

The Book of Matthew Study Guide

Chapters 11-12

10:1

After giving instructions to the Disciples regarding their ministry, Yeshua resumes preaching in the cities of the Galilee.

10:2-6

Meanwhile while in prison John the Baptist gets word about the miraculous works of Yeshua, so he sends his own disciples to Yeshua. And in v. 3 they ask, “Are You the Coming One [or Expected One], or should we look for someone else?” In light of what transpired previously between Yeshua and John, this might seem to be an odd thing for them to say. When John baptized Him, he recognized the great spiritual nature of Yeshua. According to Mat 3:17 - “A voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’” In John 1:29 John the Baptist called Yeshua, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” But John never did directly call Yeshua the Messiah. So he may have had some uncertainty about Yeshua. This uncertainty was probably enhanced by his stay in prison where he would have time to think about things. And that would include thoughts about the popular beliefs about the Messiah in that day.

It is clear that many people were focusing on those prophetic attributes of the Messiah being the King who would restore the kingdom of Israel and bring changes to this world that would secure peace in every way. This included defeating the Romans according to the way that the zealots interpreted the role of the Messiah. Up to this point Yeshua had not accomplished those things, so it is only natural that a man in prison might be influenced by these very familiar beliefs, regardless of their validity. John was a mere man, after all. This says something about human nature, even for believers. We see other examples in Scripture, such as Gideon requesting two miracles before he would obey God’s instruction regarding leading the army of Israel (Judg 6:36-40).

So John sends his disciples to settle the matter once for all. The wording of their question is cryptic, however. They don’t use the Gr. word *Christos* or Heb. *Mashiach*, meaning Christ or Messiah. Instead they use the Gr. *Erkomenos* – “Coming One.” This term was ascribed to the Messiah during the second temple period. It is manifested in the observance of Passover with the broken *matzah* we now call the *Afikomen* (meaning, “I came”), but in the second temple period that *matzah* was phrased as *aphikomenos* – Gr. for “he is coming.”

Yeshua understood the implications of their request, and His response is equally cryptic. He doesn’t come right out and state that He is the Messiah.

v. 5 – Instead He cites 6 signs from the prophet Isaiah that would validate the Messiah.

- The blind receive sight (Isa 35:4-5)
- The lame walk (Isa 35:6)
- Lepers will be healed (Isa 53:4)
Isaiah 53:4 – “Surely our griefs (or sicknesses - *choli*) He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.” Not

only do you have the sense of Him bearing our sicknesses, the word translated as “stricken” is *nagua*, which has the same root as the word translated as leprosy in Lev. 13. So the ancient rabbis understood this verse to mean that the Messiah would be associated with lepers (*Sanhedrin 98:a-b*).

- The deaf hear (Isa 35:5)
- The dead are raised up (*remez* - Isa 26:19)
- The Gospel preached to the poor (Isa 61:1)

It’s like saying, “My record speaks for itself.”

- v. 6 – Here is where the real point that Yeshua was addressing. “Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.” Those words are an exhortation to remain faithful. Remember, John was locked in prison and no rescue was in sight. Yeshua had not declared that He was the Messiah, so there was no sign that the kingdom of Israel would be established, thus freeing him from prison. Yeshua knew this, and He also knew that John faced the ultimate test of his faith when Herod would have him beheaded. And not only did Yeshua make a direct statement of needing to stay faithful, He gave an additional hint in that regard by quoting from Isa 35 when He was giving His credentials. For it holds a clear exhortation for people in situations like John faced.

Isa 35:4 reads: “Say to those with anxious heart, ‘Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; the recompense (or reward) of God will come, but He will save you.’” When John’s disciples returned to visit him in prison and reported what Yeshua had said, it is reasonable to conclude that John would have put it all together by recalling these words of Isaiah. And since Yeshua never did anything without obtaining an expected result, I believe that is exactly what happened, and John’s faith was strengthened.

11:7-14

Yeshua then honors John and his ministry.

