



The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Twelve

VII. Matthew 11:2-12:50 - Opposition to the Messiah Emerges (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Twelve

One Sabbath day the disciples were seen picking and eating grains of corn. The Pharisees were upset that the disciples were violating the Sabbath as this was considered work. However, Jesus demonstrated from an account in Scripture that God created the law, in this case the Sabbath law, for the benefit of mankind and that he was Lord of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath controversy continues when Jesus heals a man with a withered hand in a synagogue in full view of the religious leaders. They first asked the question whether it was right to cure sickness on a Sabbath so Jesus used the analogy that these men would rescue a trapped sheep on the Sabbath so they should be prepared to do even more for a person.

By using the longest direct quotation from Isaiah in the Gospel, Jesus indicates that he was the 'suffering servant' of God, sent to his people in order to bear their afflictions and turn them back to God.

When called upon to cure a demon possessed man that could not see or speak, Jesus did so but was then criticised by the Pharisees, who claimed he was using demonic power in order to perform such signs. Jesus used reasoned argument to show that if he were an agent of Satan and was casting out demons, then the kingdom of Satan would be working against itself and would therefore collapse. Thus his actions could only have been in accordance with the will of God.

Jesus uses the analogy that it takes a good tree to bear good fruit and that a bad tree can only bear bad fruit to describe how a person's true character can be judged. Therefore, no matter what a person may appear to be outwardly or what they may say, they can only produce Kingdom fruit, their good works to match their language, if they are genuine.

Despite all the miracles that Jesus had performed in their presence, the religious leaders asked him for a sign from heaven to show that he was the Messiah. Jesus judged that they were simply trying to trick him so he offered no specific sign other than that of the prophet Jonah. That is, that he must spend three days in the bowels of the earth, just as Jonah had done in the great fish, as a sign that Jesus was the Messiah.

Jesus warned people that evil spirits can return to dwell within a person who has been cleansed unless they guard their hearts and live a Kingdom life in order to prevent this from happening. When such an evil spirit does return it will dominate the person with even greater power than it did previously.

While Jesus was saying these things, his mother and brothers came to where he was but remained outside. When this was made known to Jesus he stated that his true family were those who would do the will of God.

VII.b Matthew 12:1-45 - Confrontations with the Pharisees

The Pharisees accuse Jesus of violating the Sabbath (vv.1-14), suggest he is in league with Satan (vv.22-37), and demand a cosmic sign (vv.38-42). Jesus vindicates himself as lord of the Sabbath (v.8), divine servant of justice (v.18), and the Spirit-empowered inaugurator of the Kingdom of God (v.28). Judgment will come upon the hard-hearted blasphemers (vv.30-45), for it is only those who follow Jesus who are his true family, refer to vv.46-50.

VII.b.i Matthew 12:1-8 - Plucking Grain on the Sabbath

Jesus' disciples were seen plucking and eating corn from a field on a Sabbath, a legal activity on any other day but not on a Sabbath as the Pharisees considered their activity illegal work. They challenged Jesus over this as he had responsibility for his disciples' actions.

Jesus countered their complaints using King David as an example of one who broke a commandment of God when he was hungry and was not admonished by God for doing so. Jesus point is that God created the Sabbath for the benefit of mankind, not mankind for the Sabbath. He also stated that he was Lord of the Sabbath. Thereby, claiming his deity and right to allow any activity he saw fit without it being contrary to the law.

¹ At that time Jesus went through the cornfields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.

Matthew 12:1

At that time Jesus is often used to link an account with a previous incident showing that his disciples in this account were not the apostles who were still on their first solo mission.

On the Sabbath. God had given specific instructions about the sanctity of this day in the fourth commandment: <<*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a*

sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it>> (Exodus 20:8-11). Its purpose was to allow both man and beast to rest and to spend time honouring God without the distractions that work often brings.

Pluck heads of grain. The edges of a field were not normally harvested or the workers sent back over the ground to pick up any produce that was missed, so that the poor and hungry, foreigners, orphans, and widows could gather food for themselves: <<*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest>>* (Leviticus 19:9), and: <<*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God>>* (Leviticus 23:22). This law showed the compassionate nature of God for those in need and it encouraged compassion from the land owners who correctly interpreted the law: <<*Then Boaz said to Ruth, ‘Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn’>>* (Ruth 2:8-9).

This account provides something for believers today to consider. What they do is so often being watched by others who are ready to pounce on anything that they believe to be contrary to the Gospel. When anything that disciples are doing is right and they are falsely accused, they should seek to persuade their opponents with sound reasoning, just as Jesus will do here. When they do things that are wrong and are caught out, they should not try to justify it but admit their guilt. To do otherwise would be hypocrisy.

² When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, ‘Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.’

Matthew 12:2

Pharisees were a laymen’s fellowship, popular with the common people and connected to local synagogues, chiefly characterised by adherence to extensive extra-biblical traditions, which they rigorously obeyed as a means of applying the law to daily life. They wielded significant power and influence in the lives of ordinary Jews. Many were zealous and pious, but there were others that had a reputation of being self-seeking and domineering.

Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath. As their teacher, Jesus had responsibility for the actions of his disciples; therefore the accusations were levelled at him. Picking even small amounts of grain was seen as work under Pharisaic tradition and therefore unlawful, but it did not contravene the actual code or intent of God’s law.

God's Word needs to be taken for what it actually means and, although it may need interpreting and teaching to others, it should not be added to: <<*Do not add to his words, or else he will rebuke you, and you will be found a liar*>> (Proverbs 30:6), or have parts of it omitted to suit human needs, for the consequences can be dire: <<*if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book*>> (Revelation 22:19).

