

Conflict with the Jews

Before we talk about the conflict with the Jews, we'll consider some thoughts from the last lecture. First, a question was raised regarding the relationship between the concept of "shaking the dust from your feet" and philosophy of ministry. Primarily, this concept reminds us that there is an urgency in the Gospel message, and allowing someone to think that you'll work with him forever is doing him a disservice. It's not right to let people think they can drift in between faith and unfaith indefinitely. This doesn't mean that if your next door neighbor is an unbeliever, you need to say, "I'm going to turn from you and go to somebody else," when he doesn't respond. If you're working with an American pagan who knows very little, you might have to do a lot of work to educate him about who God is and what the Bible says. It may take you a long time just to get him to understand the claims of Christ. However, there is a time to move on when someone is resistant to God's message. If you're involved in ministry, your resources are finite. You don't have infinite time for every last person. You've got to spend time with those who show more interest.

Second, someone asked what I meant when I said we don't know what happened when the disciples went out. Matthew and the other Gospels do tell us that the disciples went out and preached and healed as Jesus directed them. However, we aren't told what the people did. There's no description of how many were saved or how many received Christ's message positively. We simply know that they carried out their mission and then we get hints in Matthew 11 that after Jesus ministered, a lot of people were confused, like John. And maybe Jesus was patient with them and then others were resistant and didn't respond faithfully at all. We do need to think about why this happened.

Third, another issue to consider is how do we reconcile the concept that "faith is a gift of God's grace" with the principle that we should hold accountable people who resist God's message? Exactly how this works is beyond our human understanding. Many times in the Christian faith when we don't know the answer to something, we can make a lot of progress by simply asserting what we know to be true and sticking with that. We do know that we are dead in our sins and we do not have the ability to bring ourselves to life, so that we suddenly have insight to see the Gospel. Only God can raise those who are spiritually dead and enable them to believe.

Furthermore, it is also true that every person does have to render account for their response to God and for the deeds they do in the body, whether good or evil. Look at Matthew 11:25. After this particular section in which Jesus dealt with John tenderly and with the crowds not so tenderly, especially in 11:20-24, warning the cities about their lack of response to what has happened, calling out woe and judgment upon them, He then offered a prayer in verse 25 as a sort of explanation: "I praise you Father because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children." Now that's the sovereignty of God. That's His good pleasure according to Jesus. And Jesus, as the wisdom of God, as the personification of God's good plan and the executor of that plan, praises Him for His inscrutable will to reveal to some and to hide from others.

After this, He didn't simply go back to condemning the people to hopelessness and doom. He told them that all things had been committed to Him by His Father. Finally, He invited them back, telling them to come to Him, all who are weary and heavy laden. This showed that just as the revealing and hiding is real, so too the invitation is real. Everyone is invited to come and whoever comes will receive comfort from Him and they'll receive rest. They will receive His good yoke, His easy burden, which means that although He asks us to do a lot (think of all He asks in chapter 10, regarding Christian mission), He carries the ultimate burden for us Himself, making it easy for us.

Now we will look at the ministry of Jesus and why He received so much opposition. Matthew 12 describes some of the reasons for this direct opposition. We've already seen that the Gospel story begins and ends with conflict. Herod, at Jesus' birth, already wanted to kill Him; Satan tried to tempt Him; at Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth, the people tried to throw Him off a cliff. Very early in all four Gospels we have hints of the opposition of the Jewish leaders and of course, by the end we have massive conflict, and throughout there is strain between Jesus and the Jewish leaders and other leaders. Very early on we see things heading toward the cross, and we see that many people deeply opposed or resisted Jesus.

There are several reasons for all the conflict surrounding Jesus and His ministry. First, Jesus upset powerful people. Spiritual warfare upsets Satan, and it upsets his domain. Politically speaking, He upset the religious leaders of the day. He upset and distressed Herod and others. He also caused trouble in the minds of the religious people. As they looked at Jesus, they intuitively regarded Him as a rabbi, as one of their own. Yet, He dashed their expectations because He didn't really act according to their standards for a rabbi. For instance, the scribes and Pharisees sometimes acted toward Jesus like very disappointed family members. At other times they acted like one minister acts toward another who thinks that the other has betrayed the faith. They seemed to be thinking, "You should be with me; why aren't you?"

