

THE UNEXPECTED KINGDOM

MATTHEW 12-16



Introduction to this series

This term we're exploring Matthew 12:1 - 16:20.

All the "synoptic" gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) have the same overall shape to them. Part A of each gospel describes Jesus' time in the northern region around Lake Galilee, leading up to the critical moment at Caesarea Philippi where Peter confesses "you are the Christ". Part B of each gospel then describes Jesus' journey to Jerusalem where he suffers, dies and rises again. This series of studies covers the last few chapters of "part A" of Matthew's gospel, leading up to the turning point in chapter 16.

Jesus began proclaiming "the kingdom of heaven has come near" in Matthew 4:17 and the kingdom is a central theme of our section. In chapter 13 Jesus teaches in parables about the kingdom and people's varying responses to it. In the surrounding chapters, we see this in practice - people respond both positively and negatively, but in the end Peter reaches his breakthrough realisation about Jesus' identity.

This booklet has Bible studies for the first half of the series, and the rest will come out mid-term.

Study 1: Matthew 12:1-21

1. A big theme of today's passage is the Sabbath - the Jewish holy day of rest. Read the following Old Testament passages and note what they tell us about the Sabbath.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15	
Exodus 35:1-3	
Numbers 28:9-10	

In today's passage the Sabbath is a topic of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a reform group who wanted to enforce safety measures to make sure nobody accidentally violated the Old Testament law. When it came to observing the Sabbath, this included a careful listing of activities which counted as "work" on the Sabbath. A Jewish text from a little later in history (2nd century) illustrates their kind of approach:

"The number of [forbidden activities] are forty minus one. They are: Sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, sorting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, whitening it, combing it, dyeing it, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying [a knot], untying [a knot], sewing two stitches, tearing for the purpose of sewing two stitches, hunting a deer, slaughtering it, skinning it, salting it, curing its hide, scraping it, cutting it, writing two letters, erasing for the purpose of writing two letters, building, demolishing, extinguishing a flame, lighting a flame, striking with a hammer, carrying from one domain to another. These are the principal [forbidden activities] - forty minus one."

Read Matthew 12:1-8

- 2. What are the Pharisees concerned about? Is it a fair concern?

- 3. If it was you, how would you defend yourself against the Pharisees?

- 4. Jesus offers a multi-pronged response to the Pharisees. Summarise the points he makes in the verses listed below.

Verse 3-4	
Verse 5-6	
Verse 7	
Verse 8	

- 5. In responding to the Pharisees' accusation, what claims does Jesus make about himself?

Read Matthew 12:9-14

In this episode the Pharisees challenge Jesus before he has done anything. The Pharisees saw urgent medical assistance (eg in childbirth) as permissible on the Sabbath. But the withered hand here is not an urgent case!

- 6. If you were a Pharisee, what would you make of Jesus' principle "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath"? (Consider the note about the Pharisees above).

- 7. How does Jesus' argument here compare with what he said in verses 3-8?

By pointing out common practice regarding trapped animals, Jesus wins the argument - but he doesn't win the hearts of the Pharisees!

Read Matthew 12:14-21

- 8. Look at what Jesus does in verses 15-16. How do you think this "fulfils" the Isaiah quote in verses 18-21?

Go back and read Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28-30

9. Is there a "heavy burden" on display in chapter 12?

10. How has Jesus demonstrated his "light burden"?

11. At what points can we be in danger of being like the Pharisees?
How can we avoid this?

Notes & Prayer Points

Study 2: Matthew 12:22-45

1. Do you think there is anything that God can't forgive?

In this section we see Jesus performing an exorcism on a blind and mute man. In ancient thinking about exorcisms, the authority of a higher god or spirit was invoked to drive out a less powerful spirit from its habitat.

Read Matthew 12:22-37

2. After Jesus drives out a demon, what two explanations do people come up with?
3. According to Jesus, whose power is actually at work as he casts our demons, and what do his exorcisms demonstrate?
4. Should Christians today be concerned about demons and the work of Satan?
5. Jesus makes a stern warning in verses 31-32. How does the context help us understand this warning? How have the Pharisees been "blaspheming against the Spirit"?

