

Outraged by Mercy (12:1-21)

Good to see you guys this morning. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn with me to **Matthew 12**. A while back I was at a **soccer practice** for our five-year old son, Whit. And while I was there, one of the other set of parents from the team started having what *became* a rather heated conversation next to me. Apparently, the mom had let their son eat a corndog and fries for dinner prior to practice. The dad was *not happy* with this choice that his wife had made—I could tell that by his tone and from the everything else about how he was talking to her. He felt that having a corndog prior to practice would diminish his son's stellar performance at a five-year old soccer practice (you know, because of all the pro-level scouts that are there looking for draft potential).

And this guy said to his wife at one point in the conversation, I kid you not, "I guess that's **one more area of life** that *I'm* gonna have to take over." And then continues that level of condescension towards her for the next five minutes. It was *quite* aggressive and *quite* unhelpful, and you could just tell his wife felt horrible about it.

And then, right when I honestly was wrestling with whether or not to say something, the **most glorious thing happened**. A *wasp* began circling this man's head, as he continued complaining about everything. And I mean a *huge* wasp. Like this wasp could've won *awards*. At first, he tried to ignore it, like it didn't bother him (you know how guys do sometimes). But then it got closer and closer, he started swatting at it more and more, and then, in an act of poetic justice that I can only imagine came from directly the goodness of God above, the wasp landed on the man's forehead, and stung him, right between the eyebrows. And then this man who was evidently so much better than everyone else in his family, screamed like a small child.

Okay, so I **made up the part** about the wasp. But wouldn't have that been *awesome*? I think that was my *daydream* about what I *wish* would've happened. But everything else in the story was true. **Have you ever met someone** with that type of *posture* towards the rest of the world? Condescending, belittling, hyper-critical? Do you also have *wasp* daydreams about what might happen to them? Have you ever known someone to just always situate themselves arrogantly *above* other people, always finds fault with what others do, always have a bone to pick with somebody?

Okay. That *posture*, I would argue, kind of **sums up the overall attitude** of a group of people in the Scriptures known as the *Pharisees*. We've come across the Pharisees a couple times *already* in Matthew, but today is our first *in-depth* interaction with them. That is the type of posture they take towards the people around them. So with that

real-life parallel in mind, I want us to work through this passage together. Chapter 12, v. 1:

[1] At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. [2] When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.”

So where we pick up the story, Jesus and his disciples traveling through some grainfields. And as they do, the disciples start to pluck off heads of grain and eat them. Now to us, that might make it sound like they’re just casually snacking. I don’t know about you, but I’ve found that I do a good bit of eating in my life when I’m not actually hungry at all—I’m just bored. Right? Like I just ate thirty minutes ago, so I’m not actually hungry. I’m just not doing anything else, so I start eating. It’s a real problem, especially for my waistline.

But just so we’re clear, that’s not really what the disciples are doing here. They’re not snacking out of boredom. The passage actually says they were “hungry.” That word in the Greek means to desire eagerly, or to suffer want. Sometimes it’s actually translated to be needy. Keep in mind many of the disciples were poor—they had next to nothing, and even those that had some wealth had often given much of it away to follow Jesus. And on top of that, we read on a few occasions that the disciples’ day-to-day ministry at times prevented eating when it was time to eat.¹ So when it says they were hungry and plucking heads of grain, it doesn’t mean that they were bored and snacking. It means they likely had skipped a meal or two, and were hungry; as in, in dire need of sustenance. So they begin to eat this grain from the field.

But the Pharisees, who are apparently nearby, take notice of all of this. And they are not happy about it. They are offended—even outraged—at what the disciples are being permitted to do, because it’s the Sabbath day. Now, if you’re newer to the bible, the Sabbath was a day of rest. Once every seven days, God’s people were to take the day off for rest and reprieve and worship. All things considered, it was a relatively simple command to abide by: take one day off, every seven days. But what God had made simple, the Pharisees had turned into something very complicated.

