

MATTHEW 12-13

The tension between Jesus and the religious authorities continues to escalate. Their attempts to discredit him are failing, and so they are working on a strategy to positively destroy him. Jesus continues to escalate his fighting rhetoric. In situations of conflict and tension, people have less opportunity to stay on the fence. They must choose sides. Good and evil are at play. Sadly, it becomes us against them. There is some of this going on in the rhetoric back and forth. There is the devil and God, there are the righteous and the wicked, there is heaven and hell. What is radical in Jesus is who falls in which category. Those who in society are seen as the holy, righteous and faithful, are condemned by Jesus as liable to divine judgment. Many of those who are judged by the religious as bad or evil, are judged otherwise by Jesus. Even if they fail to fulfill the letter of the law, they have more genuine hearts and are open to Jesus and his vision.

12: 1-14 – Lord of the Sabbath

Jesus is in conflict with the religious authorities about one of the most important commandments. Not only is Jesus arguing that human needs come before the requirements of the letter of the law, but he is arguing that this is the intended purpose of the law. People come before rules. Jesus quotes the same scripture as he did in 9:13 - "I desire mercy and not sacrifice". The political implications of all this, however, are even more significant. The example he uses (of King David) not only makes a link between Jesus and David (and therefore of Jesus' claim to be Messiah-King), but of the fact that the priests in David's time were secretly supporting David's bid to become king against the then king Saul. This is a judgment against the religious leaders of Jesus' day who are not supporting him. The son of man, we're told, is Lord (has authority) over the Sabbath. In other words, he has authority to interpret God's will above anyone else. Even the temple (the sacrificial religious system at the heart of Israel's faith) is subservient to Jesus. Already we are being given a glimpse by Matthew at what will be the key charge against Jesus that will cause his execution (his threats against the temple).

12: 15-21 – Jesus the Messiah-Servant

The passage quoted here (from Isaiah 42) is part of a larger section of Isaiah that describes the Messiah as a servant – gentle, compassionate, committed to peace, absorbing the abuse and violence of hatred, and the sin of others, without striking back. There is also a prediction of the mission to the gentiles.

12: 22-50 – Having to choose sides and being part of Jesus' family

This section begins by the religious authorities once again accusing Jesus of having powers inspired by Satan. Jesus contradicts this claim in several ways, and ends by making a damning statement – those who choose against him, choose against the Holy Spirit. This is unforgivable because the Holy Spirit is the gateway to God, to God's forgiveness and renewal, to genuine hope for Israel, for the world, for eternity. To cut oneself off from Jesus is to cut oneself off from life. Hence, the unforgivable sin. It's not

unforgivable because God refuses to forgive. It is unforgivable because people make choices to cut themselves off from God. No one who turns to God in humble repentance would be refused.

(33-36) Words and actions come from deeper places within us. As much as we'd like to think that a careless statement means little or nothing, the truth is, we are surprised at how deeply hatred, maliciousness, jealousy, indifference, contempt, bitterness, etc. live in us. Jesus' world is very different than our world. In his world people are living their extremity of emotion and feeling on the surface. Times are desperate and conflicted. People aren't given the option of sitting on the fence. They have to make choices. It's as basic as right and wrong, good and evil. Choosing against Jesus is the road to evil and destruction. Whether people are genuinely ignorant or willfully ignorant or just plain hateful, is hard to distinguish sometimes. Whether people truly believe that Jesus' program cannot work, and that God has ordained another approach – i.e. violent, militant opposition to Israel's enemies – is hard to know. The fact is that many people, especially the leaders of Israel, were intent on getting more land, more security, more status, and they were willing to fight and kill for it. Is this not the work of Satan?

