

# MATTHEW 10–12

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## THE MINISTRY OF JESUS AND OF HIS COMMISSIONED APOSTLES

In Matthew 10:1–12:50, Jesus organized the workings of His Church according to the principle of administrative agency—the delegation of power by a principal (God) to His empowered servants (the Apostles and other authorized priesthood holders). Jewish law recognized a strong jurisprudence of agency powers, perhaps stemming from Jehovah entrusting His prophets, priests, and kings with divine powers and accountabilities. Roman law, on the other hand, shied away from legal uses of agents in important matters, as aristocrats retained tight personal control over their estates and official positions.

As an ideal priesthood leader, Jesus delegated service opportunities, giving expansive powers and eternal responsibilities to His Twelve Apostles. Through them, Jesus would be able to serve many more of God’s children in His kingdom. Under His guidance, the Apostles were given authority and power to preach, heal, and serve their brothers and sisters in the name of Jesus Christ (see Matthew 10:1).

As their first assignment, these Twelve Apostles were called by Jesus to minister to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 10:6). His kingdom was “at hand,” in its beginning and immanent stages. The principles and instructions that Jesus taught in the following chapters still apply today to those who become His witnesses as missionaries and ordained Apostles of His Church. In Matthew 10–12, Matthew then records ten sections of instructions given as Jesus carefully directed and simultaneously blessed the Apostles.

For example, He taught that all who do the will of the Father are “kindred,” sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters to each other. Then, as now, Apostles were not to focus on material possessions but instead were to be intent on discerning which households were spiritually prepared to embrace Jesus’s gospel. Being wise and harmless, the Apostles are expected to thrive in difficult settings. When they were

on occasion persecuted or in legal jeopardy, Apostles were admonished to be patient. Today, as then, none should expect to be popular, let alone greater than their master. Jesus also taught that while many would suffer trials, they had no need to fear, for they are individually known to and valued by their Heavenly Father. They, as we, should fear only the power of Satan, the destroyer of body and spirit. As Jesus's kingdom began to roll forth, the gospel message was not intended to be popular, and it would often result in turmoil, even within families. Therefore, Apostles then, as well as the gatherers of Israel today, must decide to take up the cross of setting aside the values of the world as part of taking up the mantle of apostolic or missionary responsibility.

The instructions found in the callings extended in Matthew 10–12 can be thought of as the first missionary handbook of the Church. This perspective helps readers to identify valuable messages in these chapters and aids in understanding some of its very forthright and demanding instructions. Much can be learned and applied to missionary work from the way Jesus called, instructed, and sent forth His Apostles. Many of these principles can be applied by current church leaders and parents.

Nephi prophetically foresaw these initial twelve whom Jesus would choose (1 Nephi 12:7). Matthew 10:2–4, as well as Mark and Luke, identify them individually by name. Spencer W. Kimball added to Matthew's witness: "And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power. . . ." ([Matthew] 10:1.) This included . . . the *setting apart*, the *charge*, the *blessing*. The promise given these leaders was most spectacular. Full authority was given them as the Redeemer said: 'He that receiveth you receiveth me' ([Matthew] 10:40)."<sup>1</sup>

The Apostles carried forth the Savior's love, knowledge, ministry, and service. The Book of Mormon warns that those who do not listen to the Lord's Apostles will receive condemnation at the final judgment (3 Nephi 28:34). Being an Apostle is an official priesthood office still in the Church today, but these principles can be applied, to one degree or another, to all those who have been officially sent and commissioned to represent the Father as missionaries and in other roles in Church service. Wise Church members listen to and follow all those who act in the role of Jesus's Apostles when they speak for Heavenly Father.

### **Matthew 10:1–15. Calling 3: Jesus Calls the Twelve to Minister to the Lost Sheep of Israel**

Jesus's calling of the Twelve Apostles affirmed the essential role of priesthood authority and direction within His emerging kingdom. Giving Israel the first opportunity to hear and accept the eternal gospel, Jesus commenced His work among the descendants of Abraham. The opening of formal missionary work to the Gentile nations would not begin until a few years later, after the death and Resurrection of Jesus (see Acts 10–13).

**10:5. Any way or any city.** According to Matthew, Jesus tells these Apostles not to use any gentile roads or visit any Samaritan cities. With his Levitical interests, Matthew wanted to record the point that

Jesus had, at first, given the Jews the opportunity to receive Him. This rule was to be strictly observed at this initial time and season. Later in the first century, for Mark and Luke, there was no need to mention any longer this gospel restriction.

**10:8. Raise the dead.** The Apostles were empowered to perform even this level of miracle, as the Savior Himself had done (Matthew 9:18, 24). In a somewhat parallel passage regarding the Seventy (Luke 10:9, 17), no mention is made of them having this higher power, indicating that the Apostles had the fullest power to act in the name of Jesus Christ.

**10:14. Shake off the dust.** This action may have several meanings. As an Apostle left a house that would not receive him, he took nothing with him, not even a grain of sand or dust, lest he be accused of taking something that did not belong to him. When leaving an unworthy or impure place, the Apostle would want to take none of that impurity with him, no matter how small. This outward gesture also left physical evidence that could be used on God's day of judgment when even the dust of the earth will cry out against those who have heard but have not accepted the word of God.<sup>2</sup>

### **Matthew 10:16–25. Instruction 3: Beware of Cunning Opposition**

Recorded most extensively by Matthew, Jesus warns His Apostles that they will be hauled before courts, beaten in synagogues, and dragged before governors and kings, and He instructs them what they should do on such occasions. As reported in Acts and elsewhere, this opposition actually occurred, leading to the deaths of most of the early Twelve Apostles, but not before this gave them opportunities to bear witness to high-ranking government officials about the Resurrection of Jesus.