The Pharisees had put together a list of 39 types of activities that they considered to be “work,” and therefore were prohibited on the Sabbath. Some of them made a lot of sense: you weren’t allowed to hunt or fish, because back then those things weren’t

¹ For example, Mark 3:20.

hobbies, they were how you provided for your family—it was work, so you weren't allowed to do it. But some of them were a little bizarre. For instance, you weren't allowed to write more than one *letter* from the alphabet on the Sabbath, because that was considered *work*. You weren't allowed to *sew* more than one stitch, because *that* was considered work. One of the more ridiculous ones was that you couldn't *put out a fire*, even if it threatened to damage property. So if your house started catching on fire on the Sabbath, too bad—you should've had your house catch on fire a different day of the week. Some of them were these bizarre, *stringent*, often *burdensome* commands.

So notice, **the Sabbath was originally intended** to *benefit* God's people. It was a day to pause and reflect and be refreshed. A day to remember that you were *more than* your work—that you are more than what you accomplish. It was a gift from God to humanity. But **what God meant as a gift, the Pharisees had turned into a burden**. They had taken what was supposed to be the most liberating, refreshing day of the week, and had turned it into a day that was just as burdensome as the other days, if not more so. **They had turned the Sabbath into the opposite of what God intended it to be**. Do you see that?

And that, essentially, is what **Jesus is about to tell them**, in his own way. Take a look with me back in v. 3:

[3] He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? [4] He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. [5] Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? [6] I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. [7] If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. [8] For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

So to answer the Pharisees' accusation, Jesus references three different **passages from the Old Testament** that *you and I* may not be very familiar with, but that the *Pharisees* were very familiar with. The first is from the life of **David**. At one point, David was on the run from King Saul, and temporarily takes refuge in the temple. And while he's there, he and his men get hungry, and are permitted to eat from the show bread that no one except priests were technically allowed to eat from. But since they are in need, an *exception* is made.

Second, he observes that **technically, the priests** who serve in the temple on the Sabbath *a/ways* violate the Sabbath, because they *work* every Sabbath. They help

people offer sacrifices on that particular day of the week, and yet they aren't condemned for it—they're actually *instructed* to do so. And **last**, he quotes from a passage in **Hosea** that he's already referenced once in Matthew, where it says that God desires *mercy*, not *sacrifice*. That verse really sums up both things he's said so far.

He's trying to show the Pharisees that **the point of God's commands** isn't just to **abstain from things, but rather about God showing mercy to his people. And because the Pharisees don't understand that, they have missed the point of the Law entirely. And they have condemned people that aren't actually guilty.** Is that making sense? Okay. And **in the next story**, the Pharisees are about to put on display just how badly they've missed the point of the *Sabbath* specifically. Continue with me back in v. 9:

[9] Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, [10] and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

This time they're in the **synagogue**, and there's a man there with some sort of **disability** in his hand. The Pharisees, who Matthew tells us at this point were *looking* for ways to accuse and discredit Jesus, see the man and **ask Jesus if it's lawful** to heal him on the Sabbath. **Now just imagine for a second being the Pharisees, seeing a man in need, and rather than looking for ways to help him or heal him or show compassion towards him—thinking instead that the most pressing thing to do is to use him as a prop in a theological argument.** That shows us a little about how *off* the Pharisees had gotten. But that's what they do. Now look at Jesus' response to them, v. 11:

[11] He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? Okay then, v. 12... [12] How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." [13] Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.

So in the *first* story we read, **Jesus used Scripture** to confront the Pharisees' thinking—this time he just uses *logic*. He says, 'if any of you have **a sheep**—an *animal*—and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath...are you seriously going to wait until the next day to pull it out? Are you just gonna sit there and let it be exposed to the conditions, or are you going to rescue it? You're going to *rescue* it! Not a chance you're leaving that animal there.' 'So *then*,' he reasons, 'you Pharisees *do* know how to show *mercy*—you just don't know how to show it to *people*, and specifically to people that you

don't think deserve it.' And then, without so much as a *word* from the Pharisees, Jesus turns and heals the man.

And in the story, we **don't see any marveling** from the Pharisees—no *rejoicing* that a man in need has been healed or cured. All we see in them is more *outrage*. More *fury* that Jesus would do such a thing and contradict *their understanding* of the Law. And this time their outrage is *even more intense*. Verse 14 says at this point...

