Session 12 – Responses

Matthew 11-12:
Jesus Confronts an Evil Generation

Facilitators: Read these recommended responses to the questions ahead of time to help you prepare to lead the small group discussion.

Participants: Reinforce what you have learned by reviewing these recommended responses after your group discussion and before you go on to the next lesson.

A. Review the Context

Discussion Leaders: Take a brief moment to review the context and what was learned last week. If you like, use the following question to encourage discussion:

- What fears keep you from sharing the good news of God's kingdom? What in the last lesson might help you face them and move on?

B. Read the Story

Discussion Leaders: If there is time, have someone read each passage before it is discussed.

C. Take a Deeper Look

John the Baptist: Matthew 11:1-19

1. a. On the surface it appears that Jesus’ answer only repeats what John already knows: That Jesus has been healing people and preaching the good news. How does the way Jesus tells him, say much more than that? (Read Isaiah 35:4-6 and 61:1-2.)

   Jesus quotes from the Old Testament to show that by his miracles, he is fulfilling prophecies about the Messiah. “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me,” he concludes. In other words, don’t be discouraged. Don’t doubt me because I’m not what you expected. Look at the signs for what they really are. I AM he who is to come.

   b. Jesus tells the crowd that John is more than a prophet; he is the Elijah who was to come. He is greatest of all prophets, sent to prepare the way for Jesus and the kingdom. Yet great as he is, even the least in the kingdom is greater than John. What do you think Jesus meant by this?

   John, although he stands at the very edge of the new covenant, belongs to the age of the old. He announces the new, prepares others for it, even baptizes the “one who is to come”—and yet he will die before Christ’s work is completed. The least of those who actually enter Christi’s kingdom will be part of his bride—the Church—and therefore will have a higher privilege than John, who was only a friend of the bridegroom. John himself realizes this. In John 3:27-30, the people are concerned that Jesus’ ministry seems to be overtaking John the Baptist’s. He says to them, “I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him...He must increase, but I must decrease.”

   c. What does Jesus say about his generation in verses 16-19?
Jesus rebukes those of his generation who reject both John and Jesus. They didn't listen to him when he "piped" or to John when he "mourned." They will not associate with Jesus, who celebrated and associated with all kinds of people, or with John, who followed very strict rules of self-denial. We both have our places, he implies. If you were spiritually wise, you would look beneath these externals and hear their message. You would see that both of us are sent from God, for specific reasons and despite our differences. You may not believe, but this wisdom will be justified by "her deeds"—the miracles I perform.

**Woe on Unrepentant Cities: Matthew 11:20-24**

2. Read verses 20-24, then use the map in Session 1, Introduction, to locate the cities mentioned. Why does Jesus compare the first three unfavorably to Tyre and Sidon and pronounce such a harsh judgment on them?

Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum are all in Galilee, "where most of his mighty works had been done" (verse 20). They have been privileged to witness first hand his miracles. Yet they have not repented of their sin. Tyre and Sidon, on the other hand, were gentile cities that Jesus says would have repented, given the same opportunity. Sodom was destroyed for its immorality and for refusing to properly receive God's messengers, yet Jesus says the Day of Judgment will be more tolerable for Sodom than for them. In spite of being favored with Jesus' presence, his teaching, and his miracles, his own people reject him and the mercy he offers. They fail to repent.

**Jesus' Yoke: Matthew 11:25-30**

3. a. In contrast to the unrepentant cities who reject Jesus' teaching and miracles, who are those who know the Father and who "come" to Jesus (Mt. 11:25-30)?

"Babes," or infants, with their simple trust, are more open to God's revelation. Also those who turn to Christ with their burdens; who take on his yoke instead and learn from him, are given rest.

b. What is the "yoke" Jesus refers to in verse 29? (See also Sirach 51:23-26; 1 John 5:3).

A yoke is not a burden but a way of carrying a burden that is shared, such as a yoke that joins a pair of oxen. When a yoke is "easy" it is well-fitted, which makes the burden light and easy to carry. That makes it possible to keeps one's eyes on Jesus and follow him instead of concentrating on the burden itself. Submission to Christ and obedience to him is liberating and brings peace and rest. In verse 29, by "yoke" Jesus is referring to his teaching, his wisdom and commandments, as opposed to the demands of the Law. He asks us to share his yoke and learn from him, to follow in his steps. Taking on his yoke is like an apprenticeship in the school of wisdom. his commandments are not burdensome in the way that the law was burdensome because paired with Christ, we have the power to carry them out.

**Challenges to Jesus' Authority: Matthew 12:1-21**

4. a. What two charges did the Pharisees bring against Jesus and his disciples in verses 1-14? (See Exodus 24:21.)