**10:16. As wise as serpents, and as pure as doves.** Like Jesus, disciples are ideally to be as wise as proverbial snakes yet as harmless as pure doves. Joseph Smith changed this verse from “as serpents” to “servants” in order to explain that His prophets and missionaries are supposed to serve Jesus and also be harmless. The Lord Himself in this dispensation qualified the word *wise* as also meaning “without sin.” “Therefore, be ye as wise as serpents and yet without sin; and I will order all things for your good, as fast as ye are able to receive them” (Doctrine and Covenants 111:11). The Greek word translated as “harmless” also means “innocent, pure,” meaning being in good standing in all ways before the Lord.

The scriptures provide many examples of the blessings of being both wise and harmless as His representatives. In the Book of Mormon, Ammon's missionary experience exemplifies wisdom and harmlessness: “Now Ammon being wise, yet harmless, he said unto Lamoni: Wilt thou hearken unto my words, if I tell thee by what power I do these things?” (Alma 18:22). Ammon's wisdom, humility, and purity eventually led to the conversion of many Lamanites.

In the early days of Christianity, Luke depicted Paul as being wise yet harmless before Sergius Paulus in Cyprus (Acts 13), before the Roman governors Felix and Festus in Caesarea (Acts 24–25), and possibly even before the Roman emperor Nero in Rome. Paul literally said: “But none of these things move me,

neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). Paul’s wisdom and harmlessness allowed him to live for three or four decades ministering to many Saints throughout the Mediterranean.

**10:20. *It will be given what you should speak.*** Jesus, on several occasions, taught His priesthood leaders to “fear not,” to “be not anxious,” and that it would be given in that moment what they should say, for it is not they who speak but “the spirit of your Father who speaks in you.” (Matthew 10:20). The Savior and the Holy Ghost know exactly what to have Their servants say, so there is no reason for Jesus’s servants to be anxious about responding. As Moses was told: “Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say” (Exodus 4:12). Special spiritual guidance has also been promised to those who teach the gospel in this last dispensation: “And it shall be given thee in the very moment what thou shalt speak and write, and they shall hear it, or I will send unto them a cursing instead of a blessing” (Doctrine and Covenants 24:6). Oliver Cowdery was promised that the Church would hear him if he spoke by the Comforter to teach the gospel, but he was not to issue commandments or revelations (Doctrine and Covenants 28:1). In Doctrine and Covenants 28:15, Oliver was advised, “And it shall be given thee from the time thou shalt go, until the time thou shalt return, what thou shalt do.”

Members of the restored Church are likewise taught today to act with the guidance of the Holy Ghost within their spheres of stewardship. How does one know if they are speaking through the Holy Ghost? Boyd K. Packer once shared, “On one occasion in a meeting I heard President Marion G. Romney say, ‘I always know when I am speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost because I always learn something from what I’ve said.’”<sup>3</sup>

## **Matthew 10:26–31. Instruction 4: Fear Satan, Who Can Destroy Both Soul and Body in Hell**

Here in Matthew, and also in Luke 12:2–9, Jesus teaches the principle of proclaiming boldly and openly sharing things that have been revealed and uncovered for open declaration. Transparency and honesty stand in contrast with the works of the adversary, who operates almost entirely in darkness and through deception.

Jesus warns that Satan can cause the death of humans not only physically but also spiritually, and the latter is to be guarded against most seriously. Here Jesus teaches clearly that we as mortal human beings have both a body and a spirit. Together they form the soul, which is separated in death but will be reunited in the Resurrection, becoming inseparably connected (2 Nephi 9:13; Doctrine and Covenants 88:15–16).

Knowing that our Heavenly Father has an eternal, glorified, perfect body provides many basic answers to the purpose of mortal, physical life here on earth. Importantly, Jesus teaches that Heavenly Father is concerned with our physical as well as our spiritual needs. He even notices and cares when a sparrow falls

or when a hair of our head falls to the ground. Surely each human being on this planet is worth at least as much if not more than each sparrow.

### **Matthew 10:32–33. Instruction 5: Confess Jesus Christ Publicly**

At the same time, human value and innate dignity come with a natural cost, namely acknowledging, confessing, and speaking well of the Creator of their earthly condition. All people, regardless of human station or condition, who advocate, confess, and testify of Jesus before others will enable Jesus to reciprocally advocate and praise them before God the Father. Likewise, all who follow Satan by denying Christ before others will find themselves denied by Christ before the Father.

What does it really mean to confess Jesus Christ publicly? Here we learn what Jesus and the early Christians believed and how it was changed over time. Again, modern revelation has restored the original meaning. In Matthew’s Greek text, the word translated in the King James version as “confess” literally means “to speak the same word, to concede, or to agree.” Its root meaning is “agreement with truth” or “acknowledgement” of the truth, especially the truth that Jesus is the Christ.

Latter-day Saints may refer to this acknowledgment as bearing testimony. The setting for confession in both Matthew and Romans was one’s legal testimony before magistrates.<sup>4</sup> In 1 Peter 3:21 and in very early Christian texts, one made a confession (or bore a testimony) before being baptized as “the pledge of a good conscience towards God.”

