

THE CHRISTIAN AND CONTROVERSY

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
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Let's Begin

A chorus that we frequently sang several years ago went something like this: "I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river in my soul..." Most people were moved by that chorus.

On the other hand, if we're honest, we must confess that living for Jesus can bring controversy into a person's life. When that happens, what is a Christian to do? How should a Christian handle it?

Today's lesson in Matthew chapter 12 considers three controversies that a Christian oftentimes finds himself facing, controversies that potentially drain the joy of serving Jesus down to dangerously low levels. We will consider each controversy as the chapter unfolds.

I. The Sabbath: It's All About Holiness (vv. 1-21)

II. The Spirit: It's All About the Heart (vv. 22-37)

III. The Signs: It's All About Him (vv. 38-50)

I. The Sabbath: It's All About Holiness (vv. 1-21)

When Jesus began His ministry, crowds flocked to Him in herds. His popularity held no boundaries. He was admired and adored. Jesus received invitations to weddings, festivals and family gatherings. In fact, Jesus was so in tune to the social scene, rumors made their way around that, unlike John the Baptist who was a social recluse, Jesus was falsely accused of being a "wine-bibber" and a "glutton" (11:19).

The atmosphere soon began to change. John's words perfectly describe the controversies in chapter 12: "He came unto His own and His own received Him not" (John 1:11). The hostility against Jesus grew and did not stop until He was nailed to a cross.

One can feel the pressure in our culture concerning Christianity. There was a time I can remember when being a Christian was an honorable thing, being a Christian was a respectable profession to hold. Today, however, is far different. It's amazing how young Christians survive the harsh environment of Christian-bashing in our public schools and university campuses.

There was a time when being a Christian was an honorable thing.

The first controversy that unfolds for us in chapter 12 surrounds the *Sabbath*. Let's first observe the hunger of Jesus' disciples (v. 8). Matthew recorded for us that Jesus and the disciples walked to the corn patch to grab a bite to eat (v. 1). There's nothing unusual about that except the day on which they chose to go—the Sabbath.

Unlike today, where gathering grain or produce from someone else's crop can get a person in really big trouble, the law in Jesus' day actually made provision for "gleaning" (Deuteronomy 23:25). To satisfy one's hunger was lawful, as long as it was any day but the Sabbath—at least for the Pharisee.

The Pharisees, who grew bolder and more critical of Jesus by the day, made sure all knew that what Jesus and His disciples did was "not lawful to do upon the Sabbath day" (v. 2). One must keep in mind that the Pharisees were highly respected by the masses of people who viewed them as prime examples of keeping the law and living holy lives. One must further keep in mind that the *Pharisees consistently elevated rules about the law above the Law itself*. That is, they placed more authority in what their commentaries said about God's Word rather than in what God's word itself said.

Listen to Jesus as He elsewhere spoke plainly about the practices of the Pharisees: "For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men... Full well ye respect the commandment of God, that ye may keep your



Reflection Connection

Do you think Christians, for the most part, handle controversy well? Explain. What are three improvements that could be made? Discuss them in class.

own tradition...Making the word of God none effect through your tradition” (Mark 7:8-13). It’s clear why the Pharisees had it in for Jesus.

One such tradition the Pharisees adored was their elaborate rules concerning the Sabbath, rules which forbade precisely what Jesus and His disciples were doing. Jesus’ response was classic. “Have you not read what David did?” Jesus asked. Imagine Jesus’ asking the keepers of the law if they’d taken time to read about what they were criticizing.

The incident concerning David about which Jesus spoke found the king-to-be eating bread that had been dedicated in temple ceremonies. The bread was “hallowed bread” and was to be eaten only by the priests (1 Samuel 21:1-6). *Here Jesus was showing the Pharisees that human need was much more important than religious ritual.* Men were not created for religious ritual. Religious ritual was always designed to serve man.

Jesus further mentioned the priestly duties on the Sabbath and how priests worked harder on the “day of rest” than on any other day of the week. Inspecting animals, slaughtering animals and gathering wood for fire were among their many duties (v. 5). How, then, were the Pharisees not also profaning the Sabbath by their arduous labor?