[14] But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

The Pharisees are so outraged that anyone who would challenge their orthodoxy—their preconceived notion of what's right and wrong—that they are ready to kill the one challenging them. The heart posture of the Pharisees is now on full display before us. So that's a glimpse into the types of people the Pharisees often were.

Now, I think there's an **inherent danger for us** in reading passages like this. Because chances are, when you and I read a passage about the Pharisees in the bible, we probably picture them as the stereotypical mean church person, right? **They're the ancient equivalent of Ned Flanders from the Simpsons, or Dana Carvey's Church Lady from SNL, or the real-life street preacher on Market Square.** The Pharisees to us are the religious, dogmatic, buttoned-down people of Jesus' day.

And once we picture them that way, I think a lot of us then go, "wow—I'm **so glad I'm not like those people**. I'm so glad I would never act like that." And **just as soon as we've thought that, we have actually become Pharisees ourselves.** I mean Jesus literally tells a story in Luke 18 where *the thing* he condemns a Pharisee for doing is saying "I thank God that I'm not like those people." So whenever you feel that attitude rise up in you—where you're going "I'm so glad I would never be like that," all the red lights on your dashboard should be going off. Because that means you are *rapidly approaching* Pharisee category.

So ironically, my posture towards the other **dad at the soccer game** was Pharisical in its own right. I was convincing myself of just how much better I was than him, to the point that I was having anger fantasies about him being stung by a wasp. I was convinced, in my mind, that I was better than him and that he deserved judgment. *Execution by wasp.* And though it may *seem* different, that is the posture of a Pharisee just the same.

You see if I could be **completely transparent** with you guys, as a pastor, I'm not all that concerned that our church will attract the traditional type of **Pharisees**. **I'm not concerned**

that we have a ton of people going around watching to see who's pulling weeds on their Sabbath, taking a picture of it, and going "gotcha! You're sinning!" Or is gonna see you take a sip of a beer at a local restaurant and go "guilty!" I mean if you're going around being that type of Pharisee, *by all means, stop it*. But I just don't think that's our crowd. The *traditional* types of Pharisees tend to get really frustrated around our church and leave rather quickly.

What I'm **more concerned about** is that we could attract a *new* type of Pharisee. **The New Pharisee gets their righteousness not from thinking they're better than *sinful* people, but by thinking they're better than *religious* people.** They're Pharisees *about Pharisees*. They don't go around thinking "I'm so much better than everybody." They go around thinking "I'm so much better than all those people that *think they're better* than everybody else." Do you see how *sneaky* that is?

You see, **the tendency in all of us is to cling tightly to our own version of what's "right"—our orthodoxy—and condemn, judge, and write off anyone that violates it.** Which is *precisely* what the Pharisees were doing. So rather than assume that we already *know* the types of people who are Pharisees, and that we certainly *aren't* them, we might be better off if we examined *ourselves* for signs of a Pharisee's *heart*. Rather than saying "wow—I'm so much better than Pharisees," maybe we should go to work on *that very type* of heart posture, wherever it may exist in us.

So **that's what I want to do** for the next little bit. We're going to finish out our passage through v. 21 here in just a bit, but before we do that, I want to do some *self-examination*. I want us to try to look inward for a second to try and determine if we have become "New Pharisees." If there are ways that we have drifted into a similar heart posture to the people we've read about in this passage so far. Make sense? So here are **three signs**, found from combing back over these two stories, **of a Pharisee's heart**. You ready? This'll be fun. And by "*fun*," I mean convicting. First sign...

Conflating (v. 2)

Look back with me at v. 2:

[2] When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

Now, there was actually **nowhere in the Old Testament that said** that plucking heads of grain was unlawful. What the Pharisees mean is that the disciples were doing what the *Pharisees had decided* was unlawful on the Sabbath. They weren't violating the Old

Testament *law*. They were violating the Pharisees' *interpretation* of the law. But in what they say, the Pharisees make no such distinction—they said they were doing what was *unlawful* on the Sabbath. Meaning they had **fully conflated their interpretation of the bible, with the bible itself**. They had effectively given them the same weight, same authority, same *umph*...as each other in their minds. They started treating those *two* things, like they were the *same* thing.

