

Matthew 12

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[0:00] At that time, Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, Look, your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.

He answered, Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread. Which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath, and yet are innocent?

I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent.

For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there.

[1:08] Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? He said to them, If any of you has a sheep, and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?

How much more valuable is a person than a sheep? Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Then he said to the man, Stretch out your hand.

So he stretched it out, and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. He warned them not to tell others about him.

This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah. He was my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight. I will put my spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations.

[2:19] He will not quarrel or cry out. No one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.

Till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name, the nations will put their hope. Then they brought him a demon-possessed man, who was blind and mute.

And Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, Could this be the son of David? But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.

Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them, Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.

If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out?

[3:31] So then, they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions, unless he first ties up the strong man?

Then he can plunder his house. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

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

Make a tree good, and its fruit will be good. Or make a tree bad, and its fruit will be bad. For a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good?

For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings out evil things out of the evil stored up in him.

[4:55] But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, Teacher, we want to see a sign from you. He answered, A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.

The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, I will return to the house I left.

[6:13] When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean, and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there.

And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. This is how it will be with this wicked generation. While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside wanting to speak to him.

Someone told him, your mother and brothers are standing outside wanting to speak to you. He replied to him, who is my mother and who are my brothers? Pointing to his disciples, he said, here are my mother and my brothers.

For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. Well, may God bless this reading to us.

I am still a young man and a young preacher, and I've learned much from the experience of doing this sermon series over the past several weeks. One of the main things I've learned is it's probably better to do shorter passages.

[7:27] If I would inevitably do this again, maybe in a few years time, probably take chapters 10, 11, and 12 a little bit slower. I'm aware that this is a long passage, but I will pray and we will get started.

Amen. Father, we thank you that you sent your son Jesus as clear evidence of your will to save your people.

We thank you, Lord, for your word, which tells us of the wonders he performed and the words which he spoke. And so, Lord, would you use this morning to capture our hearts with these wonders and signs and words again.

And may we leave this morning being convinced of your glorious love. Amen. Well, I wonder what things stood out to you most from that Bible reading.

There are definitely at least a couple of confusing phrases, aren't there? Verse 31, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Or the strange words of verses 43 to 45 about the movement of these impure spirits.

[8:38] Perhaps you picked up a little bit of the Jesus versus Pharisees drama that seems to dominate the narrative. And really much of what Jesus is saying in this passage is in response to what the Pharisees are asking or saying to him.

And so taking these many settings and strands and illustrations into account, I think Jesus is ultimately trying to communicate in this chapter what God's will is.

How fatal it is to understand that will, but still reject it. But yet how blessed it is to understand it and believe it. Verse 7 brings up the classic verse from Hosea 6.6, which Jesus has earlier quoted to them.

I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Or God's will is for mercy, not for empty ritual. And verse 50 refers to will again, the closing verse of this chapter.

Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. As disciples, our close familial relationship with Jesus is evidenced in our desire to want to do his will.

[9:53] So will is an important theme throughout this chapter. In an overarching brushstroke, God's will is always for his glory. But I'm going to bring out three aspects of that overarching will.

How we bring glory to God in the form of our three points this morning. So firstly, the will of God is for us to do the right thing. I'm taking this from the bookend verses 1 to 14 and then 46 to 50. Secondly, the will of God is for us to bring justice to the oppressed. Taking out verses 15 to 21, that long quote from Isaiah. And thirdly, the will of God is that we read his signs and do not deny them. The will of God is that we read his signs and do not deny them. I'm taking that from the longer section of 22 to 45. I should say as well, these first two points are much shorter than the third. So in case you're thinking, oh dear, we're getting a 12 minute sermon here this morning. We're not. We'll go on a little bit in the last one. So firstly, the will of God is for us to do the right thing.

[11:03] Now, this point title might sound very obvious, but how easy is it for us to know the right thing to do, but fail to do it? The Pharisees, in seeking to keep the Sabbath day holy, had made a long list of forbidden things to do on the Sabbath.