Why were the Pharisees so angry with Jesus? First, the Pharisees felt that Jesus desecrated the Sabbath. Second, He said the Son of the Man was the Lord of the Sabbath, and they understood that He meant that He was the Son of Man. Third, He exposed their hypocrisy. He not only talked about it, but He showed it. Fourth, the Pharisees were jealous for their places as the leaders. Fifth, Jesus set a higher standard, once again displacing the Pharisees from their role as spiritual leaders. Sixth, He humiliated them by beating them in debates regarding the Law.

So we see that Jesus did many things that violated the Pharisees' ideas of righteousness and wisdom. They didn't like that Jesus was willing to associate with women, children, and sinners. The Pharisees were Jesus' friends, and He talked to them. A rabbi who is quoted in the *Mishnah*, a collection of Jewish wisdom literature from around this time in history, said, "Let the house be opened wide and let the needy be members of thy household." In other words, take care of the poor. "And talk not much with womankind." Then this editorial remark is recorded, "They said this of a man's own wife. How much more of his fellow's wife? Hence the sages have said. He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself, neglects the study of the law, and, at the last, will inherit Gehenna." They felt that women were almost inherently corrupting toward men. So men were urged not to talk to a Gentile or Samaritan, their neighbors, or women. They were also urged to avoid too much talk with their own wives because it would cause the neglect of more weightier things of life, like the Law. Jesus didn't go along with these restrictions at all.

Jesus' association with children would be more a matter of folly than sin, but the Pharisees couldn't have thought that it was very wise either. His association with sinners was a grievous concern to them. At least six times in the Gospels the question of why Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners was raised. The *Mishnah* had statements about this, too, for example, *Aboth* 1:7 says, "Keep far from an evil neighbor. Do not consort with the wicked and lose not belief in retribution." In other words, if you spend time with sinners, you may forget that God is going to judge them. Custom said that if you shared a meal with somebody, you were signifying acceptance and intimacy. A religious custom said "let not a man associate—this would be a religious man, a rabbi—with a sinner, even to bring him to the law."

The Pharisees applied this specifically to food and eating with sinners, saying, “He that undertakes to be trustworthy [that is, a faithful, trustworthy teacher] tithes, number one, what he eats; number two, what he sells; number three, what he purchases; and number four, does not accept hospitality with the people of the land.” The reason for this cautionary measure is that there was no way to know the person you were eating with had tithed on his possessions or not. So Pharisees were to be sure to tithe what they ate, all that they sold, all that they had, and all that they gave to others and they were not to eat with anybody who may not have tithed. Such restrictions made sharing a meal with anyone practically impossible. So all associations were suspicious.

The way Jesus treated the law surely bothered the Pharisees. They saw Jesus’ perspective as a criticism of the law—not necessarily the Ten Commandments—but the laws about divorce, oaths, and clean and unclean foods. Jesus also didn’t seem to have had any reverence for the temple. He criticized it and its officers. Maybe the worst offense of all was that Jesus almost entirely disregarded what is ordinarily considered the oral law or the oral tradition of Israel. Now the oral law was something that the Jewish rabbis believed that God gave Moses on Sinai in addition to what Moses wrote. There was this other body of information that was only passed on by word of mouth. Often the Pharisees took the commands of God combined with those traditions and then added more regulations to it. For example, the oral tradition said, “Be deliberate in judgment; raise up many disciples and make a fence around the law.” So if you believed that it was a violation of the Sabbath to walk five miles on the Sabbath, and you believed that was what God had said on Mt. Sinai, then you would not want to walk more than a mile on the Sabbath. If the standard was set at walking only one mile, you would be sure not to walk five. This was considered a “hedge around the law.” By making the law more stringent than God’s law, they ensured they would not even come close to violating His law. Jesus paid no attention whatsoever to those regulations even though the rabbis dedicated themselves to them. He almost entirely neglected vast swathes of their teaching.