These Pharisees provide a good example if one wants to extrapolate the letter of the law; what they miss is the law's intention. Moses explicitly forbade work on the Sabbath, and gleaning from another's field could certainly be regarded as work, as a form of reaping, prohibited in Mishnah Shabbat 7:2. Essenes, the strictest Jewish Sabbath observers forbade so much as scooping up drinking water in a vessel. Yet just as Pharisees could disagree among themselves on some details of Sabbath law, a Jewish teacher who rejected Pharisaic tradition could have interpreted the law quite differently from the Pharisees, just as Jesus did. Whereas the law forbade preparing food on the Sabbath, it certainly did not forbid eating it; indeed Jewish tradition prohibited fasting on the Sabbath. Here Jesus is not a lawbreaker. Rather, the fact that his opponents wished to kill him by the end of the narrative indicates their own unfaithfulness to the law.

What this and the next Sabbath controversy teaches is a lesson that is often forgotten in the modern church, where leaders are more intent on following their traditions than they are on the correct teaching and application of the bible. For example, some people are discriminated against for being divorced or because of their sexuality. At times, sin is overlooked in preference to teaching biblical values, if the latter would put people off attending church and thereby damaging the church's income stream. If people are taught to live their lives by the will of God then all the rest will sort itself out.

³ He said to them, 'Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?' ⁴ He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests.

Matthew 12:3-4

Have you not read. Jesus was speaking to men who prided themselves on their knowledge and application of Scripture. Such a statement was a rebuke and would have been received as an insult. What Jesus clearly intended is that he is telling these people they have failed to understand God's Word and its contextual application.

What David did. The account referred to is given in 1 Samuel 21:1-6, which tells that David was fleeing from King Saul, who was seeking to kill him unjustly. David arrived at Nob hungry and went to the priest to ask him for bread. There was none there except that which was consecrated to God and legal only for priests to eat. Yet the priest gave it to David on the condition that David would confirm that he and his men were ceremonially clean.

He and his companions were hungry. David was actually travelling alone, which raises two points:

1. Was Jesus mistaken about Scripture? The answer is no as indicated by: <<David said to the priest Ahimelech, 'The king has charged me with a matter, and said to me, "No one must know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you." I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place>> (1 Samuel 21:2). David later met up with his companions.
2. David lied to the priest about the king's charge and yet did not receive a rebuke from God at the time or by Jesus here. This should not be taken as carte blanche for being untruthful, even in dire situations, but it does show that God understands and forgives human indiscretion and weakness.

Ate the bread of the Presence. Twelve loaves of bread, representing God's covenant with the twelve tribes of Israel, were to be baked and placed in the tabernacle on each Sabbath as an offering. The bread it replaced was only to be eaten by the priests: <<You shall take choice flour, and bake twelve loaves of it; two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. You shall place them in two rows, six in a row, on the table of pure gold. You shall put pure frankincense with each row, to be a token offering for the bread, as an offering by fire to the Lord. Every sabbath day Aaron shall set them in order before the Lord regularly as a commitment of the people of Israel, as a covenant for ever. They shall be for Aaron and his descendants, who shall eat them in a holy place, for they are most holy portions for him from the offerings by fire to the Lord, a perpetual due>> (Leviticus 24:5-9), but Scripture does not condemn David for eating the bread during his escape from Saul. The law was intended to serve God's people, rather than God's people being intended to serve the law: <<Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath>> (Mark 2:27).

By using a biblical narrative rather than a legal instruction, Jesus gives a good comparison as to how Scripture should be interpreted. When believers today fail to take into account the nature of many of Jesus' teachings, which are often radical, succinct statements usually unqualified, by comparing them with the narratives such as Jesus' relative patience with his disciples in not repudiating them, they repeat the mistake of Jesus' opponents, except that Jesus' opponents were more justified in their mistake, since modern day believers often treat passages as law texts that are not even legal statements.

⁵ Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and yet are guiltless?

Matthew 12:5

The fact that priests, in carrying out their duties, had to work on and thus break the Sabbath, but were guiltless in doing so, shows that God made allowances within the law for that which was considered essential in the service of God. Some laws even required work on a Sabbath, such as the eighth day circumcision law: <<Moses gave you circumcision (it is, of course, not from Moses, but from the patriarchs), and you circumcise a man on the sabbath. If a man receives

circumcision on the sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man's whole body on the sabbath?>> (John 7:22-23).

⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.

Matthew 12:6

Something greater. The Sabbath points to Christ (see v.8) and to the 'rest' he gives from the impossible task of earning salvation by good works: <<*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest*>> (Matthew 11:28).

That Jesus is greater than the temple places him above the religious establishment that ruled over the people of Israel.

⁷ But if you had known what this means, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice", you would not have condemned the guiltless.

Matthew 12:7

If you had known what this means. Once again, Jesus is critical of the religious leaders for not understanding the Scriptures for it was their responsibility to teach them to the people of God.

I desire mercy, and not sacrifice is a quotation from Hosea 6:6. Sacrifice summarised observance of religious rituals, but more important to God was mercy, which is the Septuagint rendering of Hebrew *hesed*, meaning steadfast love, and would have led the Pharisees to care for these sinners in the way that Jesus did. Jesus would challenge them on a number of occasions over their lack of compassion for their own people: <<*Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners*>> (Matthew 9:13), and: <<*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others*>> (Matthew 23:23). Jesus was showing mercy by forgiving the sins of those who would accept him as the Christ of God.

⁸ For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.'

Matthew 12:8

The Son of Man is Jesus' favourite self designation and is frequently used in Scripture. Refer to comments made on Matthew 8:20.