Relating to God isn’t about religion; it is about a relationship.

Jesus then poked a hole in their religious garment. He said: “But I say unto you, that in this place is one greater than this temple” (v. 6). In essence, Jesus was setting straight the mistaken idea that relating to God was a religious matter, a matter involving certain days, certain places and certain rituals. *Relating to God isn’t about religion; it is about a relationship that only He can provide.*

“One greater than the temple” stood before them. He set aside the whole system of temple Sabbath-keeping and sacrifice. In Jesus, the One greater than the temple, persons find rest. *Rest is not in a day of the week but in the Person of Jesus.* Jesus, therefore, concluded that He is the Lord of the Sabbath day (v. 8).

Matthew then switched scenes from the Sabbath day to focusing on the synagogue and a healing that took place (vv. 9-21). Jesus did not leave the battlefield. Instead, He took the battle to the religious corporate headquarters (v. 9).

A man was there with a “withered hand” (v. 10). As one reads this passage, it’s easy to get the impression that this was probably a set-up by the religious leaders to trap Jesus. If so, the man was merely a plant, a test case to tempt Jesus to once again break the Sabbath (v. 10).

According to Matthew, the Pharisees asked Jesus if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, that they might “accuse him” (v. 10). Jesus answers their question with a question of His own, a question that exposed their hypocrisy as soon as Jesus asked: “What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fell into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?” (v.

Reflection Connection

Contrast the lifestyle of Jesus with that of John the Baptist. Why was Jesus so interested in socializing and John so interested in being secluded?



Reflection Connection

How is working on Sunday different from breaking the Sabbath?

11). The follow-up was the clincher because it showed the value of human life. Human need far outweighed the economic interests of losing one little lamb. But if that was true, the Pharisees had no more case against Jesus breaking the law by healing the man than they did by Him breaking the law and satisfying his hunger.

The words of Jesus are so needed today by those who insist that human life is no more sacred than a pig's life. The devaluing of human life is at an all time low, a low which tells us precisely why it's increasingly easy to think more positively about killing unborn babies and helpless old people. One note of clarity must be mentioned. Jesus said, "It is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days" (v. 12). Aside from the fact that once again Jesus dismantled all of the rules the Pharisees had built around the law, He did speak of doing positive things on the Sabbath.

***Religion
always
ruins a
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heart.***

Matthew reveals the true hearts of the Pharisees and it was simple: they wanted to get rid of Jesus (v. 14). Their first council was in response to their failed attempt to poison Jesus' reputation as a law-breaker. This meeting marked the time when Israel's clock stopped as a nation. Instead of focusing on the Messiah's coming, they started figuring out ways to finish Jesus off.

How accurate they were in accomplishing exactly what Isaiah prophesied (vv. 17-21). Religion always ruins a person's heart. Like the Pharisees, a person given to religious impulses becomes obsessed with his own way of seeing things, things that he thinks please God. *But religion blinds one to a meaningful relationship with God that only can come through Jesus.*

Reflection Connection

Why were the Pharisees so interested in getting rid of Jesus? Do you think similarities exist today that attempt to get rid of Jesus? Explain.

II. The Spirit: It's All About the Heart (vv. 22-37)

The first controversy was about religion that falsely promised it would make one holy. The second controversy we explore is the Spirit. Here, it's all about the heart.

This section opens with Jesus again faced with healing a man (v. 22). One thing the religious folks could not deny was the miracle Jesus performed. So, they attempted to question the source of Jesus healing power. Of course, Matthew makes sure we understand Jesus performed the miracles He did by the Spirit of God (v. 28).

Nonetheless, the Pharisees insisted it was by demonic power that Jesus operated, power from the prince of demons himself (v. 24). This isn't the first time they'd accused Jesus with being a colleague of Beelzebub (9:34; 10:25). But it was getting close to their last opportunity for changing their mind, for they were in severe spiritual danger, the danger of crossing over to a state of no return.

