

OPENING PRAYER

Proper 28¹

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written
for our learning:
Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn,
and inwardly digest them,
that we may embrace and ever hold fast
the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ;
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

MATTHEW 12²

12 At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. 2 When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." 3 He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 How he entered the house of God, and they[a] ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests? 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? 6 I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. 7 But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. 8 For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

The Man with a Withered Hand

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. 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." 13 Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. 14 But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

God's Chosen Servant

15 When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many[b] followed him, and he cured all of them, 16 and he ordered them not to make him known. 17 This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

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 smoldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
21 And in his name the gentiles will hope."

¹ Episcopal Book of Common Prayer pp.236

² All Bible quotations and footnotes are from Biblegateway.com, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE)
Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved
worldwide.

Jesus and Beelzebul

22 Then they brought to him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see. 23 All the crowds were amazed and were saying, "Can this be the Son of David?" 24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this man casts out the demons." 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? 27 If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists[c] cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 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. 30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. 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.

A Tree and Its Fruit

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. 36 I tell you, on the day of judgment 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."

The Sign of Jonah

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." 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. 40 For just as Jonah was 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. 41 The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and indeed something greater than Jonah is here! 42 The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and indeed something greater than Solomon is here!

The Return of the Unclean Spirit

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

The True Kindred of Jesus

46 While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. 47 Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." [d] 48 But to the one who had told him this, Jesus[e] 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! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Footnotes

- 12.4 Other ancient authorities (manuscripts) read *he ate*
- 12.15 Other ancient authorities (manuscripts) add *crowds*
- 12.27 Gk *sons*
- 12.47 Other ancient authorities (manuscripts) lack 12.47
- 12.48 Gk *he*

OVERVIEW³

12:1-8 Plucking Grain on the Sabbath

The disciples pick grain to eat in the sabbath. Jesus not only claims the right to do what David did but declares that his presence is greater than the Temple and the Son of Man is Lord over the Sabbath.

The Pharisee's issue is that Jesus' disciples are breaking the laws regarding the Sabbath (Exodus 34:21) when they pluck grains of wheat in the field to eat. It is one of the key signifiers of Judaism beside circumcision. The question for Jesus and Matthew is not what is the Law? The question is what constitutes a legitimate exception to the Law? Jesus answers the Pharisee's question with a question: Jesus appeals to David's breach of the same law in 1 Samuel 21 where the argument is that a righteous man can break a covenant if it is because of hunger. Jesus is also making the implicit point that he is a descendent of David and the Messiah.

Jesus is reminding the Pharisees that a higher good (human need) takes precedence over a lesser good (ceremonial law). Jesus' authority is illustrated by David's authority; and if David could act as he did, then surely Jesus, in a manner of uncertain infringement could act similarly.

Matthew deletes Mark 2:27 "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath," because it stands in tension with Matthew's Christology. Humanity is not the Lord of the Sabbath, only Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. (It can also be seen as a conservative reaction to Mark's more expansive statement.)

The concluding sentence, 12:8 "For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." Could be viewed as making the preceding irrelevant. If Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, if he stands not under the Law and the Sabbath, but above it. Then what does Jesus need of this argument? He declares he is Lord of the Sabbath and is done with it.

12:9-14 The Man with a Withered Hand

Jesus healing on the Sabbath is the next controversy. Matthew attributes the Pharisees negative attitude to their being more worried about human precepts than God's intentions. Jesus corrects them in the spirit of the prophets (12:7; Hos 6:6). The controversy ends on the ominous note that the Pharisees are plotting to destroy Jesus.

The conflict is over whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath in cases where a life is not a stake. Jewish law, and customs say it is not lawful to heal under non-life threatening circumstances. Why did Jesus not take the amenable course and wait until sun down or the next day to heal the man's hand? Jesus is evidently seeking opportunities to show how the oral *halakah*⁴ could contradict the demands of love. Jesus argues with brevity and clarity focusing on the heart and the intent of a law rather than the legal arguments within the law. Jesus concludes on 12:12 that mercy takes precedence over sacrifice. Jesus goes on to heal by his spoken words alone, he does not touch the man.

12:15-21 God's Chosen Servant

Jesus is aware of the Pharisee's intent, so he withdraws, followed by a multitude who he heals. The beautiful Isaiah passage (42:1-4) reinforces Matthew's picture of the tenderness of Jesus, who does not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick. It is possible that this text is original to Matthew in terms of including so much of Isaiah in the Gospel. It appears to be in context, including a reference to the baptism and to the rest of the chapter's discussion of the Spirit. The double mention of the Gentiles harmonizes with another Matthean interest of mission to the Gentiles.