The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath. Jesus does not challenge the Sabbath law itself but rather the Pharisees' interpretation of it. As Messiah, Jesus authoritatively interprets every aspect of the law as he taught during the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:17-48, and here points out the Pharisees' blindness to the actual intent of the Sabbath, which was to bring rest and well-being. This final argument in response to the Pharisees' challenge (v.2) is the decisive argument – that because of who Jesus is, he has the authority to interpret the law.

VII.b.ii Matthew 12:9-14 - The Man with a Withered Hand

In a second Sabbath controversy: see vv.1-8, Luke 13:10-17, Luke 14:1-6 and John 5:1-13 for others, Jesus exercises his power and authority to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus often demonstrated clear links between his power and authority.

⁹ He left that place and entered their synagogue; ¹⁰ a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, ‘Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?’ so that they might accuse him.

Matthew 12:9-10

He left that place and entered their synagogue. Here in Matthew it is recorded that the following healing took place immediately after the incident with the disciples picking corn, whereas Luke records it as taking place on a different Sabbath: <<*On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered*>> (Luke 6:6). Opponents of the Gospel like to see this as one of several discrepancies in the accounts of Jesus’ ministry, failing to see that it makes no difference to the overall account whether they occurred on the same day or not. There is clearly an inaccuracy of minor detail in one of the accounts but it should not be used to try to denigrate either that Gospel writer’s credibility or the overall Gospel message that the Synoptics portray as a whole.

Entered their synagogue. Although he had just had a dispute with the Pharisees, Jesus would not be put off going in to worship in their synagogue. This was Jesus’ normal practice on a Sabbath for, as a devout Jew, he kept the law. It was also the main meeting place where he would find his target audience, the lost sheep of Israel.

Is it lawful. Jesus had made himself fully subject to the law: <<*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children*>> (Galatians 4:4-5), but he was never subject to the rule of the elders and he would go on to show that what he did complied with the correct interpretation of the law.

To cure on the Sabbath. In rabbinic teaching, numerous regulations defined minute categories of ‘work’ that were prohibited on the Sabbath, but these legalistic regulations were never God’s intention for the OT law. They failed to ask a crucial question of themselves: ‘Would God have permitted this healing to take place if it contravened his own instruction on not doing such things on the Sabbath?’ There are 39 things prohibited on the Sabbath in Mishnah, Shabbat 7.2.

Jesus’ opponents believed that the Sabbath could be broken only in extreme cases of life and death. Since the life of the man with the withered hand was not in danger, they believed his healing should wait until after the Sabbath.

Jerome comments that, according to the Hebrew version of this Gospel, the man was a bricklayer and his disability prevented him from working. This

makes Jesus' actions more than just an act of compassion, it becomes one of necessity else this man would have had to beg rather than work for a living.

So that they might accuse him. The Pharisees and religious leaders showed no interest in having this man healed. They were intent on finding fault with Jesus and would use even this poor man's plight as a trap for Jesus, as was also the case in: <<*Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said*>> (Mark 12:13).

¹¹ He said to them, 'Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? ¹² How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.'

Matthew 12:11-12

Even if they had only one sheep it would not be a significant loss to men like these Pharisees in financial terms, yet Jesus knows they would do what was necessary to preserve its life. If men care for beasts they should care for humans even more so, and it is to the ultimate benefit of people for them to do so, as noted by Paul: <<*For it is written in the law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.' Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever ploughs should plough in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop*>> (1 Corinthians 9:9-10).

How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep. Jesus contrasts the value of an animal with that of a human, as he did earlier to birds: <<*So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows*>> (Matthew 10:31). Refer also to comments made on Matthew 6:26. Jesus asserts that the higher principle is not simply refraining from activity on the Sabbath but doing good on the Sabbath.

So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Jesus' response is categorical after responding to their question in a way that faced them with their own lifestyle choices. Their failure to accept what they would do for a sheep in the face of condemning Jesus for healing a man is worse than hypocrisy. In fact, it shamed them: <<*When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing*>> (Luke 13:17).

This was a typical scenario that might face any man on a Sabbath. None would choose to let a prized animal die because it was the Sabbath but they protest at the healing of a human. Such was the hypocrisy of these people.

¹³ Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other.

Matthew 12:13

Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' Jesus clearly did nothing that could be considered work, not even laying his hand on the man. The man only

stretched out his hand and surely that would not constitute work even under the strictest interpretations. Clearly, the only one doing any work here was God. Does that make him a law breaker?

The deeper message here is that there is no one who can do more than to stretch out their hand to Jesus in faith in order for him to restore the things in their lives that have become withered through the general neglect of God that occurs through many people's lifestyle choices.

It was restored, as sound as the other. The miracle confirms Jesus' authority to interpret laws relating to the Sabbath (vv.1-12), and further validates his claim to be the messianic Son of Man (v.8).

¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

Matthew 12:14

Conspired against him. The religious leaders see clearly that Jesus' claim concerning authority to interpret the law was in fact a claim to messianic authority, which they judged to be a heresy worthy of death. David had experienced the same treatment from his opponents: <<***For my enemies speak concerning me, and those who watch for my life consult together***>> (Psalm 71:10), while for Joseph it was his brothers who wanted rid of him: <<***They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him***>> (Genesis 37:18).

Their intent to destroy him, whether this involved a clear intention to kill him from the outset or simply to destroy his reputation, shows that they did not have the law of God written on their own hearts! The most conservative Pharisaic school Shammai did forbid praying for healing on the Sabbath, whereas the school of Hillel did not, yet nowhere in their rules did they advocate harming those that disagreed with them, for that would have been in breach of the very law they were trying to defend. Everyone was expected to keep the royal law: <<***You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord***>> (Leviticus 19:18), and these men were supposed to set an example to others.

