

Matthew 12-13: Controversies and Parables

In the previous section, containing the second great Matthean discourse, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out and preach the Gospel. In this section the ministry of Jesus in Galilee continues and frames the third great discourse, highlighting the parables of Jesus.

Matthew bases this part of his account on Mark 2:23–3:6, which describes Jesus or his disciples doing two controversial things on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1–16): plucking grain to eat, and healing a man's withered hand. The Markan frame resurfaces twice later in the chapter. In 12:22–32, a story based on Mark 3:19–30 (= Luke 11:14-23) appears, about the healing of a man possessed by a demon. That event stirs more controversy about the authority of Jesus. The story in both Matthew and Mark concludes with a dramatic saying about an unforgiveable sin (12:31–32). The Markan frame appears finally in the story about the true kindred of Jesus (Matt 12:46–50 = Mark 3:31–35).

The stories derived from Mark all have an air of tension. They depict Jesus evoking a critical response by his actions, saying challenging things about sin, and redefining kinship ties in a provocative way. Matthew adds stories to this frame that reinforce the tension but that also frame it within a prophetic and eschatological context. His first addition reinforces his earlier comments about how the ministry of Jesus fulfills prophecy (12:15–17). The passage, unparalleled in Mark, bears hallmarks of Matthew's theological concerns and style such as the distinctive introductory formula of v 17. After the pronouncement about the sin against the Holy Spirit, Matthew adds three passages. The first is a saying about good and bad trees (12:33-36); the second a pronouncement story in which Jesus responds to a request for a "sign"; the third a comment about how unclean spirits tend to behave.

The Sabbath Controversies (12:1–14)

A number of stories in all the gospels tell of activity by Jesus on the Sabbath that was controversial in the eyes of some contemporaries (see the parallels to these stories in Mark 2 and 3; Luke 13:10–17, 14:1–6; John 5:1–18, 9:1–17). Many of these stories contain a defense of Jesus. Here the defense includes a Biblical precedent (vv 4–5), the citation of a scriptural principle (v 7), and an argument *a fortiori* (vv 11–12). The saying in verse 8 is ambiguous. If “son of man” is the simple Semitic expression for “human being,” Jesus would be arguing that general human needs trump the need to observe the Sabbath, a somewhat more liberal version of a principle found in Rabbinic literature. If “Son of Man” is understood as a reference to Jesus himself, evoking the figure described in Daniel 7:14, the verse stakes out a claim that he has authority over the Sabbath. It is likely that the ambiguity was part of the saying from its first use.

Prophecy Fulfilled (12:15–21)

After an introduction reminiscent of the Markan theme of the “Messianic Secret,” in which Jesus tries to keep his identity quiet, the narrator intervenes by citing Isaiah 42:1–4. This passage is one of Isaiah’s “servant songs,” which celebrate a prophetic figure, perhaps Isaiah himself; but they were understood by many early Christians to be prophecies about Jesus.

Matthew’s citation serves several purposes. Here in the middle of the gospel, while Jesus is active in Galilee, and after telling his disciples only to go to Israel’s lost sheep (Matt 10:6), the prophetic text reminds the reader of the ultimate scope of Jesus’ mission, as Matthew understands it, to “proclaim justice to the Gentiles.” The last verse (v 21) of the citation sounds a similar note in declaring that “in his name the Gentiles will hope.”

The prophetic text also makes a comment about the behavior of Jesus. Matthew probably understood the remark that the servant “will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets” as a reference to Mark’s theme of the “secrecy” of Jesus. Matthew apparently found the prophetic text helpful in making sense of the somewhat mysterious Markan element.