The Pharisees bring charges of two violations of the Sabbath laws: Working on the Sabbath, and healing on the Sabbath.
b. What was Jesus’ defense? [Note: If you want to read about the incident Jesus refers to in verses 3-4, it can be found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. In the following verses, priests “profane the Sabbath” without guilt when they do the work required to offer sacrifice on the Sabbath.]

Jesus cites precedent in Scripture to defend his disciples’ actions: King David himself set aside the law reserving the bread of the presence for the priests to feed himself and his men, and priests are not held to the law that no work can be done on the Sabbath, so they can serve God by offering sacrifice. Similarly, Jesus’ disciples are getting grain to eat because of their physical need for food and so they can serve one who is greater than the temple and lord of the Sabbath. He then points to the Pharisees themselves, who allow works of mercy on the Sabbath in the case of hurt animals. If animals, why not men, he asks, who are of much more value than sheep. In verse 7 he returns to his accusation that they never learned what God meant by “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (Hos. 6:6). They are putting all their focus on the external letter of the law, thereby missing its spirit.

c. Read Catechism 2168-2172. What was the original purpose of the Sabbath that the Pharisees with their zeal to enforce Sabbath regulations had lost?

The Sabbath is the seventh day of the week, the day God rested after creating the world. When he brought Israel out of Egypt to be his people, one of the first things he charged them to do was to keep the Sabbath holy. They were to imitate God by resting from work on that day and letting others rest, especially the poor. As such, the Sabbath was a protest against the servitude of work and the worship of money. It also gave them a way to imitate God in showing mercy to others. The Sabbath was to be a permanent memorial of their liberation from bondage (the Pharaoh would not allow them to rest from their labor to worship God or for any reason). By setting apart one day a week to praise God and remember his work of creation and his saving acts on their behalf, it would also serve as a sign of the covenant between them. The Pharisees had turned a day when people were to drop their own concerns and focus on God, into a day burdened with remembering what not to do. They were so focused on doing no work that they had forgotten the importance of showing mercy. They failed to enter God’s rest, and kept others out of it as well.

Challenges to the Source of Jesus’ Power: Matthew 12:22-37

5. a. What really serious charge do the Pharisees make against Jesus?

Just as they did in chapter 9, the Pharisees charge Jesus with casting out demons not by the power of God but by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons—the devil himself.

b. How does Jesus reveal the fallacy in their charge?

Jesus points out that Satan doesn’t fight against himself. If he were to do so, his kingdom would collapse.

c. What grave risk does Jesus say the Pharisees are taking by making this charge? (See verses 30-34. For optional further reading, see Catechism 1864, 679).

Jesus warns them that if he in fact does cast out demons by the power of God, then the kingdom has arrived and they are in danger. Standing against Jesus, they are scattering the kingdom and working against God. And by attributing to Satan the work of God they are committing an unforgivable sin they will be held accountable for on the day of judgment.
Jesus Confronts his Generation: Matthew 12:38-45

6. a. Read verses 38-45. What does Jesus mean by “the sign of the prophet Jonah”? (For help with this question, see Catechism 994).

The Old Testament prophet Jonah, who spent three days in the belly of a large fish before being spat out alive on the shore, is a sign of Christ’s death and Resurrection. After being saved from the fish, Jonah took a call for repentance to Nineveh, a wicked gentle nation that repented and was saved from God’s judgment only to turn around and carry off the northern tribes of Israel into exile when they failed to repent. The Pharisees have attributed Jesus’ work to the devil and have failed to repent. They will kill Jesus too and bury him — yet like Jonah, he will rise to new life on the third day to complete his mission to bring good news to the gentiles (who 40 years later will completely destroy both Jerusalem and the Temple).

b. Jesus gives two examples of gentiles (one nation — Nineveh — and one person — the Queen of the South, or Sheba) who will arise and condemn his generation. Why would they do so?

Nineveh repented; the Queen of Sheba marveled at Solomon’s wisdom. Here (in Jesus) was someone greater than either Jonah or Solomon, and his own countrymen are rejecting his wisdom and refusing to repent.

7. Jesus and the Pharisees both expel evil spirits. What will happen, though, if that generation (“the man” of Jesus’ illustration in verses 43-45) fails to fill the resulting vacuum with acceptance of the kingdom Jesus offers and with the power of the Spirit of God?

Seven spirits more evil than the first will come in, and it will be worse off than before.

Jesus’ True Family: Matthew 12:46-50


Jesus broadens the concept of family from the physical to the spiritual. In the new kingdom, the children of God are not those who are born into it and can claim it by birthright, but those who receive Jesus, who believe and who act as God’s children, doing his will.

D. Application

Discussion Leaders: If time allows, have group members share their responses to the following application question:

Are you carrying a burden that is too heavy for you? “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” says the Lord. Pray and ask God to show you what it means to exchange it for his yoke that is easy.

As a follow-up to this discussion, listen to or watch Jeff Cavins’ talk on Session 11: Matthew 11-12, “Jesus Confronts an Evil Generation.”