The subsequent plot to kill Jesus seems less to do with any interpretation of the law or indeed his perceived blasphemy, for the evidence of his healing and his teaching that showed he honoured God the Father above all else would dispute their claims. It seems more their fear of Jesus' popularity and the impact that would have on their own powerbase that was the real issue that faced them.

VII.b.iii Matthew 12:15-21 - God's Chosen Servant

After continuing with more miraculous healings, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah, aligning himself with the promised messianic servant of God, who was to come to his people in order to turn them back to God.

¹⁵ When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them,

Matthew 12:15

When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Jesus was not trying to escape all opposition but often did so to prevent its escalation until the time would come for his predicted betrayal and death. Examples of such withdrawals are: <<*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee*>> (Matthew 4:12), and: <<*Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands. He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptising earlier, and he remained there*>> (John 10:39-40). It is also clear that he did not run and hide but allowed the crowds to follow him in order that he could continue in his work.

Many crowds followed him rather than following the Pharisees who had left the meeting ahead of him. This would not have helped their mood and made them even more determined in their plotting; such is the will of the hardened heart.

He cured all of them probably refers to salvation as well as physical healing and spiritual cleansing. Matthew does not mention these crowds being Jesus' disciples but there were clearly elements of faith present for the healings to occur.

¹⁶ and he ordered them not to make him known.

Matthew 12:16

He ordered them not to make him known. Jesus carefully avoided stirring up a misunderstanding of his messianic identity. Although miracles attest to the authenticity of his message concerning the Kingdom's arrival, he did not want to draw crowds who would come simply for the sake of miracles. For other instances of what some have called the 'messianic secret', Matthew records: <<*And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, 'See that no one knows of this'*>> (Matthew 9:30), <<*Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah*>> (Matthew 16:20), and: <<*As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead'*>> (Matthew 17:9).

¹⁷ This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

Matthew 12:17

To fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah. Matthew's typical fulfilment formula, refer to comments made on Matthew 1:22, introduces his longest OT quotation from Isaiah 42:1-4. It comes from the 'Servant Songs' recorded throughout Isaiah Chapters 42-53, in which the 'servant' represents alternately the nation of Israel and the gentle, Spirit-endowed, suffering servant, whose mission is to bring justice to the nations. The nation Israel, in Isaiah Chapter 42 fails in its mission but the true servant of God will triumph eternally.

¹⁸ 'Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,

- and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
- 19 He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
- 20 He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smouldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
- 21 And in his name the Gentiles will hope.'

Matthew 12:18-21

Here is my servant shows that God knew the Messiah would submit to the will of the Father: <<*Then I said, "See, God, I have come to do your will, O God"*>> (Hebrews 10:7a), for: <<*Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered*>> (Hebrews 5:8).

My servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved. The Father expresses the same delight in his Son at Jesus' baptism: <<*And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'*>> (Matthew 3:17), as well as at his transfiguration: <<*While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'*>> (Matthew 17:5).

That he was chosen by God is important: <<*Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said: 'I have set the crown on one who is mighty, I have exalted one chosen from the people'*>> (Psalm 89:19), for he is then able to choose those to follow his Son: <<*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love*>> (Ephesians 1:3-4).

I will put my Spirit upon him: <<*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord*>> (Isaiah 11:2). Christ, as God, was equal in power and glory with the Father; as Mediator, he received from the Father power and glory, and received that he might give; and all that the Father gave him, to qualify him for his ministry.

He will proclaim justice. The servant brings the good news of the arrival of the Kingdom but also pronounces judgment on the rulers of this world who reject him.

To the Gentiles. Jesus did speak with and heal Gentiles but his primary mission was to the lost sheep of Israel. However, the Gospel he introduced was intended to be taken by his followers out to the Gentiles and this is what occurred: <<*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*>> (Matthew 28:19-20).

It is in his name the Gentiles will hope, and there is hope in that name indeed: <<*But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to*

become children of God>> (John 1:12), <<*And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you*>> (Acts 3:16).

He will not wrangle or cry aloud. He did not come the first time as a conquering warrior but worked as the humble servant, suffering ultimately in silence: <<*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth*>> (Isaiah 53:7). The Kingdom of God was advancing quietly and will continue to do so: <<*Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you'*>> (Luke 17:20-21).

He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick. Jesus the servant compassionately cares for those who have been abused: <<*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*>> (Matthew 9:36), and, once again: <<*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest*>> (Matthew 11:28). Others see this verse more in the light of his patient forbearance of those who opposed him. Ultimately, Jesus is prepared to wait for those on both sides of the fence in order to give them time to come to repentance and then: <<*He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep*>> (Isaiah 40:11).

Until he brings justice to victory, which he did by completing his work on the Cross: <<*When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit*>> (John 19:30). Yet there is still another victory to be claimed: <<*I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer*>> (Revelation 6:2).

In his name the Gentiles will hope shows that, although Jesus' ministry was primarily to the Jews: <<*He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel*>> (Psalm 147:19), his ultimate aim was to open up his Kingdom to the whole world. This had been God's intention since before creation. He calls all of mankind to have faith in him: <<*And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us*>> (1 John 3:23).

This passage may provide one window into Matthew's method of interpretation, which allowed him to draw the integral connection between Jesus and the history of his people. From this text, Matthew reminds his readers that Jesus was not a political or warrior Messiah for the present time; he humbled himself as a suffering servant until the time when he would lead justice to victory.