Testifying in the gentile, first-century world—as also in the latter-day Restoration—was an outward demonstration of a covenantal commitment to the Lord. When converts testified Jesus’s name publicly and acknowledged Him as the Son of God, He could acknowledge and own them. By analogy, they became His personal property through the personal commitment, trust, and allegiance of the “members” of his body, which they manifested by entering His new covenant through baptism (see Romans 6:3–5).

A few centuries later, the Augustinian (or Protestant) concept of “confession of faith” that allegedly and suddenly grants a person immediate salvation began to appear in Christian sermons and expositions. The King James Version’s use of the word “confess” was based on the Protestant belief that a confession of Christ led to immediate salvation. They took very literally and narrowly the words in Romans “that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Romans 10:9). But Paul was speaking of more than a mere confession. Trust in Jesus’s physical resurrection demonstrated through the ordinance of baptism (Romans 6:3–5) was also part of bringing about our being rescued or saved from spiritual death. Here Matthew affirms, as does Paul in Romans 6, the necessity of not just confessing but also of agreeing to enter into Christ’s new covenantal relationship through baptism. The early Apostles encouraged converts to transform their lives and become true disciples through testifying of Christ and exercising agency to obey His commandments and ordinances, rather than just granting them a pass to immediate salvation in mortality.

President Dallin H. Oaks clarified the principle stated in the third article of faith that “all mankind may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel” when he taught that “the words *saved* and *salvation* in this teaching signify a present covenant relationship with Jesus Christ in which we are assured salvation from the consequences of sin if we are obedient. Every sincere Latter-day Saint is “saved” according to this meaning. We have been converted to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, we have experienced repentance and baptism, and we are renewing our covenants of baptism by partaking of the sacrament.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Matthew 10:34–39. Instruction 6: Seek Not Comforts of the World, but Be Separate from the World**

When one understands that Jesus’s message is inherently peaceful, the Greek in this section is not quite as unsettling as the King James Version of the Bible makes things appear. Perhaps Matthew’s narrative has been more forcefully translated into Early Modern English to justify the violent religious strife of the Christian societies that had characterized the sixteenth century.

For example, Matthew’s words that were translated as to “set someone *at variance*” originally typically meant only “to divide or separate,” not “to set someone at variance or hostility permanently,” as may be implied in the King James Version. Instead, Matthew depicts Jesus as saying that His gospel will be initially divisive even within families. However, it is important for disciples to be more interested in Him as their Lord than in what their family members may think or do, and thereby those family members may someday be brought into the covenant as well.

**10:37–39. Take up your cross and follow.** Jesus recognizes that many family members will not immediately agree about His gospel when they first hear it. Very uncomfortable family strife will be an agonizing experience of potential social death for many of His followers. Thus, Jesus told His Apostles that they needed to carry whatever their cross might be in following Him and being like Him. In Jesus’s world, Romans utilized crosses as the most heinous way to inflict pain, slow death, and social embarrassment on the worst of the worst criminals as a deterrent, especially against insurrectionists challenging the Roman state. Luke added to this metaphor the point that disciples should take up their cross “daily” (Luke 9:23), recognizing that this is not just a one-time mortification of the flesh but an ongoing commitment to bear burdens of righteousness in daily living.

Jesus concluded this instruction with a compelling *abba* chiasm: “He that *findeth* his life shall *lose* it: and he that *loseth* his life for my sake shall *find* it” (Matthew 10:39; emphasis added). As Jesus died for us, so must disciples lose their life through social death or unselfish, dedicated sacrifice in following Him; but thereby they will find it. Conversely, those who try to accommodate themselves to the ways of the world will lose eternal life (see Luke 12:25). What are you willing to forgo for Jesus’s sake to claim eternal life?

## **Matthew 10:40–42. Instruction 7: Trust That Rewards Will Be Given to Those Who Receive You**

Jesus taught and assured His representatives that those who accept them are accepting Him, and thereby are accepting His Heavenly Father, “the one who sent me” (Matthew 10:40). They will also receive the same blessings as their teachers.

Those who speak on behalf of Jesus are in fact prophets—which is what *pro-phet* means in Greek (*prophétés* from *pro*, meaning “beforehand” and *phémi*, meaning “to declare”). Prophets, and those who accept them, will receive a reward from the Father. Likewise, those who choose to accept righteous messengers will receive a righteous reward.

The Lord added, in the modern dispensation, to this principle of receiving His servants who have His special authority: “Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:38). He also said, “He that receiveth my gospel receiveth me,” and, “Whosoever receiveth my word receiveth me” (Doctrine and Covenants 39:5; 112:20).

Joseph Smith combined the content of verses 41 and 42 thus: “He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward. And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only, in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.” Joseph’s combining these verses stresses that the verses go together in teaching and then applying a principle. Giving a drink of cold water to those who represent a prophet is a good example of how one can receive or accept a prophet and a prophet’s reward. Jesus further added in this dispensation that “he who feeds you, or clothes you, or gives you money, shall in nowise lose his reward” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:90).

The gifts from the one and true God, Heavenly Father, include priesthood power, the cleansing power of the Holy Ghost, and specific gifts of the Spirit that Jesus’s Atonement enables. Which particular gifts or blessings have you received from God the Father, and how have you then shown and returned your love to Him?

## **Matthew 11:1–19. Event 8: Jesus Confirms the Ministry of John the Baptist in Preparing the Way**

John the Baptist, a righteous man, now found himself in a miserable state, and his ministry had ended with his isolation in prison. Even though righteous, the poor of this world often suffer in mortality. John the Baptist would soon be murdered by the wicked because he pointed out their sins. Jesus said of him that no prophet was greater.