Another example of this is in how the Pharisees interpreted and expounded upon God’s divorce law. There is about a 40 page section on how to get a divorce. A small portion said:

“The divorce bill may be written with anything, ink, red dye, gum, copperous or whatever is lasting, but it may not be written with fruit juice or whatever is not lasting. It may be written on anything. It may be written on an olive leaf or on a cow’s horn, but he must give her the cow. Or it may be written on the hand of a slave, but he must give her the slave. All are qualified to write a bill of divorce except a deaf mute, an imbecile or a minor. All are qualified to bring a bill of divorce except a deaf mute, an imbecile or a minor, a blind man or a Gentile. If it was received from the husband by a minor who later became of age or by a deaf mute whose senses later became sound or by an imbecile who later became sane, it is valid. But if it was given by one of sound senses who then became a deaf mute and again became of sound senses or by one who is sane and then became imbecile and then became sane again, it is valid. If at the beginning and at the end of the act it is performed knowingly, it is valid.”

In that one paragraph of 40 pages on divorce, there’s not one line on how a husband could be reconciled with his wife. There’s not one line about forgiving her or asking for forgiveness. There’s not one line about how to avoid getting to this position. It’s regulation upon regulation upon regulation of how to end a marriage. It’s a whole track tape on divorce and when remarriage is allowed. But there’s nothing about reconciliation. And Jesus entirely ignored all of it.

To be fair to the Pharisees and rabbis, they weren’t all like this and there were some who seemed to have loved God genuinely. You read in Acts 15 that some of them joined the church. There were also some

who taught well, and we can find other parts of their teaching elsewhere. They taught on the two ways of life, on the way of obedience and the way of blessing, and it is likely that some Pharisees will be in heaven. But certainly that is not the preponderant view. The majority of them would have been more like our former description. This is why Jesus had so much conflict with them. It was inevitable because they had an entirely different view of what it means to live the life of a disciple. We've talked about other things like Sabbath regulations and rules about travel. Jesus was overthrowing a false image of obedience; that is why there is conflict.

We are not quite sure how the Pharisees came to believe in this oral tradition, and to believe that it came from God, but it probably originated when they were separated from Israel, from Jerusalem, and from the temple. They began to study the Word and develop some traditions and they treasured those partly because of their separation.

As we move on, we see what actually transpires as their difficulties come to light. The first occasion is in Matthew 12, when the disciples were going through grain fields picking some heads of grain and eating them on the Sabbath. Notice here that Jesus was not picking the grain. Next is the accusation from the Pharisees, who were in the vicinity, that the disciples were doing what was unlawful on the Sabbath. The problem was not that they walked through somebody's field and took the food. The law of God allows that in Deuteronomy. The problem is they were rubbing it in their hands, which was considered threshing, and they were plucking it, which was considered harvesting. So they were laboring on the Sabbath. And Jesus said that was okay.

To explain this, it is first important to understand that there are some things more important than punctiliar obedience to the letter of the law. For example, David and his companions did what was unlawful when they took bread only the priests were allowed to eat. This shows us that human need takes precedence over temple ritual and sacrificial ritual. Second, moving a little bit closer to the case at hand, the priests desecrated the Sabbath by working on it when they offered a sacrifice. Remember, this was a religion of animal sacrifice, and they didn't just sacrifice doves and chickens. They sacrificed bulls and goats. When we think about what would be involved in killing a bull we have to picture the priests working in gangs to heave and hoist such a large animal. There had to be days when the perspiration was running off them, and their clothes were drenched from the labor they expended. But it was the right thing to do because they were serving God. What did Jesus say?

Jesus said, "Someone greater than the temple is here." He said that it is acceptable to serve God in His temple, but there is something superior to the temple. The temple is a representation of the presence of God. Jesus is the presence of God. In essence He is saying, "If the priests' act was justified, so is My disciples' act. They need to eat so they can help Me. The prophets would have told you about this. God desires mercy not sacrifice, mercy over ritual. Furthermore, if you don't accept My three-fold argument, just consider one more point, I'm the one who decides what's right around here." Jesus said the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. They might have wanted to get in a debate by offering three counterpoints to His argument. But Jesus cut them off by asserting His authority as the Son of Man. This assertion ended the discussion.