VII.b.iv Matthew 12:22-32 - Jesus and Beelzebul

When Jesus publically healed a man possessed by an evil spirit the Pharisees could not deny his miraculous powers. Since they did not want to accept him as the

promised Messiah, they attributed his power to the only other feasible source - the devil. This was no minor charge against Jesus for sorcery was punishable by death. Jesus used reasoned argument to show that their thinking and claims were flawed.

²² Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see.

Matthew 12:22

They brought to him a demoniac. An evil spirit had taken possession of this man's body, robbing him of the ability to speak and see. Jesus once again demonstrated his superior power over the spiritual realm by casting out the demon, healing the man instantly by restoring both his sight and speech. This was not the first time that Jesus had performed such a healing: <<*So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them*>> (Matthew 4:24).

²³ All the crowds were amazed and said, 'Can this be the Son of David?'

Matthew 12:23

Can this be the Son of David? The people thought of David as a warrior and king. Therefore, they believed the Son of David would be a liberator in similar vein. It was difficult for them to comprehend that this gentle healer could indeed be David's promised Son, yet the work he was doing and the words he spoke were truly compelling and many would come to the right conclusion. Refer also to comments made on Matthew 9:27 on the use of the title Son of David.

²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.'

Matthew 12:24

When the Pharisees heard it. It is unclear from the text whether the Pharisees did not witness the healing but only heard about it or whether it was the people's question that he was the Son of David they were responding to.

Only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons. Practicing magic by Satan's power was a capital offense, punishable by stoning. This view of Jesus as a sorcerer was common among Jews even into the early centuries of Christianity. Refer also to comments made on Matthew 10:25.

This fellow casts out the demons hardly seems an appropriate way to refer to the Christ of God who has such an exalted name: <<*Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the*>>

earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father>> (Philippians 2:9-11).

²⁵ He knew what they were thinking and said to them, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. ²⁶ If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?’

Matthew 12:25-26

He knew what they were thinking. Knowing their thoughts indicates Jesus’ omniscience and therefore his deity. This is a capability that Jesus displayed on several occasions: <<*But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts?’>> (Matthew 9:4), <<Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come and stand here.’ He got up and stood there>> (Luke 6:8), and: <<But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side>> (Luke 9:47). It was an ability normally attributed to God: <<The Lord knows our thoughts, that they are but an empty breath>> (Psalm 94:11), and: <<You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away>> (Psalm 139:2).*

Kingdom divided against itself. Satan would not work against himself by exorcising the demons, which were such a key part of his attempt to control the world. Even if Satan were to permit a few exorcisms in order that a particular sorcerer might gain notoriety, Jesus widespread cleansing of evil spirits was nothing short of a full scale assault on the kingdom of Darkness and Satan would never have sanctioned that. How could he?

The necessity of concord or harmony for survival represents common wisdom in ancient society, unfortunately sometimes ignored by Christians today, something that Paul felt he should speak out against: <<*If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another>> (Galatians 5:15).*

²⁷ If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

Matthew 12:27

Your own exorcists are possibly associates or disciples of the Pharisees. Extra-biblical Jewish literature contains stories about strange rituals for casting out evil spirits, such as those recorded in Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 8.45-48, Tobit 8:2-3, and Testament of Solomon throughout, but it is unclear that they were successful. The only account in the NT shows they probably were not: <<*Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.’ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit said to them in reply, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?’ Then the man with the evil spirit leapt on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded>> (Acts*

19:13-16). The amazement of the crowd in: <<*They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, 'What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!'*>> (Luke 4:36), and further evidence of power over spirits with a word: <<*That evening they brought to him many who were possessed by demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick*>> (Matthew 8:16), indicates that Jesus' authoritative casting out of demons was unprecedented. No example of people casting out demons is found in the OT, although King Saul was inflicted with an evil spirit and David was able to calm it with his music and singing as recorded in 1 Samuel 16:14-23.

28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come to you.

Matthew 12:28

It is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons. Jesus' amazing power over demons was due to the power of the Holy Spirit working through him: <<*And when Jesus had been baptised, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him*>> (Matthew 3:16).

The Kingdom of God is inaugurated, although not completely realised, in the ministry of Jesus. The Kingdom of God occurs only five times in Matthew, compared to 32 occurrences of 'Kingdom of Heaven', which occurs in none of the other Gospel accounts. Jesus is not only the messianic Son of David (v.23), but the King who exercises God's own Kingdom power against Satan and his agents, overcoming the kingdom of Satan through his much greater power: <<*He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle*>> (Isaiah 59:17), a theme expanded on by Paul in Ephesians 6:10-20; and most clearly demonstrated by John in Revelation 19:11-21.

The Kingdom of God has come to you. The fullness of the Kingdom will not appear until Jesus returns, yet he makes it clear that it is possible for all believers to grasp its reality and help to herald it in, in an interim sense, during the present age. In fact, the Kingdom of God is within every believer and should be on display to any non-believer through those who live a Gospel-centred life.

Most Pharisees apparently believed that the prophetic Spirit had been quenched when the last biblical prophets died and that the Spirit would be restored only in the time of the Kingdom of God. Although many Pharisees apparently rejected miracles as proof of the truth, Jesus summons them to consider an alternative explanation for his miracles, namely, that the promised time of the Spirit has come.

29 Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his property, without first tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered.

Matthew 12:29

Jesus was able to expel demons because he had bound Satan, the strong man. Beginning with Jesus' victory over Satan during the temptation in the wilderness, recorded in Matthew 4:1-11, Jesus demonstrated that Satan was powerless to prevent him from proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and demonstrating the reality of its presence through his work and his words. Here, Jesus is saying that his integrity before God in defeating temptation has given him power over Satan.