Jesus’s miracles were to be reported to John the Baptist, signaling to the Lord’s forerunner and relative that the prophet had now accomplished his mortal mission. Jesus provided him comfort and simultaneously provided Matthew an opportunity to declare again that Jesus was the expected Messiah. The

list of various types of miraculous occurrences is gathered from prophecies in Isaiah 29:18–19; 35:5–6; 42:7, 18; and 60:1. As a scribe, Matthew took careful note of Jesus’s knowledge of and use of the prophecies of Isaiah.

Matthew also testified of Jesus’s mission by quoting Malachi 3:1 (“Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me”) as well as Isaiah 40:3 (“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God”). To these prophecies, we can add Nephi’s words (“I also beheld the prophet who should prepare the way before him”; 1 Nephi 11:27). Additionally, in Doctrine and Covenants 35:9, Sidney Rigdon was taught that those with authority from the Savior would be able to perform several of the same miracles mentioned here.

### **Matthew 11:20–24. Instruction 8: Know That Curses and Woes Will Come Upon Unrepentant Cities**

In verse 20, Matthew used a term that literally means “powers,” translated in the King James Version as “mighty works,” to describe Jesus’s impressive miracles that occurred in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum through His messianic power and authority. These three towns on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee will eventually face stern judgment, for Jesus had ministered in them, raising their level of accountability. If the cities of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom had received such miracles, their people would have repented.

Of Tyre, Ezekiel, speaking long ago on behalf of the Lord, prophesied: “By the multitude of thy merchandise, they have filled the midst of thee with violence, and thou hast sinned: therefore, I will cast thee as profane out of the mountain of God. . . .Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee” (Ezekiel 28:16–17).

Speaking likewise on behalf of the Lord to Sidon, Ezekiel prophesied: “Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I am against thee, O Zidon; and I will be glorified in the midst of thee: and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall have executed judgments in her, and shall be sanctified in her. For I will send into her pestilence, and blood into her streets; and the wounded shall be judged in the midst of her by the sword upon her on every side; and they shall know that I am the Lord” (Ezekiel 28:22–23).

This same principle was thus taught by Jesus and also, in different ways, by Joseph Smith through the phrase “where much is given, much is required.” Disciples who do not live up to the light they are given are called to repentance by the Savior. Jesus rebuked with the common Old Testament form of placing a woe (or curse) upon the people.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus expects His miracles to elicit the proper response of true repentance found in Job 42:6: “Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” In this dispensation, in Doctrine and Covenants 75:22, the Lord explained to His Apostles that “it shall be more tolerable for the heathen in the day of judgment, than



for that house.” As any people witnesses miracles, it is essential for them to repent so the final judgment will not result in sadness. What miracles have you seen in Zion, and how have you responded to them?

## **Matthew 11:25–30. Calling 4: Jesus Invites All Who Are Burdened to Come Unto Him**

Hoping that all will repent and come unto Him, Jesus now invites everyone—especially those who are heavy laden—to come unto Him. If people come unto Him and “learn of Him,” He will reveal His truths, and He will also reveal the Father. This invitation comes logically and sensitively as a sequel to the brief prayer of thanks that Jesus offered to His Father in Matthew 11:25–26. In that prayer, Jesus expressed deep gratitude to the Father for seeing fit to reveal His will to novices and to children. Revelation is one of the greatest gifts given by God to His children here on earth. Except through personal revelation, no person can truly know the Father or His Son, Jesus Christ.

As a blessing to all who come to Christ, Jesus promises to give them rest. The Greek word here, *anapauein*, does not imply a permanent vacation but a pause on the journey, allowing time for refreshing and renewal or a requiem (as the Greek word is translated into Latin). Jesus also offers to help people learn from Him, for He is gentle and submissive at heart, and His “yoke” is easy, making our burdens light (Matthew 11:28–30). These are wonderful words of great assurance.

**11:28. Come unto Me.** These words are inscribed on the pedestal upon which the Christus statue stands in its original home in the cathedral in Copenhagen, Denmark. The word “come” in verse 28, “Come (*deute*) unto me (*pros me*),” is not the usual word for “come,” but it is a very inviting imperative of the word that says “keep on coming, continue heading toward (*pros*) me or approaching me.” This word is used often by Jesus. It is a very encouraging expression, and the emphasis is on reassurance. The Lord was saying, “Keep coming, I know you are working hard, follow My footsteps.”

The text also says, “I will give you rest.” The Greek word used here for “rest” is similar to the word “pause.” Jesus was not yet referring to eternal rest, but here He says He will provide a break for His followers to catch their breath and regenerate their strength.

The expression “learn of me” is ambiguous in English. It can mean “learn *about* me,” but here it clearly means “learn *from* me.” It has mainly to do with learning from His example, much like the invitation to “follow me.”

**11:30. My yoke is easy.** In the expression “for my yoke is easy,” the Greek word for “easy” is better translated as “well-fitting, useful, or easier to bear.” A yoke that works well is one that has been fit properly to the animal. If a hiker has a backpack on whose straps do not fit properly, the trip is uncomfortable. When the hiker adjusts the straps, it fits so that the burden can be carried properly. It is the same weight but because it fits, it becomes bearable. The load does not actually become lighter—it simply makes all the burdens feel lighter.

There were two kinds of yokes in the ancient world: a harness that could be put on an animal and another more common harness used on two animals, for which farmers would yoke together two that were the same size and strength so they could pull evenly. So, the idea of a yoke applies equally to a lone animal or to a pair; it can thus be applicable to single adults as well as to couples. Readers here commonly imagine putting upon themselves *His* two-person yoke. But Jesus does not necessarily need to be the other person in the harness; that would be imbalanced since no one else is as strong as He is.