- v. 10 – He declares that John is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Mal 3:1 that a messenger would precede the Messiah, preparing the way for Him. And that is exactly what John did.
- v. 14 – Yeshua declares that John also filled the role of Elijah according to the prophecy of Malachi 4:5 – “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD.” That is the prophecy that led to the inclusion of a place set at the table for Elijah in Passover Seders.

But John was not a reincarnation of Elijah. So how do we make sense of that? Luke 1:17 provides us with an important detail. He says about John - “It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah. . .” This phrase “spirit and power” is a figure of speech called a “hendiadys” that is commonly used in Hebraic speech and writing. It does not refer to two different things – it links together two terms to represent one concept. For example, in 1 Tim 1:17 – “glory and honor” represents “glorious honor.” So the idea being expressed in Luke 1:17 is that John came in the spiritual power of Elijah. In other words, he would be as effective as Elijah in accomplishing God’s purposes.

11:15-24

Not every community believed in Yeshua and agreed to follow Him. And Yeshua has harsh words for them in v 24 –“I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.” This was the best offer anyone could ever receive – citizenship in the kingdom of God and to turn it down is the ultimate rejection of the Lord.

11:25-30

v. 25 – In Yeshua’s prayer to the Father, He said that God hides things from the wise and intelligent and reveals them to infants (KJV “babes”).

v. 27 – Paraphrase: the only way to know the Father is when the Son exercises His will to reveal that truth.

So Yeshua’s revelation of truth is absolutely essential for anyone to know about God. And that is reaffirmed in the next three verses (28-30). The term “yoke” had a very specific meaning in the biblical culture. It was used to refer to the particular interpretation of Torah held by a rabbi. Like beasts of burden attached to a wooden apparatus that cause them to submit to the instructions of the master, *talmidim* (disciples) were called to submit to the instructions of rabbis who were considered to have authority to make interpretations. They referred to the process as being “yoked to the Torah.” But in actuality they were yoked to the interpretation of Torah held by a particular rabbi. But by the time of Yeshua, the mere number of interpretations had become vast, and thus the number of obligations was vast. To the point that it was a great burden, indeed an impossible burden, to live out.

So Yeshua comes along and, as one with authority, He brought an interpretation of Torah that was really not new, for it was a return to the pure message of Moses and the prophets. As He said in v. 30 – “For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.” He came and scoured away the layers and layers of burdensome obligations set forth by those who came between Moses and Yeshua. He made Torah light again. He called people to live by faith, and to love their neighbors as themselves, to live humbly before God and to know and practice lives of genuine sacrifice. The result would be rest for their souls.

And so it is for us – we are yoked to the way that Yeshua interprets Torah. But that is a very good thing because He makes it easy for us to understand if we will just listen to what He has to say. And the burden of His teaching is light because He does not overload us with complicated religious obligations. He is telling us that we all have the ability to follow His teachings.

12:1-14

The previous chapter ends with Yeshua describing the nature of His interpretation of Torah. But what if that interpretation was in conflict with the interpretation held by others who demanded a more burdensome religious approach? How would they react? We can easily see how they would call him a heretic for in their eyes he was rejecting the yoke of Torah. When in fact He was bringing the people back to the original yoke of Torah.

The issue at hand involves the way Yeshua and the Pharisees interpreted Torah in relation to the Sabbath. We need to know that only 2 specific requirements were stated in the Torah regarding Shabbat. It was given as a day of rest (Ex 20:10; 31:15; Lev 23:3). The people were forbidden to kindle fire (Ex 35:3). 38 more prohibitions were formulated by the Pharisees as part of the Oral Tradition, not inspired Scripture. They reasoned that there were 39 kinds of creative work (*melachot*) that were involved in the creation of the tabernacle. Thus they should be forbidden in

every generation. In time the 39 categories of prohibitive activities were recorded in the *Mishnah* (7:2) and that became the foundation for rabbinic Judaism until this day. And then variations called *toledot* were derived for each category, and the 39 turned into a vast number of specific restrictions. But the important thing to recognize is that this is a yoke or an interpretation of Torah, not Torah itself, thus it does not have the authority of God's Word. Moreover it is an interpretation held by those who rejected the authority of Yeshua. And that is where the conflict arises here in Mat 12. Two of the 39 Pharisaic prohibitions were reaping and threshing.