Their hostility was becoming so evident that Jesus warned them explicitly that they were close to committing what we know as the "unpardonable sin." Jesus said:



“Wherefore I say unto you, all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto man; but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men” (v. 31). Jesus looked past all the tricks and tests the Pharisees used to try and trap Him in His speech. He looked deep down within their heart.

Jesus looks deep down within the heart.

The Pharisees were in danger of committing an act that was unforgivable. Think of it! A sin so gross and so heinous that God said it wouldn't be forgiven. What is the unpardonable sin?

Reflection Connection

Ponder the phrase “unpardonable sin.” What feelings surface when you think of it? Allow the class to openly participate.

Some have suggested the unpardonable sin is the murder of another human being. But that's not what Jesus had in mind here. Others say it's adultery. But again, adultery seemed far from Jesus' mind when He spoke of the unpardonable sin. One would think that speaking evil of Jesus, blaspheming Him would constitute the unpardonable sin. But Jesus explicitly ruled that out when He said, “And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him...” (v. 32) Paul even admitted to blaspheming Jesus himself (1 Timothy 1:13). So what is the unpardonable sin?

First of all, recall that **God gives a three-fold witness to the soul.** God the Father is a witness found on every page of the Old Testament. The Father's witness is seen in John the Baptist as he thundered about the Messiah He was sending. A second witness was right before the Pharisee's eyes: the miracles the Son of Man performed pointed to no one else but God Himself.

Now, the third witness is the Holy Spirit who validates the Word of God and the Person of Jesus. The Holy Spirit works directly on the heart through these other two witnesses, peeling away doubt, disbelief, skepticism, and rebellion. If the Holy Spirit is rejected, God has nothing else to say. There is no further witness to your soul. Consequently, your soul stagnates to a state beyond all hope of redemption. *The unpardonable sin is the willful, final rejection of the Spirit's testimony to Jesus. The words of one's mouth express the decision of one's heart.* If you do so in full knowledge of the contrary, you are in essence, calling white, black.

The Pharisees stood at the threshold of no return; they had rejected all the evidence regarding Jesus. If they now reject the Spirit who works in Jesus, they seal their fate in hell forever. It's really all about one's heart. This lesson should be the most sobering study thus far in Matthew. It forces one to see that *being a disciple of Jesus is all about surrendering one's heart to Him.*

III. The Signs: It's All About Him (vv. 38-50)

The Pharisees responded to Jesus: they demanded a sign (v. 38; cp. 1 Corinthians 1:22). Perhaps the sensational would convince them. Actually, they'd already been given a sign, a star in the north sky which hung like a banner over the place where Jesus was born (2:2). Jesus dismissed their desire for additional signs as merely the wishful whims of the insincere.

Nonetheless, He explained that His resurrection would serve as a great sign, the foreshadowing of which was seen in Jonah's day as well as in Solomon's (vv. 40-42). Jonah was swallowed by the big fish, buried, as it were, in the ocean bottom



and three days later washed ashore, alive and unhurt. So will the Son of Man be killed, buried and three days later, rise from the dead. Thus, Jesus' resurrection was one sign they would receive.

As Jesus was speaking of these matters, His mother and brothers came and wanted to speak with Him. Almost from the beginning, Jesus' family misunderstood Him. In fact, some of them thought He'd lost His mind (Mark 3:21). Jesus made it clear that no earthly relationship He had developed would ever hinder His role as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (vv. 49-50).

Golden Greek Nugget

Matthew mentions "devil" or "devils" five times in verses 22-28. One could get the wrong impression that more than one devil existed. The term for the one and only "Devil" is "diabolos," found, for example in Matthew 4:1. In vv. 22-28, the Greek term is "daimonion" and refers to demons. There is one Devil but many demons. Satan will work in any way possible to corrupt one's views about Jesus.

Wrap Up

Christians face controversy each and every day. Three of the most common controversies Matthew describes focus on religion, the heart and who Jesus is. Unless one is sold out to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, a relationship with God is impossible. It can never happen through religion. Our relationship with God always centers within our heart, the Holy Spirit testifying and verifying Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