Jesus was saying, “I will give you a calling, and it will be fit for you. I know what you can bear, and I know what you need and where you are needed. You come to me and I will tailor to you it through revelation.” How will this be properly fitted, and how is this going to work? It works because when individuals come to Him, He can reveal their strengths by showing them their weaknesses. That is why when we receive callings and assignments, we are called by revelation. In a way, the whole theme of revelation is drawn together in this chapter. Personal revelation can be equated to the design of the personal yoke.

### **Matthew 12:1–8. Challenge 3: Why Do You Hand-Pick Wheat on the Sabbath Day?**

Knowing how best to keep the Sabbath day holy was a seriously debated subject in Jesus’s day, and it remains a challenge even today. As you study this section, observe how this encounter affects how you think of keeping the Sabbath.

Jesus’s disciples were eating wheat in a grain field on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1), providing Jesus a setting to offer instructions about proper Sabbath-day activities in His kingdom. The disciples’ actions were technically permitted. They were eating grain according to the law of Moses, which allows on ordinary days that “when thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbour, then thou mayest [legally] pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbor’s standing corn” (Deuteronomy 23:25). That did not amount to theft.

However, the concern of the Pharisees here was that the disciples were doing this permitted “work” on the Sabbath. Jesus countered by reminding His challengers that David and his hungry men entered the temple and ate the shewbread that was to be eaten only by the priests (Matthew 12:4). Moreover, Jesus pointed out that on holy days (which are also types of Sabbath days) the priests must perform work by performing sacrifices (12:5). Further, the Pharisees were overlooking the fact that Jesus was the very God Jehovah who had issued the law to Moses and ancient Israel in the first place. For all these reasons, Jesus explained how the spirit, and not just the performance, of the rule is what is important to Him: “But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath day” (12:7–8).

This does not mean, of course, that anything is permissible on the Sabbath. It is a weekly day of rest and worship and service during the time that belongs to the Lord. Thus, Exodus 31:13 suggests that keeping

the Sabbath should serve as “a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you” (see also Ezekiel 20:12). Likewise, still today, the Sabbath day is kept holy as a sign of our willingness to accept and keep our covenants with God.

In a revelation to Isaiah (Isaiah 58:13–14), the Lord said that if we “call the Sabbath a delight” and turn from doing our own ways, “then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”

In this dispensation when the Lord revealed the law of Sabbath observance, He expressly authorized, for example, that necessary cooking was permitted to prepare essential food—with “singleness of heart” (Doctrine and Covenants 59:13), just as the disciple gathered only by hand the food necessary for them to continue in their services on the Lord’s day.

### **Matthew 12:9–14. Challenge 4: Why Do You Heal a Deformed Hand on the Sabbath?**

This encounter begins with a question asked by the Pharisees, challenging Jesus, “Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day?” A man with a withered hand was close by. Jesus knew that most Pharisees were zealous followers of the strict Jewish scholar named Shammai. But there was another notable group of Jews in Jesus’s day named the Essenes, or the “Holy Ones” (or “Saints”). They were the authors or preservers of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Answering the Pharisees’ question with another question, Jesus asked, “Who among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?” Jesus probably knew that the Essenes would have answered with a categorical “no one,” for those extremist Jews followed the rule found in the Dead Sea Scrolls that required: “Let no man help a beast to give birth on the Sabbath day; and if it fall into a cistern or into a pit, let it not be lifted out on the Sabbath.”<sup>7</sup> Having pitted the Pharisees against their sectarian rivals, Jesus made the obvious point that a person is more important than a sheep and then went ahead and miraculously healed the man’s hand. Realizing they had been bested and not knowing how far Jesus might go with this principle, the Pharisees held a formal council to discuss arresting Jesus and destroying Him (Matthew 12:14).

Moreover, Jesus may have been alluding to the situation of a poor person who had only one sheep, namely the story about one little ewe lamb in Nathan’s fable in 2 Samuel 12, exposing King David’s adultery with Bathsheba. Were the Pharisees like David in not giving the poor man his only chance of livelihood? Indeed, in the first century AD, a man who did not have use of his hand was normally unable to work and relegated to a life of poverty.

Jesus’s healing of this disabled man provides yet another example of how Jesus prioritized serving the least of God’s children in His ministry, even allowing this poor man whom He healed on the Sabbath to escape the grips of poverty. He overcame those who challenged Him not only in word but also in deed.

What specific good deeds could you accomplish on the Sabbath to bless the needy? How have you been served by others on the Sabbath?

### **Matthew 12:15–21. Miracle 11: In Healing All Peoples, Jesus Fulfills a Prophecy of Isaiah**

In response to the rejection by the Pharisees, Jesus simply withdraws. He does not fight back or argue but simply turns the other cheek. Many people in a great crowd of people follow Him, and Matthew quietly reports, “And he healed them all” (12:15). This day of miracles draws together Matthew’s compilation in chapters 8–12 of Jesus’s intertwined ministry of calling, instructing, blessing, healing, and responding to challengers.

