

Most people, at some point in their life, have paid a visit to the optometrist. After some customary questions, you sit behind a large machine called a phoropter, as the doctor begins to switch the lens. You look at different letters and they say, “How about now, how about now, how about now, how about now?” The whole idea is to find which prescription you need to have 20/20 vision. The doctor will try lots of different options to get things just right so you can see as clearly as possible.

I have a friend who used to work for a major events company. They would travel all around the country where they would fill up large gymnasiums and arenas with thousands and thousands of people and then put on fantastic experiences. There would be bands and comedians and speakers. People would pay hundreds of dollars to attend. He helped with the planning and the execution. He told about a time when they were getting ready to host one of their largest events to date, with about 10,000 people at this arena. It was packed. This was going to be an epic, iconic event. The arena was full, everyone was ready, the people took the stage, but the screens wouldn't turn on. They couldn't get the cameras and the projector to work. No one could see the speakers; there were no graphics and images. It was an absolute disaster. At a production and technical level, it's hard to imagine a bigger mistake. Everyone was complaining. Yelling out, “We can't see. Turn on the screens.” They were getting trolled on Google reviews in real time.” But there was nothing they could do. They had one of the most embarrassing professional moments they could remember. After the event, once everyone cleared out and they brought out a boom lift, went up forty feet in the air to inspect the projector, and found that someone had left the cap over the lens. Everything was working perfectly, but the cap prevented anything from being seen.

Now I want you to think about those two situations. Not for everyone, but for a lot of people, that's what it's like as they look at Jesus and try to understand his identity and mission. For some people, the more they read, the more they look and study and research, the more the identity of Jesus comes into clearer and clearer focus, and they are able to understand who he is, and respond to him with faith, devotion, and love. If you were with us last week when we walked through Matthew 11, that's what we saw with John the Baptist. There was a time he was in prison and suffering, and his vision got fuzzy. His heart and mind were filled with doubts. He questioned in the darkness of a prison cell what he remembered seeing vividly in the light. He went to Jesus and asked questions to try to understand him better, so that his faith could grow stronger. What we are going to see in our chapter today, Matthew 12, is that there were other groups of religious leaders known as the Pharisees. Instead of going to Jesus like John, with an open mind and an open heart, truly desiring to know and respond to the truth, they put a cap over their eyes. No matter what Jesus said or did in order to reveal his true identity, they refused to pay attention.

Matthew 12 is all about bringing Jesus' identity into clearer view. You get to decide if you want to keep your eyes open so you can see him and respond, or if, for any number of reasons, you want to close your eyes and ignore the evidence in front of you. Let's dive in.

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they

said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.” He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven’t you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” (Matthew 12:1-8)

There was clearly a great deal of contention and debate circling around the idea of the Sabbath, about what you can and cannot do on the Lord’s Day. We experience that in the modern world, as well. In 1903, the Wright brothers were ready for their inaugural flight. They waited for the perfect weather conditions, which occurred on December 13, 1903. But they delayed their inaugural flight because December 13 was a Sunday, and their dad made them promise not to do any work on the Lord’s Day. Many of you know the movie *Chariots of Fire*, chronicling the story of Eric Liddel and other British athletes of the 1924 Olympics, who refused to participate in the events for which they had spent years training, because they were held on the Lord’s Day. Some Christians in modern times, like these Jews in ancient times, had very strong convictions about what you can and cannot do on the Sabbath. Why is that?

It begins in the book of Exodus 20, when God gives his people the Ten Commandments, which teach people how to honor God. Don’t worship any other “gods,” don’t make any idols, don’t use my name in vain. The fourth commandment is, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy,” (Exodus 20:8). God told his people, “If you want to honor me, you have to practice Sabbath. One day, every week, resting from work and focusing on worship.” There were hundreds, thousands of ancient religions throughout the world, but the Jews were the only ones, the only people on the planet, who practiced the Sabbath. This became an identity marker; it was part of what made Jewish people Jewish people. They circumcised their boys, they ate a kosher diet, they kept the Sabbath. They were so stringent on Sabbath keeping that their opponents used it against them. There were several instances in history when their enemies attacked the Jews on a Sabbath. Many of the Jews chose to surrender and die rather than fight on the Lord’s Day. Practicing Sabbath was so important for them that one Jewish rabbi, Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, who lived near the time of Christ, taught this: “If the people of Israel would observe but two Sabbaths properly, God would redeem them immediately!” In other words, if you want to be delivered from the Romans and experience the salvation of God, keep the Sabbath!

The Old Testament, on more than 100 occasions, required keeping the Sabbath. But the Old Testament didn’t give a lot of definition on how to keep the Sabbath. We are supposed to worship and rest, but what exactly does that mean? So the Jewish leaders came up with a list of things they could and could not do.