And we do this sometimes even if we don't realize it. For example, if you've ever said or thought something like "no Christian should ever _____," you've done a version of this. If you've ever said or thought something like "every Christian *should* _____," you've done this. You fill in the blanks. "I just can't fathom how any Christian *would*..." vote *Democrat*. Vote *Republican*. Support *Trump*. Support *Biden*. Watch *this* kind of TV show. Watch *that* kind of movie. Listen to *this* type of *music*. Wear *that* type of clothing. Support *this* organization or *not* support that one. Or, "Every Christian *should*..." support *this* candidate. (Should) be *married*. Have a date night with their spouse once a week. Send their kids to private school. Send their kids to *public* school. Attend a church that does ministry *this* way, or preaching *that* way." My counselor calls this "should-ing" all over people.

And we literally could go on for hours, right? But **anytime we start thinking** "every Christian *should* _____" or "no Christian should _____," and we haven't taken that belief *directly from the pages* of Scripture, we are in danger of doing what the Pharisees did: **conflating** their reading or interpretation of the bible with the bible itself. Pharisees often *shoulded* all over people. Make sense? Okay, next one.

Fault-Finding (v. 10)

Look with me at the second half of v. 10:

Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

So the Pharisees here ask a *theological* question ("is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"). But it's **not actually a question at all**; it's an attempt to *find fault*. They are *looking for reasons* to reject Jesus' authority and teaching. They're waiting, seemingly around every corner, to catch Jesus in a lie, or an act, or a contradictory statement, so that they have *ammunition* for their opposition to him.

Can I just ask: **do you ever do this?** Do you find *joy* in finding *fault* in other people? Do you decide in *advance* not to like a person, and then meticulously look for reasons to

justify that decision? Does part of you *rejoice* a little when you find out that someone has a shortcoming, or a struggle, or a character flaw? Do you find joy in being *right* at the expense of someone else being *wrong*? That's the posture of *fault-finding*. And the posture of a Pharisee. And lastly...

Escalating (v. 14)

[14] *But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.*

Finally, we read in the passage that in response to Jesus' words and actions, the Pharisees are **ready to conspire to murder** Jesus. I'd say that qualifies as *escalation*, wouldn't you? They didn't just turn around and gossip about him. They didn't just subtweet him. They didn't just write passive aggressive blogs about him. They went out and started plotting how to *kill* him. They *escalated* the situation.

And the Spirit of a Pharisee is **always to escalate**. Every offense you commit against them is an *ultimate* offense. Every person who frustrates them is assumed to have the *worst possible* motive. Every sin they see is the *worst kind* of sin. Every concern they have with you is a *grave* concern. Every issue they have needs to be addressed right away or *else*. Every opinion they have is the right one and the best one. Pharisees have an incredibly difficult time agreeing to disagree on anything.

One thing we try to do **whenever someone comes to us with a concern**—whether that's a concern about another follower of Jesus, or about City Church in general—is help them put it in one of two *categories*. We get them to say whether their concern is a **preference**, or a **conviction**. **A preference means there are multiple right ways to go about something**. I might prefer to do it *this* way, and you might prefer to do it *that* way, but both are right and good—we just have different *preferences*. **A conviction means there is a right and a wrong way to do something**, and the other person is doing it wrong, so I need to correct them right away. Do you see the difference?

Okay, **all that up to say** that the spirit of a Pharisee is to *escalate every preference to a conviction*. Every difference of opinion with someone becomes a *moral issue—they're necessarily right, and other people necessarily are wrong*. A Pharisee is inclined towards escalation. Everything gets blown out of proportion, everything is threat level midnight. Everything is my way or the highway. They *escalate*.
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So *conflating, fault-finding, and escalating*. **Those are some postures** and characteristics of a Pharisaical spirit. There are others where those came from to be sure, but we see at least *those* in our passage today.