³ Sources include notes from Barton and Muddiman, Biblegateway.com, Brown, Raymond E., S.S., Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV Version, France, R. T., Levine, Amy-Jill, and Marc Zvi Brettler Editors, and Morris, Leon.

⁴ Halakah is the totality of laws and ordinances that have evolved since biblical times to regulate religious observances and the daily life and conduct of the Jewish people. Source: *Britannica*

The passage presents Jesus as the unobtrusive servant of the Lord. God's Spirit rests upon him. And he brings salvation to the Gentiles. It presents Jesus as a suffering servant from the beginning of his ministry (12:18). Who do the "bruised reed" and "smoldering wick" refer to? In general terms it is to the marginalized in both Jewish and Gentile society, the harassed outsiders who are the objects of Jesus' tenderness and compassion.

12:22-32 Jesus and Beelzebul

Jesus heals a blind and mute demoniac and people associate the miracle with the "Son of David", i.e. the Messiah. The Pharisees react with hostility and attribute Jesus' power to Beelzebul. Jesus argues that he is plundering a strong man's house (i.e. the realm of Satan) and warns that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (attributing his power to the devil rather than to God), will not be forgiven.

The crowds are presented favorably in this passage. They conclude from Jesus' exorcism that he may be the Davidic Messiah. In contrast, the Pharisees see Jesus' action as originating from evil, and wish to make sure that the crowds do not follow Jesus. Jesus counters their argument by saying evil cannot cast out evil. (The argument of the Pharisees does not make sense.) Jesus is saying that the Pharisees are making irrational arguments.

Jesus believed that the power of God was at work in him to overcome evil forces and that his success was part of God's eschatological deliverance. Jesus is arguing, that from his exorcism experiences one should conclude that the kingdom of God was at work. In essence because Jesus is the Messiah, authorized by God to act, his actions have power and authority, and are effective. Jesus is asserting the mystery and magnitude of his own person but giving himself no title.

Jesus accepts the miracles of others but holds his own to be of a different sort because of his identity. What is decisive is not the exorcisms, but the exorcist. The house of the strong man is Satan's kingdom, and his goods and possessions are the people he has under his sway. Jesus frees them through his ministry of exorcism.

12:33-37 A Tree and Its Fruit

Jesus opposes the idea that words do not matter, only actions. Blasphemy has eternal consequences because to speak evil is to reveal an evil heart and the true self. Which can result in eternal divine judgement. The tone of Jesus' condemnation gets sharper for Jesus calls the Pharisees a brood of vipers from which evil emerges and whose work will condemn them on judgement day.

12:38-42 The Sign of Jonah

When the scribes and the Pharisees request a sign, Jesus offers them only the signs of Jonah (who produced repentance in Nineveh), and of the queen of south (who appreciated the wisdom of Solomon). He asserts that he is greater than either and they do not recognize what he has done.

The question is what did the *sign of Jonah* mean? Guessing was Jesus himself or his teaching the sign? Was Jesus deliverance from death in view? Was the Son of Man coming to judge included? Or the destruction of the temple? The irony is that the Pharisees do not want words, they want a spectacle of action to make them believe. They are ignoring everything Jesus has already done.

12:43-45 The Return of the Unclean Spirit

Jesus has driven out evil spirits, but the return of the evil spirits will make the last state of this evil generation worse than the first.

How to interpret 12:43-45?

1. Jesus' generation is now purified by his ministry, is going to be menaced by a greater power of evil;
2. It is not enough to drive out a demon. The space it occupied must be filled by God. If not, it can be refilled by evil and made worse;
3. Many early church leaders saw the passage as an allegory with three stages for the history of the Jews.

12:46-50 The True Kindred of Jesus

The unexpected arrival of Jesus' mother and brothers raise the issue of who is Jesus family. The conflict in Matthew is between what Mary knows in Chapters 1-2 about Jesus origin and relationship to God the Father, and her behavior now seeking to bring him home. Matthew does not resolve this conflict. Now that the kingdom of God has been proclaimed, the disciples who do the will of the heavenly Father are brother, sister, and mother to Jesus.

