the Lord is offering.

Eze 36:25 Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. 26 A new heart **also** will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do *them*.

They have experienced the reformation of outward cleansing, but not the regeneration of the Spirit. In rejecting the mediator of the New Covenant, they are leaving their houses vacant, ready for a new Spirit to come in.

45 Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself,--As a result such a person is vulnerable to even worse demonic infestation than he was at the first. The initial demon that left was offended by superficial righteousness, but the “more wicked” spirits seek to exploit that fleshly righteousness with more subtle sins of hypocrisy and self-righteousness. It’s illustrative of this distinction that Saul of Tarsus, scrupulous about outward purity as a Pharisee, became aware of his sin when confronted with his covetousness (Rom 7:7), the last of the ten commandments and perhaps the most subtle.

and they enter in and dwell there: and the last *state* of that man is worse than the first.

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Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation.--The implication for the scribes and Pharisees is that their condition is even worse than that of the demoniacs whom the Lord has healed.

The point here seems to be that these “friendly” scribes and Pharisees are still part of the wrong family, still under demonic control. Because they are of the “generation of vipers” in the previous paragraph, they are an “evil and adulterous generation” in this one. They give an outward appearance of conformity to the law, but they are actually in great spiritual danger.

46-50, The Lord Takes the Offense

Since beginning this study, my understanding of the role of this last paragraph has changed. After comparing ch. 12 with ch. 13, and seeing how ch 12 is echoed in 15:1-28, I believe this paragraph is more closely related to 13:53-58 (chart,

	Ch. 12	Ch. 13
Public Rejection	1-45, the Pharisees reject the Lord	1-52, the Lord rejects unbelievers (by hiding his teaching in parables)
Private Rejection	46-50, the Lord rejects his family	53-58, his home town rejects the Lord

Table 7: *The Structure of Matthew 12-13*

Table 7). Thus 12:1-45 is a chiasm centered around Isaiah’s prophecy of the conversion of the Gentiles, not an alternation; the lower-right-hand box of Figure 3 should be deleted.

46 While he yet talked to the people, behold, his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him. 47 Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee.--This episode has deep significance, given what we have just read. Two details deserve our attention.

First, the focus is on his mother and his brethren. The previous two sections have played on the two words translated “generation”: γεννημα “offspring” (of vipers, v. 34) and γενεα “cohort” (evil, adulterous, and wicked, vv. 39, 41, 42, 45). We have seen that these terms describe the natural condition of all mankind, who belong to the seed of the serpent, and that even the Pharisees, the most disciplined of the Jews, belong to this group. Now there appear his mother, of whom he is the physical offspring (γεννημα), and his brethren, who belong to his physical cohort (γενεα). What is his relation to them?

Second, the note that his family was “without” indicates that at the time of this episode he is indoors (chart). It is only natural that when the Lord is addressing the large multitudes of the general public, he is outdoors, but he moves inside to a more private setting to address the disciples. We will see this in ch. 13:

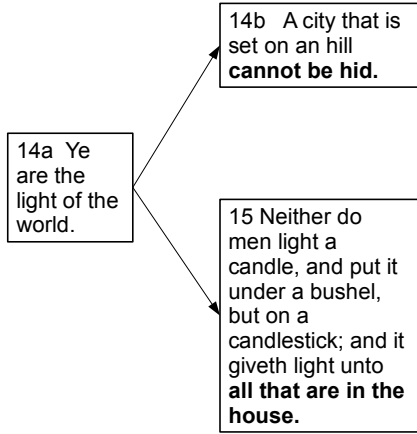
Mat 13:1 The same day went Jesus **out of the house**, and sat by the sea side. 2 And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, ... 36 Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went **into the house**: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field.

Again, when the Pharisees try to trap him on the question of divorce, he withdraws to the house

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to instruct the disciples:

Mar 10:2 And the Pharisees came to him, and asked him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife? tempting him. ... 10 And **in the house** his disciples asked him again of the same matter.



Recall our study of the Sermon on the Mount, and the parable of the lamp on the lampstand. the effectiveness of light (chart, Figure 9²¹). These parables point in two different directions (chart).

Figure 9: Two Kinds of Light

The city on a hill sheds light outward, to draw in unbelievers. The lamp gives light to those “that are in the house,” the community of believers.

