

## Matthew 12B

- It's been a few weeks since we last studied in Matthew, so let's revisit what's going on in chapter 12
  - Chapter 12 is the turning point in Matthew's Gospel, the chapter where that generation of Israel loses the kingdom
    - By the time we reach the end of this chapter, Jesus will have withdrawn His offer of the Kingdom for their unbelief
    - And He will issue an ultimatum to the nation concerning His return
  - Meanwhile, the nation's rejection of Jesus altered Jesus' entire approach to ministry
    - We'll study those effects later at the conclusion of this chapter
    - But first, we need to finish Matthew's explanation for how and why that rejection moment happened
  - In Chapter 11 Matthew gave us the first major reason, which was the hard hearts of a people committed to pursuing self-righteousness
    - Now in Chapter 12, Matthew is showing us the second reason – one that involved the opposition of the religious leaders
    - That second reason was the Sabbath
    - Or more specifically, it was Jesus' refusal to acknowledge the authority of the Pharisees' endless list of Sabbath day rules
    - For that reason more than any other, the Pharisees conspired to have Jesus killed
- We might wonder why the Pharisees would be so upset with Jesus over something so minor
  - But in Jesus' day (and even still today), the Sabbath observance was something special for Jews; it was the law above all the rest
    - The rabbis called the Sabbath day Israel's "queen"
    - And because the rabbis were so enamored with the Sabbath, they gave it special attention in their rules

- There were over 1,500 rabbinical rules for Sabbath observance
- Which turned the day of rest into a complex maze of regulations bringing burden and worry
- For that reason, Jesus ignored and mocked the religious leaders' Sabbath rules
  - He did so to make clear that the Pharisees' rules weren't God's rules
  - In fact they weren't even in keeping with the spirit of God's law
- But the Pharisees depended on their system to maintain power over the people
  - So when Jesus openly rejected their Sabbath regulations, he infuriated the Pharisees
  - And ultimately, it became their chief reason to kill Him
- So with that background, let's return to Chapter 12

[Matt. 12:9](#) Departing from there, He went into their synagogue.

[Matt. 12:10](#) And a man was there whose hand was withered. And they questioned Jesus, asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" – so that they might accuse Him.

[Matt. 12:11](#) And He said to them, "What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out?"

[Matt. 12:12](#) "How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

[Matt. 12:13](#) Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand!" He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other.

[Matt. 12:14](#) But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.

- When I started this chapter, I mentioned that Matthew has assembled several examples of Sabbaths from among many that happened in the Galilee
  - He wanted to illustrate how absurd the Pharisees' Sabbath rules were but also how determined Jesus was to ignore them
    - Our second example takes place in a Galilean synagogue, perhaps the one in Capernaum

- While in Israel, our group stood in this synagogue...probably in the very place where Jesus spoke these words
- And on that Saturday, Jesus encounters a man with a withered hand, a deformity he probably possessed since birth
  - This type of infirmity was worse than it sounded
  - In that day if a man couldn't perform work with his hands, he was virtually useless and therefore likely destitute
  - And being unable to work in that day meant a life of poverty and insecurity and stigma as he depended on charity for support
- The man's presence in the synagogue on this day was not a coincidence
  - Jews often viewed a birth defect as a sign the person was under judgment from God because of his parents' sin or his own sin
  - Such a person would be looked down upon and even ostracized
  - So for this man to have secured a prominent seat in the synagogue on the occasion of Jesus' visit is most unusual
- Therefore, we must assume he gained entrance by the influence of powerful people
  - In other words, the Pharisees probably planted him in the congregation to entrap Jesus on the Sabbath
  - In fact, Matthew and Luke tell us that the Pharisees were hoping they could catch Jesus violating their rules for the Sabbath
- In Matthew's earlier example of Sabbath conflict, the Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of violating the Sabbath walking through a grain field
  - But that confrontation didn't go as they expected, so now they've clearly decided to go after Jesus Himself
    - In v.10 Matthew says the Pharisees ask Jesus if healing on the Sabbath was lawful
    - They were asking Jesus to render an opinion concerning one of their Sabbath rules
    - There was a rabbinical rule that prohibited healing on the Sabbath because it was considered work