Matthew presents Jesus family seeking Jesus in less harsh terms than Mark. The elevation of a spiritual family over one's physical family is found elsewhere in Judaism. (Deut 33:9) For Jesus the break is spurred on by personal experience and eschatological expectations. The kingdom demanded all of Jesus and those who followed him. The reference to God as Father makes the theological point that there is only one spiritual Father and that is God.

REFLECTION

How do you balance social-political systems with faith – are there situations where the social-political is upheld in conflict with faith?

What is your image of kingship and how does the suffering servant compare?

Do you demand a "sign" from God as part of your faith?

CLOSING PRAYER

We thank you, heavenly Father,
for the witness of your apostle and evangelist,
Matthew, to the Gospel of Beatitude and Grace
which you have given us in your Son, our Savior;
and we pray that, after his example,
we may with ready wills and hearts obey
the calling of our Lord to follow him;
through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

The Rev. Zoila Schoenbrun

GOSPEL COMPARISON⁵

Pericope ⁶	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Plucking Grain on the Sabbath	12:1-8	2:23-28	6:1-5	
Healing the Withered Hand	12:9-14	3:1-6	6:6-11	
Jesus Heals Multitudes by the Sea	12:15-21	3:7-12	6:17-19	
On Collusion with Satan	12:22-30	3:22-27	11:14-15 11:17-23	
The Sin against the Holy Spirit	12:31-37	3:28-30	12:10	
The Sign of Jonah	12:38-42	8:11-12	11:16 11:29-32	
The Return of the Unclean Spirit	12:43-45		11:24-26	
Jesus' True Kindred Relatives	12:46-50	3:31-35	8:19-21	15:14

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barton and Muddiman Editors, Dale C. Allison Jr., Matthew Contributor, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, 2001
- Brown, Raymond E., S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 1997
- Childs, Brevard S., *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments, Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*, Fortress Press, 1992
- Davies, W.D., Allison, Dale C. Jr. *Matthew Volume II Chapters VIII-XVIII*, The International Critical Commentary, 1991
- www.Gospelparallels.com, *Comparing the Gospels*
Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV Version, 1989
- France, R. T., *The Gospel of Matthew* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) – July 27, 2007
- Kittel, Gerhard Editor, Geoffrey W. Bromley, Translator, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume III, VI, 1965
- Levine, Amy-Jill, and Marc Zvi Brettler Editors, *The Jewish Annotated Bible*, Second Edition, New Revised Standard Version, 2011, 2017
- Mills, Watson E., *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, Mercer University Press, 1990.
- Morris, Leon, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary (PNTC))– July 29, 1992
- New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989.

⁵ Source: <http://www.gospelparallels.com/>

⁶ An extract from a text, especially a passage from the Bible, "a book of pericopes"

SLOW RELIGION: GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW



The Inspiration of St. Matthew,
Caravaggio, 1602

Slow Religion, The Gospel According to Matthew is a lay person-led adult education weekly series for Christians and seekers. Slow Religion uses a literary and historical approach to the ancient texts to identify and apply insights from the Gospel to today's world.

Matthew's gospel is worth studying because the author attempts to uphold Jesus' Jewish past, with Jesus ministry, death, and resurrection, in the context of the 1st Century CE Jesus movement and early church, and in a hostile Hellenistic and Jewish world.

21st Century readers recognize Matthew as the source of many of the best-known stories and sayings of Jesus as well as a social philosophy that many non-Christians believe in. Famous for its Sermon on the Mount, The Beatitudes, and other teachings, Matthew is often called the most Jewish of the Gospels, while also contributing with the Gospel of John to antisemitism.

The class is created and led by Joe Jennings and advisors include: the Rev. Zoila Schoenbrun, St. Stephens Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA; the Rev. Br. Richard Edward Helmer, Episcopal Church of our Saviour, Mill Valley, CA; Eugene E. Lemcio, PhD, Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Seattle Pacific University; the Rev. Heather Wenrick, the Episcopal Church of the Ascension, Seattle; and the Father Vincent Pizzuto, PhD., vicar at St. Columba's Episcopal Church, Inverness CA and Full Professor at the (Jesuit) University of San Francisco, New Testament and Christian Mysticism, in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies.

Prior Slow Religion Classes include the Gospel of According to Mark (2021-22), the Foundations of Christian Faith (2020-21), the Holy Spirit (2020), the Gospel According to John (2019-20), and Paul's Letter to the Romans (2017-8).

For more information, bibliography or to join the Slow Religion mailing list go to: www.slowreligion.com