And one of those things was reaping. And so to see the hungry disciples of Jesus picking heads of grain and eating them, though seemingly insignificant, was against the Jewish religious thought of the day.

But for picking heads of grain on this blessed Sabbath day, Jesus Christ did not forbid them. And why not? Well, simply put, it's because God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

His will is for his people to be merciful. An outward display of sacrifice is insufficient if it is not accompanied by an internal beating heart of mercy.

So let's briefly look at the examples that Jesus gives from verses 3 to 14. Ahimelech the priest was right to give the consecrated bread to King David and his companions because they were in need.

[12:20] The priests are right to do their necessary work on the Sabbath day because they were commanded to in the law. According to the Pharisees Mishnah, the man with the shriveled hand wasn't in danger of death and so he shouldn't have been healed on the Sabbath.

He should wait to the next day. But Jesus is not limited to the rules that the Pharisees have made up. And doing seemingly little work, Jesus speaks to the man to stretch out his hand and it was completely restored.

And the punchline of this section has to be verse 12b. It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Now that statement seems glaringly obvious but we must not forget that in all of the Pharisees' attempts to keep the Sabbath day holy, they forgot that to be holy like the Lord is to be a doer of good.

To be holy like the Lord is to be a doer of good. God desires mercy. He is not that interested in our outward shows of virtue and righteousness if they don't come from a heart of mercy and compassion.

So should not our aim on the Sabbath day be to do good to each other? I know it's not that we can't do good on other days of the week, but should not the day of the week set apart as holy be the day which we dedicate particularly to God's holiness and his goodness.

[13:57] We make the Sabbath day a lot about rest and rightly so, but let's not make the same bitter mistake that the Pharisees made of thinking that a day of rest means a day of focusing so much on the rest that we avoid doing anything good for others.

At the end of this passage, Jesus says the disciples are like his brothers. They are like close family members to him because they do the will of God which he had been sent to do.

And I think the disciples are beginning to understand that doing good, for example, spreading the gospel, helping those who are sick, are things which Jesus does and therefore they do it.

The disciples were not wrong to pick the heads of grain, but it's not just about the disciples not doing something wrong because the disciples are often doing something right.

The Pharisees seek to catch out the disciples in their error, but ultimately the disciples say and do more good than the Pharisees because the disciples follow the pattern of Jesus's loving righteousness, which is what we should also follow in.

[15:11] Now for my second point, the will of God is for us to bring justice to the oppressed. Let's be realistic for a moment. We all know that we live in a world full of injustice, people suffering at the hands of others, international wealth being unequally distributed, people of the very top having more than you could ever need, people at the bottom struggling to survive.

But I want to clarify that when I say justice, I'm not just limiting that word to social justice. I do also mean moral justice. What about those victims whose perpetrators have got away with it?

Or those malicious words spoken against people who are only really trying to help? And overall, the word justice in the Bible is simply divine order.

It's people getting what they deserve with clear, undivided judgment. Well, in understanding God's will, we need to understand the justice which he sent Jesus to fulfill.

In verse 16, Jesus warned those he healed not to tell others about him. And he said this precisely to fulfill what was spoken of him by Isaiah in Isaiah 42.

[16 : 26] He is the chosen, spirit-filled servant who will proclaim justice to the Gentile nations so that, in verse 21, all of the nations can put their hope in him.

His goal is to bring justice, this divine order, to all the nations of the earth. We mustn't forget that Jesus' work is to bring a new heaven and a new earth filled with resurrected people who no longer sin, but glorify him forever in a world full of social order.

His justice is wide-spanning. It's universal. It's not just to do with our own individual experiences. And so it's actually quite hard to imagine what this will actually look like.

And the reason that Jesus' fame doesn't spread as quickly as it possibly might is because in fulfillment of Isaiah, he doesn't quarrel or cry out in the streets.

Jesus doesn't make a big scene, but the wonder of the miracles he so naturally performs, unavoidably attracts the crowds, whether it is a happy crowd or a critical one.

[17 : 38] And in verse 20, a bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. Jesus, in bringing justice, does not just blow out the weak.

