



Word to Life studies are sermon-aligned study guides, created to help the church dive even deeper into the passages we study together on Sundays.

Each week there will be five studies to help you prepare for the upcoming weekend sermon. This will also be a great discussion tool at your next LifeGroup meeting.

We hope you enjoy and grow deeper in your faith!

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WORD TO LIFE

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Week 19: Matthew 12:9-21

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 12:9-21

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

- **Activity:** Read the following Old Testament passages and write down what you notice about the Sabbath?
 - **Exodus 20:8-11**
 - **Deuteronomy 5:12-15**
 - **Jeremiah 17:21-27**
- **Activity:** The early church set a pattern of gathering daily and worshipping particularly on the first day of the week in honor of Christ's resurrection. Read the following and write down what you notice.
 - **Acts 2:46-47 and Acts 20:7**
 - **Colossians 2:16-17**
 - **Romans 14:5**

- **Question:** How would you summarize the question of verse 10 by those opposing Jesus in your own words?

- **Question:** Why do you think Jesus responded to the Sabbath question of verse 10 with a comment about “*value*” in verse 12? How are they related?

- **Question:** Do you think there are any parallels today that are similar to how the Pharisees reacted in verse 14?

- **Questions:** What do you think these prophecies about Jesus mean in your own words? What do they tell us about Jesus’ actions and character?
 - *A bruised reed he will not break*

 - *A smoldering wick he will not quench*

 - *Until he brings justice to victory.*

- **Question:** At this point, Jesus withdrew, and He also ordered people to “*not make Him known.*” Why do you think He did that?

Week 19: Matthew 12:9-21

Day 2: Love Your Neighbor

READ: Matthew 12:9-21

EXPLORE:

What would be your reaction if you saw a disabled, homeless man on the street walking next to you? Would you be nervous, scared, indifferent, compassionate, empathetic, and/or helpful towards him? Would you feel any different if you saw him when you walked into church? In this passage of Matthew there is a man with a withered hand in the synagogue. He has made his way into the Jewish religious gathering and the Pharisees spot him after Jesus walks in. Their immediate thought towards this man was to use him for their own purposes.

Oftentimes those who are most vulnerable in society are used by people or ignored altogether. Politicians are notorious for claiming to stand up for this group or that group but usually are only found to be standing up for themselves. Politicians generally have a pretty low bar in terms of morality, but people expect far more from those who claim a religious authority. The Pharisees were the religious authority during the time of Jesus and all the Jews looked to them for how to best obey God. They, however, did not know the heart of God. They not only misused the law, but they let their envy and hatred of Jesus cloud their spiritual understanding altogether.

Many people think that Jesus was the first to say, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It was actually first written in the book of Leviticus (19:18). The Pharisees knew the law better than anyone, yet they did not live by it. When they looked at the man with a withered hand, they did not see someone to be helped, but rather, someone to be used. They were blinded by their envy and hatred so much that rather than praise God for His healing of the man, they focused on how they might destroy Jesus. Imagine the

spiritual state of those who see miracles and yet are unfazed by them. It is a common belief that those who do not believe in God only do so because they have not been shown enough evidence.

The Bible shows us time and time again that this is not the case. Pharaoh saw many signs and wonders and still did not believe. We even see the Israelites doubt God after He performs miracles for them. Just three days after God parts the Red Sea, the people grumble and complain, believing they will die of starvation. We do not need anything more than God's Word and Spirit to believe. God's Word told the Pharisees to love their neighbor as themselves, but they refused.

So, how do we learn from the Pharisees mistake? It's pretty simple actually. We seek to do good to those around us like Jesus did. By saying that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath, Jesus is stating that we should always be doing good to others. It's easy to find a loophole like the Pharisees did for why we do not need to do such and such, but that is to look inward rather than outward. Our job is to do good to everyone, and the best good we can do is to bring everyone to Jesus, who has the power to heal anyone.

BIG IDEA: It is always lawful to bring people to Jesus.

APPLY:

- **Question:** What have you justified not doing that you know would be a good, God-honoring thing?

- **Question:** How can you do good to those around you?

Week 19: Matthew 12:9-21

Day 3: Questions Reflect the Heart

READ: Matthew 12:9-21

EXPLORE:

The questions we ask reflect the state of our heart. We ask why, when, and how. When we ask questions, we are seeking understanding, next steps, healing, and fulfillment. As part of my (Courtney) job (counseling), I hear a lot of questions. *Why did they leave me? What did I do wrong? Where am I going to end up? How do I move forward?* I do not think I have ever answered any of those questions outright. Instead, it is my job to reflect the beliefs, thoughts, and feelings of the individual to help them navigate those questions and develop answers that push them towards wholeness. I do not tell my clients the answers to all their questions because 1) I normally do not have the answers and 2) a straightforward answer does not help them grow, learn, heal, and excel. Jesus is our Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6) and, therefore, knows what we need more than we do. Not only did Jesus live the human experience, but He, also, created the human experience, so He certainly has all the answers we need. Nevertheless, He often responded to questions with questions (Matt. 9:14-15, Matt. 15:2-3, Mark 4:38-40, Mark 10:2-3, Luke 6:1-4, etc.), not because He does not have the answers, but because He wanted the person asking the question to see the state of their own heart because that is the first step that leads to spiritual transformation.

In Matthew 12:11-12, Jesus answers the Pharisees question saying, "He said to them, 'Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.'" Jesus responds with a question that He, of course, knows the answer to. He knows that they all help their sheep on the Sabbath, but He also knows that

the man with the withered hand was likely under the care of the Pharisees. Instead of seeking to do good and help those in need around them, the Pharisees used the man to try to entrap Jesus. Jesus knew the state of their hearts but is asking the question to reveal to the Pharisees their heart motive. If Jesus had simply answered, “Yes” to their question, there likely would have been an intellectual debate but, instead, Jesus reveals the selfishness of their hearts to lead them to repentance and transformation.

As we live in obedience to Christ, we will care for many who are hurting, lost, and living in rebellion against the Lord. They will ask challenging questions. As we seek to reflect Christ, we can ask revealing questions to stir up conviction, awareness, and change. We can show the compassion of Christ through the questions we ask. As you evangelize and comfort, seek to learn the heart motives of those asking difficult questions and respond back with questions of your own that stir up awareness and challenge beliefs and actions.

BIG IDEA: Questioning questions guides the one asking to awareness, conviction, and change.

Apply:

- **Question:** How often do you listen to respond rather than reflect? How can you adjust the way you respond to others so that you can help them identify their heart motives?
- **Question:** What questions do you need to ask yourself to reveal your heart’s motives? If you were to be honest with yourself, what questions are you asking the Lord that expose a heart of selfishness?

