



Matthew 11–12—Commentary Notes*

A. Introduction

Matthew 5–13 provides an account of Jesus’s early public ministry. Matthew systematically proved that Jesus was God’s promised Messiah through recording the Lord Jesus’s teaching (chs. 5–7), His authority through signs and miracles (chs. 8–9), and His commissioning of the twelve disciples to preach the good news of the heavenly kingdom (ch. 10). As the message of the kingdom spread widely, opposition to Jesus also significantly increased. Such resistance was evident in the imprisonment of Jesus’s forerunner, John the Baptist, rejection by several Galilean towns, animosity (hostility) from the Pharisees towards the Lord, and hindrance from Jesus’s own family.¹

In our study of Matthew 11–12, we will discuss how the four types of responses to Jesus’s message resulted in a pivotal change in how Jesus taught and proclaimed the kingdom of God thereafter (Matt 13:10–17). As a result, God temporarily diverted His work from the Jews after they rejected Christ and extended His salvation to the Gentiles.

B. Outline

- I. 11:1–15 A puzzled John the Baptist asked Jesus a sincere question.
- II. 11:16–24 An apathetic crowd disregarded the works of Jesus.
- III. 11:25–30 A believing child understands the Father’s will and purpose and responds to His call of rest.
- IV. 12:1–50 The prejudiced religious leaders openly opposed Jesus.

C. Content

I. 11:1–15 A puzzled John the Baptist asked Jesus a sincere question.

John the Baptist was “forcibly retired” after fulfilling his assignment as the forerunner to the Lord Jesus’s early ministry. While in prison, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus a question because he became uncertain as to whether Jesus was indeed the Messiah. The life of John the Baptist, a messenger of God, causes us to know anew our own value and significance.²

11:1–3 – John the Baptist’s question. “After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, He went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask Him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’” John the Baptist was imprisoned shortly after Jesus began His public preaching. (Matt 4:12, Mark 1:14–15, and Luke 3:19–20 all record the circumstances surrounding his imprisonment.) According to the ancient account of the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, John was locked up in Machaerus, a fortified palace located on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. At the time of this event when he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the Messiah,³ he had already been in prison for about half a year. As for why he was put in jail, Matthew will explain later in 14:3–4. There are two possible reasons for John the Baptist’s question:

* Translator Note: These Commentary Notes were originally compiled in Chinese and translated into English for use by CCF International’s English classes. All sources listed in the table (only listed in English when applicable) at the end of these notes were used and consulted in the original Chinese compilation. Please refer to the table for the references of each numbered annotation. For more information on the sources consulted, please contact CCF International. All biblical references are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV® Copyright © 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

1. His circumstances. John and his ministry shook the whole region of Judea. Therefore, it was common that many followed him, wanting to hear his teaching. Now that he was put in a dark, small, and filthy cell, he was no longer able to do anything for the Lord Jesus. How he must have wished to continue pouring his entire life into God's ministry especially when he was still in his prime! Instead, it seemed that he was doomed to "waste" his precious life in prison. Such circumstances might have caused John to be frustrated and disheartened.⁴
2. His understanding of the prophecy. The life of John the Baptist is recorded in the New Testament, but he is considered as the last of the Old Testament prophets. Like the prophets before him, John had the revelation and the anointing of the Holy Spirit for his service (Matt 11:13; 2 Pet 1:20–21). But unlike the saints after Pentecost, John the Baptist did not have the indwelling Holy Spirit because God the Spirit had not yet descended (John 7:39). Therefore, his understanding of prophecy was limited just like the majority of the Jews in his time. He along with the rest of the Jewish people hoped that the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament would be fulfilled in their time, especially the part about how the Messiah will deliver Israel from the hands of their enemies and take His seat on the throne of David in Jerusalem to rule over all the land. In order for us to further understand their view, we must understand two aspects of the Old Testament's prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah and its two phases.
 - a. The first aspect: Christ (Messiah) is seen as the suffering Savior (Isa 53; Ps 22). We will reserve a detailed discussion about this for another time.
 - b. The second aspect: Christ is seen as the triumphant mighty King (Isa 9:7; Mic 5:2). Today, we understand that these two aspects represent the two comings of Christ, and the time lapse between them has been more than two thousand years and continuing. Christ has not yet come to judge the world and rule over it as King. John the Baptist and the Jews of his time only understood the second aspect about the glorified Christ who will politically deliver Israel as a nation. They failed to recognize that the Christ must first suffer and become the propitiation for sin.