6. Do you think it's possible to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit today?
7. Jesus assures them "anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven". We might find this a bit surprising, wondering why speaking against Jesus (God the Son) should be less serious than speaking against the Holy Spirit. Can you think of other examples in the Bible of people speaking against Jesus in some way, and later being forgiven?
8. In verses 33-37 Jesus uses this episode as an example in some teaching about the significance of our speech. According to Jesus, what do the Pharisees' words reveal about their hearts?

Study 3: Matthew 13:1-23

Read Matthew 13:1-17

This chapter is the first time “parables” are mentioned in Matthew. After Jesus has taught the crowd, his disciples ask him why he teaches in parables. This doesn’t just mean “why do you use stories” but “why do you speak in such a tricky way”.

1. Does Jesus speak to everyone in parables, or just to a certain audience?
2. How does Jesus describe the difference between the “insiders” and “outsiders”?
3. If Jesus had just spoken complete nonsense to the crowds, but explained the truth to his disciples in private, would that have been the same as what’s going on here? Why or why not?

Read Matthew 13:18-23

4. The different soils depict different outcomes for “the message about the kingdom”. Fill in the table below:

Environment (in the parable)	What happens to the message? (in real life)
On the path	
On rocky ground	
Among thorns	
On good soil	

5. The seed falling on the path illustrates somebody not “understanding” the message about the kingdom. Where has the word “understanding” been used in this chapter so far? How does this help us see what Jesus means here?
6. Can you think of people whose reaction to the message about Jesus has been like the path, rocky ground, or thorns? How did it play out?

7. What take-home lesson do you think Jesus wanted his disciples to get from this parable and its explanation? (And what do you think Matthew wanted his readers to get out of it?)

Notes & Prayer Points

The "crop" in the parable most likely represents a life of committed obedience in recognition of the kingdom of heaven proclaimed. (The Greek word also means "fruit" and represents obedience in Matthew 3:8, 7:20, 21:43). Although the measures being used aren't quite clear, a yield of 30, 60 or 100x what was sown is a fair to very good return, but not a miraculous overflow.

8. What do you make of the varying amounts of fruit produced in the good soil in the parable?

9. Which of the dangers represented in the parable do you feel most susceptible to right now? What steps can you take to ensure the word bears fruit in you in the end?

Study 4: Matthew 13:24-52

Since chapter 4, Jesus has been declaring “the kingdom of heaven [kingdom of God] is at hand”. In this collection of parables he reveals to his disciples some truths about this kingdom. Each parable begins “the kingdom of heaven is like...”, but we need to realise the kingdom is represented by each story as a whole, not necessarily the first person or thing mentioned in each story.

Read Matthew 13:24-43.

1. What do these parables have to say about the kingdom in the short term and long term? Fill in the first three rows of the table on the next page.
2. Why might the disciples have needed to have this short-term vs long-term distinction explained to them? Consider what happened back in Matthew 12:22-28.
3. How does this set of parables make you feel about the future?

(questions continue on p.19)

Parable	What does it tell us about kingdom in the short term?	What does it tell us about the kingdom in the long term?
Wheat & Weeds Verses 24-30, 37-43		
Mustard Seed Verses 31-32		
Yeast Verse 33		
Fishing Net Verses 47-50		
In summary		

Read Matthew 13:44-50

4. What does the parable of the net have to say about the kingdom in the short term and long term? What about the whole set of parables overall? Fill in the remainder of the table above.

5. What dangers would we face if we forgot about the short-term and long-term distinction that Jesus explains here?

6. The parables of the treasure and the pearl (verses 44-46) don't have a short-term/long-term distinction.
 - a. What main point are they making about the kingdom?

 - b. Why do you think these parables have been sandwiched in between the short-term/long-term parables?

 - c. What action are they designed to inspire - for the disciples listening to Jesus, and for us reading Matthew's gospel?