Week 19: Matthew 12:9-21

Day 4: The Value of Human Life

READ: Matthew 12:9-13; Genesis 1:26-31

EXPLORE: We see in this passage of scripture an amazing statement from Jesus. If we are not careful we might overlook it, but Jesus utters a profound statement in verses 11 and 12. He says “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!” Christ speaks to our inherent value for human life. We should clearly value, as God does, the lives of humans. But why?

To understand why human life is important, we need to go back to when humans were first created. When God was creating the world, He spoke these incredible words, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” He then goes on to give mankind dominion over the earth, and to steward His good design. The key here is that we are created in the image of God, often summarized in the Latin term “Imago Dei.” Humans have intrinsic value because we are all made in God’s image.

Notice that all humans are made in the image of God. It is not limited to a certain people group, or only Christians. It is not determined by race or gender or religious affiliation. All humans have value, no matter the stage of life. However, it is limited to humans. God never says in His creation of the earth that other animals are endowed with His image. It is a right reserved for mankind alone.

The value of human life is often lacking within other worldviews. Some worldviews say we simply exist, without any creator or intelligent beginning. If that is the case, then there is no need to care for human life. A sheep has no more value than a human! Some worldviews and religions raise the creation over the creator.

They see nature and the environment as the ultimate. Yet, the creation should not be worshiped, only the creator. Unlike other religions, Christianity rightly makes God the center of worship, but also still gives value to human life.

BIG IDEA: All humans are made in the Image of God, and this gives them rights at every stage of life. This Christian view of life, Imago Dei, ensures that all people of all ethnicities and affiliations have God given rights, which other worldviews fail to accurately give and prioritize.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Do you find it easy to see the “image of God” in others? Even your enemies?

- **Question:** How can you encourage others knowing they are made in the image of God?

Week 19: Matthew 12:9-21

Day 5: Collateral Damage

READ TOGETHER: Matthew 12:9-21; Isaiah 42:1-4

EXPLORE TOGETHER:

If you were trying to overthrow a society because of its injustice to its people, what would you do? Chances are you would have to compartmentalize the essentials. You would gather the strongest among those who can resist and have to be willing to deal with collateral. In World War 2 there were many strategic decisions that had to be made in order to achieve victory. Churchill ordered the bombing of the civilian population of Dresden in order to psychologically damage the German people. Japan preemptively attacked Pearl Harbor because they felt the US pressure overseas. The US in return dropped the infamous atomic bombs in order to end the war with what they estimated would be the least amount of death. These examples are of countries with comparable militaries but imagine what it would take to overthrow a government that has virtually all the firepower. This is why many in the world have justified terrorism, because how else can you stop the oppression?

In Matthew 12:18-21, Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 42, there is a servant spoken of that will bring forth justice, but not in the conventional way. It is said that this servant will not be heard. This is already unusual. Usually, someone bringing forth justice proclaims their strength. They announce that they are coming and what they will do to their enemies, but this servant is different. It then says that this servant will not break a bruised reed nor quench a smoldering wick. If you are like me, you have no idea what these things are. A reed could be used in the ancient world for many things. It refers to like a well cut piece of bamboo.

People used it to make flutes, measuring rods, or pens.¹ If a reed got damaged it was to be easily discarded because it was common and inexpensive. A smoldering wick would be like our version of a match. How quickly would we get another match if the one we were using kept going in and out? The reed and the wick represent the weakest in society. The servant is said to keep those seen as useless and grant them justice.

Jesus does not believe in collateral damage. He is the fulfillment of the servant spoken of by Isaiah that overthrew His oppressors not by wrath, but love. The Christian “kingdom” movement would go from a measly 12 people to dominate the Roman Empire to the biggest religion in the world. Jesus began the movement not with violence but with sacrifice. He did not sacrifice the weakest in His movement but instead sacrificed Himself for everyone.

BIG IDEA: Jesus did not believe in collateral damage but made a difference through His love for the weakest.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Who in your life is overlooked by most people?

- **Activity:** Reach out and talk to someone you normally wouldn't and seek to love them like Jesus would have.

¹ Leon Morris, *Matthew*, 311.

Week 20: Matthew 12:22-32

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 12:22-32

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

Activity: This passage could be outlined into five sections. Read the following and provide answers to the following.

- 1. Speculation (vv. 22-23) |** What were people wondering about Jesus?
- 2. Accusation (v. 24) |** What were the Pharisees thinking about Jesus?
- 3. Refutation (vv. 25-27) |** How did Jesus refute the faulty thinking about His identity and action?
- 4. Elaboration (vv. 28-30) |** How did Jesus further explain his work?
- 5. Implication (vv. 31-32) |** How did Jesus conclude His response to the faulty beliefs?

- **Question:** On several occasions we have seen Jesus do incredible things and the Pharisees respond in opposition. Why do you think we are told about their rejection so consistently in Matthew?

- **Question:** On a few occasions, it is crystal clear that Jesus knows the thoughts of those around them. How does the idea of God knowing your every thought make you feel?

- **Question:** What do you think the following sentences from Jesus mean? ²⁹ *Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.* ³⁰ *Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.*

- **Questions:** How did the Pharisees blaspheme² particularly in this passage? Are we capable of the same type of blasphemy today? Why or why not?

² A workable definition for “blasphemy” could be a defiant irreverence toward God.

Week 20: Matthew 12:22-32

Day 2: The Mystery of Healings

READ: Matthew 12:22-32

EXPLORE:

I've always been fascinated with magicians. When I was a kid, most people generally thought of magicians as quirky guys with a black top hat, cape, black suit with a white shirt, a flower on the shirt, and of course—the white gloves. They would pull a rabbit out of a hat, find a card, or cause something to disappear. As I grew older I noticed that the magician persona started to change. They started to abandon the traditional attire for eye liner, short sleeve shirts, and jeans. Some of the tricks were similar but the *grand reveal* started to get more casual. One thing that stayed the same though was that I wanted to know how they did the trick! We all know that knowing how a trick is done takes away from the experiential wonder of surprise and awe. A good magician though, nay—a great one, comes up with an illusion that no one can figure out. They leave everyone guessing, even the other magicians. When they are *that good* it takes your focus from the illusion to the magician.

A clear mark of Jesus' messiahship and sonship are His miracles. Many times in the gospels Jesus heals through certain means. He heals through faith, commands, touching a hand, stretching out His hand, touching a casket, being touched, touching eyes, touching ears, touching a tongue, and even using mud. Sometimes though, He just heals them. That is what Jesus did in this passage in Matthew. It was so common for Jesus to do a miracle that the Gospel writers sometimes just summarize what happened. There can be a tendency for us as we are reading scripture to quickly read past the miracles of Jesus. I mean He performed so many of them, what's one more? I would caution you not to do this. Each miracle provides a unique account of

Jesus' ministry on earth. Each one was recorded for a specific purpose. What can we learn from this one in particular?