John the Baptist's question could be what an honest seeker or doubter would also ask. However, he did not pour his doubts about Jesus into his disciples, who came to visit him in prison, which must have brought him great comfort. He avoided confusing them as well. Instead, John the Baptist asked them to bring his question directly to Jesus: was He the Messiah, or do they wait for another? John did not hide his doubts in his heart, nor did he draw up a conclusion according to his own feelings and logic. He took his puzzle directly to the Lord and sought a clear answer from Him. Therefore, if doubts and confusion drive us to seek the Lord even more sincerely, such "doubts" or "confusions" are healthy.⁵

When you doubt your salvation or whether your sins have been forgiven, or if you are unclear about God's purpose and work in your life, look to the promises in Scripture and the transformation in your own life thus far. Instead of distancing yourself from Christ, turn to Him and bring all your questions and confusions to Him. You can also seek wise counsel from pastors and spiritual elders and avoid aimlessly searching and creating even more unnecessary confusion.⁶ Always strive to seek your answers from God's Word. When you pray and read God's Word, your faith will be strengthened and your doubts addressed.

11:4–6 – The Lord Jesus answered John's question directly from Scripture (11:4–6). Jesus answered John the Baptist by pointing to His signs and wonders with the words of Isaiah concerning the Messiah. Jesus seemed to say, "I am the one whom the Old Testament prophets spoke of!" (Isa 29:18–19; 35:5–6; 42:1–7; 61:1). He cleared all of John the Baptist's doubts by citing John's favorite book, Isaiah, and helped him to see that everything John's disciples had seen and heard from Jesus were the very fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies. Then Jesus continued to encourage this tired servant. "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." The Lord

exhorted John and told him that those who suffer for the Lord and choose to remain steadfast in trusting God even in the midst of hardship are blessed. They will receive praise and honor from God.⁷

11: 7–10 – Jesus’s highest praise for John the Baptist. In this passage, the Lord Jesus praised John the Baptist’s character and the work he accomplished for God. He asked the crowd what drew them to the wilderness to hear John and his message. It was not because John was a people-pleasing politician (“a reed swaying in the wind”), or a lavishly dressed person of wealth and power (“in fine clothes”). Rather, it was because John delivered his message with God-given power. John’s popularity was evident in Jesus’s question. He was beloved not because he had status but because he was a messenger sent by God. Through him, God gave words that the spirit of man desperately needed to hear. While many messages of the Old Testament prophets pointed to Christ, John the Baptist was the only one who not only prophesied about His work (Matt 3:11; John 1:30) but personally became the forerunner who “prepared the way for the Lord.” He preached the message of repentance, led people to Christ, and proved to them that Christ was “the Son of God (John 1:34)!” Therefore, only John shared the closest and most direct relationship with Christ, a great honor among all the prophets. For this reason, the Lord Jesus stated that John the Baptist was “more than a prophet” (11:9).

11:11–15 – Jesus explained John the Baptist’s limitation. “Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” From the perspective of human history, there is no one greater than John the Baptist, for he was the pioneer for the kingdom of heaven, who announced the arrival of the age of the grace of Christ.⁷ Yet, from the perspective of the heavenly kingdom, he is one of the “least.” Let us examine the restrictions John the Baptist experienced by looking at his relationship with the kingdom of heaven. John the Baptist lived in a time between the Old and New testaments, before the death and resurrection of Christ and before the coming of the Holy Spirit. In essence, he belonged to the old age. In comparison, the disciples of the Lord were later baptized by the Holy Spirit into the new spiritual body—the church, the Bride of Christ. John the Baptist, on the other hand, was only the “friend” of the Bridegroom (John 3:29). Even though he was greater than all other Old Testament prophets because of his closeness with Christ as mentioned in 11:9, Jesus’s disciples, along with all Christians since then, share even greater intimacy with the Lord because they are children of God through the forgiveness of the cross. Furthermore, because they believed in the Lord, they are “in Christ” and are able to enjoy special privileges and grace as a result. And through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, they can know the Lord more and have the right to fellowship with Him. This, however, does not mean John the Baptist’s faith was weaker or that he was less loyal compared to others after him.