- The Pharisees accused Jesus of violating this rule many times across the Gospels
- In this moment, we know the leaders didn't ask their question out of a sincere interest in Jesus' opinion
  - It's a trap...they've placed a sympathetic figure in front of Jesus and now they're daring Him to heal the man on the Sabbath
  - When Jesus performed the healing, they could declare Jesus guilty of violating the Sabbath
  - Jesus would be discredited before the people and He could be charged with the death penalty under Jewish law
- How does their accusation of breaking the Sabbath stand up against Scripture?
  - Simply put, it doesn't
  - The Pharisees' oral law forbid healing on the Sabbath, but God's Law says nothing specifically about healing
  - So there was no specific prohibition against healing in the Law
  - And when the Law is silent on a specific situation, we must fall back to applying general principles found in the Law
- So that's exactly what Jesus does here
  - He declines to debate the merits of their rabbinical rule against healing on the Sabbath
  - And instead, in vs.11-12 Jesus uses a very traditional *midrashnic* technique of answering a question with a question
  - And by His question, Jesus points the Pharisees' attention back to a principle found in God's Law
- Jesus asks the Pharisees how they would respond if one of their animals was in distress and in need of assistance on the Sabbath
  - Naturally, they would rescue the animal even on the Sabbath as an act of compassion
    - They wouldn't let the animal suffer even for a day, because the Law commands compassion for the weak and vulnerable

[Ex. 23:2](#) “You shall not follow the masses in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert justice;

[Ex. 23:3](#) nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute.

[Ex. 23:4](#) “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him.

[Ex. 23:5](#) “If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him.

[Ex. 23:6](#) “You shall not pervert the justice due to your needy brother in his dispute.

- The Law instructs Israel to show compassion for the weak at all times
  - It was always the right thing to do even on the Sabbath, even for the sake of an animal...even your enemy’s animal
  - And so Jesus says, surely if God’s law is concerned about the plight of animals, how much more the plight of people?
- Yet when the Pharisees turned from the needs of animals to the needs of people, they became *less* compassionate
  - The Pharisees taught that healing on the Sabbath was permitted only in life-or-death situations
  - So in less critical situations, as in the case of this crippled man, a healing had to wait for the next day
  - They were more focused on holding people to keeping their rules than on ministering to the needs of people
- Here again, we see an example of a principle we learned earlier
  - Any time keeping the Sabbath created unreasonable burdens on God’s people, then the Sabbath restriction was set aside
  - Because the goal of the Sabbath was rest – refreshment – not adding more burdens
- Jesus cites this principle of compassion, or “doing good” as He calls it, to defend his healing work on a Sabbath
  - Jesus says in v.12 that since showing compassion for an animal on the Sabbath was good, then showing compassion for a person is better

- And making that man wait even one more day longer for his healing wouldn't be compassionate, not if Jesus possessed the means to heal him now
- That would have meant enduring one more day of burden instead of rest
- And this man deserved as least as much compassion as an animal
- So with that, Jesus orders the man to stretch out his hand
  - And as the man does, it's restored – meaning it's returned to a healthy state, a miracle healing
  - The room probably erupted in astonishment as the man celebrated his freedom from his curse
  - And all the Pharisees can do at that point is slink out the door
- Before we move on, I want to draw your attention to the faith of the man Jesus healed
  - Matthew described this man's hand as withered, using a Greek word that literally translates as "dry", as in shrunken – a life-long condition
    - No doubt this man must have endured cruel jokes as a child and even as an adult
    - How many times do we imagine this man was taunted by other children who mocked him by telling him to stretch out his hand?
    - Or as an adult, how many times do we suppose this man was cursed or ridiculed by strangers because of his odd appearance?
  - So now imagine what went through this man's mind as Jesus asked him to stretch out his hand in that very public forum
    - I wonder if his mind went back to all that mocking
    - Did he wonder whether this too was a cruel joke?
  - The answer, of course, is no, because the man does as Jesus asks
    - And what led this man to obey Jesus? He had faith to believe that if he obeyed, the Lord would respond in mercy

- I'm sure he had heard of Jesus' healing ministry and knew of Jesus' power
- So when Jesus issued that call, the man responded in faith anticipating something good was going to happen
- The point I'm making is this...the man's healing required a response of faith to Jesus' call
  - Ask yourself what would have happened if he had hesitated to extend his hand perhaps out of doubt or fear?
    - What if he had asked for some assurance from Jesus that a healing would take place
    - What if he had waited to see if his hand was healed first before he took the risk of stretching it out
  - I believe the answer is he would have missed the miracle
    - This man's story gives us a second principle to consider in Scripture
    - The principle is that the Lord call us at times to take a step of faith which requires we trust Him if we are to see where He's leading us
    - If we answer that call, the Lord delights to reveal Himself to us in new ways, and in the process our walk is strengthened
    - If we refuse His call, we may never find out what was waiting for us on the other side of faith
- We see examples of this principle at work across the Bible
  - For example, God asked Abraham to take a step of faith...