Matthew had just spoken of Jesus' fulfillment of being the servant from Isaiah 42. This servant was prophesied to bring forth justice to the downtrodden and weak. The man Jesus healed was blind, mute, and demon oppressed. I literally can't imagine a worse state for a human being. Jesus heals him for nothing in return, the man did not even show faith. Jesus amazed everyone except the Pharisees. They claimed He must be Satan. Just like a great magician, Jesus' works could not be explained and so the focus turned to Him. The healing was so undeniable that the Pharisees punted to the only thing they could—it must be Satan! Jesus though, used this as an opportunity to provide wisdom and give a warning to those who harden their hearts to things of God. This will be talked about more in depth later in the week, but today's focus is on Jesus. Jesus can liberate even the most oppressed! Do not harden your heart like the Pharisees to the things of God today.

BIG IDEA: Jesus healed the demoniac in order to show how He can heal anyone and how people can find a way to harden their hearts to the things of God.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Why do you think Jesus heals in so many different ways?
- **Question:** What would it look like for you to be more receptive to God moving in great ways around you?

Week 20: Matthew 12:22-32

Day 3: Son of David

READ: Matthew 12:22-32; 2 Samuel 7:8-17

EXPLORE:

As a teenager, I (Dan) didn't put much thought into miracles. I didn't grow up in a Christian home or go to church very often, so it wasn't really a word I used. The closest idea was probably tied to a "miraculous" game-winning touchdown catch that Franco Harris made for the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1972; still referred to as "the immaculate reception!" Fantastic? Yes! Sportscenter-worthy? Certainly! A miracle? I suppose it's possible.

Many years later, when my wife (Jaime) successfully delivered our amazing, beautiful, healthy baby girl – that's when I saw a REAL miracle firsthand. There's no need to speculate – she's a miracle! Sportscenter-worthy? Give her time – she's only 8! The doctors had told us that Jaime wouldn't be able to have any more children. She already had 3 healthy boys, and at 39 years old, the season of childbirth had passed. The bloodwork and every test she took confirmed it. There was no way we could have another baby. Except God had other plans for us, and we witnessed a miracle!

After seeing Jesus heal a blind, mute, demon-possessed man, many onlookers realized that they had just witnessed a miracle. "Is this the promised Messiah, descendent of David, we have been waiting for?" many wondered. "And all the people were amazed, and said "Can this be the Son of David?"

In 2 Samuel 7:8-17, we read about God's covenant with David when He promises, "your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever." So, referring to the coming Messiah, as the Son of David, would have been customary at that time by Jewish believers.

And then, there is the timeline recorded in Matthew 1:17: "So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations." This confirms that King Jesus was indeed a descendent of King David!

There are other examples in the Gospels where we see this 'title' referenced: First, in Matthew 9:27 "And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying aloud, "Have mercy on us, Son of David." Second, in Matthew 15:22 "And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." Third, on Palm Sunday, in Matthew 21:9 "And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

Predictably, there were some that still didn't BELIEVE back then – even after hearing about all the miracles He performed. Amazingly, there are some that still don't BELIEVE today – even after reading about so many miracles recorded in the Bible. Unbelievably, some thought that Jesus might have been using evil spirits to cast out those evil spirits. (Present day scribes might consider an editorial "SMH" here!). For Believers, that makes no logical sense – neither back then, nor today.

The greatest miracle to-date, of course, was the resurrection on Easter Sunday. Something that ONLY the Son of God, Son of David, Messiah, Jesus could do! And He still has another miracle planned for His followers...to take us home to heaven some day! Marantha (Come Lord Jesus)!

BIG IDEA: Jesus is the ultimate miracle worker and the promised Savior from the House of David.

APPLY:

- **Question:** What convinced you that Jesus is the Son of God?

- **Question:** What miracle(s) have you experienced so far in your life?

- **Question:** When a miracle is witnessed, who typically gets the 'credit' for the miracle?

Week 20: Matthew 12:22-32

Day 4: Faith and Reason

READ: Matthew 12:22-32

EXPLORE:

There are many people in the world today who believe that faith is opposed to reason. There are religious people who would say this as well as non-religious people. The idea is that faith in and of itself is believing something in spite of the evidence. This is not a Christian concept. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead as evidence that He is the Son of God from the Father (John 11:42). Luke writes his Gospel in order to give an orderly account of the life of Jesus as evidence that the events actually took place (Luke 1:1-4). Paul argues from Greek philosophical understanding in order to convince his audience in Athens of the one true God (Acts 17:28). The Bible by its very nature is an evidential book. It records the events of the Lord within real world history so that people everywhere might believe and come to know how they are to live with God forever in eternity. In our passage today we get an example of the way Jesus utilizes logic and reason in order to destroy the accusations of His opponents.

When Jesus is accused of using Satanic powers to cast out demons, He retorts His accusers with a few key arguments. His first argument was very rhetorically powerful. He essentially says, "If I was from Satan, I would not weaken my own army in the fight against God." He prefaces this by noting how ridiculous it would be for those within a city or house to attack each other, because then they would end up destroying themselves. Rather than Jesus explicitly stating His arguments He likes to ask rhetorical questions where He expects His audience to know exactly what He is saying. After finishing His first argument with a rhetorical

question (Matt 12:26), He then uses another one. Jesus essentially says, "If by the power of Satan one can cast out demons, then the other Jews you approve of can have the same charge levied against them." He then goes on to state what's at stake if they are wrong. He says if He does cast out demons from the Holy Spirit then it validates His whole ministry of the kingdom. He then uses one more rhetorical question as an argument against His opponents. He essentially says, "In order to cast out demons someone must bind up Satan, which I have done." This course of argumentation should actually lead us to recognize that Jesus has absolute power over the natural world as well as the spiritual.

Jesus used solid reasoning and argumentation in His ministry, and we should as well. He even shows us an effective form of arguing. Jesus shows that rather than direct statements, questions can be very effective in diffusing opposition and winning people over to your side. The Apostle Paul reiterates the overall point of this WTL when he says, "We destroy arguments, and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:5)."

BIG IDEA: Jesus shows us how to argue.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How do you understand both faith and reason? How effective do you think reasoning with people about Christianity can be?
- **Question:** How can you be effective in discussing the things of God while at the same time being loving?

Week 20: Matthew 12:22-32

Day 5: The Blasphemy Against the Spirit

READ: Matthew 12:22-32

EXPLORE:

If you were to describe Jesus with just a few adjectives, what would they be? Think about how the Gospel authors portray Jesus. Think about Jesus' ministry and the way He interacted... What words come to mind?