Satan's or a strong man's house represents the sinful world over which, until the coming of Christ, he had such power. Jesus has come to plunder the house and rescue people, i.e. plunder his property for the Kingdom of God: <<*He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son*>> (Colossians 1:13).

Without first tying up the strong man. Satan may be tied which restricts him. Therefore, he no longer has the free reign on earth that he once enjoyed. However, he is still permitted some freedom of movement by God in order to test and tempt people. Yet he must surely know where ultimate victory lies: <<*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel*>> (Genesis 3:15).

³⁰ **Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.**

Matthew 12:30

Whoever is not with me is against me. Jesus does not allow anyone to remain neutral about him. The account: <<*John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.'* But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward'>> (Mark 9:38-41), indicates that Jesus' followers cannot make such demands about loyalty to themselves. People have always had two choices: either to follow God or reject him, there is no middle ground, although there are a lot of people who will not indicate which way they will choose: <<*Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.'* The people did not answer him a word>> (1 Kings 18:21). In his song 'Gotta Serve Somebody', Bob Dylan writes, 'You're gonna have to serve somebody, well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord. But you're gonna have to serve somebody'.

Whoever does not gather with me scatters basically repeats the first clause and refers to harvesting. Those with Christ will gather a crop of believers to him, while those who oppose him will drive others away as well.

³¹ Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

³² Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Matthew 12:31-32

People will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy would have been seen as an outrageous statement by the religious leaders, but the grace of God will always overshadow the thoughts of men. God had always held out his hand for those who would repent: <<*Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool*>> (Isaiah 1:18). Paul would later bear personal testimony to the grace and mercy of God: <<*I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*>> (1 Timothy 1:12-14). The prophet describes God so well: <<*Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger for ever, because he delights in showing clemency*>> (Micah 7:18).

Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, demonstrated even on the Cross as Jesus called for forgiveness of those who were taunting and killing him: <<*Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'*>> (Luke 23:34a).

Blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. This is the sin of attributing to Satan what is accomplished by the power of God, and doing this through the flagrant, wilful, and persistent rejection of God and his commands. This sin is committed today only by unbelievers who deliberately and unchangeably reject the ministry of the Holy Spirit in calling them to salvation. Refer also to comments made on Luke 12:10.

Jewish teachers acknowledged that deliberate sin against God's law, i.e. 'sin with a high hand' or that which is done defiantly, such as deliberate blasphemy against God, was normally unforgivable: <<*But whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, affronts the Lord, and shall be cut off from among the people. Because of having despised the word of the Lord and broken his commandment, such a person shall be utterly cut off and bear the guilt*>> (Numbers 15:30-31).

Even such a sin as Peter's denial of Jesus clearly does not count in the unforgivable category; the context of blaspheming against the Spirit here refers specifically to the sin of the Pharisees, who are on the verge of becoming incapable of repentance. The sign of their hardness of heart is their determination to reject any proof for Jesus' divine mission, to the extent that they even attribute God's attestation of Jesus to the devil.

The sin is unforgivable only because it reflects a heart too hard to repent. Those who desire to repent, troubled by the fear that they may have committed this sin, clearly have not committed it!

In this age or in the age to come speaks of both the church age and a time following Jesus' Second Coming in judgement on all of mankind.

VII.b.v Matthew 12:33-37 - A Tree and Its Fruit

Jesus indicates that a genuine disciple will live according to a righteous lifestyle and produce good works as a natural outworking of their faith in God. Others may outwardly appear to be disciples but their deeds, actions and indeed their very thoughts will betray their claims. Ultimately, they will be found out on the Day of Judgement, for God sees what is in a person's heart.

That one's speech reveals one's heart may represent conventional Jewish wisdom; Jesus here indicates that even the most careless words spoken without thought will testify concerning one's character on the Day of Judgment. God does not listen only to what believers say during Sunday morning church services.

In this context Jesus is saying that one expects people like these Pharisees to blaspheme the Holy Spirit because their hearts are so corrupt. Because the Pharisees appeared righteous to most other observers: *<<So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God>>* (Luke 16:15), Jesus' harsh condemnation of their behaviour sounds an even greater warning to those today who reject the truth of Christ yet sit in churches.

³³ **'Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴ You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure.**

Matthew 12:33-35

For the tree is known by its fruit speaks of the human character, for the heart is the root and defines the tree, with its fruit being the resultant speech, thoughts and lifestyle choices of a person. Unless the heart is reformed the fruit will always be bad. The analogy of treasure in v.35 is a repetition of the fruit analogy for a person's treasure is stored in the heart: *<<For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also>>* (Luke 12:34), reinforcing the point Jesus is making about the need for a person's character to be reformed: *<<I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect>>* (Romans 12:1-2).

Brood of vipers. Snakes were well known for their subtle movements and lethal strikes, alluding to the character traits of some of these men. Refer to Matthew 3:7 for a more detailed commentary on this saying.

Abundance of the heart. The Pharisees' attempt to label Jesus a blasphemer (v.24), is itself blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Their wicked words reveal the evil within their own hearts; they were bad trees in need of radical conversion.

³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.'

Matthew 12:36-37

The Day of Judgment refers to Christ's Second Coming and the resulting outcome for those who pretend to be disciples but are not, is explained in comments made on Matthew 7:23.

Every careless word. Eternal judgment awaits for those who attempt to turn the people against Jesus by slanderous accusations of blasphemy. A person will be held accountable for their thoughts and for their spoken words: <<*Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; your own lips testify against you*>> (Job 15:6), and: <<*Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits*>> (Proverbs 18:21).