He will bring justice to the weak and the poor and the needy. We've seen in his miracles that his way of justice is not to get rid of all the people who are incapable of contributing.

He does not say that your value is in what you do or what you are able to do. He aligns value with the fact of who you are, that we are all his creation, that we are all his image bearers.

If you feel weak today, Jesus is not here to make our lives worse. Remember the fairly soon upcoming days when you will be with him.

You will be a newly created part of his new creation. Isn't that great news for us today to know that we've got so much to look forward to in this new created order of divine justice in a new heaven and a new earth.

[18 : 43] And so folks, following the pattern of Jesus as the disciples do, we should also take care of the poor and needy. We shouldn't cry out and make a scene, but we should focus on the smaller things.

Because when we get really good at the small things, the big thing starts to come together. Some of the most righteous people are doing the quiet tasks away from the spotlight.

Doing the right thing means looking out for the weak. Jesus cares for and sustains us. And so we ought to do the same for each other. So remember to give financially and of your time.

Remember the young. Remember the old. Look out for those you are not seen here today. None of these things are wasted in eternity.

And thirdly, and as I say, I'll spend longer on this point. The will of God is that we read his signs and do not deny them. We all know that instinct, don't we?

[19 : 51] When you're driving on unfamiliar roads and you see a stop sign ahead of you and your natural reaction is to just start pressing on the brake, even if gently, you know a stop sign is approaching so that your approach will be controlled.

In a not too dissimilar way, Jesus gives plenty of clear signs of who he is. And our gut reaction ought to be to start to repent and change gears in response to his lordship.

But this is the grave mistake of the Pharisees. They see the signs, but the signs don't have their effect. The warning is consistently ignored.

When they ask for a sign in verse 39, Jesus knows it's an impractical question. They've seen so many signs, what use will another one be?

If you're going to teach someone who never learns to stop how to brake at a stop sign, the solution is not to put up more stop signs because they already ignore them.

[21 : 02] And we see evidence of this in verse 22 to 29. Jesus' authority to drive out demons is again questioned. And not only does Jesus show the Pharisees how unreasonable it would be for Satan's kingdom to be divided against itself, he also shows them in verse 29 that the reason he is able to drive out demons is because he is binding Satan.

The only reason he can carry off the demons, the possessions of the strong man's house, is by binding the strong man himself. God is tying the knots on Satan and so Jesus has come to start plundering his house.

The fate of the devil and the demons is indeed worse than we perhaps first expected. Then when all this Jesus is saying that the sign is clear because if the demons are being cast out by the spirit of God, not Beelzebul, then surely his ministry is one worth paying attention to and not criticizing because this is evidence that the Messiah is among them.

And then we should move on to these classically debated verses in verses 31 to 32. blasphemy against the spirit will not be forgiven. Now what is blasphemy against the spirit?

Well let me first say what it definitely is not. People who are concerned about whether or not they have committed this sin won't be the ones who have committed it because if you can be restored to repentance then you've not committed the unforgivable sin.

[22 : 38] An important link is that the reason it is unforgivable is because the person never repents of it anyway. So if you want to repent of your sin then you've not committed the unforgivable sin.

So I'm not suggesting that we have done this in ourselves but what I will say though is blasphemy against the spirit is knowing and seeing the truth about Jesus yet choosing unbelief in our hearts. This is the unforgivable sin and it develops and becomes clear over time rather than in one definite act to deny in our hearts what we have seen and know is true to know and understand the truth about Jesus yet choose to not believe it instead.

Now why do I say this? Well let's remember that the Pharisees really are not that stupid. They know that it is not by the prince of demons that Jesus drives out demons.

As we've acknowledged that's a fairly unconvincing thing to say. But the reason they made the extreme point that he is using the power of Satan is because they get a sense that the opposite extreme that Jesus' works are empowered by the spirit of God is probably true.

[23 : 56] The amazing signs and wonders can only mean one thing. Either this is the prince of demons messing around or this is the king of angels conquering victoriously.

It is the obvious that it is obvious that it is the latter but the Pharisees have darkened their foolish hearts and have chosen to believe the former. They know it's the king of angels but they say it's the prince of demons.

