

In Chapter 12, Matthew records a series of what are commonly referred to as “controversy stories.” These are incidents where either he or his disciples do something that causes concern on the part of the guardians of Jewish law. The Pharisees were a Jewish sect dedicated to living by the literal text of Mosaic law as well as the rabbinic interpretations of those laws recorded over centuries of discernment and debate. Moreover, for the Pharisees, the so-called “traditions of the elders” were also to be obeyed by every faithful Jew. These included laws and rituals pertaining to ritual cleanliness. Included here were also the scribes. They were essentially lawyers educated in the observance of these laws and traditions. Because these two groups were the self-appointed guardians of Jewish traditions, and because they were not afraid to confront infractions when they saw them, Jesus and his disciples often ran into trouble with these two groups.

As we have already seen, Matthew, who served essentially as the creative editor of this version of the gospel story, often placed similar stories together in one or more chapters. For example, Matthew 5-6 consists of Jesus’ teachings. Chapter 8 is largely miracle stories. Chapter 12, as previously mentioned, is mostly stories related to controversies between Jesus, the Pharisees, and the scribes.

These particular controversies centered on Sabbath observance. In one, Jesus’ disciples pick grain on the Sabbath. In the other, Jesus heals a man while at the synagogue for Sabbath worship. In both cases, Jesus cites other precedence to make his case. But the bottom line is that the Sabbath rule is not meant to be slavishly observed such that any and all activities are prohibited. The purpose of the Sabbath is to provide time for needed rest, and time for spiritual instruction and worship. Should there arise the necessity of actively doing something to provide for human need, this is perfectly permissible. The rule of love for neighbor always trumps other less essential rules. The Pharisees know this, and so when Jesus breaks the letter of the law in order to observe the Spirit of God’s primary law, they have no answer—at least at first.

Later, they make a feeble attempt to counter Jesus’ actions by accusing him of acting in the power of a demon. Jesus easily dismisses their argument by pointing out that demons don’t inspire good works. He then warns them that whoever sins against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven. That is, by definition, anyone who hardens his heart to the Spirit of God is damned.

Chapter 13 consists of a collection of parables. One might think that Jesus teaches in parables in order to reach as many people as possible since these are usually stories or metaphors taken from the daily lives of ordinary people. However, that would be an unwise conclusion. Actually, the meaning of a particular parable is embedded in the symbolism. For example, when the kingdom of heaven is compared to a sower, a mustard seed, or the yeast used to make bread, understanding depends on whether or not the

meaning of the kingdom of heaven is understood. Most people who heard these parables had no idea of what Jesus was talking about when he referred to this concept. Therefore, his use of parables was actually meant to hide his meaning from those who were not able to discern what the kingdom of heaven meant to Jesus. Therefore, when his disciples asked him to explain why he taught in parables, he answered, "to you it had been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them (for example, the Pharisees), it has not been given."

Only Jesus can reveal what these teachings mean. Some, such as his disciples, have been chosen to understand. Others have not. The bottom line is that all human beings hear and understand according to their own preconceived ideas and worldview. Jesus' message challenges any and all human concepts concerning ourselves, God, and our relationship to God. If we already understood these things, we would not need Jesus who in fact, is God's self-disclosure. If we knew God, we would also know God's Son. The fact that he was rejected and crucified proves that human beings don't and never will have an understanding of God unless God gives it to them. This Jesus does for some but not others. This is further demonstrated by the fact that after his resurrection, he appears to some but not others. Why some are chosen and not others is a mystery, known only to God. In due time, some will come to realize that the kingdom of heaven is the rule of God's love that breaks into our lives as the presence of the resurrected Lord. This event is transformative and results in becoming what Paul called "a new creation."

Chapter 14 is another collection of miraculous events designed to reveal the in-breaking kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus. One of these miracles, Jesus walking on water, includes a story of faith in order to illustrate how it is that a person can experience the miraculous birth of faith through which the kingdom of heaven is received. Peter is invited to get out of his boat and walk with Jesus on water. While fixing his gaze on Jesus, this experiment in faith is a success. However, when his attention is drawn away from Jesus due to the storm, and when as a result he is overcome by fear for his safety, he sinks. Nevertheless, Jesus reaches out and saves him from drowning but not without confronting him. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

This pointed question is addressed to all of us. Who among us does not lose heart, become fearful, and grasp for help when we can't handle the challenges that come our way? However, the flip side of this story illustrates that Jesus is patient with us. He not only forgives our weakness, he helps us in the midst of our failed attempts to trust him. Hopefully, as time goes by, we will demonstrate that our hearts represent the good soil capable of producing growth when the seed of God's word is planted therein.

Chapter 15 contains a variety of stories that represent challenges to traditional understandings of what the Jewish Messiah would teach and do. The chapter opens with a controversy between Jesus and the Jewish elders concerning the "traditions" versus the "commandments." The Pharisees are troubled because the disciples flaunt the rules concerning ritual cleanliness. Jesus could care less about these "human" traditions. But he

does care about God's being more concerned about rules of human origin than rules of divine origin, Jesus concludes by quoting Isaiah who himself accused his contemporaries of honoring God with their lips while their hearts were far from him.

This pretty much shuts them up. However, he goes on to explain why these "human precepts" are basically worthless. Dirty hands do not "defile" a person because whatever goes into the mouth ends up in the sewer. On the other hand, what comes from the heart does "defile" a person because therein dwells all manner of spiritual filth such as murderous thoughts, lust, and hatred. One does not need the Spirit of God to clean hands. One does need the Spirit of God to clean out the heart.

In the next story, Jesus is taken by surprise by the faith of a gentile woman who wants him to heal her daughter. At first, he rejects that request because he believes he was sent only to the people of Israel. However, in the end, faith trumps ethnicity, and he therefore expands his ministry to include gentiles.

The chapter ends with more miracles meant to illustrate Jesus' comparison for the people who come to him for help. One gets the impression that he would sooner have some time to himself for prayer and communing with God. However, even here, his comparison moves him to respond. For Jesus, love always wins out in a conflict.

The central story in Chapter 16 is the confession of Peter. Jesus, after some time with the people as an itinerant teacher, preacher, and healer, wonders what people are saying about who he is. Most think he is one of the prophets come back from the dead. Why not a new prophet? Because according to tradition, the age of prophecy ended about the year 400 B.C. Therefore, if he were a prophet, he would have to have come back from the dead.

But then, Jesus gets to the point of his question. "Who do you say I am?" he asks the disciples. All except Peter are too timid to respond. Peter confesses Jesus as "the Son of the living God." After pointing out that only God could have revealed this to him, Jesus says, "You are Peter (Petros, meaning "rock") and on this rock I will build my church." For Roman Catholics, this becomes the verse which legitimizes the institution of the papacy since Peter was thought to have been the first bishop of Rome. However, this would leave Protestants out in the cold. Therefore, Luther's position was that the "rock" was not Peter himself but rather Peter's confession—the message of the church. Moreover, there is no historical confirmation that Peter was the first bishop in Rome anyway. Thus, on closer examination, this idea that the church was built on Peter becomes a rather thin idea, especially when you take the letters of Paul into account. For Paul, the church is the Body of Christ—the community bound together by the Spirit. Moreover, the presence of the Spirit is confirmed, in so far as this is possible, by the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord.

Chapter 17 opens with the story of the transfiguration. Here Jesus' three closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, receive a vision that confirms Jesus' divine identity, together with confirmations from Elijah, Moses, and God himself. This is the turning point wherein Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem where he will suffer death for the sake of the rest of us.