

Title: Matthew 12-14

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Abstract

In this lecture covering Matthew 12–14, Dr. Craig Keener examines the escalating conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities, centered on the Sabbath controversies and Jesus' divine claim as "Lord of the Sabbath". Keener analyzes the literary nature and historical context of Jesus' agricultural parables in Matthew 13, highlighting how they reveal the hidden, pervasive character of the present kingdom to true disciples while remaining riddles to outsiders. Finally, the study contrasts the tragic, grotesque execution of John the Baptist under Herod Antipas with Jesus' life-giving, compassionate ministry, underscoring the deep political tensions of the Herodian dynasty and the ultimate, absolute cost of discipleship.

Outline

I. Introduction: The Clash of Traditions (Matthew 12)

- **A. The Sabbath Controversy in the Grain Fields (12:1-8)**

1. Gleaning other people's fields was permissible under biblical law; Pharisees approved of the practice.
2. Pharisees objected to meal preparation (rubbing husks and grinding grain) on the Sabbath, viewing it as a technical labor violation.
3. Jesus' scriptural defense of His disciples:
 - a. David and his companions eating consecrated showbread in an emergency, demonstrating that human need takes precedence over ritual laws.
 - b. Priests working in the temple on the Sabbath without violating the spirit of the law.

4. The priority of mercy over sacrifice, matching prophetic mandates from Hosea, Isaiah, and Amos (Hosea 6:6; cf. Isaiah 58; Amos 5).
5. Jesus' divine authority as the "Lord of the Sabbath".

- **B. Healing on the Sabbath (12:9-14)**

1. Hypocrisy of Pharisaic rules: Pharisees allowed pulling an animal out of a pit or watering livestock on the Sabbath but objected to healing a chronic condition.
2. Jesus heals the man with the withered hand without physical labor or formal prayer, simply commanding him to stretch it out.
3. Pharisees plot to execute Jesus, violating their own principles of legal leniency and high evidentiary standards for capital cases.

- **C. The Messianic Secret and the Servant of the Lord (12:15-21)**

1. Jesus commands people not to publicize His healings to restrain popularity and delay premature execution on the cross.
2. Fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1-4: the quiet, meek, and spirit-empowered servant who does not break a bruised reed or cry out in the streets.

II. The Beelzebul Controversy and Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:22-45)

- **A. Accusations of Sorcery (12:22-24)**

1. Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul (a death-worthy charge under Jewish law).

- **B. Jesus' Threefold Refutation (12:25-30)**

1. A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand: Satan would not systematically dismantle his own work.
2. "By whom do your sons cast them out?"—contrasting Jesus' authoritative command with the Pharisees' use of incantations, magic rings, and physical remedies.
3. Casting out demons by the "Spirit of God" (or the "finger of God" in Luke 11:20) demonstrates that the Kingdom of God has arrived.

- **C. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (12:31-37)**

1. Definition: extreme, persistent hardness of heart that attributes clear works of the Holy Spirit to Satan, making the individual incapable of repentance.
2. Parable of binding the strong man: Jesus binds Satan (initiated at the temptation in Matthew 4) to plunder his goods (deliver demoniacs).
3. Warning of accountability on the Day of Judgment: every idle word spoken will be judged.

- **D. The Sign of Jonah (12:38-45)**

1. Religious leaders demand a sign, ignoring the miracles already occurring.
2. The Sign of Jonah: Jesus' burial and resurrection after three days (using ancient inclusive day-counting).
3. Gentiles (Ninevites, Queen of Sheba) who responded to lesser light will rise to condemn the unrepentant generation.
4. Parable of the returning unclean spirit: an empty house swept clean is re-occupied by seven worse spirits.

- **E. Jesus' True Spiritual Family (12:46-50)**

1. Jesus redefines family ties, stating that His disciples—those who do the Father's will—are His mother and brothers, prioritizing spiritual devotion over cultural family obligations.