Now how this translates to the modern day I'm still working out because the Pharisees' clear eyewitness rejection of Jesus' spiritual power is a little different to non-Christians' rejection of him today who have not seen him with their eyes but I think the principle remains.

I guess I just want to say that lots of knowledge and reflection is not a bad thing but knowledge is not the saving thing. To be saved requires us to have faith in what we know.

It means believing what our conscience is convicted of and not ignoring it. So I just wanted to leave that there. I don't think there's people here who have committed the unforgivable sin that's not what I'm trying to say and if you're worried that you have well you won't because remember you're thinking about repenting which I don't think happens for those who have committed this sin so I don't want people freaking out and that they've committed this sin on their way to grow block don't worry.

[25 : 24] So I want to say a few words about verses 43 to 45. I think the crucial thing that this section is saying is that though an evil spirit may leave a person or house as the person is referred to if after leaving that person is not filled with another spirit that being the Holy Spirit then that person is susceptible to becoming possessed.

again the emphasis I think is on verse 44 when the evil spirit arrives it finds the house unoccupied. The house is empty it's easy to get into again though the evil spirit has gone away nothing has changed since it has left the Holy Spirit has not come in.

And so in simple terms I think Jesus is saying that we can't be super evil or kind of in the middle we have to have a heart of righteousness and that is only possible unless our hearts are occupied by the spirit if not we're in a dangerous place.

Now I don't know where you're at with the Lord this morning but wherever we are I think verse 34 is a revealing thought for all of us isn't it?

[26 : 39] May I encourage you to reflect upon these words? verse 34 says that the mouth speaks what the heart is full of where it's also being translated out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks folks what we say is who we are what we say is who we are and so in verse 36 to 37 it is entirely appropriate that we will be judged on account of our words our words will either acquit us or

condemn us words are really important and so what have you said this week?

How have you said it? Are your words spoken with anger and frustration or are they spoken with love and compassion? Have what you said this week been encouraging or mainly discouraging? if you were to play back an audio recording of everything that you have said Monday to Saturday would you be able to tell that you are a Christian?

Verse 36 we will have to give an account for every empty word spoken so let's all resolve to think before we speak but more deeply than that let's resolve to nurture our hearts so that our overflow is purer how do we sort out our words by sorting out our hearts now I want to close this morning with verses 38 to 42 the Pharisees and the teachers of the law ask for another sign and Jesus says that there is only one sign left for them which is the sign of Jonah now what is the sign of Jonah well Jesus and Jonah have a few things in common the prophet Jonah had an extraordinary testimony didn't he I mean it really is a bit of a miracle that Jonah survived and even made it to Nineveh how did

Jonah describe the experience of having spent three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish in Jonah chapter 2 well let me quote Jonah himself from his prayer in the belly of the fish here's a few things that he said to the Lord from deep in the realm of the dead I called for help when my life was ebbing away I remembered you Lord you Lord my God brought my life up from the pit folks it's easy for us to gloss this over but let's not forget that it was a total miracle that Jonah did not die in the belly of the great fish in the depths of the sea it was extraordinary that Jonah survived this event and the Bible doesn't tell us this but maybe this is the Jonah that the Ninevites saw Jonah arrived in the great city and started to walk shouting out 40 more days and

[29:50] Nineveh will be overthrown and the sign of Jonah is the words the message he spoke but it is also the man who bore the message himself Jonah perhaps as skinny as a bone smelling of fishy stomach acid eyes straight and serious because of the shock of the traumatic event he has just experienced in the sea the Ninevites responded to the message because they knew that this man this prophet had an important story to tell this was a special figure who God had saved from certain death the Lord is a God who judges but even in the depths of darkness he can save the Ninevites started to see that well if God can save this man in the heart of the sea in the belly of a fish well surely he can save our corrupt city the

