“THE REJECTION OF THE KING” (PART 1)

Throughout Matthew’s gospel Jesus is presented as King. The Jews had been looking forward to the coming of their Messiah, promised by God, who would deliver His people, conquer God’s enemies and establish an earthly kingdom, ruling from Jerusalem. The Old Testament prophets also spoke of a suffering Servant who would save His people from their sins. So this Messiah King, whoever He is, would bring both deliverance from Israel’s enemies but also redeem His people from their sins and be the Savior of the world. So Matthew presents to his mostly Jewish readers Jesus Christ as their long-awaited Messiah King.

Matthew lays out Jesus’ credentials as Israel’s Messiah King in the first 3 ½ chapters. He records Jesus’ public ministry. Up to this point in our study of Matthew Jesus has been ministering in Galilee, His hometown area and the area where His disciples were from. Matthew tells of Jesus amazing healing ministry and of His authoritative teaching and preaching. Great crowds followed Jesus as He went from town to town touching lives both physically and spiritually. And as He did, Jesus demonstrated His divine power and compassion for the people.

As we read thru Matthew’s gospel one thing becomes very clear…this Jesus is no ordinary man. And He isn’t just a good guy or a good teacher. His own words and His actions reveal that He is much more than that. Jesus refers to Himself in messianic terms, like “Son of Man.” In His response to John the Baptist’s disciples as to whether He was the Messiah Jesus says this: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them.” Basically what He is saying is “I am doing those very things that were foretold in the Old Testament that the Messiah would do.” Jesus refers to God as His “Father.” That is significant. By doing this Jesus claims to be the Son of God. He is much more than just a good teacher. He is indeed, as the prophet Isaiah said and Matthew quoted in Chapter 1, “Immanuel,” God with us, God in human flesh.

Well, as we saw this last week and we will see it again this week – both the people and their religious leaders REJECTED Jesus. They did not believe His claims to be the Son of God and the did not accept Him as their Messiah King. As John 1:11 puts it, “He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him.” Rejection, unbelief, criticism and hostility.

In Chapter 11 we see that some people believed Jesus. There may have been some doubt and questions, but they believed Jesus and followed Him. However, most of the people did not believe. They criticized Jesus. Many were apathetic toward Him. They were completely unmoved and unchanged by Jesus’ and His message of repentance. Yet, despite all this Jesus continues to invite people to come to Him, to believe in Him, to receive Him. Jesus says, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out” (John 6:37). So, Jesus’ invitation is an open invitation to all who will believe.

Chapter 12 is a major turning point in Jesus’ public ministry. There has been rejection of Jesus and His message by both the people and their religious leaders, there has been little hostility. In Chapter 9 the Pharisees had questioned why Jesus and His disciples ate with tax collectors and sinners. They had accused Jesus of blaspheming when Jesus healed the paralytic and told him “your sins are forgiven.” They were aware of His teaching and His many miracles. They came to the false conclusion that Jesus was casting out demons by the power of Satan. But beginning in Chapter 12 there is a growing and open hostility toward Jesus. And it reaches the point that the religious leaders – the scribes, the Pharisees and the Herodians conspire to kill Him.

READ Matthew 12:1-8. Here we see the first confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. If you read Deuteronomy 23:25, the Mosaic Law that addresses this particular issue, it does not say what the disciples did was a violation. But over the centuries since the Law was given, the Jewish rabbis had added numerous rules and restrictions regarding the Sabbath. They were not a part of the Law given to Moses. One section of the Talmud, the central text of rabbinic Judaism, has 24 chapters listing all of the Sabbath laws. The people had become so burdened by legalistic rules about the Sabbath that it was no longer the day of “ceasing” (that’s what Sabbath means) or day of rest that God intended it to be. Instead the Sabbath had become burdensome. Peter says in Acts 15:10, "They (the scribes and Pharisees, Jewish legalism) place a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear." Jesus would later say in Matthew 23:4, "They tie up heavy burdens hard to bear." Jesus knew the people were seeking rest from all of that which is why He said back in Chapter 11, “I will give you rest…My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

It’s important to note that the 4th Commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” is the only one of the Ten Commandments not repeated in the New Testament. It was the only one that was ceremonial for God’s people the Jews and not a moral absolute. So Jesus’ example of David and his men in the tabernacle at Nob (1 Samuel 21) is appropriate to this situation. In that example David broke a ceremonial law (Leviticus 24, 12 large loaves of bread placed on the table of showbread, baked every week, representing the 12 tribes of Israel, only could be eaten by the priests). But it was alright in God’s eyes for them to eat it because of an overriding physical need…the extreme hunger of David and his men. The bread on the table of showbread had a purpose . It was there to represent God’s perpetual relationship with His people. But it was only ceremonial. That incident reflects the heart of God…He is merciful and compassionate. Jesus reminds the Pharisees that the priests themselves are in violation of the Pharisee’s nit-picky Sabbath rules every time they offer sacrifices in the temple. Jesus points again to the heart of God when He cites from Micah 6 (in verse 7): “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” Jesus says, “If you knew the heart of God you would not have condemned my guiltless disciples. I desire for you to show mercy above ceremony or ritual.”

Then Jesus said in verse 6, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” Of course He was referring to Himself. To the Pharisees the temple represented the very presence of God. Well, Jesus WAS God. Then down in verse 8 Jesus says, “For the Son of Man (a clear messianic reference to Himself) is Lord of the Sabbath. Such statements must have infuriated the Pharisees!

READ Matthew 12:9-13. Here we have another confrontation. It’s quite a dramatic scene (Mark 3 and Luke 6 give parallel accounts). While Jesus is in the synagogue the scribes and the Pharisees confront Him. Jesus responds to them using a contrast of rescuing a sheep from a pit (doing good in accordance with the Law, Deut 22:4) and not in violation of the Sabbath. The heart of God would have you do good for a man as much or more as you would do good for an animal.

In verse 14 the Pharisees conspire to kill Jesus. Mark adds that they counseled with the Herodians whom they hated.

Matthew then interjects verses 15-21 to clarify something about the Messiah. He shows Jesus as fulfilling a prophecy about the Messiah from Isaiah 42, “My Servant, My beloved.” Matthew in these verses paraphrases Isaiah in order to show how Jesus is doing what the Messiah is supposed to do. What is that? He will bring comfort and encouragement to the weak and the oppressed. He is going to declare justice and righteousness even to the Gentiles. He is going to show tender compassion to even the lowliest in society. He is NOT going to stir up a revolution or force His way into power. Why does Matthew throw this in here? Why is it important? Because it counters the Pharisee’s own ideas about what the Messiah would be. You see, in their minds and in the minds of most of the Jews the Messiah would have a political agenda. He would come and in a great military campaign would overthrow the Romans, the bad guys, the enemies of God. That was their idea and it was based on some of the messianic prophecies. What we know now is that this idea of a conquering Messiah who would rule is going to be what Jesus does when He comes back again – this is the Jesus of Revelation 19 and 20. But they were looking for that kind of a Messiah then, in their day.

Application – can we become as blinded as the Pharisees were?