By your words you will be condemned or **you will be justified** means people's words will be outward evidence of their inward character.

Justified here means 'shown to be righteous'. This verse does not use **justified** in the Pauline sense of 'declared righteous by God', refer also to comments made on James 2:21. Similarly, evil people's evil words will be evidence by which they **will be condemned**.

VII.b.vi Matthew 12:38-42 - The Sign of Jonah

The three days inside the fish was symbolic for the similar time from Jesus being placed in his tomb until the knowledge of his resurrection. The religious leaders ask for a sign that Jesus is from God. Jesus explains that his generation needs no greater sign that he is from God than his own message.

The prophet Jonah tried to flee from the presence of God in order to avoid his calling. As part of the process of bringing him back to God, he was thrown from a ship into the sea and was swallowed by a big fish, where he remained for three days before being vomited out onto a beach: <<*Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land*>> (Jonah 2:10).

³⁸ Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.'

Matthew 12:38

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees. It seems that not all of these men believed that he performed miracles by the power of the devil, for these were asking for him to show them further signs to demonstrate he was from God. They further show their respect by addressing him as teacher.

A sign. Jesus had already performed many miracles or signs that validated his messianic identity, starting with his sign of changing water to wine for the benefit of his followers: <<*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him*>> (John 2:11). These men were asking for a sign that they could use against him, for they clearly had closed their minds to the reality of who was among them.

Because God has already provided the world with sufficient evidence, he has the right to expect faith from those who have heard the truth. It is important to be ready to respond to people's objections to the faith, but sometimes believers must also point out where the challengers ignore evidence already available to them. Ultimately, God wants people to believe by faith in him and not faith in the signs he performs.

³⁹ But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.'

Matthew 12:39

Adulterous refers to spiritual adultery, i.e. unfaithfulness to God. Jesus never rebukes people who seek healing out of genuine need, but he knows these opponents have malicious motives: <<*The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven*>> (Matthew 16:1).

Adulterous generation. Their forefathers had committed adultery in the eyes of God: <<*She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce; yet her false sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore*>> (Jeremiah 3:8). Now this generation acted as an adulterous wife; they departed from the God, to whom by covenant they had been espoused: they were not guilty of the whoredom of idolatry, as they had been before the captivity, but they were guilty of infidelity, and all iniquity, and that is whoredom too: they did not look after gods of their own making, but they looked for signs of their own devising; and that was adultery.

Jonah's rescue by God was a sign to the people of Nineveh that his message was from God. Jesus' death and resurrection (v.40) will likewise be God's sign to the present generation.

⁴⁰ For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

Matthew 12:40

Three days and three nights in Jewish reckoning is inclusive, meaning no more than three days or the combination of any part of three separate days. Jesus was raised 'in three days' although he was buried Friday afternoon and resurrected Sunday morning, i.e. part of Friday is day one, all of Saturday is day two, and part of Sunday is day three.

It seems that God had done this to Jonah: <<*But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights*>> (Jonah 1:17), not just to teach him and certainly not to teach the Ninevites, who probably never even heard of it, but as evidence that would support Jesus as the Christ when he rose after three days.

41 The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!

Matthew 12:41

Jesus' words affirm the historicity of the story of Jonah and the reality of the resurrection of the dead. He says that the people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment, thus predicting an actual future event; and that these same people repented at the proclamation of Jonah: <<*And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth*>> (Jonah 3:5), indicating that Jonah's preaching in Nineveh was an actual historical event.

Something greater than Jonah is here. By analogy Jesus is not just greater than this one prophet; he is superior to all the revered prophets in the OT.

One should keep in mind, however, that the Ninevites did not witness Jonah's release from the fish for themselves; indeed, there is no evidence he even recounted it to them. The Ninevites experienced the effects of a divine sign they never recognised, and this may be Matthew's point: the Ninevites repented without recognising a sign, hearing only the one message of the wrath of God to come upon them with no repeated offers of free grace, whereas Jesus' opponents were too hardhearted to repent despite the many signs he had been giving them, and the reasoning he provided them with. All the Ninevites needed was Jonah's preaching of the truth, yet Jesus is greater than Jonah and many still rejected his word.

42 The queen of the South will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!

Matthew 12:42

The queen of the South refers to the queen of Sheba whose visit to King Solomon is recorded in 1 Kings 10:1-29 and 2 Chronicles 9:1-12. Sheba was most likely the home of the Sabæans in south western Arabia, present-day Yemen. She was a Gentile who responded to the message that God had blessed this King with so much, especially his great wisdom, reminding the reader here of the Gentile Magi seekers that came looking for a different king about 1,000 years later: <<*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem*>> (Matthew 2:1). He would prove to be the source of all wisdom.

Jesus claims that he is: <<*greater than the temple*>> (v.6), the prophet Jonah (v.41), and the wise king Solomon. He thus elevates himself and his message of the Kingdom to be greater than, and the fulfilment of, the three greatest institutions in Israel: priest (or law), prophet, and king.

At least part of the point of this story of the queen of Sheba, when placed in context, is Solomon's witness to the nations, and God's concern for Gentiles stands at the heart of the book of Jonah as well. By appealing to two repentant Gentiles in the Hebrew Bible, Matthew reemphasises the Gentile mission: those who know little about Israel's God, like the Ninevites or the queen of Sheba, or the Magi earlier in his Gospel, are often least arrogant, hence most responsive to the Gospel.

In addition, the queen travelled a great distance and paid a high price in expensive gifts to hear the wisdom of Solomon and yet the Jews would not listen to the wisdom of this king who was greater than Solomon, a king that had come to his own people: <<*He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him*>> (John 1:11), and offered them everything at a very low price, their undivided loyalty to his Father through him.