Ninevites feared the Lord and repented in sack cloth and ashes when they heard the story of this prophet and the reaction was appropriate if God has the power to give life and take it away to save a foreign Israelite prophet stuck in the belly of a fish for three days who has now come all the way here to tell us his story if salvation belongs to him then we ought to cry out for it and so the Ninevites turned from their evil ways and God relented of his judgment to them the queen of the south was none other than the queen of Sheba in 1 Kings 10 who traveled over 2,000 miles to see the glory and splendor of Solomon's kingdom and temple and hear the heyday of the prosperity of the kingdom of Israel huge wealth wisdom flowing from the heart of the king you would see this kingdom and meet their king and at this point in

Israel's history you would be pretty convinced that their god was good the queen knew that the kingdom had been built by the wisdom of its king Solomon who at this time was a faithful follower of the Lord but here's the sign of Jesus Jesus was not only saved from a near death experience he was saved from death itself just as Jonah spent three days in the belly of the fish you would count three days for as as Jesus was in the realm of the dead before he was resurrected the wisdom that the queen of Sheba heard now written in the book of Proverbs is personified in this man Jesus so be wise and have faith in who he says he is friends this sign of Jonah is nothing more and nothing less than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ his healing miracles and his preaching ministry are indeed evidence of his divine character but the clearest sign of all is the historically accurate and spiritually testified evidence that

Jesus Christ died and rose again Jesus his message of repentance and faith preached by his spirit filled apostles after his resurrection was unconquerable God had raised Jesus from the dead and they said now repent and turn from your evil ways and have faith in this resurrected man that you can have new life this is a God who now raises people to everlasting spiritual life so get on his side and enjoy this life now folks I've spoken a little bit about the will of God being about us doing good acting justly following his signs but if you don't mind let me speak a bit about what some other passages say about the will of God in the New Testament Galatians 1:4 says that according to the will of God the Father Jesus gave himself evil age according to

Ephesians 1:9 to 10 the mystery of God's will is revealed in Christ who brings everything together in unity folks we can only do the right thing through the spirit of this resurrected man Jesus Christ living in us we can only emulate Jesus justice and his compassion for the oppressed If we understand how Jesus did it and have faith in him we can only read the signs and respond to them through the help of Jesus spirit in us a good heart which overflows with good words so do you see how this sign of Jesus resurrection is so significant no wonder Jesus told the Pharisees that this is the greatest sign of them all that Jesus was abandoned to the realm of the dead and yet he rose again because we have heard this news understood it believed it we can also be resurrected in our body and in our spirit friends we know this is true so let's lean into it we can do the will of [35:16] God because we have a spirit in us the house is not unoccupied the house is full of the holy spirit not an evil one let's do good let's do the right thing may our sanctified hearts speak fruitful words because knowing that Jesus has died and resurrected and responding to this news evidence is that we have not blasphemed the spirit but indeed we've been filled with the spirit friends today let us read the sign we can become resurrection that we don't follow its sign if you see believe and hope in this sign of resurrection then that means that new life also lives within you what great news this is for us as we are in the eyes of God we are made holy and spiritual because we have the same spirit living in us that lived in

Jesus and empowered him in his ministry we can do good works because the source of all good wells up in our hearts and overflows into our mouth the continued witness of Christ's resurrected power which is the will of God continues through his voice of his church people often become Christians because they meet Christians they hear Christians talking they observe what Christians are doing and they see the love of Christ the will of God God if you want to do the right thing if you want to be more in line with God's mission of justice and resurrection if you want to keep understanding even more clearly what God is saying in his word then may I encourage you to examine this sign of the resurrected Jesus Christ this is

God's will this is God's plan that we will be rescued from this present evil age he has accomplished this very plan through this sign of Jonah the sign of Jesus the death and resurrection of his son and therefore the death and resurrection of his people so lean in and take hold of this new life which is God's will for you to have let me pray God we thank you that you do not blow out a smoldering wick but you can use us however weak we are feeling Father we thank you for this marvelous sign that your son Jesus was resurrected from the dead we pray that we would take this truth to heart so that we can walk in his new life please help us to see with eyes of faith and show us how we can do the right things and walk in them

Lord you are always with us and so we trust that you can help us to apply these truths to our lives we ask this in your son's name amen