11:12 – “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.” Another way to put it is that the kingdom of heaven has been forcibly advancing, while violent men attempt to seize it by force. This reflects the attitude of those in opposition at that time. The message of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus brought to the Jews was met with violence. They vigorously resisted and attempted to overthrow this message of the kingdom to the extent of killing John the Baptist and crucifying Jesus. Since John the Baptist began to preach, the religious leaders desperately wanted to obtain a kingdom, but not the one Jesus offered. Therefore, they resisted His message and tried to establish their own dominance.⁸ Note that to “raid” means to “seize by force,” but not that one can obtain heaven by his own effort, for salvation is accomplished by the Lord Jesus alone and has nothing to do with the works of man. Therefore, be careful not to take this verse out of its context.

11:13–15 – John the Baptist ended the age of the Law and began the New Testament era of grace. Jesus said that if the Jews were willing to accept this, then John the Baptist was the Elijah prophesied about in Malachi 4:5–6. John had the spirit of Elijah; he came to restore all things (Matt 17:11). But because man rejected Jesus, this prophecy concerning Elijah was not completely fulfilled. “Whoever has ears, let them hear” is the same statement John wrote to the seven churches

in Revelation 2–3. When the time of judgment comes, those who have ears but refuse to listen will suffer the consequences.

II. 11:16–24 An apathetic crowd disregarded the works of Jesus.

11:16–19 – An apathetic generation. Jesus compared the indifferent generation of His time to children sitting in marketplaces who suggested playing the game of weddings (with pipe and dancing) and funerals (with mourning and beating the breast) with one another. Like those children, people expected John the Baptist and Jesus to “dance” or “beat (their) breasts,” that is, to perform miracles or to take the place of the king, but both rejected the people’s expectations. Those who were displeased with the serious and simple life of John the Baptist, who neither ate nor drank, said that he was demon-possessed. On the other hand, they accused Jesus, who differed from John and ate and drank with sinners, of being a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Even though it was an apathetic generation, many still received the gospel and believed the good news that John and the Lord Jesus preached. They were able to enter into heaven. This demonstrates that regardless of the attitude of the Jews, God’s wisdom for the world would be revealed as planned.

11:20–24 – Denouncing the non-respondent towns. Jesus rebuked three towns specifically in this passage because they did not respond to the many signs and miracles which He had done in their midst. Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum were located in the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Three other Gentile cities that shared a similar evil reputation were Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom. Tyre and Sidon were located on the Phoenician coast, about 35 and 60 miles from the Sea of Galilee, respectively. They were rather large cities in the Old Testament period and were famous for their wealth. Ezekiel 26-28 records the prophecies concerning their destruction. Sodom was located about 100 miles south of Galilee. It was destroyed according to the account in Genesis 19. Jesus said that if these Gentile cities had seen the miraculous signs of Jesus, they would have repented and escaped total destruction. In comparison, the towns in Galilee had the “great light” shining on them, they enjoyed special opportunities to hear the personal message of the Lord, they beheld His wonders, and yet they remained unresponsive. They chose to live their own lives and dismissed salvation. The people in Capernaum rejected Jesus just like Chorazin and Bethsaida did, even after He had lived among them for some time. Therefore, none of these cities will be lifted up to heaven. Rather, they will go down to Hades (the place of the dead).¹⁰ Indeed, these towns are ruins today.