Mark 3:7–12 gives a more detailed physical report of this overwhelming day of healing: It happened by the Sea of Galilee; sick and needy people of all kinds came from far and wide, from throughout the region, from the north, south, east, and west. Jesus healed many, and when unclean spirits were cast out, they cried out, “You are the Son of God.” The press of the crowd was so great that Jesus told His disciples to have a boat standing by so He would have a place to avoid being crushed. Apparently, Jesus didn’t need to use that lifeboat, but instead He again strictly told this very large crowd to give Him no publicity, thus emphasizing the dramatic conflict brewing between Jesus and those who opposed Him (Matthew 12:16; Mark 3:12).

In the Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 12:15, Joseph Smith makes explicit the point that “Jesus knew when they [the Pharisees] took counsel [against him],” and for that reason “he withdrew himself from thence: and great multitudes followed him, and he healed their sick.”

Matthew, in turn, focuses on how Jesus’s loving, understated, universally welcoming, and powerfully amazing healings fulfilled the prophecy found in Isaiah 42:1–4, which Matthew simply quotes, without further comment, in Matthew 12:18–21.

**12:17–21. In order to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah.** With his Levitical interests and a Jewish audience in mind, Matthew quoted Isaiah to bear witness of various aspects of Jesus’s messiahship at least fourteen times. Here in this day of Jesus’s healing and humility, Matthew finds prophetic affirmations that Jesus was God’s servant—chosen, beloved, and well pleasing, and that God had placed His Spirit upon Him. Here, as prophesied, Jesus proclaimed righteousness to the Gentiles surrounding Judea. He does not argue or raise His voice, and He will not seek publicity in the streets. He will do no damage, even to a bruised reed. He will not put out even the smallest light. His victory will be just, and all people will find hope in His name.

Isaiah’s prophecy speaks messianically and symbolically: “The reed is a type or symbol of humanity; and the Messiah, who finds many reeds bruised by the storms of life, is inclined to bind up and heal rather than break and destroy. The Greek word for flax was linen, which is one of the products prepared from this fibrous plant. The ‘smoking flax’ is a reference to the wick of an oil lamp. The gentleness of the Messiah would figuratively disallow his even putting out the smoking linen wick used in a lamp.”<sup>8</sup>

Elder James E. Talmage explains why Jesus may have “urged the people to refrain from spreading His fame” at this time, for “at that stage of His work, an open rupture with the Jewish hierarchy would have been a serious hindrance.”<sup>9</sup> The meekness of Jesus as messianic king would have been striking to both Jews and Gentiles who, in contrast, proverbially believed it was normal to ostentatiously do good to friends and evil to enemies.

The disciples of Jesus should go and do as He did. What are some ways you have learned to be tender and loving with others, especially those who might be considered enemies? Why should one not seek publicity or fame for serving the Lord?

### **Matthew 12:22–30. Challenge 5: Jesus Answers Those Who Say He Is Healing with Evil Powers**

One of the common reactions of those who were skeptical about Jesus’s miracles was to claim that He performed these signs and wonders by the power of evil spirits. But why can evil not cast out evil? What did Jesus say? By whom is evil conquered?

Joseph Smith clarified Matthew’s narrative here by adding, “But when the Pharisees heard that He had cast out the devil, they said [among themselves], ‘This man doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of devils.’” Reacting to Jesus’s miraculous power, the Pharisees concluded that Jesus must have been the prince of devils or demons.

His answer was that “every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand.” A devil would not cast out a devil.

James E. Talmage explained that Jesus confounded his adversaries when “He asked: ‘If I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast them out?’ And to make the demonstration plainer by contrast, He continued: ‘But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you.’ By the acceptance of either proposition, and surely one was true, for the fact that Jesus did cast out devils was known throughout the land and was conceded in the very terms of the charge now brought against Him, the accusing Pharisees stood defeated and condemned.”<sup>10</sup>

Because Jesus was able to know the thoughts of the Pharisees, He was able to use them as supporting His divine nature. Joseph Smith affirmed that only God knows our thoughts: “There is none else save God that knowest thy thoughts and the intents of thy heart” (Doctrine and Covenants 6:16).

The Joseph Smith translation expands Matthew’s narrative as follows: “But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, the kingdom of God is come unto you, for they also cast out devils by the Spirit of God, for unto them is given power over devils that they may cast them out.” Thus, only by and through the Spirit of God does one have power to cast out devils. Because God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost are the source of truth and light, they are the means of dismissing the adversary and those spirits who followed him. Disciples endowed with power know how to command Satan to depart, and he must withdraw.

### **Matthew 12:31–32. Instruction 9: Commit No Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost**

Next, Jesus spoke to His disciples and to those in His inner circle and said, “Whoever blasphemes or speaks against [or contrary to] the Holy Ghost will not be forgiven in this age or in the future” (12:31–32). Those who have received the Holy Ghost and have testimonies of the truths of the gospel commit grievous sin by denying the Holy Spirit and the knowledge that they have been given. Mark and Luke include similar warnings, but only Matthew emphasizes the eternal nature of the consequences of speaking against the Holy Ghost, both in this world and in that to come.

One of the Ten Commandments reads, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” (Exodus 20:7). The injunction against evil speaking is now expanded to include blasphemy against the Holy Ghost as well. While lies and deprecations spoken about men can be forgiven (Matthew 12:31), speaking against God the Father or the Holy Ghost take defamation and desecration to a whole new level, especially for those who know better.

In this case, the knowledgeable Pharisees had been accusing Jesus of healing by the power of evil and having an evil spirit Himself. This was dangerously close to maligning the Holy Ghost, the very instrument of the spirit of repentance and forgiveness. The Joseph Smith Translation emphasizes that such sins, including blasphemy against the Son of Man, may be forgiven, but only if those who commit them “receive [Christ] and repent.”