- You could travel, but no more than 3,000 feet. You could take up to 1,000 steps in any one direction, but no more!
- You could not eat anything larger than an olive, because it would require too much effort to chew.
- You could not look in the mirror, because if you did and saw a grey hair, you would be tempted to pluck it.

- You could not move a chair, because most of their floors were dirt, and if you moved a chair, it might make a rut in the ground, and making a rut in the ground is a lot like plowing a field to plant seed, and that's obviously work.

I'm not exaggerating. Those were their rules, and most of the people in Israel kept them strictly. Then Jesus came along, and what did we see in our passage? Jesus' disciples, because they were hungry, were plucking heads of grain and eating them. To be super clear, this was not against the Scriptures. This did not violate any command in the Bible, but it did violate *the Pharisee's interpretation of Scripture*. They said to Jesus, "Look, they are breaking the law!" Jesus gives two very unexpected, very provocative responses. He doesn't debate with them about the merits of their claim. He doesn't tell them, "We'll, that's not really in the Bible; that's just your interpretation." Rather he says, "Don't you remember that when David and his companions were hungry, they entered the house of God and ate consecrated food?" David technically broke the rules, but he was the king. His kingly authority took precedence over the regulations. That was the first response. But Jesus gives them more. He said, "What happens every Sabbath in the temple? You guys get to rest and take the day off for rest, but the priests who serve God in the temple still have work. But because they are priests, working on behalf of God, you don't worry about them being in violation of the rules." Do you see what Jesus is doing? He's not only claiming to be Israel's true king, he's also claiming to be Israel's high priest—the one who offers sacrifices, the one who takes away sins, the one who represents God to people, and also represents people to God! Again, those are explosive, provocative claims. Jesus caps it off by saying in "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." In other words, "I'm in charge, I set the rules, I can do whatever I want." The Pharisees must be thinking to themselves, "Who in the world does this guy think he is, claiming to be our king AND our high priest, claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath? He's lost his mind." What in the world could Jesus possibly do to prove to the Pharisees, and to everyone else for that matter, that he really is Lord of the Sabbath. Well, look in your Bibles at the very next passage.

"Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, 10 and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" (Matthew 12:9-14). According to their own rules, it was not lawful to heal on the Sabbath. The rule the Pharisees taught was that if you were sick, the only treatment you could seek was treatment that could keep you from dying. Anything beyond a life and death, immediate matter, had to wait until the following day. You could do open heart surgery, but you couldn't set a broken bone. With that in mind, look at what happens next.

Jesus said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. (Matthew 12:11-13)

This is pivotal for multiple reasons. First, Jesus performed this miracle on the Sabbath, proving the claim he made in the verse before, that he really is the Lord of the Sabbath! Second, the only other time this phrase "stretch out your hand" is used in the entire Bible was when God told Moses to stretch out his hand over the Red Sea, and the sea parted to set the Israelites free from

captivity in Egypt. This is a powerful connection to Moses—and listen to what Moses said in Deuteronomy 18:15: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.” Moses, the initial one to stretch out his hand, was the first great prophet of Israel. But he said, one day, God will raise up another prophet, who will also stretch out his hand and perform a miracle; you must listen to him!

Through all of these interactions on the Sabbath, the identity of Jesus is coming into clearer and clearer view: **Jesus is our Prophet, Priest, and King.** Let’s reflect on the deep, life-changing implications of each of these. Jesus is our **prophet**, which means he speaks the very words of God to us and leads us to truth. Jesus is our **priest**. We have all sinned. Because of our sins, we are separated and estranged from God, under guilt and condemnation. Jesus comes and not only offers a sacrifice to atone for our sins, he also becomes the sacrifice. Priests are supposed to represent God to people and represent people to God. Because Jesus is fully God and fully man, he can do this in the most perfect and complete possible way. And Jesus is our **king**. He is the one who has come to guide us, to lead us, to provide for us, to protect us. Every one of these interactions, everything Jesus did, was intended, like an optometrist working the different lenses, to bring Jesus’ identity into clearer view. Jesus is doing and saying these things so we can understand who he is, and respond to him with faith, devotion, and love.

That’s what Jesus says should happen for anyone who really looks to him with an open heart. But that’s not the posture the religious leaders and Pharisees had toward Jesus. After they saw and heard all the evidence about Jesus’ identity, rather than responding with faith, “The Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus” (Matthew 12:14). Did you see that? Not only did they have no interest in really understanding who Jesus was, they had deep hostility, hatred, and animosity toward him. They wanted to eliminate him! Not only were they secretly plotting his death, but they also initiated a disinformation campaign to provide a supposed explanation for how Jesus was healing people and casting out demons. “The Pharisees said, ‘It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons’” (Matthew 12:24). They didn’t deny that the miracles were happening—they couldn’t deny the miracles because everyone was there, watching it happen with their own eyes. So they did the only thing they could think of: they came up with a malevolent and sinister explanation for how it was happening. “Sure he has spiritual power, but that power is coming from Satan, not God.” In other words, they didn’t only put the lens over their own eyes, to keep them from really seeing Jesus; they were trying to cover other people’s eyes, too.