III. 11:25–30 A believing child understands the Father’s will and purpose and responds to His call of rest.

11:25 – Praising the heavenly Father. “At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children.’” The Lord Jesus praised the Father upon hearing the good report from His disciples as they returned from their evangelistic trips (Luke 10:13–20). Just when the Lord Jesus faced strong opposition from religious leaders and the hardened hearts and indifferent attitude of the Jewish towns, His disciples brought news of great success from their trip, in which even demons submitted to them. This timely positive report comforted and provided the evidence Jesus needed. He rejoiced over those who came to Him with childlike faith and praised the heavenly Father for them. According to God’s pleasing will, He hid His wonderful and marvelous deeds from the wise and learned (the religious leaders) and revealed them to little children (the humble and simple ones).¹¹ Note that Jesus was not condemning the wise and learned, but rather those who became proud because of it. What hinders people from God is not wisdom but pride. Similarly, what opens the heart of man is not foolishness and ignorance but humility. Jesus connected faith with humility. Even if one were as wise as Solomon, without a childlike heart of trust, he shuts himself outside the gates of heaven, especially if his knowledge puffs him up.¹²

11:26–27 – The declaration of Jesus. This declaration is the center of Christian faith. Jesus declared that God is revealed to man only through Him. The Apostle John expressed the same truth in recording what Jesus said: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Only in Jesus can we come to know God the Father (for this is the privilege of the Son of God). In other words, only through believing and receiving Christ Jesus can we obtain the knowledge of God.¹³ This passage concludes with this great declaration of Jesus.

11:28–30 – The call to rest. In this passage, Jesus invites all who are weary and burdened to come to Him, to leave their burdens to Him and to enjoy His rest.

11:28 – “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” The Lord Jesus used the phrase “weary and burdened” to describe all people on earth who are under various burdens (related to clothing, food, money, education, career, marriage, children, etc.—problems that cause all to be “tired and troubled.”). Apart from Christ, no one has true rest. No matter who they are, everyone needs the peace that Christ gives. This is because sin is what ultimately burdens man. Sin turns everything in life and work into burdens that drive rest away from people. There are three sources of burdens that are the result of sin: (1) We have left God and acted against His will. If our relationship with the Creator God is not restored, the burdens of sin will continue to oppress us. (2) Our relationships with man are broken. Unless God removes such a burden, we will suffer from unrest all our lives. (3) Environmental pressures—the enemy deceives and accuses us, causing us to lose peace and live with the burdens of guilt and confusion.

The Lord Jesus issued a great invitation of comfort to us. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” The Lord Jesus knows our weaknesses and hardships. He knows that we are unable to bear our burdens. He wants us to trust Him and cast all our anxieties on Him because He cares for us (1 Pet 5:7).

11:29 – “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” The Lord goes a step further to show us how we may have peace. Just because we have obtained salvation, does not mean that we know how to enjoy the fullness of Christ’s salvation. We need to take up the Lord’s yoke and learn from Him in order to find true rest and to experience how Christ bears our burdens daily. Only in this way are we able to live out the life of Christ (Ps 68:19).

1. Take up the Lord’s yoke. This means complete submission to the Lord’s will, to obey His assignments and to serve Him according to what He has commissioned us to do. After a believer is saved, even though he now has the assurance of eternal life, his heart will not enjoy rest unless he obeys God’s will. Jonah’s experience on the boat to Tarshish, as he traveled in the opposite direction of God’s will, illustrates this truth (Jonah 1:4–14). Please note that the “rest” here does not mean that one does not work, but rather to work according to the will of the Lord.
2. Learn from the Lord. These words are for those who “have obtained” His rest. What is to learn from the Lord? It is to be His disciple, obey His directives and follow His footsteps. We can find countless examples of Jesus in the Scriptures (John 13:12–15; Eph 5:2; Phil 2:5–8; 1 Pet 2:21–23), but here the Lord emphasized His gentleness and humility of heart. This is what we need to learn from the Lord because these are the secrets to enjoying His rest. A proud man often loses peace and is angered when he goes unnoticed by others. On the contrary, the heart of the Lord is humble and gentle. “Gentleness” is meekness and self-sacrifice. It depends completely on God’s wisdom, and is, therefore, does not easily hurt others or gets hurt.

