

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 12,

Matthew 12-14

6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to R Explainer. Today, we are diving deep into Matthew's gospel, chapters 12 through 14. And let me tell you, this section is intense.

It's where a message that's all about hope and healing starts to spark some really serious and ultimately deadly conflicts. And that's really the million-dollar question, isn't it? It's the central paradox of this whole story. How on earth does a ministry that's all about compassion and restoration lead directly to a murder plot? Well, let's peel back the layers and really unpack this kingdom and conflict.

Okay. So the first major battleground is the Sabbath, and this isn't just a simple disagreement about a day of rest. No, this is a fundamental clash over the entire purpose of God's law.

Is it all about following rigid rules to the letter, or is it actually about meeting human needs? So the whole thing kicks off over something that seems pretty minor. Jesus' disciples are hungry, and they start picking some heads of grain to eat. But the Pharisees, they see this as work, as preparing a meal, which is a big no-no on the Sabbath.

But Jesus, he just turns their own rule book right back on them. He says, Hey, have you not read? And brings up King David, who in a moment of sheer desperation was allowed to eat the holy bread that was only for priests. The point is crystal clear.

Human needs sometimes outweigh ritual law. And this is the mic drop moment. He quotes the prophet Hosea to remind them what God is really after.

It's not about perfect, flawless sacrifices and rituals. It's about having a heart of mercy and compassion. He's basically trying to shift the entire conversation away from nitpicking rules and back to the actual spirit of the law.

Well, after that, the tension just skyrockets. He's in the synagogue, and there's a man there with a withered hand. Jesus completely turns the tables on his critics.

He puts a question to them. Look, if one of your sheep fell into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn't you pull it out? I mean, of course they would. So he asks, isn't a person way more valuable than a sheep? And with that, bam, he heals the man, proving his point that it's always lawful to do good.

Now, here's what's so wild about this. Their reaction is just extreme. You know, historically, the Pharisees were actually the ones who made it incredibly difficult to apply the death penalty.

They were known for being lenient. But here, after this public act of mercy, they immediately start plotting to murder him. It's like all their high-minded principles just went out the window the second their authority was publicly challenged.

So they've clearly lost the argument about the Sabbath. What do they do next? Well, they escalate their attack. They shift from accusing Jesus of just breaking rules to questioning the very source of his power.

This gets serious fast. And this is a massive escalation. They're not just calling him a rule breaker anymore.

Now they're accusing him of sorcery. They're saying he's casting out demons by the power of Satan himself, Beelzebul. And under Jewish law, this wasn't just a theological debate.

This was a capital offense. This was an accusation that could get you killed. Jesus' response here is just a masterclass in logic.

First, he points out how absurd their claim is. He's like, think about it. Why would Satan fight against himself? A kingdom divided can't stand.

Second, he puts the ball back in their court. Okay. If you say my power is demonic, then what about your own people who perform exorcisms? Where does their power come from? And third, he lays down the ultimate challenge.

But if I'm doing this by the spirit of God, then you're not just watching a miracle. You are witnessing the arrival of the kingdom of God right here, right now. And this is what leads to that really heavy warning about the unforgivable sin.

Now it's important to get this right. This isn't about accidentally saying the wrong thing or having a bad thought. It's about a state of the heart.

It's when your heart becomes so hard, so set against God, that you can look at the undeniable, good, life-giving work of the Holy Spirit and deliberately call it evil. At that point, a person can't repent anymore because they've completely flipped their moral compass upside. So this raises a huge question, right? How can some people look at Jesus and see God's kingdom while others look at the exact same thing and see a demon-possessed sorcerer? Well, Jesus actually addresses this by totally shifting his teaching style.

He starts telling these stories we call parables. You can think of a parable as a kind of story-based sermon illustration, but it's got this fascinating twist. For those who are willing to lean in, you know, the disciples who stick around after and ask questions.

For them, the parables reveal these incredible secrets of the kingdom, but for the hostile crowd or the casual listener, the meaning stays hidden. They kind of act like a spiritual filter. The parable of the sower explains this perfectly.

The message of the kingdom is like a seed, and it lands on different kinds of hearts or soils. As you see here, for some, the message just lands on the path and it gets snatched away before it can even sprout. For others, it's like falling on rocky ground.

It sprouts up quick, but there's no depth. So it withers. And for so many, it falls among thorns where all the worries of life and the lure of wealth just choke it out completely.

The point is it all depends on the receptivity of your heart. Next up, he uses this image of a mustard seed, which back then was proverbially the smallest seed you could think of for the kingdom of God. He says it seems totally insignificant at the start.

Maybe it even looks weak, but it's destined to grow into something enormous. A tree so large that it provides shelter for all the nations of the world. It's this incredible promise of unexpected world-changing growth from a really, really humble beginning.

And the kingdom is also like yeast. A woman takes just a little bit of yeast and hides it in this huge batch of flour. We're talking enough to feed a whole village.

You can't actually see the yeast working, right? But it's influencing, just silently and unstoppably, transforming the entire batch of dough. And that's the nature of the kingdom. A lot of its power is hidden from view, but its effect is pervasive, and it's total.

And now the narrative takes a really dark and dramatic turn. Matthew gives us this shocking real-world contrast between the humble hidden kingdom of Jesus and the corrupt, violent kingdom of the world. So the ruler of the region, Herod Antipas, he kicks off this huge scandal.

He decides to divorce his wife, who, by the way, was a princess from a powerful neighboring kingdom, so that he can marry Herodias, who was his own brother's wife. I mean, this wasn't just a moral mess. It was a political time bomb.

And John the Baptist, being John the Baptist, publicly calls him out on it, which of course lands him in prison. Then we get to one of Herod's infamous birthday parties, and this grim story just unfolds. Herodias' daughter, Salome, performs this provocative dance.

Herod, drunken and full of himself, makes this incredibly foolish oath to give her whatever she wants. Well, prompted by her vengeful mom, Salome makes the most horrifying request imaginable. I want the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

And Herod, trapped by his own ego in front of his guests, agrees. A banquet of lust ends in a grotesque act of murder. And this scene just lays out the central conflict in the starkest terms possible.

On one side, you've got Herod's kingdom. It's fueled by pride, by lust, by drunken power plays. And what does it produce? Death.

Grotesque death. On the other side, you have the kingdom Jesus is bringing. It's demonstrated through humility, mercy, service, and what does it produce? Healing, nourishment for thousands, and life.

Two rulers, two banquets, two totally opposite results. And so, it all comes down to this one question. The parables tell us the kingdom isn't obvious.

It's hidden, like treasure in a field, like yeast in dough. If its true nature is revealed not in the kind of power Herod has, but in quiet acts of mercy and service, then the challenge for every single person, then and now, is this: how do you train your eyes to see it?