

# Jesus Rejected by the Pharisees

by John F. Walvoord

---

*Jesus is rejected by the Pharisees, who accuse Him of violating the Sabbath and healing by demonic power, but He defends Himself and His disciples, and emphasizes the importance of true discipleship.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 12:8-50

**Topics:** "Sabbath Observance", "Holy Spirit"

---

## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the growing rejection of the Pharisees towards Jesus, focusing on three incidents related to Sabbath violations where Jesus and His disciples are accused of breaking the Mosaic law, attributing His power to the devil, and demanding a sign other than miracles. Despite the Pharisees' accusations, Jesus defends His disciples by highlighting the importance of mercy over technical observance of the law, showcasing His authority over the Sabbath as the Son of Man. He further challenges the Pharisees' unbelief, warning them against blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and emphasizing the significance of true discipleship above all earthly relationships.

---

## Transcript

Disciples Accused of Violating the Sabbath, 12:1-8

The growing rejection of the Pharisees, who earlier had been friendly to Jesus, becomes apparent in this chapter. First, there are three incidents relating to the Sabbath, in which Jesus is accused of breaking the Mosaic law (Mt 12:1-21); second, Jesus' power is attributed to the devil (vv. 22-37); third, the Pharisees demand a sign other than miracles (vv. 38-50).

The opening incident tells how the disciples, walking through the green fields on the Sabbath, began to pluck ears of grain and eat them because they were hungry. Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 6:1-5 also record the story. The Pharisees, on the alert for any ground of accusation of Jesus and His disciples, immediately accused them of doing that which is not lawful to do on the Sabbath. As Morgan points out, the hostility of the Pharisees began when Christ forgave sin (Mt 9:1-8), was increased by Jesus' associating with publicans and sinners (vv. 9-13), and now is inflamed by Christ's ignoring their petty rules about the Sabbath.<sup>57</sup>

The Pharisees did not accuse the disciples of stealing, as plucking a few ears of grain was permitted by Deuteronomy 23:25, but the law forbade any work on the Sabbath (Ex 20:10). The Jewish traditions made this very specific and equated plucking ears with reaping grain, which was forbidden on the Sabbath.

Lenski notes that the penalty could be death for such an infraction, if the act was deliberate.<sup>58</sup>

Although Jesus Himself had not participated in the act, He immediately defended His disciples, presenting three arguments. First, He called attention to David's experience, recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6, when David was hungry while fleeing from Saul. The priest gave him bread taken off the table of shewbread when it was replaced with fresh bread, even though normally, such bread was reserved as holy, for the priests alone. Technically, this was breaking the law, but David was not condemned because of it, illustrating that satisfying hunger was more important than observing a technicality.

A second argument was derived from the fact that the priests in the temple broke the law by many of their duties in their work in maintaining the sacrifices and the other rituals. Jesus called attention to the fact that they were blameless.

His third argument was His own person, as one who is greater than the temple. If Jesus could not condemn them, why should the Pharisees be critical? As He stated in Matthew 12:8, "For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day."

Jesus further analyzed the basic problem of the Pharisees, however, which was that they put technical observance of the law, such as sacrificing, as more important than showing mercy. He stated that if they knew the meaning of the statement, "I will have mercy and not sacrifice" (Ho 6:6; cf. Mic 6:6-8), they would not have condemned the disciples whom the Lord pronounced "guiltless." Jesus had referred to the same thought in answering the Pharisees in Matthew 9:13. The problem was not what the disciples had done but the merciless hearts of the Pharisees.

#### Jesus Accused of Violating the Sabbath by Healing, 12:9-14

On the same Sabbath, Jesus entered the synagogue and was confronted by a man with a paralyzed hand. The Pharisees saw this as another opportunity to accuse Jesus if He would heal the man on the Sabbath, and they raised the question, "Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days?" (12:10).

According to the parallel accounts in Mark 3:1-5 and Luke 6:6-11, Jesus asked the man with the paralyzed hand to stand before the whole assembly. In Mark and Luke, He only raised the question as to whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, but in Matthew He used an illustration. If a sheep would fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, would the owner not lift it out? Was a man not better than a sheep? Jesus concluded, "Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days" (Mt 12:12). With this introduction, He asked the man to stretch forth his hand, and it was made immediately well. The action infuriated the Pharisees, who had neither Scripture nor logic to refute this miraculous work of God. In their frustration, the Pharisees are recorded in verse 14 to have held a council as to how they might destroy Jesus.

#### Others Healed on the Same Sabbath, 12:15-21

Not wishing to incite the Pharisees further, Jesus then withdrew, but multitudes followed Him, and the Scriptures record simply, "He healed them all," at the same time instructing them not to publish the healings. This is interpreted by Matthew as fulfilling Isaiah 42:1-3, which Matthew quotes. In Matthew 12:21, Matthew summarizes the meaning, "And in his name shall the Gentiles trust," which is an interpretive conclusion of the entire passage.

