



Chapter 12

Opposition makes our knees buckle. We want to be liked. We want to be accepted and supported. Everyone, though, has experienced it. Sometimes opposition is the result of a misunderstanding or miscommunication. Other times, it happens precisely because *we have been* clearly understood. These cases are not always so hopeful.

Icebreaker:

1. Think of a time when you faced opposition. Was it because you were misunderstood in some way, or was it precisely because *you were* understood? How did it turn out?

Jesus's ministry was full of opposition. He was no doubt misunderstood, but some of the most intense resistance came precisely because there was no mistaking what He was claiming. Tension in Matthew's Gospel has been building, but it is surfacing here in chapter 12. Kingdoms aren't established with confetti and parades; rather, they advance in spite of opposition.

Verses 1-14

The Pharisees created a "heavy-laden yoke" (11:28-30) of technicalities regarding the Sabbath. Rebuking them, Jesus uses the repeated phrase in verses 3 and 5, "have you not read?" David had disobeyed the law for the sake of hunger (1 Sam 21) by eating bread intended only for the priests (Lev 24:5-9), yet he was not condemned. Additionally, the priests violate the Sabbath with their various responsibilities in the temple.

The temple was the center of Israel's worship as it represented the very presence of God on earth. Hear the bold-yet-true claim of Jesus, then, in verse 6! This is the second time now that Jesus has quoted Hosea 6:6 (the first was in 9:13)—God's desire is "mercy, and not sacrifice." The Pharisees' exhaustive rules made it nearly impossible to rest or experience God's mercy!

2. Legalistic rules about the Sabbath miss the point; however, so does dismissing the Sabbath (often in the name of "not being legalistic") so that we fail to enjoy it. What has been your experience of living out the Sabbath?

Watch the conflict escalate. The Pharisees *observed* (spied on?) Jesus and the disciples in verse 2. Now, in verse 10, they're looking to *accuse* Jesus legally. In 14, they'll plot to *kill* Him! Jesus uses a common sense example to make the point that *it's always lawful to do good*. In all, Jesus is claiming to have authority over the Sabbath (v. 8), which stokes the conflict's flame.

3. The core issue here is not so much about the Sabbath as it is about Jesus's authority. How is this question of Jesus's authority still the source of conflict today?

Verses 15-21

Jesus is thoroughly aware of what's going on (again), yet, rather than calling in an airstrike of lightning bolts, He withdraws. Many follow and Jesus heals all who are sick. In sharp contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus is God's true servant described centuries before in Isaiah 42:1-4. Even in the face of opposition, the Servant and His Kingdom are marked by gentleness and justice.

4. How should the promise of final justice give us hope (see vv. 20-21) in the face of opposition from those who do not welcome the King and the coming Kingdom?

Verses 22-37

Jesus heals a demon-possessed man, which inspires a renewed inquiry into His true identity. The Pharisees attribute Jesus's works to the devil as a kind of black magic. The absurdity is made obvious by Jesus's response. Even so, the following verses can be confusing.

The "strong man" is a likely reference to Satan, whom Jesus demonstrated power over. Verses 30-32 contain the question of what "blasphemy against the Spirit" means. The absurd charge that Jesus was leveraging Satanic power to drive out demons is key to our understanding. In short, they were denying God's power by attributing it to Satan. Commentator N.T. Wright, explains it this way:

"Jesus is warning against looking at the work of the spirit and declaring that it must be the devil's doing. If you do that...you have just cut off the very channel along which forgiveness would come. Once you declare that the only remaining bottle of water is poisoned, you condemn yourself to dying of thirst."

We can reassure ourselves since those guilty of it would have little concern about committing it!

5. Notice that the conflict is over *the source of authority* behind the miracles and *not over whether Jesus performed them* in the first place. How can this distinction encourage our faith today?

The careless words of the Pharisees stem from their evil hearts. Good words flow out of a good heart. The nature of our heart, then, is exposed by what we say and has eternal consequences.

6. Ask the Lord to reveal whether you need to seek forgiveness—both from God and other people—for something you've said.

Verses 38-45

The Pharisees' rejection of Jesus invites God's judgment against them. Similar to 11:20-24, Jesus claims that OT figures will participate in the judgment against those who refuse to believe. The illustration of cast-out demons points to the rejection of the Messiah. Jesus freed them from evil, but their refusal to commit to Jesus left them open to an even worse problem than before.

7. Have you observed someone having an "encounter" with Jesus, but who hasn't yet made a lasting commitment? In what ways does this fall short of God's desire for us?

Verses 46-50

This chapter closes with a picture of what we gain by following Jesus. We join into the intimacy of a family relationship with Jesus when we obediently follow Him. We should not interpret this as a diss by Jesus toward His family, but as a picture of the Kingdom community. It's a comfort to those whose relationships have been harmed because of their faithfulness to Jesus.

8. What comfort is it that Jesus considers you His "brother and sister and mother"?

Tying the Bow

Opposition is real and it's no joke when we run into it. The end of this chapter seems to be a potential rallying point of encouragement and comfort. If you're a part of God's church then you're a part of God's family—a brother, a sister, a mother, of Jesus. How awesome!

9. Are you experiencing opposition because of your commitment to Jesus? Talk about this in your group and then pray for each other, asking God to bond us together as a family even as we encounter opposition.