11:30 – “For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” The yoke of the Lord is easy, and His burden is light and full of grace because His “yoke” comes with His presence, the power of His might, and His timely encouragement. It is a burden of joy. We might not be able to lay down our burdens in life

right away, but as we begin to experience the lightness of bearing the yoke of the Lord, laying down our own burdens becomes easier. When we continue to live for ourselves and carry burdens that are not of the Lord, we will become weary and lose peace. This is not to say that we do not fulfill our human responsibilities and care only for spiritual matters. It means that we commit and surrender all our responsibilities and rights in life into the Lord's hand (Rom 12:1). Before, we were masters of our own lives, bearing our own responsibilities. But now, we are stewards who faithfully fulfill the Lord's will, and He becomes the One who bears all the consequences. This is the secret the Apostle Paul taught believers, that "whatever the circumstances...I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Phil 4:10–13). Therefore, whoever is willing to bear the Lord's burden carries the yoke of the Lord and will certainly find heavenly rest and fulfillment of the soul in the love of the Lord.¹⁴

Jesus has prepared a custom-made yoke for each of us to be "yoked" to Him to fulfill God's original purpose for creating us. Let us seek God's yoke for us even if it constrains us. Because when we accept the yoke God wants us to carry, we will experience His promised rest.

IV. 12:1–50 The prejudiced religious leaders openly opposed Jesus.

This section contains the fourth response to Jesus by the Pharisees (the religious leaders of the Jews). They strongly opposed Him. These religious leaders rejected the Lord Jesus Christ and the message He preached because His message conflicted with their long-time prejudices and the religious rituals and traditions they passionately held fast to. Furthermore, the Lord condemned their lack of compassion towards the needs of those around them. As Jesus encountered their resistance, He was never frustrated or overcome with discouragement. Instead, He used them as examples to teach His disciples in order to further solidify their faith and to help them learn more truth.

There are four examples of opposition to Jesus in this section.

1. Concerning the Sabbath (12:1–21). The Lord Jesus clarified the fourth commandment in the Ten Commandments concerning the interpretation of the Sabbath and its application. He also clarified what work ought to be done and the need for compassion on this day.

12:1–8 – The Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28; Luke 6:1–5). The Law commanded the Israelites not to do any work on the day of Sabbath (Exod 20:10). And according to the rules set forth by the Pharisees, picking wheat from the stalks was an act of harvesting, rubbing wheat in the palms was regarded as threshing, and blowing off the chaff was the work of winnowing. Keeping the Sabbath holy was evidence of God's covenant with the people of Israel (Exod 31:16–17). During the wilderness years, the Israelites had to gather double portions of manna on the day before the Sabbath so that they would not need to do any work of food preparation on the next day. Scripture records an example of people put to death because they gathered wood on the day of Sabbath (Num 15:31–36). Therefore, the Pharisees blamed Jesus for not correcting His disciples as their teacher. In response to their accusation, Jesus gave the following three precedents.

First, He used the incident of how the priest offered the showbread to David while he was on the run from Saul. He gave David the old showbread that had been replaced by the new one on the day of Sabbath, but it was reserved as food for priests only (Lev 24:9; 1 Sam 21:1–6). David responded to the priest by declaring that he and his companions were "clean" (i.e., having not lain with women in the prior three days), and more so on the Sabbath. It was apparent that David had violated the law, but Jesus defended him because he did what was necessary to maintain his livelihood and strength.

Second, it was not unlawful for priests to do work in the temple on the day of Sabbath (Num 28:9–10; 18–19). We all know that Sunday is the Lord's Day. Therefore, Christians set this day apart to worship God. But ministers or pastors remain busy on Sundays to serve their

congregation. Back then, the priestly work of sacrifice performed on the Sabbath in the temple was holy even though it contradicted what the Law taught the people—to lay down all work on that day. The priests were serving God. Therefore, their actions transcended (surpassed) the Law and were not in violation of the regulations of the Sabbath. Jesus said, “I tell you that something greater than the temple is here” (12:6). That *something* was Jesus (in the original text, “something” is neuter, which points to a matter or a thing). A possible interpretation for Jesus’s statement may be that Jesus and His kingdom are greater than the holy temple. Jesus and His kingdom are the very essence of the holy temple, which represents God’s presence among man. When the tabernacle was first built in the Old Testament period, it meant that God was among His people (Exod 25:8; 40:35). Likewise, when Jesus was among the people, He was the realization of Immanuel—God with man (Matt 1:23). Jesus, therefore, was saying that if you think the temple is significant, there is something even greater than it, *someone* who is standing right before you. Do you not see?