One word that you may or may not have thought of is *intense*. Jesus is represented as a very intense person. He calls His disciples to accept difficult teachings, He has no problem proclaiming His teachings to massive crowds, and He is quick to come down hard on His opposition. In our passage, we see Jesus refuse to pull any punches (figuratively). Jesus says that there is a sin that will not be forgiven. As the most forgiving person in human history, this is a surprising statement by Jesus. Jesus says that the one thing that cannot be forgiven is "the blasphemy against the Spirit." This statement has frightened professing believers for ages, so it's important that we understand it in light of its context.

Jesus is arguing with those who certainly do not believe in Him. He has just been charged that His power is from Satan. He gives them solid reasoning as to why that is ridiculous. He then gives them the aforementioned warning, and it is a warning. He tells them that every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven except the blasphemy against the Spirit. It's worth noting how some have interpreted this phrase throughout church history:

- 1) The "blasphemy" is denying Christ after professing Jesus as Lord and Savior.
- 2) The "blasphemy" is rejecting any of the Holy Spirit's work.
- 3) The "blasphemy" is not accepting the Holy Spirit by grace through faith in Jesus.

- 4) The “blasphemy” is attributing something done by the Holy Spirit to a work of Satan.

Trying to discern the correct interpretation among these options can be difficult. Interpretations 1, 2, and 3 rely on reasoning or scripture outside of the context of our passage. Interpretation 1 was common in the Early Church and relies on assuming Jesus is referring to the same thing as the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 6:4-6) and John (1 John 5:16). This is unlikely because Jesus is speaking to unbelievers in Matthew. Interpretation 2 lessens the use of the word “blasphemy” to any sort of skepticism. Blasphemy has much more serious connotations than any sort of rejection. Interpretation 3 assumes that the “blasphemy” is unforgivable because the only thing throughout scripture that God does not forgive is unbelief and a lack of repentance. The problem with this interpretation is that it does not fit the context well. Jesus is speaking against the Pharisees not only because of unbelief but because of their specific accusations. This leaves Interpretation 4.

The “blasphemy against the Spirit” that the Pharisees committed was attributing demonic works to Jesus. This is similar to Isaiah 5:20 “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil.” Can this blasphemy be committed today? Maybe. It certainly is possible to attribute demonic works to the Spirit’s work, but there seems to be a higher level of accountability to those who rejected Jesus in His day. They saw great miracles by the very Son of God. Whether it's possible or not we should all be weary of making the charge that anyone has committed the unforgivable sin.

BIG IDEA: The text highlights blasphemy of the Spirit as attributing demonic works to the Holy Spirit.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How do people today call good evil and evil good?

Week 21: Matthew 12:33-37

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 12:33-37

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

- **Activity**: While reading, include some observations in the space below.

- **Question**: Using an online concordance, physical concordance, or your memory, can you think of any other occasions in Scripture where a tree and its fruit are used to talk about righteousness or lack thereof?

- **Question**: Have you ever had a good or bad experience where you were surprised about what you said and what it indicated about your heart?

- **Question**: Why do you think the two areas of focus for Jesus in this middle section of the passage deal with a person's "word(s)" and "treasure(s)."

- **Question:** In your opinion, is it easy or hard for you to live as though verse 36 is true in your everyday life?

- **Question:** How would an awareness of judgment influence the way that you think, speak, and act?

- **Questions:** Jesus talks about careless words in verse 36. What are some examples of careless words you've spoken? What are some examples of careless words you've heard spoken around you?

- **Question:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
 - Jesus was not suggesting that people who use all right words are righteous before God. Instead, He was describing how a person's words show their righteous or unrighteous heart before God.

Week 21: Matthew 12:33-37

Day 2: Fruit Bearing

READ: Matthew 12:33; James 3:12; John 15:4; Galatians 5:19-23

EXPLORE:

Jesus taught in parables, with word pictures, and used familiar experiences in order to relate to His original audience. In this ancient agricultural setting, the people listening to Jesus would have understood exactly what He was saying in our passage this week: "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad." You see, His audience most likely spent a significant part of their lives outdoors, working and observing the land, and this was not the first time, nor the last, that "trees" or "fruit" was used to teach a lesson.

Today's WTL focuses on fruit bearing as seen in the Bible. The Greek word for fruit is *karpos* which means, a result of something, a sign, or the product of one's life. Remember, according to Jesus, this can be good fruit or bad fruit (Mt 7:17-20). The fruit of the Spirit or the fruit of the flesh. Jesus tells us in John 15:4 that He is the true vine and we are the branches and that we must abide, remain, endure in Him in order to grow good fruit. You see, good fruit is the visible outcome of this internal abiding. When we are planted in Him, fed by Him, and submitted to Him, the fruit of the Spirit is a natural result.

Galatians chapter 5 lists the various characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit which will organically result when we walk in obedience and faith in Jesus. However, the same section of scripture lists the fruit that results when we walk in our sinful flesh. A godly life is one controlled by the Holy Spirit and identified by: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, but an ungodly life is one controlled by the sinful nature and identified by: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries,

dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these (Gal 5:19-23). Our fruit, our lives, the choices we make and the results we experience will reveal where our obedience and loyalty lie. Fruit is evident to all and is a great indicator that we may need to make a course correction in our spiritual walk.

BIG IDEA: What we focus on will result in fruit.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How much time do you spend in God's word or presence compared to the world and the things in it?

- **Challenge:** Make an honest evaluation of the fruit you have been producing lately. Identify areas of weakness and go to God in prayer to ask Him to align your ways with His will.

Week 21: Matthew 12:33-37

Day 3: Wise as Serpents

READ: Matthew 12:33-37

EXPLORE:

For the second time in the book of Matthew and not the last, the Pharisees are referred to as a brood of vipers. In Matt 3:7, John the Baptist makes the same analogy, and then in Matt 23:33 Jesus will do so again as well. We don't even need our science book to learn how dangerous vipers can be because we actually learn in Acts 28:3 when Paul is bitten by a viper that these are deadly, venomous snakes. The natives in Malta were shocked and assume Paul must be some sort of god when he doesn't swell up and die from his viper attack.

Even if you have no clue what sort of snake a viper is or what the heck a brood is, it is quite clear that this was not a favorable comparison of the Pharisees to a family of highly venomous snakes. The serpent sealed his fate for all future analogies in Genesis when he played his part in the fall of man. Much like the first serpent with Eve, the Pharisees act and speak like they are righteous, but their words are really full of harmful poison that was craftily injected into their fellow Israelites.