Now, all that said, I **don't want to end there**. All we've done so far is help identify and single out Phariseeism where we see it. I want to *end* by giving us all a picture of **a better posture** towards others. Because opposite all of these postures from the Pharisees is the posture of Jesus himself. So take a look with me at **the rest of our passage**, starting in v. 15:

[15] Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. [16] He warned them not to tell others about him.

Jesus is **aware of the Pharisees' plot** to kill him, so he **moves along** to another place. Jesus told his disciples in previous chapters that they shouldn't be against moving along when they face threats or violence against them. Here, Jesus takes his own advice. But even as he does that, he **can't really get away** from the crowds. Tons of people follow him, and he continues to heal and help those people—but he warns them as he does all this **not to tell others** about him. Jesus knows how things will end for him, but he's not trying to accelerate it. He tells people to keep quiet. He's not after notoriety for notoriety's sake.

And notice **this is the polar opposite** of the **Pharisees**. Jesus will criticize *them* at one point for *loving* notoriety for notoriety's sake.² They think of themselves so highly that they have begun to equate their *reading* of Scripture with Scripture itself. Jesus does precisely the opposite: **though he is arguably the most worthy person of notoriety in the history of the world, here, he intentionally discourages amplifying that notoriety.**

And then, Matthew gives us a summary statement—an **Old Testament prophecy** that he feels directly applies to this moment in the story. And in it, we're going to see even more *contrasts* between Jesus and the Pharisees. Look with me at v. 17-21:

[17] This (meaning this posture, or this approach to ministry) was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah (and here's the quote from Isaiah 42): [18] "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. [19] He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. [20] A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. [21] In his name the nations will put their hope."

² See Matthew 23:5-7.

So this figure prophesied about in Isaiah, “the servant of the Lord,” would not be one to “quarrel or cry out.” In other words, he **won’t go out looking for a fight**. He won’t nitpick and find fault and go around stirring up conflict with people. He’s not looking for an opportunity to accuse people of things. *Contrast* that with the Pharisees who *go out looking* for ways to accuse and tear people down.

And then this language about **“bruised reeds”** and **“smoldering wicks.”** These were word pictures Isaiah used to talk about essentially, needy people. **Poor people. People with disabilities. People with lifelong illnesses. People in need of healing and deliverance and rescue.** Matthew is saying that Jesus will not place additional *burdens* on people like that—he’s looking for ways to *help* them. To *heal* them. To *include* them and *restore* him. And this passage is saying he will not stop doing just that until he has made everything just as it should be.

Now there’s one **last thing to know** about Matthew using this Isaiah passage. And that’s that **up until this point, nobody really thought this passage referred to a singular person**. The “servant of the Lord” Isaiah talked about was always believed to refer to the nation of Israel as a *whole*. Here, Matthew actually insists that it refers to a singular *person*—the person of Jesus. Here’s why that’s significant: it means that Jesus had come to be what Israel had *failed* to be. He came to be what we—God’s people—couldn’t figure out.

See the truth is that **all of us have at least a bit of Pharisee in us**. All of us, in our own ways, conflate our *interpretation* of the Scriptures with the Scriptures themselves. All of us, at one point or another, find joy in finding fault. All of us tend to escalate our concerns and conflicts to a higher level of importance than they probably warrant. But the good news of the kingdom isn’t “try to stop acting like this.” The good news of the kingdom is that **Jesus, the Messiah, has come to be and do what all of us have failed to be and do. The good news of the kingdom is that he has come for those who realize they have failed.**

And **if we can acknowledge that** about ourselves, and acknowledge *that* about *him*, he grants to us *access* to his way of life. **Through his life, death, and resurrection, he came for those who have failed to be the servants of the Lord, so that he could be the servant of the Lord on their behalf, and so that through him we might become who we were always meant to be.** So if you want to become less like a Pharisee, the best thing to do is to get to know Jesus. Learn how he related to people. Learn how he understood the Old Testament commandments. And allow *him* to transform our hearts to be like his. Put your hope in him, and let him change who you are from the inside out.

Let me pray for us.