Third, Jesus reminded them that He desired mercy (goodness) not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6). This was the second time Jesus quoted the same verse. The first time was when He said that He came to call sinners in order to show them mercy (Matt 9:13). Jesus reminded the Pharisees to look into the spirit behind the law. God looks at our godliness and our hearts, at whether we love Him and not at what we do outwardly (mere obedience to the law).

We need to have a heart of compassion and not simply outward obedience of religious rituals and formalities. Ordinarily speaking, our actions reveal our hearts and thoughts. However, ask yourself, “When I serve and give offerings, does my heart draw near to God as well?” We may find out that we may be making offerings to God but not loving Him. However, if one loves God, he will definitely give offerings to Him. When God established the Sabbath, His intention was for man to remember His salvation and blessings. He wanted to grant man rest so that their lives might be renewed. But the Pharisees burdened the people with their many rules and regulations, as if man was made for the Sabbath and ended up robbing the people of rest.

As the people of God, we serve God from different roles. How do we respond to this passage? Often times when we pursue holiness, we fall into the way of the Pharisees and become legalistic and lack compassion. May the Lord help us to not only pursue excellence in our service, but to also increase in compassion towards brothers and sisters as we seek righteousness, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt 23:23). Do we not all need the compassion and mercy of others? If we follow after the heart of the Father, and act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8), we will naturally draw many to know the Lord.

Jesus’s declaration. “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (12:8). Jesus is (1) the Son of man. Jesus came as the Son of God, but He was also a man with authority. Jesus is (2) the Lord of the Sabbath. As the Jews observed the Sabbath, they had to examine how they treated the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus had the authority to interpret the meaning of the Sabbath. He wanted the Pharisees to recognize His divine identity.

12:9–13 – Healing on the Sabbath Day. It was obvious that the Pharisees wanted to find an opportunity to accuse Jesus. Therefore, they pointed to a man with a shriveled hand and asked Jesus whether it was lawful to heal him on the Sabbath. According to Jewish rabbinic law, it was against the law to heal on the day of the Sabbath, unless the person was near death. This was however not a prohibition in the Old Testament Law. If Jesus did not heal the man with a shriveled hand, it would mean that He identified with the narrow regulations of the Pharisees and equated their rules as the law of God.¹⁶ Jesus boldly faced this challenge head on because He knew that these tedious and uncompassionate rules of the Sabbath were not in line with the Father’s heart. He came to set the captives free. He wanted man to be emancipated from these human rules. Therefore, even though Jesus knew that He would anger those who opposed Him, His loving kindness and compassion and His obedience to the will of God caused Him to act without compromise. Jesus answered their questions by asking them whether they would

rescue their sheep from the pit if it fell into it. If even they would save their sheep on the Sabbath, how much more should a man, made in the image of God, be saved? Are not people more precious than sheep? After responding, Jesus courageously and openly healed the man's withered hand on the Sabbath in the synagogue. With this miracle, the Lord Jesus once again proved that His authority came from God. He Himself was the "Lord of the Sabbath." However, his actions also created a crisis.

12:14–21 – To do away with Jesus. "But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus." The Pharisees did not see God's heart of compassion after Jesus healed the man with the shriveled hand. Rather, they further hardened their hearts and made their final decision: to completely reject Jesus and His message, including the truths of the Old Testament. They did not realize that while they accused Jesus of violating the law by healing on the Sabbath, they were also working in plotting to kill Jesus. Jesus, on the other hand, did not panic, even though He knew their plot to kill Him. He knew that no one could touch Him before the time set by God (John 7:30; 8:20; 10:18). The Lord Jesus very wisely chose to leave that place in order to avoid open confrontation with those who opposed Him (Matt 10:23). He continued His healing ministry, and many followed Him. When He healed the sick, He instructed them not to spread His fame for it would only stir up more resistance to His ministry. This passage recorded the deeds of Jesus as a fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1–4, revealing that Jesus had the authority and the mark of the Messiah.

2. Concerning Satan and the demon-possessed (12:22–37). The Lord Jesus responded to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who slandered Him and accused Him of driving out demons not by the power of God but by the devil.