Luke’s parallel suggests the same distinction (chart, Table 8). He reports another episode when the Lord used both the lessons from the OT and the saying about the light on a candlestick. (Remember that, like any frequent teacher, the Lord often repeated his illustrations.) Here he explicitly contrasts the outreach to Gentiles, illustrated by Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba, with the revelation granted to “they which come in.”

Against this background, it is interesting the Lord’s family chooses to stay outside of the house where he is teaching and seeks to call him out, rather than coming in to join those who rejoice in his revelation. We know that during his life the Lord’s brethren did not believe in him. Note

Extent	Matt 5:14-15	Luke 11:29-36
Outward, to all the world	14b A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.	29 And when the people were gathered thick together, he began to say, This is an evil generation: they seek a sign; and there shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet. 30 For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation. 31 The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with the men of this generation, and condemn them: for she came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon <i>is</i> here. 32 The men of Nineve shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas <i>is</i> here.
To the community	15 Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.	33 No man, when he hath lighted a candle, putteth <i>it</i> in a secret place, neither under a bushel, but on a candlestick, that they which come in may see the light.
Individual		34 The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light; but when <i>thine</i> eye is evil, thy body also <i>is</i> full of darkness. 35 Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness. 36 If thy whole body therefore <i>be</i> full of light, having no part dark, the whole shall be full of light, as when the bright shining of a candle doth give thee light.

Table 8: Luke’s Explanation of the Lamp on a Lampstand

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John's comment in John 7 (chart). The context is again one of Jewish opposition, as in 12:14:

Joh 7:1 After these things Jesus walked in Galilee: for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him.

Again, he is interacting with his brethren:

Joh 7:2 Now the Jews' feast of tabernacles was at hand. 3 His brethren therefore said unto him, Depart hence, and go into Judaea, that thy disciples also may see the works that thou doest. 4 For *there is* no man *that* doeth any thing in secret, and he himself seeketh to be known openly. If thou do these things, shew thyself to the world.

And again, we learn that they do not support him:

Joh 7:5 For **neither did his brethren believe in him.**

Perhaps in this case they are discouraging Mary from entering the house. They do not want to be seen as associating too closely with him, for fear that the establishment, which is growing increasingly hostile, will think they are his followers.²²

48 But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? 49 And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren!--Here the Lord clearly rejects his physical family in favor of God's spiritual family, made up of those who "do the will of my Father." He thus emphasizes the contrast with the "generation of vipers" and the "evil and adulterous generation."

50 For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.--The Lord uses the same expression here that he did in the Sermon on the Mount (chart),

Mat 7:21 Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.

It is noteworthy that he makes the criterion for entering heaven, and for being a member of his family, "do[ing] the will of [his] Father," not just believing. At first, this seems in tension with the notion of justification by grace through faith that Paul emphasizes so strongly:

Eph 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

But Paul sees that free salvation as resulting from repentance, which (as we have seen from the example of Nineveh) consists in turning from one's wicked works. He told the elders at Ephesus,

Act 20:20 I kept back nothing that was profitable *unto you*, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house, 21 Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

In addition, he saw true faith as inevitably leading to good works:

²² It is intriguing that the gospels use the imagery of entering "into the house" to communicate a similar idea to the one that Hebrew represents as going "without the camp," 13:13, a distinction that may bear further meditation.

Matthew 12

Eph 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

When he warned the Corinthians of the consequences of their carnality, his language was very much like that of our Lord in Matthew 7:

1Co 6:9 Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, 10 Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

If we would truly be the Lord's disciples, we must not hang back, ashamed of being associated too closely with him, as were his physical brethren. We must be willing to come "into the house" with him, leaving the world behind and identifying clearly as his disciples.

Notes

Saul and 12:31-32

It is interesting to compare the behavior of the Pharisees here with that of Saul of Tarsus before his salvation. When the Lord appears to him, he says,

Acts 26:14 And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? *it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.*

What were the pricks against which Saul was struggling?

His later testimony as a Christian shows that it is not the deliberate rejection of truth, as in the case of the Pharisees:

Act 23:1 And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.

Acts 26:9 I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Phil. 3:6 Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

Rather, the idiom is the same as that of Israel as an ox that will not yield to the yoke, see the notes on Matt 11 on the Lord's yoke. He represents himself as an unconverted Israelite whom the Lord brings to himself.