Continuing on to Matthew 12:9-13, we see Jesus in a synagogue where there is a man with a shriveled hand, and the Pharisees are watching Him. Jesus says that it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, and it seems like they don't even answer Him. Jesus tells them what He thinks. He asks them if they would save a sheep that had fallen into a pit on the Sabbath. Jesus knew the answer would be "yes." Helping an animal on the Sabbath day was acceptable, and that was part of their understanding. Jesus was asserting that a man is more valuable than a sheep, so he should be helped as well.

Rather than wait for an answer from them, Jesus told the man to stretch out his hand and He healed him. After this, the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. This was not just because of what He did but also because He was not willing to debate with them. He was asserting that He was in charge and would do what He wanted to do without even listening to them. So they were angry and plotted to destroy Him. Jesus responded to this in a couple of ways. He first told them that their opposition and their plot would not stop Him. In verse 15, He continued to heal others, warning them not to reveal His identity to anyone. When He healed the demoniac, He was in a pagan land, and He told them to tell others about what had happened and that He had done it. But when He was in Israel, He said don't tell. In pagan lands He was preparing the way for days to come because they didn't know enough to expect the wrong thing. In Israel, He told them not to talk about Him so that there wouldn't be false expectations and false images of what Jesus would do.

He went on to say that all the opposition He was receiving was getting sharper, thereby fulfilling what Isaiah said. Matthew 12:18 quotes Isaiah 42, saying, "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love and in whom I delight. I put my spirit on Him. He will proclaim justice to the nations." Matthew quoted Isaiah to show that Jesus was fulfilling His ministry. In verse 18 there is a hint that His ministry will continue and go to the nations. It appears again in verse 21: "In his name the nations will put their hope." He was sending the message that if Israel rejected Him, He would go to the nations.

Second, He said that He may get in disputes, but He would not quarrel. He was not going to cry out in the streets. Third, in verse 20, He reveals Himself as a quiet deliverer. People looked to Him, wondering who He was—was He the Christ? They wondered what these signs and miracles indicated. But He was not going to crush His opposition and quench a smoldering wick, or snap off a broken reed. Nonetheless He planned to go forth to victory. He wouldn't do this by crushing others, but He would "lead justice to victory." These were very strong words. He would propel justice to victory. He would conquer but not simply crush others.

In Matthew 12:22-37, Jesus healed a demoniac, leading to an escalation of the conflict with the Jewish leaders. He healed someone who was brought to Him, and after this healing, some people said, in verse 23, "Could this be the Son of David, could this be the deliverer whom we await, could this be God's servant?" The Pharisees insisted that He was not the Son of David. They said that His power came from Satan. Jesus responded to that accusation by saying it was foolishness. It would be folly for Satan to drive out Satan because he would be destroying his own household. This was an illogical accusation to level against Jesus. He explained that His miracles meant that the kingdom of God had come upon them.

He has spoken like this before. Now, He was challenging the crowds to take a stand. He told them something like, "I just healed somebody, which proves the kingdom has arrived. These people over here say it proves I'm in league with the devil. If you stand by neutrally here, if you don't line up with Me, you're against Me." Quiet support, quiet approval, which is the way a lot of the Jews did it, was not enough. He was telling them that they had to line up actively with Him or side with the opposition.

In Matthew 12:31-32, He addressed the Pharisees: "I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the 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." As leaders and teachers in the church, you may have someone come to you concerned that he has committed the unpardonable sin; he hasn't. If he had committed the unpardonable sin, he wouldn't care. The very fact that a person is worried about it indicates that he is not hard-hearted toward God and sealed in his wickedness. What is the unpardonable sin? Notice that the Pharisees were close to

committing it, but they didn't commit it. They were warned about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, but they're specifically told that they hadn't actually committed it because they had only spoken against the Son of Man.

