

COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

AN EXAMINATION OF MATTHEW 12:1-14

BY NATHAN BATTEY

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To my father who taught me
to love truth with conviction.

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Forward

Brother Nathan Battey has provided a very good work for the Lord's Church. He has fulfilled the obligation of I Timothy 4:6 as a "good minister of Jesus Christ" by establishing his views within "the words of faith and of good doctrine." This is a stressful period of time where Hebrews 2 reminds us we labor under the lifetime bondage of fear and death. However, our obligation is to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). Brother Nathan makes the Son shine through the cloudiness of human opinion in this study of Matthew 12:7. Men have muddied the water, and this passage has been abused as a license to sin. Brother Johnny Elmore once told me, "Don't ever forget muddy water looks deep!" Anyone feeling tension between their present stressful circumstances and the law of God must reconcile their choice to the law of God. Foolish statements such as "I just don't think God will hold it against me if..." or "We are doing the best we can" are often dangerous justification. If we have missed the mark, we need to fix it with God and move on. The message of the Son of God is "He who hath ears to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches" (Revelation 2:7). Revelation 2:10 outlines faithful obedience even to death. God is our Father and has proven longsuffering, gracious, and merciful. I Corinthians 13 requires all that we do be done in love. Kindness and love must be joined with steadfastness in our public and private allegiance to God's revealed word. I commend this book and pray that it will bring blessing to the brotherhood.

Cullen Smith

Acknowledgements

Writing this book has been a labor of love and learning aided by the insights and corrections of many faithful brethren. While the failures and shortcomings are my own, I want to thank all who have helped me along the way, and I pray that the labor will stimulate study and growth in the Kingdom.

Special thanks and recognition are due A. K. Richardson, Brandon Stephens, Cullen Smith, and my father for their willingness to critique, support, and endorse my book. My greatest thanks is due Savannah, my virtuous wife, who spent numerous hours editing my mistakes and endured the all-consuming nature of the project. She is more than I deserve and my single greatest blessing in Christ.

May God be glorified and the Kingdom strengthened through His power in the midst of trials!

Preface

When I began writing I did not set out with the intention of writing a book. What began as an article continued to grow until it became what you now hold in your hands.

At the prompting and prodding of several advisors I have decided to present my material in two parts. In hopes of engaging a larger reading audience, it was suggested that I provide a simplified version in conjunction with a more detailed approach. Therefore, the first part of this book assumes some of what will be proven in the second half where the details, evidence, and theories are fleshed out. For readers who do not wish to read the entire second part, I hope that it will at least provide helpful material on particular points of interest.

Above all I ask that you consider what is written in God's word. If what I have written contradicts Scripture, reject it. If, on the other hand, what this book contains is in accordance with Scripture, take it to heart and act upon it. I pray that I have been faithful to the Word and conveyed the love and humility of Christ.

Nathan Battey

Indianapolis
April, 2020

Introduction

In the midst of our current COVID-19 crisis, the church is faced with many difficult decisions including whether or not to continue assembling for worship. The government in most states has issued special regulations which forbid gatherings of more than ten people and have brought added stress to our brotherhood. As a result of the mandate and the nature of the pandemic, congregational leaders are forced to make difficult battlefield decisions. My heart goes out to my brethren, and I pray that God will strengthen us through the power of His word.

Questions facing leaders include: Does our current crisis fall within the grounds of “Obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29) or is it a situation where Christians should submit to their government for their own good (Romans 13:3-4)? What should we do? What must we do? Should we continue to assemble or must we suspend worship until the storm is past (however long that might be)? These and many other questions hang over the heads of congregational leaders as members sit poised awaiting a response.

Making decisions in highly emotional times is always difficult. It may be that in a few months we look back at our current crisis with regrets over decisions made, yet in the moment brothers and sisters are trying to do the best they can. It is imperative that we remain as humble and calm as possible while demonstrating compassion towards all.

In the midst of the chaos and confusion a repeated refrain can now be heard as brethren have begun quoting the words of the Lord in Matthew 12:7:

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“But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.”

The question is not, “What did Jesus say?” but rather, “What did Jesus mean by what He said, and does His statement have any bearing on our current moment of crisis?” Is the meaning of the Lord’s statement self-evident? And what are we to make of the difficult setting in which it was issued? Before discussing the validity, implications, and consequences of applying Matthew 12:7 to our current crisis, we need to carefully investigate what is largely recognized as a difficult passage and prove its interpretation rather than assuming it.