Jesus and Beelzebul (12:22-31)

All the gospels except John report that Jesus was, among other things, an exorcist. The saying recorded in v 28 may well express a conviction of Jesus himself that the effectiveness of his exorcisms was a ground for belief that the reign of God was being realized in and through him. The actions of Jesus, like his Sabbath behavior, were a source of controversy, both in his own day and in the debates between his disciples and their critics. The accusation lodged here that Jesus was a minion of “Beelzebul,” the “ruler of the demons” (v 24), was one of the charges made against him. The response initially appeals to common sense. If Jesus is expelling demons he cannot be an instrument of the demonic realm. Another saying bolsters the defense (v 29). In it, Jesus compares himself to a burglar who, in order to be successful, must tie up the “strong man” who owns the house he is invading. The familiarity of the saying mutes its very provocative character (Jesus is like a thief!). This is true of Jesus’ teachings elsewhere, as well.

Concluding the defense, an unrelated saying (v 30–32) distinguishes between insults to Jesus, such as the claim that he served Beelzebul, and insults to the Spirit of God at work in the life of the community of Jesus and his followers. The suggestion that the latter are unforgivable stands in tension with the message of the gospels proclaiming abundant forgiveness (e.g., Matt 18:22). The notion that there is an “unforgivable sin” appears elsewhere in the New Testament, e.g., in the Epistle to the Hebrews 6:4–6, where the sin seems to be apostasy, understood by

many interpreters as the obstinate refusal to accept divine forgiveness. Perhaps something similar is involved here, although interpreters have long wrestled with the saying.

Good and Bad Fruit and Trees (12:33–37)

The note of judgment in the saying about the sin against the spirit prompts another similar saying. The contrast between good and bad trees and their fruit already appeared in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:17–19), and the threat that bad trees would be cut down and burned appeared in the preaching of John (Matt 3:10). The application of the imagery is immediately made clear. The “bad trees” are the “brood of vipers” who have challenged Jesus (v 34). The harsh condemnation is followed by further evocations of eschatological judgment (vv 36–37).

The Sign of Jonah (12:38–42)

Controversy continues in a story that Matthew shares with Luke 11:29–32. In response to a challenge for a “sign” authorizing Jesus to do what he does, he responds with another harsh reproof of the “wicked and adulterous generation.” He proceeds to tell them about an unexpected sign, the return of the Son of Man from the earth after three days and three nights, an event likened to the return of Jonah from the belly of the great fish. The allusion to the resurrection of Jesus, here clearly equated with the “Son of Man,” is Matthew’s interpretation of the saying about Jonah. The Lukan version of the story simply refers to the prophetic activity of Jonah as the “sign.” That version is probably the more original, reinterpreted by Matthew in the light of his belief in the resurrection of Jesus. A further parallel, to Jesus as a teacher wiser than Solomon, reinforces the comparison to the prophet (v 42).

Unclean Spirits (12:43–45)

The observation about how difficult it is to get rid of “evil spirits,” paralleled in Luke 11:24-26, is likely to be a saying that stems from Jesus himself. Later disciples are unlikely to have suggested that Jesus’ power was so limited.

True Kin (12:46–50)

Matthew inherits the saying about redefining kinship from Mark 3:31–35. This is another case where long familiarity with a saying of Jesus blunts its highly provocative character. In a society that highly valued kinship ties, the preference for the intentional community of disciples is highly subversive.

The Parables of Jesus (13:1–58)

Matthew’s third major block of teaching, almost as well known as the Sermon on the Mount, consists primarily of parables: the Sower (13:1–9), the Tares (vv 24–30), the Mustard Seed (vv 32–33), the Leaven (v 33), the Treasure (v 44), the Pearl (v 45), and the Fishnet (vv 47–48). Interspersed with the parables are interpretations: of the Sower (vv 18–22), the Tares (vv 36–43), and the Fishnet (vv 49–50). Following the last interpretation, Jesus comments on those who understand his teaching (vv 51–53). In one other block of material Jesus explains why he speaks in parables (vv 10–17). The chapter ends with a brief story about the reaction to Jesus’ teaching in Galilee (vv 54–58).