12:22–24 – This passage recorded the miracle of how Jesus cast out demons. It was supposed to be a glorious event. Unfortunately, the Pharisees could not see the wonderful work of God with their eyes, nor could they praise God's victorious power with their lips. They opposed Jesus and were jealous of Him because the crowd praised Him as "the Son of David." The Pharisees were very displeased by the people's remarks. Therefore, they accused the Son of God to be in union with Satan, that He drove out the demon by the prince of demons.

Jesus's reply (12:25–37):

- (1) The power of Satan would not stand if it were divided (12:25–26). To cast out demons by the power of Satan meant that the devil's kingdom was divided. If any nation, city, or home were to divide amongst itself, destruction would result. Therefore, to say that Jesus drove out demons by the power of Satan meant that Satan used his own power to destroy his own kingdom. This was a very absurd and unreasonable statement.
- (2) By whom did the Jews drive out demons (12:27)? The general public thought that the Jews were able to drive out demons with the power of God. If so, why could they not believe that Jesus's power also came from God? Jesus pointed out that their accusation was not logical. If they alleged that Jesus cast out demons by the power of Satan, then they implied that the Jews also did the same.
- (3) Jesus drove out demons by the mighty power of the Holy Spirit (12:28). Jesus clearly declared the truth here that it was the power of the Holy Spirit by whom He cast out the demons. This proved that God's kingdom (His reign) had come, and that the prince of this world, Satan, would be cast out and destroyed along with his work as well (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Eph 2:2).
- (4) The illustration of the strong man (12:29). This illustration explained that Christ was able to drive out the evil spirits from man not because of Beelzebul but because He had the authority to overcome Satan. Therefore, He could drive out Satan's follower, the spirit that caused the man to become mute. In this illustration, the "strong man" is Satan, who is also

a roaring lion (1 Pet 5:8). The strong man's "house" refers to this world, the dominion of the devil. The "possessions" are those bound by the devil. To first tie up the strong man and then plunder his house means that one must first overcome Satan in order to free those bound by him. Jesus then went on to invite people to make a decision: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters" dissension and confusion into this world (they are the ones who divide, 12:30). There are only two positions in life: one is with Christ, and the other is against Christ and union with the devil. There is no middle ground. An attitude of apathy and indifference is the same as opposing Christ.

The parable of the strong man shows us that the purpose of the gospel of Christ is to snatch Satan's spoils—all the unsaved who are held in his hands because the whole world is under the control of the evil one (Satan) (1 John 5:19). The Lord Jesus came to destroy the work of the devil and to rescue man from the dominion of the evil one. He came to turn them from darkness to light. Perhaps you do not understand why your family and friends do not believe in the Lord. The Lord tells us that Satan will suffer loss. We must rely on the Lord and His victorious name to bind the strong man and to demolish the strongholds in people's hearts—anything that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. We must pray that our unbelieving family and friends may be delivered from the bondage of the enemy and be saved (2 Cor 10:4–5). Are you willing to daily pay the price by proactively praying for the salvation of your family and friends so that they may be brought to the Lord sooner than later?

(5) Jesus's warning for blaspheming the Holy Spirit (12:31–37; Mark 3:28–29). "Every kind of sin and slander" means that "all sins" can be forgiven because Christ has borne all our sins, and His precious blood is able to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. As long as we ask for God's forgiveness through the Lord Jesus, God will certainly forgive our sins. This was the case with the Apostle Paul, who used to blaspheme God but was forgiven (1 Tim 1:13; 1 Pet 2:24; 1 John 1:9). To blaspheme the Holy Spirit means to purposely reject and oppose the work of the Spirit and to refuse salvation and remain unrepentant. Its result is eternal condemnation and destruction. This was the Pharisees' attitude in hardening their hearts, denying Christ's signs and wonders, and refusing to accept that He is God. They were determined to reject His salvation. Today, believers have the eternal indwelling of the Holy Spirit. If we accidentally speak words that offend God but immediately sense the rebuke or fear of God in our hearts, we did not blaspheme the Holy Spirit but rather sinned unintentionally.¹⁷ We can always come to God to confess our sin and ask Him to forgive and to restore our intimate relationship with Him.