VII.b.vii Matthew 12:43-45 - The Return of the Unclean Spirit

Jesus provides a timely warning to all disciples that, if they do not guard their hearts and live a Gospel-driven life, they leave themselves open to Satan once again taking control of their lives, as do those who do not come to faith at all.

⁴³ 'When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting-place, but it finds none.

Matthew 12:43

Unclean spirits were often associated with waterless regions, apparently because deserts were thought of as being devoid of the blessing of God that came with rainfall and abundant crops: <<*Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches. Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith shall repose, and find a place to rest*>> (Isaiah 34:13-14), <<*They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an*

uninhabited salt land>> (Jeremiah 17:6), <<*And he will stretch out his hand against the north, and destroy Assyria; and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert*>> (Zephaniah 2:13), and: <<*but I have hated Esau; I have made his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals*>> (Malachi 1:3).

Gone out of a person. It is unlikely that any evil spirit would give up control of a person voluntarily so this most likely refers to those who have been driven out by the power of God's Holy Spirit.

It wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting-place, but it finds none is the sad destiny for those who choose to serve an uncaring master. This imagery could of course refer to the dry, spiritless existence of the Gentile nations, to whom the spirits were driven from those Jews who did come to believe. Many of these evil spirits would then come under attack as the Gospel spread to these regions, providing them with no peace.

44 Then it says, "I will return to my house from which I came." When it comes, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order.

Matthew 12:44

My house from which I came. Evil spirits are persistent in seeking ownership of a person's entire material and immaterial self.

Empty, swept, and put in order indicates that a person has been cleansed of possession or perhaps brought to salvation. However, this is a state that needs to be maintained by abiding in Christ: <<*You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing*>> (John 15:3-5).

45 Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So will it be also with this evil generation.'

Matthew 12:45

Seven is linked in Scripture with completion or perfection, here perhaps signifying the completeness of demon possession once the evil spirit returns, bringing its associates along. Multiple demon occupancy is referred to in Scripture: <<*Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him*>> (Luke 8:30).

If this evil generation continues to reject Jesus, even after witnessing his divine authority over evil spirits, their condition will be worse than if they had never seen or even heard of him at all.

They enter and live there. This could not happen in cases where it is by the power of Christ's Holy Spirit that a demon has been cast out for he gives instructions for them not to return, providing further proof to all that he was not in league with the devil: <<*When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!'*>> (Mark 9:25).

The last state of that person is worse than the first provides a warning to the church of Christ throughout the generations of what will happen to those who do not hold on to what they have in their first love for Jesus, for he will reject those who reject him and yet remain faithful, accepting those who are his own back into his Kingdom: <<*But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent*>> (Revelation 2:4-5).

Matthew specifically places this paragraph within the discussion of this evil generation and uses it, unlike Luke, to conclude Jesus' response to his opponents. Whatever else the parable might say about exorcism, Jesus' point is what it says to that generation: although Jesus was exorcising the generation, its evil leaders were setting it up to be demonised all the more by rejecting Jesus' reign.

If one translates the passage literally, a key sentence may be conditional: the demons will return if the house is left empty. Were Jesus' opponents accusing him of being in league with Satan through his exorcisms? Jesus here returns the charge: it is they, not he, who are re-demonising their generation, for they leave the house empty in which God, the only true alternative to the devil, should reign: <<*See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord"*>> (Matthew 23:38-39).

VII.c Matthew 12:46-50 - The True Kindred of Jesus

Jesus shows that, while family loyalties are important, it is a relationship with God that is to be the central focus of everyone's life. Those who do the will of God will therefore be considered as the family of Christ.

⁴⁶ While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him.

Matthew 12:46

His mother and his brothers. There is no mention of Joseph, who was believed by many to have been his earthly father, those not knowing of the conception by the Holy Spirit. This may indicate that Joseph had died by this time for he is never mentioned after the visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years old as recorded in Luke 2:41-51. Jesus' family may have been trying to bring him to his senses from their perspective: <<*When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind'*>> (Mark 3:21), for they did not understand his true identity at that time and would naturally assume that taking on the Pharisees would have only one outcome. As the eldest son, Jesus

would have been responsible for the care of the family if Joseph had indeed died by this time.

⁴⁷ Someone told him, ‘Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’

Matthew 12:47

Some manuscripts omit v.47 but it is included in the NRSVA. Its addition or omission adds or detracts nothing from the intended meaning of the passage.

The reason for them standing outside can only form the basis of speculation. Some say the room was too full for them to enter, while others say it was because they were family and thought they knew him, and that they did not want to associate themselves with his teaching. Their proper response should have been to be sat at his feet listening to his teaching as did Mary, upsetting her sister in doing so: <<*But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her’*>> (Luke 10:41-42). There is an old proverb that says of some people, ‘The nearer they are to the church, the further they are from God’, which may seem cynical but there are those who are part of a church and lose sight of why they are there.

⁴⁸ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ ⁴⁹ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!

Matthew 12:48-49

Here are my mother and my brothers. Jesus’ messianic mission takes priority even over familial loyalties. Rather than negating the importance of one’s biological family, see Matthew 15:3-9, Jesus is demonstrating the pre-eminence of a person’s commitment to him and the Kingdom of Heaven.

⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’

Matthew 12:50

For whoever does the will of my Father. Jesus clearly identifies the primary criterion for discipleship and salvation, for every aspect of these things is encapsulated in the will of God. It should be at the centre of every disciple’s life to do the will of the Father: <<*Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*>> (Matthew 6:10).