The parables in this chapter are of two different types. Most are best described as similitudes, brief comparisons of a reality, the Kingdom or Reign of God, and some illustrative

image. Two, the Sower and the Tares, are short narratives. Matthew inherited several things from Mark, the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1–12), its interpretation (Mark 4:13–20), the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven (Mark 4:30–32), as well as the concluding story about the reaction to Jesus (Mark 6:1–6). For other stories he drew on other sources.

Matthew's interpretations of the parables are straightforward. Following Mark, he understands the Sower as an allegory of how the teaching of Jesus is or is not received. The same principle provides an interpretation of the Tares. That story is taken to be an allegory that illustrates one of Matthew's favorite themes, the expected eschatological judgment. The same allegorical meaning is read out of the parable of the Fishnet.

The interpretation of each of the parables is given privately to the disciples, in accord with the theory that Matthew outlines in vv 10–15. Parables are a vehicle of teaching, but only for insiders. Matthew understands the fact that outsiders do not understand to be the “fulfillment” of a prophecy of Isaiah 6:9–10, a passage in which Isaiah castigates the failure of Israelites of his generation to understand his prophetic message.

Although Matthew derives this passage from Mark, he has made a subtle change. In Mark's version, the prophetic text explained the *purpose* of Jesus' teaching with such stories and similitudes. He was *preventing* the people from understanding (Mark 4:12). For Matthew, the prophecy does not point to the aim of Jesus' story-telling strategy, but the problem that he was confronting, a people who *refused* to understand. In Matthew's eyes that refusal was the grounds for the negative judgment that awaits the allegorical equivalent of the tares and the bad fish. Their destiny is the fiery furnace and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v 50), one of Matthew's favorite expressions.

Modern interpreters of the parables have noted that the allegorical interpretations of Mark and Matthew seem to be secondary and are lacking in the case of many of the similitudes. Many scholars suspect that Jesus himself often used parables as a form of provocative teaching, rather than as illustrative allegories. So, for example, the parable of the treasure hidden in the field (vv 44–45) succinctly describes the action of a man who secures his own future in an ethically questionable way. As many moralists of the day would have agreed, he had an obligation to try to find the proper owner of the treasure, rather than lay claim to it himself. How, one might ask, is such an action an illustration of the Reign of God? Perhaps the question is not unrelated to the saying encountered in 12:29, where Jesus compared himself to a burglar!

Similarly thought provoking are the images of leaven, a substance that is perhaps necessary for ordinary daily life, but one that has to be cleaned out at the Passover season, the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Does the image have a positive or a negative valence?

Divorced from their allegorical interpretations, the longer stories may also take on new meaning. Is the main character in the Sower a careful farmer or a careless profligate? Is the farmer in the Tares an image of a patient, prudent steward of the land, or is he taking a big risk with his crop? A clever preacher or storyteller could no doubt find more than one way to use these little tales. The true potential of the parables gives added significance to the comparison made in v 52 with a householder who can bring out both the new and the old from his storeroom.

A prophet without honor (13:54–58)

To conclude his account of this stage of the Galilean ministry Matthew uses Mark 6:1–6. Galileans who knew Jesus and his family (v 55) would not accept him either as a powerful

exorcist or a teacher of wise tales. What was probably a traditional proverb summarizes the situation: A prophet is not without honor except in his own country (v 57).

Questions for Discussion

1. The notion that Jesus was a source of controversy runs through these chapters. What were the major reasons, as Matthew understands them, for that situation?
2. How provocative do you find the sayings of Jesus, such as his comparison of his own activity to that of a burglar or his similitudes that are not always making edifying points? Are these sayings and stories a challenge to contemporary Christians?
3. How have you come to understand the parables of Jesus? Do you read them in more than one way? Do you have a favorite?
4. How have you come to understand Matthew's role in framing the story of Jesus and his teaching? What are his major concerns? Are you in sympathy with them?

Recommended Readings:

Donald Hagner, "Matthew's Parables of the Kingdom (13:1-52)." In *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*. Richard Longenecker (ed.) Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000. 102-24.

Jonathan Pennington, "Matthew 13 and the Function of the Parables in the First Gospel," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13 (2009): 12-20.