The unpardonable sin is not simply the sin of unbelief, as some people say it is. One can repent of unbelief, so it is not "unpardonable." The Pharisees saw what Jesus was doing. They heard His claims and they said His statements and actions were wickedness, were demonic. By definition, if you believe that Jesus is demonic, you're not going to turn to Him in faith. But this still was not the unpardonable sin because they only blasphemed against Jesus and not against the Holy Spirit. So it had to be more than this. Jesus had not yet died and risen. All the signs of His identity had not occurred yet. The unpardonable sin would be to see all that the Pharisees saw, to see it with clarity and with power as they saw it with clarity and power, and to ascribe it all to wickedness, to trickery, to demons, and to satanic forces. To deny Christ and His power in a deliberate way, not only having seen the evidence, but having the testimony of the Holy Spirit as well, was the unpardonable sin.

Probably very, very few people commit the unpardonable sin. There are some people who would be candidates for it: people who know the Bible; have Christian spouses who faithfully show them the love of Christ, and compassion, tenderness, patience, and fidelity of Christ and who have been really transformed since they became Christians; but that still doesn't impress them. Perhaps they came to church at first, just to be supportive, and heard good preaching many times. After sitting there for a year or two, they quit coming because they couldn't stand it anymore. They say things like, "I just wish they'd all shut up. I don't want you to ever go to church again, and I just hope the church burns down." Yet the good news is that short of that kind of behavior, even the Pharisees with their libels against Christ could be forgiven.

In Matthew 12:33-37 Jesus said that the real reason the Pharisees said He cast out demons by Satan's power was that they were bad trees, and you can't bring good things out of a man who has bad stored up in his heart. In other words, you say what's in you. If someone curses and says hateful things constantly, it's because there's hatefulness in their heart. If they curse God and they resist God with their words it's because there's resistance to God in their heart. And those who bless Christ have love of God in their heart.

Immediately after this, some Pharisees asked to see a sign from Jesus that confirmed what He said. This is galling because they just saw a sign and said He performed His miracles by the power of Satan. So Jesus, having given them enough signs already, said he would not give them any signs except for the sign of Jonah. Now, Jonah did not do anything; he performed no signs to prove he was a prophet. He just preached. There was a sign involved in the story of Jonah though. He was in the belly of the great fish for three days. When we talk about the sign of Jonah, we're not talking about a sign that Jonah performed, we're talking about the sign Jonah himself is. The sign of Jonah *is* Jonah. His disappearance and reappearance *was* the sign. Jesus was telling the Pharisees that the next sign they would get was Himself. His death and resurrection was to be their sign. Until then, He withdrew from this wicked generation.

There are three points to summarize Jesus' conflict with the Jews and its impact on His ministry. First, Jesus did do some things that looked like violations of their laws, as they understood it, so it is possible to understand why some of them ascribed His power to Satan. They could have quoted Deuteronomy 13:6-9: "If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, 'Let us go and worship other gods' (gods that neither you nor your fathers have known, gods of the peoples around you, whether near or far, from one end of the land

to the other), do not yield to him or listen to him. Show him no pity. Do not spare him or shield him. You must certainly put him to death. Your hand must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people.” The Jews of this day regarded this as a passage that justified the unjust execution of a beguiler of the people, someone who spoke smooth things and performed certain signs, but led you away from God. Some of the Pharisees probably saw Jesus that way, at least initially.

Second, they saw the deeds of Christ, they heard His claims, and they saw Him back them up. One can see why they might have had some doubts about Him, why they might have been a bit like John the Baptist, not fully understanding because Jesus did not fit all their criteria. But when they saw the evidence, they didn’t ask for an explanation. They judged Jesus as wrong. If they hesitated between belief and unbelief, they didn’t take it to God the way John and Thomas and Peter and you and I do or should do. Instead, they were certain that they knew Jesus was not God’s sent one.

Third, ultimately they did the work of the evil one—they killed Christ. They killed God’s Son. Take Jesus’ own words to heart. He did say that they had wickedness in their hearts, that they were hypocrites and deceivers. So while some understanding might be necessary, it is clear that they had seen enough; they should have known. Yet they persisted in their rebellion. This is a warning that sometimes religious leaders can be the strongest opponents of the true Gospel. It’s a religious man, and religious woman who could be sure in their own mind about God and resist it more strenuously than the pagan or the agnostic who doesn’t even know enough to truly oppose it.