So, if snakes and serpents are so negatively perceived in the Bible, then why in Matthew 10:16 does Jesus command the 12 apostles as he sends them out to be "wise as serpents"? Pharisees are serpents, so serpents are bad, right? Why would Jesus instruct the 12 to act like the Pharisees? He didn't. He didn't say be wise **like** the serpents: conniving, plotting, corrupting to achieve our goals. He said be "wise **as** serpents", as in, the Pharisees are very intelligent and practiced at deceit and so you better be prepared to match that with an equal response of wisdom and truth. Jesus demonstrates this necessary wisdom on several occasions when he sees through and thwarts the Pharisee's attempts to trick him

into incriminating or conflicting with himself. “Wise **as**” not wise **like**.

So what does that mean for us? In our relationship with our savior we are to be like sheep, following and relying on our heavenly shepherd to protect us from a world full of wolves. One of the tools he gives his people to protect themselves is wisdom. The wisdom to see through the lies and tricks that Satan uses to deceive us. The wisdom to spot the traps the enemies of our God set for us. Ask God to provide the wisdom that allows you to remain as “innocent as doves” while you share the Good News with the world.

BIG IDEA: We should seek to be wise as serpents not wise like serpents.

APPLY:

- **Activity:** Pray for God’s wisdom to protect you and your fellow Christians as you serve God in the world. Pray for the ability to discern God’s wisdom from Satan’s lies.

Week 21: Matthew 12:33-37

Day 4: Say Less

READ: Matthew 12:33-37; James 3:3-12; James 1:19-20

EXPLORE:

We all know a talker. I, myself, am quite the talker. I am trained to break awkward silences as a long-time youth leader. My heart has always been to make sure not one single student could leave saying “I didn’t really talk to anyone.” If it is silent in any group setting for more than two seconds I have a talking point.

Ecclesiastes reads “Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore, let your words be few.” Basically, say less.

In this passage Jesus makes it clear that it is from the heart that the mouth speaks. Is it wrong to be chatty? Not necessarily, however, we should be weary of it. We know from scripture that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick and the tongue cannot be tamed by any human being. This is not to say that we are not responsible for what comes out of our mouths. We see in this passage that we will be held accountable for all of our words. It is saying, however, that we must handle our words with care. Even greater than that, we must guard our hearts and minds, because they are the entry point of what becomes our words and actions.

A few of my friends and I were discussing a good question, “At what point do our thoughts become sin?” Let’s be honest, we all struggle with shameful images, judgy moments, dark thoughts, or thinking plain, mean things. These can catch us a little off guard when they cross our mind. There is no doubt many thoughts can be intrusive, but we do have the ability to control what we let settle into our hearts, what we expose our hearts to, and what flows out from our hearts. In Romans, we are advised that the

world will try to conform us, so we must be on guard and transform our minds. In Philippians, we are told to actively meditate on what is pure and honorable. Colossians says to put to death what is earthly inside of us. We do not mature passively. These scriptures call us to action to tame the tongue. The scripture that has helped me grow the most is found in James, “let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger”.

In order to keep our speech from being harmful or empty we need to slow down and seek the wisdom of God. I would rather say 4 impactful and meaningful words than 100 slightly helpful ones. I’m not saying when someone needs encouragement, spend 7 days and 7 nights before speaking (Job reference), but sit with the Spirit before opening your mouth. Ask the Lord what your friend, coworker, or family member truly needs to hear (and does NOT need to hear), and be guided by wisdom in that conversation. The people I am most comforted by are the ones that patiently listen, wait, and share not their own life advice, but scripture-led encouragement. We need to lower our personal takes, our life experience, what we recently heard on a podcast and elevate the implanted Word. Not to say your personal touch and experiences are harmful. God surely has weaved your story in a way that can bless others, but Christ Himself and His given Word should be the epicenter of our hearts from which would flow honey to hurting wounds and a fragrance of good fruit.

BIG IDEA: Having a heart of meekness will produce fruitful speech

Challenge:

1. Meditate on pure and good things before your day gets started. Fight to rid your mind of worldly thoughts and pray that your words spoken today will be filtered with Godly wisdom.

Week 21: Matthew 12:33-37

Day 5: Hard Words

READ: Matthew 12:33-37

EXPLORE:

The scene is set. There are many opponents who wish to destroy me and everyone with me. What am I going to do? How am I going to make it through this? I have survived worse, but this time I might not be so fortunate. What were you picturing in that opening scene? It could have been a battle to the death in a terrible war. It could have been an attempted escape from a closed country like North Korea. Or, it could have been me in the 4th grade playing a basketball game in a church league. It just so happens that the last one is accurate. Understanding the context is crucial to reading any words on a page and especially holy scripture. Reading verses in isolation is a good recipe for confusion and even promoting falsehoods.

The end of our passage today says that everyone will be either justified or condemned. What does this mean? Is our eternal salvation entirely dependent on all of our words collectively, or some words, or one statement? Why isn't Jesus more clear about something so consequential? Let's look back at the context. Jesus has been going back and forth with the Pharisees who have just called Him a tool of the devil. He has been arguing with them and has just told them that they are in danger if they blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. He then sets up two dichotomies. He says that a tree is either good or bad. He then says a man is either good or bad and that effects if his treasure is good or bad. The verse right before 37 says that everyone will give an accounting for their words on the day of judgment.

It's always important to note Jesus' audience. Here Jesus is speaking to His opposition who need to be brought to repentance and humility not someone who is already those things. It's also important to note that words are used differently in the Bible. Justified can mean pronounced good (Luke 7:29), shown to be correct/vindicated (Luke 7:35), freed (1 Timothy 3:16), or considered righteous by God (Romans 3:20). The last view is most common in the New Testament and what most Christians think of when they see the word. Which does Jesus mean in Matthew 12:37? Before answering it's helpful to look at what the word justified is set against: condemned. Condemned in scripture appears to always mean "to be found guilty." With this understanding *justify* in our context most likely means *vindicated*. Jesus is saying that our words will either prove us innocent or guilty. Which words though? The context shows us that everyone falls into two categories according to Jesus and the heart is what makes the difference (v. 34). So "the words" mentioned in verse 37 vindicate the state of one's heart. How do we have a good heart before God? We have to have the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:22), and we get the Holy Spirit by believing in the gospel and trusting alone in Jesus for our salvation. Jesus' statement is in line with the rest of scripture with an added focus on the importance of words. While the words themselves do not save anyone they can show us if we are in step with the Spirit in our hearts or not.

BIG IDEA: Words show where our hearts are at.

APPLY: Analyze every word you will say today and reflect on if you think your words honor the Holy Spirit within you or not.

Week 22: Matthew 12:38-42

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 12:38-42

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

- **Activity**: While reading, include some observations in the space below.

- **Question**: Have you ever encountered people who seemed to demand a sign from God? If so, explain.