**Gen. 12:1** Now the LORD said to Abram,

“Go forth from your country,  
 And from your relatives  
 And from your father's house,  
 To the land which I will show you;

- The Lord asked Abraham to move away from his home so that he might receive a new land as an inheritance

- Abraham didn't know where he was going or what he would find when he arrived
- And the only way he could know is if he agreed to go as God called him to do
- He first had to answer God's call by faith in order to learn the rest of the story
- We might ask how did Abraham even know which direction to begin walking? East? West? North? South?
  - But that question misses the point...the Lord isn't asking us to determine the path when He calls us to follow Him
  - He only expects us to obey in faith that He's taking us somewhere we need to go
  - And as we take a step of obedience, He will reveal the rest of the plan
  - Simply put, God can't steer a stationary object, so I imagine that as Abraham began to walk, then the Lord directed His steps
- Or consider the examples of Noah, Jacob, Gideon, Daniel or many others who God called to do something that seemed impossible
  - Noah had to build his impossibly large boat *before* the rain came if he expected to see God's mercy in the flood
  - Jacob had to leave his family and land *before* he knew how the Lord would bring him home
  - Gideon had to enter into battle with 300 men against many thousand *before* he could know how the Lord would grant victory
  - And Daniel had to make up his mind to defy the orders of the king of Babylon *before* he knew how the Lord would protect him
- And each of us will have moments in our walk with Christ when we must take a step of faith before we know how the Lord will complete the rest of the sentence
  - I am convinced that every believer lives every day of their life with a call from the Lord in some area of their life
    - That call remains in our heart and on our mind until we obey it



- Maybe it's a call to walk away from some sinful habit or a call to begin a new work of service or a call to support a ministry financially
- Perhaps the Lord is convicting you to become more involved in studying the Bible or in making prayer a bigger part of your life
- Maybe the Lord is calling you to walk away from your current life as He did Abraham or Jacob so you can serve Him in a new way
- But in every case, God issues the call, then He expects us to take a step of faith knowing He will give us the rest of the plan in time
  - If living this kind of life with Jesus sounds strange or impossible, then let me encourage you to consider it
  - Honestly, you'll never know the miracles you're missing because you're unwilling to take that step of faith
  - Missionary in Kenya...
- So let's say God is calling you to spend more time in study of His word
  - But you hesitate because you think you don't have the time in your schedule
  - Maybe the real problem is you don't have enough faith that God can give you back the time?
  - Bible study example...
- Or maybe you believe you don't have the budget to support that missionary in need or you don't have the skill to get involved in that ministry opportunity...
  - Or maybe God's telling you to put away some sin in your life yet you can't find the self-control to make it happen
  - Be encouraged tonight to put the Lord your God to the test...
- Take a step of faith, show God you're serious about obeying Him
  - And then watch what God does next to move you down that path
  - That's what *walking* with the Lord means...it's a step-by-step journey of obedience in response to God's call

- So back to our story, Jesus has won another battle over the Sabbath, but Matthew says the fight with the Pharisees was just beginning
  - In v.14 Matthew says the Pharisees began conspiring against Jesus seeking to destroy Him
    - They convened a meeting in which they discuss how to bring Jesus and His ministry to an end
    - John describes that meeting this way

**John 11:47** Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, "What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs.

**John 11:48** "If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

- Notice what concerned the Pharisees about Jesus
  - Were they concerned that Jesus might be a fraud? No
  - Were they concerned that Jesus was teaching false things to the people? No
- They were concerned that the people might believe Jesus' claims to be king *because* Jesus' claims were compelling
  - And if that happened, Jesus' rise to power would threaten the Romans' and lead to an end to the Pharisees' authority
  - Their response proves what we already knew about these men: they were not interested in the truth but only in preserving power
  - And therefore, they were willing to undertake any action – even murder – to maintain their system of power
- For that reason the Pharisees are the Bible's poster children for the sin of self-righteousness, which blinded that entire generation of Israel
  - Paul describes the problem this way