Clarifying the nature of such blasphemy or evil speaking, Joseph Smith taught: “All sins shall be forgiven, except the sin against the Holy Ghost; for Jesus will save all except the sons of perdition. What must a man do to commit the unpardonable sin? He must receive the Holy Ghost, have the heavens opened unto him, and know God, and then sin against Him. After a man has sinned against the Holy Ghost, there is no repentance for him. He has got to say that the sun does not shine while he sees it; he has got to deny Jesus Christ when the heavens have been opened unto him, and to deny the plan of salvation with his eyes open to the truth of it; and from that time, he begins to be an enemy. . . . You cannot save such persons; you cannot bring them to repentance; they make open war, like the devil, and awful is the consequence.”<sup>11</sup> “All other sins are not to be compared to sinning against the Holy Ghost and proving a traitor to thy brethren.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Matthew 12:33–37. Instruction 10: Know a Tree by Its Fruits and a Man by His Works and Words**

Next, Jesus returns to His words in the Sermon on the Mount that “by their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:20). Referring to His critics as a “generation of vipers,” Jesus taught that a tree cannot bring forth both good fruit and bad, and similarly a house divided against itself cannot stand. He now applies this principle to words as well as actions. Because the mouth speaks out of the heart, how can a person with an evil heart speak good? Thus, Jesus instructs His disciples and warns His critics that on the day of

judgment, all will be judged or justified not only by their deeds and the intentions of their hearts but also by every careless word they have spoken (12:36; see also Alma 12:14).

Following Jesus's death and Resurrection, Peter used this principle—without the imagery of the tree—in an impressive defense to the Sanhedrin. The members of the Sanhedrin marveled at Peter's logic. "Indeed, a notable miracle hath been done by them is manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it," they said (Acts 4:8–16).

People who afflicted the Savior's covenant people in Joseph Smith's day and did "drive, and murder, and testify against them" were also referred to as "a generation of vipers" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:23). Only through repentance is it possible for individuals to be transformed and produce good spiritual fruits.

### **Matthew 12:38–42. Sign 1: The Sign of Jonah is Identified as Being a Sign of Jesus**

At this point, some of the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign. Jesus told them that "the sign of Jonas" was all they would get. What is the sign of Jonas (Jonah)?

Jonah was a well-known early prophet from Northern Israel, up the coast from Nazareth. He was called by God to go to the Assyrian capitol city of Nineveh, in northern Mesopotamia, to preach the word of God and to call the people there to repentance. Jonah fled, going west on a ship that was caught in a ferocious storm. Jonah slept during the tempest, was awakened, confessed to being the cause of God's displeasure, and was thrown overboard into the raging sea and apparently died. From the depths of *sheol* (hell), Jonah's spirit cried out to God for forgiveness and promised to return to God's temple and offer sacrifices. After three days in the belly of the great monster, he was cast up onto the shore and was revived. He kept his vows and went dutifully to Nineveh, where the people believed him and repented of their sins.<sup>13</sup>

Several echoes of Jonah's story are found in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus too slept through a great tempest on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 9:24–25). Here in Matthew 12, Jesus tells the scribes and Pharisees that the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (12:40). He also warns the Jews of His day that they will be judged and condemned by the Gentiles of Nineveh for not repenting as they did (12:41). All of these typologies involving Jonah can be seen as parts of the sign of Jonah on this occasion.

Before long, the Pharisees and Sadducees will speak again with Jesus, "tempting him" and wanting Him to show them not just a sign from the past but a "sign from heaven" (16:1). Jesus will decline their request, saying they have enough, including the sign of Jonah. While He will not elaborate on what that sign might mean, shortly afterward, speaking to His Apostles, He will refer back to what He has said here in Matthew 12:40 and will prophesy that he will "be killed and be raised again on the third day" (16:21).

Thus, the main import of the "sign of the prophet Jonas," as James E. Talmage explained, "was that for three days he had been in the belly of the fish and then had been restored to liberty; so would the Son

of Man be confined in the tomb, after which He would rise again. That was the only sign He would give them, and by that would they stand condemned.”<sup>14</sup>

**12:39. An adulterous generation.** Because God’s covenant with Israel and a husband’s covenant with his wife are both sacred covenants, adultery was widely used in the Old Testament as a metaphor for the unfaithfulness of Israel, breaking their covenant with Yahweh.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the New Testament extends the meaning of “adulterous” to become a figurative expression for total unfaithfulness toward God.

Jesus used this word in rebuking sign seekers as a wicked and adulterous generation. It is notable that in the latter days, the Lord admonishes the Saints again about sign-seeking. He warns that sign-seekers would see signs, “but not unto salvation.” He adds that faith is not generated by signs, but “signs follow those that believe” and that “signs come by faith, not by the will of men, nor as they please, but by the will of God.” To sign-seekers He warned, “I, the Lord, am not pleased with those among you who have sought after signs and wonders for faith, and not for the good of men unto my glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 63:7–12).

Joseph Smith taught: “The principle is as correct as the one that Jesus put forth in saying that he who seeketh a sign is an adulterous person; and that principle is eternal, undeviating, and firm as the pillars of heaven; for whenever you see a man seeking after a sign, you may set it down that he is an adulterous man.”<sup>16</sup>

Joseph provided a specific example when he “was preaching in Philadelphia. A Quaker called out for a sign. . . . I told the congregation the man was an adulterer; that a wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and that the Lord had said to me in a revelation, that any man who wanted a sign was an adulterous person. ‘It is true,’ cried one, ‘for I caught him in the very act,’ which the man afterwards confessed when he was baptized.”<sup>17</sup>

Demanding a sign seems to be the product of the loss of the Spirit that teaches truth. Seeking signs results from not being open to receiving the truth from the Holy Spirit. How can disciples avoid seeking inappropriate signs and ask spiritually helpful questions to receive truth from the Holy Ghost?