(38-42) Jesus offers two examples to point to who he is and what will happen. Jonah is a sign of his death and resurrection on the third day. It is also a sign of judgment, for the wicked Assyrian (gentile) city of Nineveh repented and was saved in Jonah's day. Israel is not repenting (turning and following Jesus) and is, therefore, doomed. Jesus is also greater than Solomon and all his wisdom. Solomon was the one who also built the first great temple. Jesus is the replacement of the temple and the religion it represents as defined by the religious establishment. Clearly, Jesus was pushing all the right buttons(!) which would inflame the religious leaders. Given the crowds that were following Jesus, he had to be dealt with.

(43-45) Israel had known revolution before. They had got rid of their enemies before. But what had replaced it all? The religion of the Pharisees and the state of the people shows that their spiritual condition as a nation is worse than it has ever been. Jesus is trying to show them a way to genuine transformation to become true light.

(46-50) It has come down to this: Jesus' true family are those who are his followers. There is no room in such a conflicted context for any ambiguity. Having said this, the gospel writer and readers know how the story ends. Jesus' biological family become part of the earliest Christian community upon Jesus' resurrection. His mother, brothers and sisters become key leaders and members of that community. Even though initially they were somewhat antagonistic or questioning of what he was doing and the claims made about him, they come around and become truly Jesus' family.

13: 1-58 Key parables of the kingdom and popular response to them

The Parable of the Sower – Here we have a description in story form of how different people respond to Jesus' message and the spiritual psychology that goes on in them. Satan is an active player in all this. Today we would leave it more to mystery as to why people do not respond to the call of God through Jesus. How can some people live

careless lives, indifferent to their need for God, for grace and compassion, for living committed lives to peace and goodness? Sometimes we can explain some things. Other times we cannot.

Jesus describes four kinds of people. In one kind of person, the gospel never has a chance to take root. The words are heard, but that's as far as it goes. Another kind of person not only hears the word, but something of the word takes root. But then trouble comes, and faith is tested. The person loses her faith or it becomes inconsequential. A third kind of person is one in whom the word also takes some root. But rather than trouble, it is the worries and concerns that come with living out their ambition. They become distracted by life's many demands and preoccupations. There is little left to cultivate and grow the roots that have begun to grow. And so, faith falls away or becomes inconsequential here also. Finally, there is a category of person who not only hears the word, but in whom the word takes root. And further, the root grows and begins to bear fruit. People are different and so the quantity of fruit is different. What matters is not the quantity, but the fact that fruit is being born.

The parable of the weeds among the wheat is another story attempting to explain why things are the way they are among people. In this case, though, there is a sense that people are people within families and within communities. And even though people live and work together, play and laugh together, they are not always on the same page. But only God knows peoples' hearts and the work that may be happening secretly. It is not for us to execute the judgments of God. If we try to become God's agents of judgment, we will end up damaging the very cause we want to uphold. Remember in chapter 7 that Jesus said we should not be in the business of judging others. We become hypocrites inevitably, and then we serve Satan rather than God. In making judgments we always end up accentuating the evil in others and downplaying the evil in us.

Other parables of Jesus include parables of how little seeds can be the cause of incredible growth in time. That's how God's kingdom must come, not by violent or forceful means, but by quiet and gentle acts of compassion and forgiveness. Finally, there are parables about the importance of making choices and establishing priorities. If the kingdom of heaven matters to us and following Christ is of vital importance in our lives, we will so organize our lives and prioritize our time, money, efforts and so forth, to maximize the growth of the kingdom in us.

Parables, like the rest of Jesus' ministry, are a source of division and conflict. Some people shut themselves off and refuse to try to comprehend the message. They claim ignorance, or lack of understanding as an excuse. Others, however, are hungry, and keep following Jesus toward greater and greater understanding. Add to this the scandal of Jesus' pedigree. Everybody knows where he has come from, especially those of his hometown. He is just an ordinary peasant with an extraordinary set of claims about himself and his path for Israel. He is either inspired by Satan or is a lunatic. They will have none of it. They shut themselves off from the Holy Spirit (the unforgivable sin). Jesus, like God can only work where there is genuine openness to him.