- **Question**: How would you describe the difference between demanding a sign from God and asking for discernment from God?

- **Question**: What do you notice about how Jesus used the story of Jonah in verses 39-40 to reveal His burial and resurrection?

- **Question:** If someone were to ask you, “Is the burial and resurrection of Jesus a sign? And, if so, what does that sign point to?” How would you answer them.
- **Question:** Why did Jesus point to the repentance of the wicked city named Ninevah as a word of warning to the Pharisees He was encountering?
- **Activity:** Verse 42 references a queen from the south and the example she set. Read I Kings 10:1-13 for her story.
- **Question:** Solomon was a well-known king in Israelite history. How do you think Jesus’ statement about something greater than Jonah and something greater than Solomon would have been received?

Week 22: Matthew 12:38-42

Day 2: How Much is Enough?

READ: Matthew 12:38-42; Luke 16:19-31

EXPLORE:

A son goes to his father and ask him for some food. “Good father, may I have some food?” The father looks at his son and provides a small piece of bread. The son eats the bread and then asks for more. “Good father, may I have some more food?” The father looks at his son and provides a whole loaf of bread. The son eats some bread and asks for a side. “Father, may I have something to eat with this bread.” The father looks at his son and provides some chicken. The son eats some but asks for better. “This chicken isn’t that good, I want steak.” The good father takes back the bread and the chicken.

How much is enough? When does gratitude turn into entitlement? How should you treat the ungrateful? In our passage today we see that the Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign to validate who He claims to be. Jesus’ response is fierce and direct. Was it wrong for them to ask for a sign? Is it wrong for us to ask for a sign from God? This passage gives us many things to sort through.

It must be acknowledged that Jesus performed miracles throughout His ministry. Jesus healed diseases, casted out demons, and even raised people from death. Jesus performed miracles not only in front of His disciples but also the Pharisees. They saw real life miracles but did not consider them to be convincing enough. They wanted something more. Perhaps they wanted to see Jesus fly into the clouds or call down fire from heaven. Whatever they wanted, it’s clear that healing and exorcisms weren’t enough for them. They showed an incredible

lack of faith in Jesus. That's why Jesus responds so aggressively. Only evil and adulterous people discard the clear works of God as insufficient. Jesus calls them adulterous because they were like idol worshipers who deny the true God of Israel. This was a theme with the Jews throughout the Old Testament. What about asking for signs from God in general though?

It's evident that whenever anyone seeks for signs or a sign it is because they are lacking in faith. It's a faith problem rather than a sign problem. Signs do not automatically lead to faith. There have been many who have received signs from God upon request and did not respond in faith. Some notably have, however. Oftentimes the ones who respond in faith come from another religion like Islam. Signs are never the determinative factor for anyone though. God's Word always is the main catalyst for true faith. This is clearly seen with the story in Luke referred to as "The Rich Man and Lazarus."

While not inherently sinful, asking for signs shows a lack of faith in what God has already revealed to you. This WTL began with a story about a son's discontentment in the provision of his father. Our Heavenly Father has provided more than enough for us to have an abundant life here and in the next. We must choose each day to be grateful rather than skeptical like the Pharisees.

BIG IDEA: God provides more than enough for us in everything.

APPLY:

- **Question:** In what aspect of life are you least grateful to God? How can you change that?

Week 22: Matthew 12:38-42

Day 3: Jesus' Death and Resurrection Foretold

READ: Matthew 12:39-40; Psalm 110

EXPLORE:

Growing up in the late 1970s and early 80s was a lot different from today, no doubt. Even as elementary school-aged kids, we would get on our bikes early in the day...and only come home for snacks, and when the streetlights came on at dusk. There were no iPhones, iPads, AirTags, GPS, or Life360. So, I (Dan) am not sure if my mom ever knew exactly where we were (riding BMX trails, going to friend's houses, popping wheelies, and jumping curbs)...but I distinctly remember hearing (on several occasions) "you boys are going to be the death of me!"

I'm certain that we never intentionally wanted to scare her by any means. Like many children (and let's be honest, many adults too), you think the world revolves around – you. You feel like you are at the center of everything that happens every day and the sun rises or falls based on how your day is going.

Jesus told His followers about His pending death several times before it happened. But they didn't really believe Him - until that Friday before Easter. He wasn't just using a figure of speech; our sin really was "the death of Him".

The first time we see Jesus' death foretold in the New Testament, is in Matthew 12:40, "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." We see it again in Matthew 16:21, "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

And we also read about His death foretold in Matthew 17:22-23, “As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.” And they were greatly distressed.”

Despite telling His disciples 3 times– and of course, the Prophets of the Old Testament...some just didn’t believe Him. Some still wanted ‘a sign’.

It’s no secret that the Pharisees and Sadducees wanted to see the death of Jesus. They were completely fine with that ‘sign’. But Jesus’ followers were awaiting the sign of His resurrection. That’s the ‘sign’ that separates Him from every other human being that has ever lived!

When we see predictions of His death throughout Scripture, we also see predictions of His resurrection. In Psalm 110, for example, David witnesses God the Father (Yahweh) say to the Messiah (Adonai), “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for fulfilling all of the prophecies as our one true Messiah!

BIG IDEA: Jesus, the ultimate prophet, keeps His promises.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Did you need a ‘sign’ to put your trust in God? If so, what was it?
- **Question:** What acts of God have strengthened your faith?
- **Question:** What ‘signs’ in your life could be used to witness to others?

Week 22: Matthew 12:38-42

Day 4: Nineveh Rises Up in Judgment

READ: Matthew 12:38-42; Jonah

EXPLORE:

Today we will discuss the example of Nineveh that Jesus used to rebuke the scribes and Pharisees in Mathew 12:38-42. Jesus says, *"The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."* In Jonah 1:2, God commands Jonah to *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."* This is a unique circumstance, as this is the only case of a prophet being sent to a foreign nation to deliver God's message against them. At the time Nineveh was a center for idolatrous worship. When the reluctant prophet gets to Nineveh and proclaims God's message *"the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them."* And *"When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it."*

The people of Nineveh are a powerful example to the scribes and Pharisees as they received a message from a reluctant prophet and instantly repented showing the power of God despite of his weak servant. In contrast, the scribes and Pharisees have seen Jesus perform miracles and do not believe. The hearts of the scribes and the Pharisees are closed off to God's message from Jesus more than the Gentiles of Nineveh were to God's message from Jonah.

The argument that Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it also echoes back to Matthew 11:21-23, *"Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they*

would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you."

Here Jesus highlights that signs and miracles were given to those in Israel. In this passage Jesus uses the example of Nineveh as an example of someone who repented rightly with a weaker message bearer. Jonah was a reluctant prophet, and Jesus is the incarnate Son of God. The people of Nineveh heard God's message and rightly responded with repentance, whereas the Scribes and Pharisees are hostile and revolt against Jesus. God spared Nineveh destruction, and the example of Nineveh will condemn the Scribes and Pharisees disbelief at the coming judgement.