#### Pharisees Accuse Jesus of Healing by Demonic Power, 12:22-37

Following the many miracles already recorded, an outstanding case of need was presented to the crowd in one who was demon possessed and both blind and dumb. Such a pitiful person should have aroused the sympathy even of the Pharisees. When Jesus, with amazing power, healed him so that he could both speak and see, and by inference cast out the demon, it brought amazement to the people, and they said, "Is not this the son of David?" (v. 23).

The Pharisees countered by accusing Him of casting out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Beelzebub was actually a heathen deity, referred to earlier by Jesus in Matthew 10:25, and one supposedly in authority over the demons.

Jesus answered the Pharisees by showing the illogic of their statement. He pointed out that this would be a kingdom divided against itself. It would be Satan casting out Satan. If the casting out of demons is by Beelzebub, then by whom did the Pharisees who were exorcists cast out demons? The point was that only the power of God or someone under the power of God could accomplish this.

Jesus then drove home His point. If demons have been actually cast out, then it must have been by the Spirit of God, and then, in the person of Christ, the kingdom of God had come unto them. One could not enter the demonic realm victoriously unless he first had bound the strong man (v. 29). The Pharisees had to make a choice. They were either with Jesus or against Him. But if they were against Him, they were guilty of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, a sin which by its nature is not forgiven (vv. 31-32).

There has been much misunderstanding about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Here it is properly defined as attributing to Satan what is accomplished by the power of God. Such a sin is not unpardonable in itself, but rather because it rejects the person and work of the Holy Spirit, without whom repentance and restoration are impossible. As far as it applies today, it is not the thought that one seeking pardon will not find it, but rather that one who rejects the Holy Spirit will not seek pardon. It is the ultimate in unbelief. In verse 33, He points out that a good tree brings forth good fruit and a bad tree brings forth bad fruit. They must judge Him on the basis of His works.

The unbelief of the Pharisees calls forth the strongest language. Christ addressed them, "generation of vipers," or poisonous snakes. He declared that they were evil and therefore could not speak good and warned them that as unbelievers, every idle word they speak will be called to account on the day of judgment. He concluded in Matthew 12:37, "For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." This was addressed to the unsaved Pharisees, not to Christians who were justified by faith and whose sins had been forgiven.

#### Unbelieving Pharisees Seek a Sign, 12:38-45

Having thus been challenged to face the evidence that Jesus was indeed what He claimed to be, the Pharisees, in their unbelief, asked for a spectacular sign. Jesus answered them in an unsparing indictment. He declared "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas" (v. 39). He then recited the facts of the experience of Jonah, how he was three days and three nights in the great fish, and He described this as a prophetic incident, anticipating that the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. In other words, He was predicting His death and resurrection as the supreme sign for those seeking evidence of His claims. In the incident of Jonah, the men of Nineveh repented, even though they were unbelieving Gentiles. Here Jesus, who was far greater than Jonah, was before His own people, and they would not believe.

Jesus cited another illustration of the queen of the south who heard and believed in the wisdom of Solomon (1 Ki 10:1-13). Now a greater than Solomon was here, and the Jews would not believe. Again the illustration is of belief among the Gentiles which would emphasize the point He was making to the Pharisees.

In concluding His talk with the Pharisees, Jesus pointed out the emptiness of religion without the supernatural power of God. In Matthew 12:43-45, He described the case of a man who, delivered of an unclean spirit or demon, proceeded to set his life in order religiously. His house, however, although swept and garnished, was empty. By this it is meant that the demons had left him and permitted some improvement in his religious life, but that he was far short of being born again and renewed by the Spirit of God. The reference to the evil spirit walking through "dry places" is based on the idea that the desert is the haunt of demons.<sup>59</sup> The evil spirit, upon returning, brought seven other spirits and dwelt in the man, so that his last state was worse than his first. Jesus stated that, in like manner, the wicked generation of the Pharisees will experience the emptiness of their religion, which will lead to greater spiritual bondage.

#### Central Place of True Discipleship, 12:46-50

As Jesus was concluding His controversy with the Pharisees, word came to Him that His mother and brothers were outside and desired to speak to Him. Jesus used the occasion to emphasize the need of discipleship above all earthly relationships. He dramatically asked, "Who is my mother? and who are my brethren?" Then, according to verse 49, "He stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, behold my mother and my brethren!" He went on, in the concluding verse of the chapter, to define a disciple as one who does the will of His Father in heaven. "The same," Jesus declared, "is my brother, and sister, and mother." Coming at the conclusion of this chapter, it emphasizes the futility of mere religion or family relationships. Rather, the important issue was to be a disciple and to do the will of God. Although Jesus was at all times courteous to His mother, He never attributed to her any special qualities (cf. Jn 2:4). There is nothing in the Scripture to justify the exaltation of Mary to the role of a mediator between God and man.

57 G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 124.

58 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, p. 461.

59 R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 133.

---

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-f-walvoord/jesus-rejected-by-the-pharisees/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**