3. The Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign and Jesus warned them (12:38–45; Luke 11:24–26, 29–30). The teachers of the law and the Pharisees wanted Jesus to perform a sign from heaven in order to test Him. They wanted not a simple miracle but a mighty sign that only the Messiah could do in order to prove His identity. Jesus responded.

12:38–42 – The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees' request and Jesus's rebuke. Jesus called them "a wicked and adulterous generation." They lacked honesty and sincerity of heart and were deeply rebellious against God. They were unwilling to accept the many wonders God had already given through Jesus, so they asked Him for another sign. Even though they professed to belong to God, they were disloyal to Him (Jer 3:14–20). Their hearts were wicked. Jesus had already spoken about His resurrection (John 2:19–21), and now He reminded them of Jonah, an Old Testament prophet, who was swallowed by a great fish and vomited up after three days. Such miraculous deliverance was like resurrection to Jonah. Indeed, this incident caused Jonah to obediently preach God's message to the Gentiles, bringing about a city-wide repentance in Nineveh (Jonah 1–3). Jesus chose this Old Testament event to point to his own burial and resurrection on the third day. The people of Nineveh repented upon hearing the message of the "resurrected Jonah." Now, the message of the kingdom of God was being personally preached by one who was greater than Jonah, who came from God and is the only

begotten and beloved Son of God—Jesus. However, the Jews remained unrepentant.

12:43–45 – The warning of demons returning to a person (Luke 11:24–26). The Lord Jesus pointed out that if the Pharisees continued in their stubbornness and unbelief, their condition on earth will be like one who was freed from an impure spirit and then used all sorts of religious acts to sweep themselves clean and put themselves in order. Yet, “religion” is never of any use because that person’s life (house) is still vacant and without a master, for he did not invite Jesus to be the Lord of his life. He will once again be bound by the same impure spirit and suffer far more severe consequences. Previously, he was possessed by only one evil spirit. But now, he will be taken captive by seven additional ones who are more wicked than the first one. His end, therefore, will be much worse than before. Jesus warned that the Pharisees and the religious leaders of His time will fall under such a dangerous predicament because they attempted to reform themselves by their own efforts, hoping that their religious acts would “clean” them—but to no avail. They might have received the baptism of John the Baptist, but they rejected Jesus Christ the Messiah. Hence, they became the devil’s target and opened a way for his entry.¹⁸

4. Jesus described His spiritual family (12:46–50; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 8:19–21). Jesus’s mother and brothers came to Him hoping to speak to Him. His brothers had not yet believed in Him (John 7:5). They witnessed the miracles of Jesus and heard His message of the heavenly kingdom, but they did not receive it or yet believe it. They came to Jesus perhaps because they wanted to force Him to quit His ministry so that He would not become tired or mad (Mark 3:20–21). Perhaps they also wanted to warn Him to be careful of the Pharisee’s opposition. Jesus then pointed out to them and to His disciples that God desired a relationship deeper than that of blood relations. He wanted one that comes through believing in the Lord Jesus and obeying the Father’s will, through which one becomes a child of God and a member of God’s spiritual family. By God’s grace, Jesus’s younger brother, James, later became a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13) and wrote the book of Jude. Jesus’s other brothers also became His disciples after His resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:14).¹⁹

D. Conclusion

The commitment of people today towards the call of believing in Christ is also manifested in four different responses. Which one is yours? How do you respond to Christ and His Word? Do you bring your doubts and confusions boldly to the Lord and ask Him, so that through His Word, you might be strengthened? Or do you remain indifferent even after hearing many messages? Are you willing to trust the heavenly Father like a child and enjoy rest in Jesus? Or are you one who has “joined” a church and participated in its many religious activities but have no real relationship with the Savior?

Romans 6:23 says: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Do you know the consequences of each of these four responses to the gospel? On the one hand, it is resurrection to life, and on the other, it is falling to condemnation and destruction. Let us not be ones who are unresponsive to the Word of the Lord. Let us not be like the pharisees who held fast to religious rituals and formalities but determined to resist believing in the Lord. Their end is eternal destruction. Take heed! This is a matter of life and death. May you make the right choice!

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