APPLY:

- **Questions:** How have you seen people react to God's message in your own life? Do they more mirror the Scribes and Pharisees or the example of Nineveh?

- **Questions:** How can we cultivate a mindset that is quick to receive messages from God and rightly respond? How do we incorporate prayer, bible study, and repentance in our weekly routines?

Week 22: Matthew 12:38-42

Day 5: The Best of the Best

READ: Matthew 12:38-42; 1 Kings 10:1-13

EXPLORE:

One of the most famous basketball players in history was Julius Irving, more known by his nickname Dr. J. He played in the 1970s and 80s and was an amazing player to watch. He was one of the first non-big men to dunk on a regular basis. He famously could dunk starting his jump from the free throw line. The people watching Dr. J were mesmerized by him and many would buy tickets just to see him play. Dr. J was an amazing player, but many would say that he was nothing compared to Michael Jordan. Most people consider Michael Jordan as the best basketball player to ever live. Even Dr. J himself recognized the greatness of Michael Jordan. For someone who saw him play and loved watching him but not Jordan would be crazy. Dr. J was great, but Jordan was on a whole other level.

In Matthew 12:42, Jesus speaks of a character known as the “Queen of the South.” He says that she will condemn the scribes and Pharisees at the judgement for not recognizing the greater Solomon. What does Jesus mean by this? Well, it’s important to first establish who Jesus is talking about. The “Queen of the South” is clearly found in the Old Testament (1 Kings 10:1). She was identified as the “Queen of Sheba,” which came to King Solomon from a faraway land. Sheba most likely refers to south-west Arabia which was referred to by the Assyrians as Saba.³ This location would be in modern-day Yemen. This Queen came to see Solomon because he was widely known for his great wisdom. She

³ Donald J. Wiseman, *1 Kings*, 139.

had heard of his wisdom from a faraway land, and she hoped that just half of what was said about him was true. She took a leap of faith and traveled the long journey and was not disappointed in what she saw. Yet, the Pharisees could not recognize the greatness in their own land.

This was the point Jesus was making when He brought up the Queen of the South. She went so far for just a chance to see the greatness that God had placed on Solomon, yet the Pharisees miss what is right in front of their face. That's why Jesus essentially says that if she could see what the Pharisees missed right in front of their faces, she would condemn them herself. It's just like how Dr. J would condemn a basketball fan who failed to see Michael Jordan. Why would you not want to see the greater player?

What can we learn from the Pharisees? Oftentimes we struggle to see what God is doing right in front of us. Sometimes we get too self-focused, sometimes we care about things that do not matter, and/or sometimes the enemy stops us from seeing how God is working. We all need to look at what God calls us to do and see Him work in our lives and with those around us.

BIG IDEA: Don't miss the greater Solomon like the Pharisees.

APPLY:

- **Question:** What are ways you have seen God move in the past?
- **Apply:** Pray for God to move in your life, in the lives of those around you, and your church.

Week 23: Matthew 12:43-50

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 12:43-50

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

- **Activity**: While reading, include some observations in the space below.

- **Question**: It is not just healthy things that grow and multiply. The same is true of unrestrained evil. Where in your life do you think you have “given space” to things that are not honoring to the Lord?

- **Questions**: On a scale from 1-10, how would you rate how well you guard the following? Do you trust and obey God well in the following?

Your House ___/10	Your Finances ___/10	Your Time ___/10
Your Boundaries ___/10	Your Phone ___/10	Your Mind ___/10
Entertainment Choices ___/10	Your Dress ___/10	Your Health ___/10
Your Time with God ___/10	Your Words ___/10	Your Purity ___/10

- **Question:** How do you actively prepare yourself for the spiritual battle that is all around us? How might you better prepare?
- **Question:** How do you think our churches might be different if they lived with a deeper awareness of Jesus' statement about His disciples and their familial relationship?
- **Activity:** Spend some purposeful time in prayer today in light of what God has said through His Word this morning. This week is a wonderful opportunity to press into some crucial components of the Christian faith!

Week 23: Matthew 12:43-50

Day 2: The Importance of the Spirit

READ: Matthew 12:43-50

EXPLORE:

There is a strong inclination towards neutrality that plagues those of us in the Western World today. The ideology comes from what's referred to as post-modernism. Post-modernism suggests that truth cannot be known and the best way to understand the world around us is to be unsure. It also suggests that anyone who does claim to know the truth should be derided as bigoted and intolerant. This is the philosophy of many people in the United States whether they realize it or not. "Do not pick a side on whether something is right or wrong just say I do not know." This mentality has led many to not care about anything. To go through life not picking a side and choosing to remain neutral as to not offend.

In Matthew 12:43-45, Jesus gives a spiritual principle. He says that when an unclean spirit leaves something uninhabited and nothing else takes its place, more will come to that same place. This shows us the danger of being liberated from something and not looking for protection against what could come upon you again. Jesus came into the world from heaven and healed so many as well as liberated so many from demons, but He warns that unless they are filled by Him, they will be worse off. This principle seems to apply not only to the individual but the community. Israel as a nation was in danger. Jesus can heal and set the captives free, but it does not matter if they do not accept Him and receive the Holy Spirit.

Even today in the Jewish community, there has been largely a push towards secularization. According to the Jewish Virtual Library, 43.5% of Jews are outright secularists which means that they do not subscribe to any religious aspects of their heritage. Not just that they do not attend synagogue but that they do not even believe in God. When God is abandoned completely, no foundation for anything can be established. With no foundation, any belief or practice can sneak into a society.

What does this mean for us as Christ followers today? It means that we must stand up for truth and not be okay with neutrality. We do not force our beliefs on anyone, but we recognize that being neutral towards God does not benefit anyone. We speak the truth in love for the good of those we know who are not believers. We also recognize that the Holy Spirit keeps us safe from evil entering us, so we praise God for Him.

BIG IDEA: Neutrality towards God is not a good thing.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Why do you think Jesus says seven more spirits enter the original house? Why does it get so much worse?

- **Question:** How can this passage remind you to be bold in sharing the gospel rather than passive?

Week 23: Matthew 12:43-50

Day 3: The Necessity of Community

READ: Matthew 12:43-50

EXPLORE:

In America, tipping is considered a must but in Japan it is considered a big insult. The Japanese take pride in their work and their compensation, so it is an insult to tip them because it is as if you are saying that they need your money. In America, most people eat with their right hand, but no one would think twice if you ate with your left hand. In many Middle Eastern countries it is considered rude and unclean to eat with your left hand. This is because Muhammed was thought to have condemned a man who ate with his left hand. In America, whistling is seen as harmless, albeit slightly annoying to most people. However, in Russia, whistling (particularly indoors) is considered bad luck and thought to attract evil spirits. How does this relate to our passage? We need to be cognizant of cultural differences.