The challenges of leadership are daunting under normal circumstances, and even more so in the midst of a pandemic. I have the utmost sympathy for all of my brethren who strive to lead and I pray that God will grant us wisdom to lead according to His word.

My comments on Matthew 12:1-14 are written out of sincere love for truth and the brotherhood. I have not written out of hatred or spite, nor am I trying to take a shot at any of my brethren. Please do not mistake my convictions and concern for arrogance, hatred, or a lack of mercy. I am strongly convicted that we must demonstrate mercy to those who doubt (Jude 22-23), while at the same time trying to strengthen the members who hang down (Hebrews 12:12). I have written this book because I am concerned that brethren are misusing Matthew 12:1-14 to advocate positions that cause harm rather than good. Rather than dismissing the position of others, or asserting my own, I hope to engage those with different interpretations and challenge all to grapple with a difficult portion of Scripture. I am not naïve enough to think that I will convince all, but I do hope to identify where difficulties and differences lie.

THE DIFFICULTIES

The difficulties of interpreting Matthew 12:1-14 are legion. The following inexhaustive list notes some of the major difficulties:

- 1- Why did the Pharisees attack Jesus rather than His disciples?
- 2- Did the disciples actually sin or had they merely violated Pharisaic tradition?
- 3- What is the significance of Jesus' twice repeated question "Have you not read?"
- 4- In using the example of David and his men eating the showbread are we to understand David to have sinned or was he justified in his action?
- 5- Instead of answering the Pharisees directly, why did Jesus choose the example of David eating the showbread if a violation of Pharisaic tradition is under consideration?¹
- 6- Did the priests actually profane the Sabbath when they offered sacrifices on the Sabbath?
- 7- Do the examples of David and the priests express the same truth or a different truth?
- 8- Are we to understand the examples of David and the priests as lawful, unlawful, exceptional, or a mixture of lawful and unlawful?
- 9- Why did Jesus claim to be greater than the temple?
- 10- When Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" did He justify the actions of the disciples, rebuke the Pharisees, or both?
- 11- Did Jesus radically change Hosea's message and fill it with meaning that was completely foreign to the original text?

¹ As He did in Matthew 15:1-9.

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- 12- Why did Jesus refer to Himself as the Son of Man?
- 13- What did Jesus mean when He claimed to be “Lord of the Sabbath”?
- 14- When Jesus invoked the title “Lord of the Sabbath,” did He claim the authority to violate the Sabbath simply because He is God?
- 15- What constitutes an ox-in-the-ditch type situation?
- 16- Does love trump law or mercy destroy sacrifice?

Though the significance of each of these questions may not be understood, I hope they demonstrate the complexity of the passage and issue a warning of caution to any who would assume its simplicity. Hopefully the discussion which follows will provide answers to these questions and not leave you hanging, though I must forewarn you that not all of the answers will be provided in Part 1.

Matthew 12 has long been neglected in the teaching of the church due to the difficulties it entails and critical examination is much needed. One of the major challenges of interpreting Matthew 12 (and Matthew’s Gospel in general) is understanding both Matthew’s and Jesus’ usage of the Old Testament. As Matthew addressed a Jewish audience, he appealed to them through their Scriptures. Both the Lord and His apostle required a working knowledge of the Old Testament and presented their instruction as a fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17-19). Matthew 12:1-14 is no exception to this rule and requires that modern readers become Old Testament students. Matthew’s message cannot be understood without an examination of Jesus’ Bible.

Engaging Matthew from an Old Testament perspective is illuminating, demanding, and rewarding. When Old Testament quotations, allusions, and echoes are encountered the reader

must pause and assess the original contextual meaning in order to understand its New Testament usage. As the old saying goes, “A text without a context becomes a pretext.” A failure to engage the intertextual relationship of Old Testament passages in the light of progressive revelation will result in skewed and false understandings. “Have you not read” and “Had you known” still serve as warnings that Bible students must heed.

I pray that what I have written brings clarity rather than confusion while avoiding the ditches of legalism and hypocrisy. Should I fall into such a ditch, I’m sure that one of my good brethren will help pull me out!