- v. 1 – The disciples picked grain in order to eat (the Pharisees considered that to be reaping). Lk 6:1 adds the detail that it was wheat and that they rubbed the heads together to break it up and make it easier to eat. And the Pharisees considered that to be threshing. So we had a conflict of interpretation and Yeshua took the heat.

Beginning in 12:11 we have another example of *kal-ve-homer* reasoning, *meaning* “simple and complex” or “light and heavy.” It gives the sense that if something is true in a simple, light situation, it will also be true in a more complex, heavy one. The opponents of Yeshua sought to get him to contradict Torah by provoking him into healing a man on the Sabbath who had a withered hand. Yeshua responded by pointing out that people will always rescue their sheep if they fall into a pit on the Sabbath. The life of the sheep was the light aspect in this reasoning. And the life of the disabled man was the heavy aspect. He deduced the value of the life of the man called for healing, the equivalent of pulling a sheep from a pit, regardless of the day or time. This means of interpretation provides a practical, caring way of applying biblical principles. Instead of giving increasingly complex guidelines in simple situations, it enables us to be guided by simple guidelines in complex situations.

- v. 14 – Confirms that this is a conflict between differing interpretations of Torah, because the Pharisees realized that Yeshua was a real threat to their authority. So they conspired to destroy Him and His system. In light of the implications of this chapter, there are implications for Messianic believers. Our focus must be on resting in “the Lord of the Sabbath” (v. 8) and His interpretation of Torah, not the burdensome method of Rabbinic Judaism.

12:15-22

Yeshua quotes from Isa 42:1-14, another Messianic passage, that describes His gentle character, in contrast to the harshness of the religious authorities.

12:22-37

The healing of a blind and dumb demon-possessed man is significant. In those days there were Jewish exorcists who cast out demons, but it required conversing with the demon. An example is described in Acts 19:13-16. But in this case, the man cannot speak so the people were amazed. The Pharisees offer an explanation that Yeshua was in league with Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons. Yeshua shows how illogical that kind of thinking is. It is foolish to ascribe authority to a false god when the true God does something. And then in vv 31-32 He makes a statement that is often misunderstood. He describes two kinds of blasphemy (“to speak evil about”)—against Himself (the Son of Man) and against the Holy Spirit. The former can be forgiven, but the latter cannot.

Context helps us to understand how that can be true. He had just been dealing with His Messianic credentials plus the difference between His authority (yoke or interpretation)

regarding Torah and that of the religious authorities. In addition we know that many people rejected Him as Messiah and His teachings, not just in that day, but in every generation. And they spoke against Him. But there were also people who later came to realize the truth and believed in Him. And the same is true today. That kind of ignorance He gladly forgives. But the person who denies the power of the Spirit and willfully gives credit to Satan instead, acts outwardly from a hardened heart that cannot be softened and thus forgiven, much like that of Pharaoh in Exodus.

12:38-45

Yeshua singles out the generation that was alive at that time for being particularly evil. They had the Messiah right in their midst, working all kinds of miracles and bringing life to the Torah again, and they rejected it.

vv. 39-40 – When asked for a sign, Yeshua declares the only sign to be given is that of Jonah being in the belly of a sea monster for 3 days and nights. Obviously at that time, nobody would be able figure out what He was saying. But later on, after learning about His death and resurrection spanning 3 days, people could understand what Yeshua meant here. And so can people today. The death and resurrection of Yeshua is the ultimate sign that He is who He said He was.

12:46-50

Yeshua uses a visit from His mother and brothers to declare that His true family are people who do the will of the Father. What is the will of the Father? According to John 6:40 – “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.”