In Matthew 12:45, Jesus calls the generation that He is a part of evil. Jesus is a part of a culture that viewed life more from a collectivist perspective rather than an individual one. Being seen as an individual was not really common until the Enlightenment in the 17th century which happened in the West. Many parts of the world still have more of a collectivist mindset. This is relevant to our passage because Jesus often speaks in generational terms. He condemns His own generation numerous times because of their lack of belief. What are we to make of Jesus condemning an entire generation?

It's obvious not everyone in his generation was condemned but there was clearly widespread unbelief that was indicative of that whole generation. What caused that generation's lack of faith? We can lose sight on the big picture when we are too focused on things in our immediate vicinity. We hold some responsibility not

just for ourselves but for our community. Therefore, we should be thinking about how our lives effect not only ourselves but our community.

Faith is a personal thing, but it is also a communal thing. As Christians we are called to be set apart as a group. The word used for “church” in Greek literally means “the called out ones.” We are not just called out individually, but God calls us out collectively. We are called out from the world, to live holy lives. We live our lives in communion with each other so that we can encourage each other and exhort one another as needed. When we fail to do this, we not only fail what we are responsible for personally, but we fail those around us that need us. We are all united by our common faith in Jesus Christ and we should never forget that. Church is not somewhere we go for ourselves, but it’s where we go for the other members of the church. Every generation is not only responsible for their own generation, but they are responsible for telling the next one about Christ. Do not let your generation be the one to lose faith, but push it to be strong in faith.

BIG IDEA: Jesus thought generationally and so should we.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How often do you think in generational terms and doing your part for others?
- **Question:** How can you better serve the global church as well as your local one?

Week 23: Matthew 12:43-50

Day 4: The Household of God

READ: Matthew 12:43-50; Galatians 4:4-7

EXPLORE:

When Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are wanting to speak to him, he makes a profound statement: his true family consists of those who do his Father's will. What is His will? That we repent, believe, and by faith receive God's pardon for our sins through Jesus. Our passage says Jesus stretched out his hand toward his disciples—a gesture that reminds us of the moment he stretched out his hands on the cross. All of us who unite in faith beneath that cross are part of his family.

Jesus emphasizes the importance of the spiritual family without diminishing the importance of the natural family. God still expects us to honor our father and mother, and Paul warns that anyone who doesn't care for his relatives is worse than an unbeliever. When we follow Jesus, we join a new family consisting of people who are centered on being obedient to the Father's will. This family takes priority over other relationships, including those with familial bonds.

In the Old Testament, God is described as Israel's Father—an idea that takes on even deeper meaning in the New Testament. Through Christ, we can call God "Abba"—a word signifying intimacy and trust used by Jesus in his prayer to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. When we are "born again," we are born into the family of God. We are adopted as sons and invited into God's household.

Today, just like when Jesus first spoke these words, there is a community forming around Jesus. Those who follow him as disciples, he identifies as his true family. He said *whoever* does the Father's will is his family, highlighting the opportunity for

everyone to join his household. Notice he doesn't recognize *everyone* in the crowd as his family, but only those obedient to God's will.

We call this family "the church." Not everyone who attends the church is in the family of God, but everyone in the family of God is a member of His church. Believers in Christ become brothers and sisters. Some Christians address each other as "brother" or "sister" to remind them of the God-given spiritual connections they have with one another.

Like in our natural families, brothers and sisters in Christ have responsibilities to each other. We are told to "do good to everyone, especially those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). While we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, we are told to love other believers "with brotherly affection" (Romans 12:10). Tomorrow we will look at practical ways to live as the family of God.

BIG IDEA: By grace through faith Christians are adopted into the household of God. God is our Father and we believers are brothers and sisters.

APPLY:

- **Question:** In what ways can you act towards other Christians that will show you are a member of God's household?
- **Activity:** Spend time in prayer asking God to teach you to be a good son or daughter to him, and a good brother or sister to other Christians.

Week 23: Matthew 12:43-50

Day 5: A Day to Share

**READ TOGETHER: Matthew 12:43-50; Romans 8:15-17;
Colossians 3:12-14**

Instructions: *We believe that biblical study and spiritual growth are meant to be shared. This Word to Life has that exact focus in mind. For some, Day 5 might be a good opportunity to lead your family in a devotional. For others, this study might serve as a simple reminder to tactfully communicate your faith with those around you. Regardless, this study is designed to help you grow in your faith by sharing it with others.*

EXPLORE TOGETHER:

Imagine a big family reunion - the kind where you know some people intimately, some by name only, and others you've never seen. Cousins are catching up over brisket plates and mystery casseroles. There's laughter, tears, and maybe even a few misunderstandings. With people from different parts of the country, varied backgrounds, and a mix of ages, it can be a bit chaotic and get a little messy. That's the church.

When we choose to follow Jesus and receive God's pardon for our sins, we are reconciled with God and become members of His family. With God as our Father, fellow Christians become our brothers and sisters.

As a Christian, you're already part of God's family—but it might not always feel that way. So how can you start living like the family member you really are?

Because we won't be perfected until God makes all things new, it's no surprise that at times we will both offend others and be offended ourselves. Like every family, the church is made up of imperfect people who need to ask forgiveness, receive grace, and grow in love

for one another. Paul instructs us to bear with one another and forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven us.

To build strong, family-like relationships, it's important to find a biblically grounded congregation and put down roots. People who chronically move from church to church miss some of the deeper benefits that come with long-term membership of a church body. Being committed long term to a congregation of believers encourages unity, accountability, discipleship, and spiritual maturity.

Spending more meaningful time with other believers is key to building strong relationships. Our LifeGroups are one place where that happens. Many of our groups meet for a couple of hours once a week to share a meal, study the Bible, pray, and have honest and rewarding conversations - building deeper bonds than what's possible on Sunday mornings alone. Committing to a small group like this can draw you closer to other believers.

Another excellent place to build Christian relationships is on serve teams. The Holy Spirit gives each believer gifts to build up the body of Christ. Joining a serve team gives you the opportunity to connect with other team members as you use and develop your gifts while blessing other church members.

BIG IDEA: We each should be intentional about connecting with other believers to grow a community that looks and feels like a family.

APPLY TOGETHER:

Activity: Write down one practical step you can take this week to build or strengthen a relationship with someone in your church family. It could be inviting someone to coffee, joining a LifeGroup, joining a serve team, or simply having a meaningful conversation after church.



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