**Rom. 10:1** Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.

**Rom. 10:2** For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge.

**Rom. 10:3** For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

**Rom. 10:4** For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

- Paul had a heart to see his countrymen come to faith, but Paul said self-righteousness stood in their way
  - The Jewish people in Jesus' day pursued God earnestly and many had a sincere desire to please Him...
    - But their zealousness was not accompanied by knowledge, Paul says
    - The Greek word used here for knowledge means knowledge of the truth, as opposed to an opinion or an assumption
    - The Pharisees were very knowledgeable, but the knowledge accumulated wasn't of the truth
    - They were experts in their own system of rules
  - Their dedication to that system certainly made them appear pious but that righteous appearance was a facade
    - Paul says they held their beliefs sincerely...but they were sincerely wrong
    - And when you're running in the wrong direction, running faster won't make it better
  - But that's what the Israel of Jesus' day was doing...running as hard as they could in the wrong direction toward self righteousness
    - They believed that adhering to a rabbinical Judaism system would bring them righteousness
    - And Paul says once Israel's leaders had fallen in love with that system, they would not subject themselves to God's righteousness
    - Paul means that when God revealed that Israel could receive His righteousness through faith in Jesus, they turned it down
- Here we have the third and final principle for tonight... if you are determined to pursue God the wrong way, you don't get credit for effort

- Doing things we prefer in place of answering the call of God isn't obedience...it's just serving ourselves
  - We may assume God will be impressed with our self-sacrifice, but He sees it for what it is: self-validation, self-satisfaction, self-righteousness
  - We're like Pharisees, committed to a religious system of our own making rather than to a relationship rooted in God's word
- Let's face it, there's a seductive quality to systems of self-righteousness
  - Self-righteousness appeals because it places us in the driver's seat and allows us to feel good when we achieve difficult things
  - And the more difficult we can make our system, the more we believe we are worthy of receiving God's praise
  - That's why Pharisaic Judaism was motivated to keep adding rules
  - As they made pursuing self-righteousness increasingly more difficult, they judged themselves that much more worthy of God's praise
- So when Jesus showed up condemning the Pharisees' system rather than congratulating them for it, the Pharisees couldn't accept it
  - They were convinced the Messiah, when He came for Israel, would have praised the Pharisees for their hard work and pious lifestyle
  - They expected gold stars on their report card, yet Jesus gave them an "F"
  - So as He rejected them, they rejected Him
- But true righteousness which comes by faith understands that the Lord has already done the hard work, a work we could never do
  - Jesus offered Himself as a spotless, sinless sacrifice for us and gave us credit for His sinless life lived on Earth
    - So now that Christ has done that work for us, we have nothing left to contribute...as Jesus said, it is finished
    - That's why our faith in Christ brings us liberty and freedom from the Law

- Because Jesus kept the Law, so now we have received full credit for keeping the Law through our faith in Him
- As Paul said:

**2Cor. 5:21** He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

- Can you do better than perfection? Can you keep more of the Law than Jesus did on your behalf? Certainly not
  - Can you produce in yourself a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness you received from Christ by faith? Impossible

**Gal. 3:3** Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

- So don't waste time trying
- Don't turn your walk with Christ into a pursuit of self-righteousness
- If you allow your heart be tempted into a pursuit of self-righteousness, you are throwing away the freedom Christ won for you

**Col. 2:20** If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as,

**Col. 2:21** "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!"

**Col. 2:22** (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?

**Col. 2:23** These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

- As believers, we need to understand where our righteousness comes from and where it doesn't
  - From the moment of our confession in Christ, we become perfect in our spirit made so by God's Spirit
    - Which is why Paul couldn't understand how the Galatians thought they could improve their standing by works of flesh

- Are you walking with Christ that way?
- Do you think God is more pleased with you because you take burdens upon yourself?
  - Maybe you try to keep a Sabbath or observe certain other works of the Law given to Israel
  - Perhaps you observe them for your own edification, which is fine
  - But if you observe them because you think doing so will make you more righteous or pleasing to God, then you are pursuing self-righteousness
  - And if you look down your nose at other Christians who refuse to share in your convictions, then you're thinking like a Pharisee
- We don't want to rest in our own works of piety, even if those works come straight out of the Bible
  - We want to forever rest in Christ's work, knowing that we have nothing whatsoever to offer toward our own righteousness
  - That's what we mean here when we say we want to help believers grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ
- It means helping people learn how to move away from works of self-righteousness and toward greater reliance on Christ's work
  - We want to apply these three principles:
    - We seek ways to relieve burdens and increase compassion, not merely enforce rule-keeping
    - We want to encourage steps of faith in answer to God's call so that we might all experience more of the Lord's grace in our lives
    - And we want to put away any pursuit of self-righteousness that may impede our walk of faith
- That's what growing in the grace of God looks like, and it always looks radical and even threatening to the world – just as it did in Christ's day