## **Matthew 12:43–45. Instruction 11: Beware and Prevent the Return of Unclean Spirits**

Jesus ended this conversation with the Pharisees with a short parable containing a dire warning about covenant-makers who reject their covenants, or believers who reject Christ and baptism after having accepted them. In this parable, an unclean spirit was expelled from a man and thus went wandering around through dry and empty places, seeking another body to move into. Not finding anywhere, the unclean spirit decides to return to his former host. When that evil spirit arrived, he found his former home empty, cleaned out, and spiritually all in order. Knowing he will now need even more help than before, that spirit goes and brings seven others more evil than himself to help him move back in. Jesus warns that the last state of that once-repentant man will be worse than it was at first. This instruction wisely counsels the



Apostles to warn new members of the Church to be more diligent than ever. It teaches Church leaders to fellowship new converts diligently, knowing that old sins will be knocking on the door hoping to be let back in.

Jared Halverson has pointed out that when one has “cleaned out” the evil from the house, there is at first a lighted vacancy sign in the window, waiting for bad habits to return. “Rather than leaving things empty, once the bad habit is gone, fill up the house with good habits, so that the evil things have nowhere to stay when they try to return.”<sup>18</sup>

Mormon, in one of his “thus we see” interludes, also was well aware of a similar principle: “And thus we can plainly discern, that after a people have been once enlightened by the Spirit of God, and have had great knowledge of things pertaining to righteousness, and then have fallen away into sin and transgression, they become more hardened, and thus their state becomes worse than if they had never known these things” (Alma 24:30).

Jesus thus warned the Pharisees not to reject the covenant. The dismissal of the evil spirit represented the acceptance by many Jews of John the Baptist’s baptism unto repentance. The cleaning of the house then represents the initial acceptance of Christ’s basic teachings. The return of the evil spirits comes when many Jews will reject Jesus as the Christ.

### **Matthew 12:46–50. Instruction 12: All Who Do the Will of the Father Are Covenant Kindred**

The final instruction in this section of Matthew comes while Jesus was teaching in a house with His mother and His brethren “standing without.” The Greek actually says, “having stayed outside.” The implication was that they were not standing out there because there was no room, but they had decided, for one reason or another, to remain outside. Jesus’s family then sent in a message asking if they could talk to Him. There was no indication of their purpose. Some early manuscripts omit verse 47, while others provide an aside indicating that someone said to Jesus, “Your mother and brothers are outside and want to speak to you.”

Jesus used this event not to criticize His mother and His brothers but as an object lesson. He pointed to His disciples and asked the people who were listening to Him, “Who is my mother? Who is my brother?”

For the answer, He quoted His own words in the Sermon on the Mount; “Whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven” (see Matthew 7:21). We in Christ’s Church generally refer to other members as brothers and sisters. This in no way diminishes the importance of relationships within families, but recognizes that through making and keeping covenants with Heavenly Father people also become covenant daughters and sons.

The Book of Mormon and prophets of this dispensation have accentuated this principle of becoming Jesus’s family members through faithfulness. King Benjamin said, “And now, because of the covenant

which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters” (Mosiah 5:7).

In Joseph Smith’s translation, we read that Jesus went on to honor and care for His mother: “And he gave them charge concerning her,” while He needed to go his way, “for my Father hath sent me.” Brigham Young added: “I do not think that the Savior will claim any son or daughter of Adam to be His brother, sister, mother, or kin, or connection of any kind or description, according to the flesh, except those who do the will of our Father in heaven.”<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Spencer W. Kimball, in Conference Report, October 1958, 54.
- 2 On the rocks crying out, compare Luke 19:40; Helaman 12:7, 19.
- 3 Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2004), 357.
- 4 See Luke 21:12–15; 1 Peter 3:13–16.
- 5 Dallin H. Oaks, “Have You Been Saved?,” April 1998 general conference, online at [churchofjesuschrist.org](http://churchofjesuschrist.org).
- 6 See Numbers 21:29; 1 Samuel 4:8; Isaiah 3:9–11; Jeremiah 13:27; Ezekiel 24:6–9.
- 7 Cairo Damascus Document 11.13.
- 8 D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse by Verse: The New Testament*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2006), 1:272–273.
- 9 James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News, 1916), 266.
- 10 James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News, 1916), 267–268.
- 11 “History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844],” p. 1976, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/348>; capitalization and punctuation modernized.
- 12 “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842] [addenda],” p. 10 [addenda], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/545>.
- 13 For more on the sign of Jonah, see Book of Mormon Central, “What Is the Sign of Jonah? (Matthew 12:39–40),” *KnoWhy* 652 (November 23, 2022), available online at <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/what-is-the-sign-of-jonah>.
- 14 James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News, 1916), 270–271.
- 15 See Ezekiel 16:15; Hosea 4:15–19; Malachi 2:14–16.

16 “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842] [addenda],” p. 10 [addenda], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/545>; capitalization and punctuation modernized.

17 “History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843],” p. 1466, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/109>; capitalization and punctuation modernized.

18 Cited in D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse by Verse: The New Testament*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2006), 1:278.

19 Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London, UK: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–1886), 4:279–281.

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