Generation of Vipers in the OT

A related expression (εκγονος ασπιδων offspring of asps) appears three times in the LXX of Isaiah as one translation for Hebrew words referring to serpents:

Isa. 11:8 And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the **cockatrice**' צפעני den. *Evidence of the Messiah's Genesis I dominion over the creeping things of the earth*

Isa. 14:29 Rejoice not thou, whole Palestina, because the rod of him that smote thee is broken: for out of the serpent's root shall come forth a **cockatrice** צפע, and his fruit *shall be* a fiery flying serpent. *Of the sequence of Gentile conquerors*

Isa. 30:6 The burden of the beasts of the south: into the land of trouble and anguish, from whence *come* the young and old lion, the viper and **fiery flying serpent** שרף מעופף, they will carry their riches upon the shoulders of young asses, and their treasures upon the bunches of camels, to a people *that shall not profit them.* *General characteristic of a*

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hostile and dangerous land

Is this a source for the Lord's expression? The Greek is different, the idiom is lacking in Hebrew, and it's not clear what such a reference would add to his accusation. So I'm preferring the interpretation in the body of the exposition, that he is bringing to mind the events of creation.

Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees

Scribes are associated with Pharisees in v. 38. Figure 10 shows the distribution of these terms, individually and jointly, throughout the book (data in file ScribesPhariseesSadducees.ods).

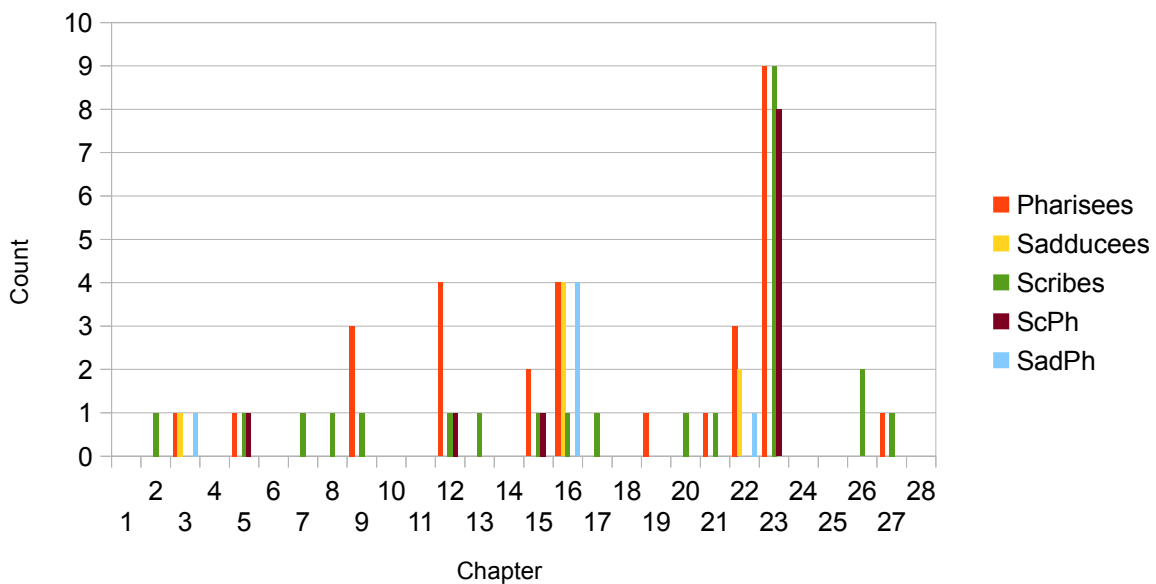


Figure 10: Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees in Matthew

Observations:

- The Sadducees and Scribes are never named in the same verse.
- Sadducees are distributed rather differently than the other two. Much less common—only in ch. 3 (rebuked by John, along with Pharisees), 16 (joined with Pharisees four times), and 22 (offering their challenge to the Lord, followed by Pharisees). They are not part of the general rebuke in ch. 23.
- 16:1 is the only place that the Sadducees and the Pharisees act in concert.
- Both sign requests are from joint committees (scribes and pharisees in ch. 12; sadducees and Pharisees in ch. 16)