III. The Parables of the Kingdom's Presence (Matthew 13)

- **A. The Literary Nature and Purpose of Parables (13:10-17, 34-35)**

1. Hebrew concept of *mashal*: includes story parables, riddles, proverbs, and allegories.
2. Comparison to rabbinic parables: Jesus' parables use similar stock features (e.g., landowners, kings) but are more agrarian, eschatological, and subvert conventional cultural values.
3. Purpose: parables act as sermon illustrations that reveal secrets of the kingdom to disciples while remaining riddles to outsiders who reject discipleship.

4. Rejection of Adolf Jülicher's single-meaning rule: ancient Jewish parables frequently had multiple points of contact with reality.

- **B. The Parable of the Sower and the Soils (13:1-9, 18-23)**

1. Galilean agricultural practices: sowing seed before or after plowing.
2. The four soils represent four responses to the word of the kingdom:
 - a. Path: seed stolen by the devil due to lack of understanding.
 - b. Rocky ground: shallow commitment that fails under persecution and trial.
 - c. Thorny ground: seed choked by wealth and worldly worries.
 - d. Good ground: understanding disciples who produce abundant, fruitful harvests.

- **C. The Parable of the Wheat and Tares/Weeds (13:24-30, 36-43)**

1. Agricultural reality: enemy sowing darnel (*Lolium tomentum*), which looks identical to wheat in early stages.
2. Spiritual meaning: coexistence of the righteous and the wicked in the world until the final end-time harvest and judgment.

- **D. Parables of Hidden and Pervasive Growth (13:31-33)**

1. Mustard Seed: starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a large shrub, referencing Daniel 4 and Ezekiel 17 to show the kingdom's expansion.
2. Yeast/Leaven: a woman hides yeast in 50 pounds of flour (enough for 100 people), symbolizing the quiet, unstoppable pervasiveness of the kingdom.

- **E. Parables of Absolute Value (13:44-46)**

1. Treasure Hidden in a Field: a peasant worker sells everything he has to buy the land and secure the treasure.
2. Pearl of Great Price: a wealthy merchant liquidates his capital to purchase a single, peerless luxury pearl.

3. Central lesson: the kingdom demands absolute sacrifice, which is joyfully made for its supreme worth.

- **F. The Parable of the Dragnet (13:47-50)**

1. Galilean fishermen separating kosher (edible) and non-kosher fish.
2. Spiritual meaning: the final judgment will separate the righteous and the wicked.

- **G. Scribes of the Kingdom (13:51-53)**

1. Disciple-scribes who integrate the treasures of the Old (Torah) and the New (Kingdom); Matthew as a prime example of a scribe for the kingdom.

IV. The Tragic Cost of Discipleship and Herodian Politics (Matthew 14)

- **A. The Political Context of Herod Antipas (14:1-5)**

1. Tetrarch (governor) of Galilee and Perea under Rome.
2. Affair with Herodias (his brother's wife), requiring him to divorce his first wife, a Nabataean princess.
3. The political fallout: the princess escapes to her father, King Aretas IV, resulting in later military defeat and instability in Herod's domain.
4. John the Baptist's arrest at Machaerus for denouncing the unlawful and politically sensitive marriage.

- **B. The Grotesque Banquet of Herod Antipas (14:6-12)**

1. Birthday celebration adopting Greek/Roman customs favored by the Herodian elite.
2. Lewd dance of Salome (Herodias' daughter) leading to Herod's drunken, boastful oath.
3. Salome, advised by her mother in separate quarters, requests John's head on a platter.
4. Execution of John by decapitation; his disciples courageously bury his body, contrasting with the later abandonment of Jesus by His own disciples.

5. Thematic contrast: Herod's immoral, death-dealing banquet vs. Jesus' compassionate, life-giving feeding of the 5,000.

- **C. The Historical Demise of Antipas and Herodias**

1. Herodias pesters Antipas to petition Emperor Caligula for the title of king.
2. The emperor is angered by the request and banishes Herod Antipas to Gaul, where Herodias joins him in exile, demonstrating the ultimate downfall of their illicit power.