That begs the question: why? Why didn’t they want to see Jesus and follow him? Why didn’t they want others to see Jesus and follow him? Jesus didn’t come to affirm our beliefs, utilize our institutions, or enhance our wealth. This caused the cap to be over their eyes, and the same can be true for us!

Do you know one of the most likely indicators that you will like someone is if they affirm your beliefs? If you are a huge fan of Purdue and you see someone wearing a Purdue shirt and they say, “Purdue is the best program in all of college sports,” you’re more inclined to like that person. If *The Office* is your favorite TV show and you meet someone who can quote all the lines, you are more inclined to like that person. I love my kids, so when someone comes up to me

and says, “You kids are the smartest, kindest, most well behaved children I’ve seen,” I say, “Whose kids are you talking about?” I’m joking, of course.

We naturally resonate with people when they affirm us and agree with us. Jesus didn’t come to affirm us and tell us everything we already believe and are already doing is right! He comes to the world, he came to the Pharisees, he comes to us, he comes to you, and says, “You’re wrong! You are sinful. You are selfish. You are stubborn. You are in darkness. And you need to repent.” “The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). If you can’t take someone stepping on your toes, confronting you, challenging you, disagreeing with you, and telling you that you are wrong and you need to change your mind and change your ways, like the Pharisees, rather than conclude Jesus is the Messiah, you’ll cover up the evidence and explain it away.

But it’s not just those who agree with you, it’s those who utilize your institutions. If you are really into politics and you have a certain party you love, you probably get excited when you find out someone influential votes like you, and you think “Yes, they see it! They are on the right side.” If they come out for the other side, it’s, “Who cares what actors and athletes think?” We love when people use the same things we like to use—whether it’s going to the same school we went to or eating at the same restaurants we like. People who own Jeeps have a certain wave, and anytime they pass another Jeep they do this three-finger salute to them. “I have a Jeep, you have a Jeep, we are on the same team!” When people support and utilize the same institutions we do, we get excited. The Pharisees had two institutions: temple and Torah. They leveraged all their passion and influence toward getting people to get right with God by going to the temple and studying the Torah. But Jesus came and said, “That temple that you guys spent 46 years building? It’s not needed any more. I’m the temple. If people want to meet with God, they can just come to me. If people want their sins forgiven, they can just come to me. That building where you’ve placed all your hope is irrelevant now. You’ve also spent too much time trying to understand and interpret the smallest details of the Torah, but I’m the author of that book. It’s all about me, so I get to tell you what it means and how to live it out.” These guys had devoted their entire lives to the temple and the Torah. They had placed all their eggs in these two baskets, and Jesus said, “Those are the wrong two baskets.” But the Pharisees would rather keep their baskets and be wrong than give up their baskets and become right. Is there anything in your life like that? Is there anything you love and hold so dearly that if Jesus came and said you’ve been wrong on that one your entire life you’d rather just be wrong than have to give it up and re-order your life? Think about members of the KKK 100 years ago, or white slave owners 200 years ago. They didn’t care what the Bible said about human dignity and liberty, they didn’t care what the constitution said, pulling from the Bible that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with inalienable rights. They would not, they could not change their minds. They were going to die on that hill. Are there any hills you would rather die on than change your mind to follow Jesus? If so, it will keep you from being able to see his true identity.

Jesus didn’t affirm their beliefs, utilize their institutions, or enhance their wealth. The Pharisees and teachers of the law ran a religious ecosystem that benefited themselves. Jesus taught about money plenty, and he told people to be radically generous with their resources, but the money wasn’t intended to go into the coffers of the religious institutions. Remember when the rich young ruler approached Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life? After they

talked for a while, what did Jesus say to him? “Go, sell all your possessions”— and do what with them? Give them to the temple? No. Let the Pharisees decide what to do with them? No. “Give them to the poor.” Then come and follow me. When Jesus saw the money changers profiteering in the temple, overcharging people and exploiting worshippers, Jesus didn’t look the other way. He made a whip and drove them out! “This is a house of prayer, but you’ve turned it into a den of robbers!” There was aggression and outrage and the self-serving financial practices of these people. Jesus not only brought no economic value to the religious leaders of his day, he was a threat to it! Jesus critiqued the religious leaders of his day and said, “You look really good on the outside so that others are impressed with you, but I can see the inside: you are full of greed and self-indulgence” (Matthew 23:25). For a lot of people, whether they are rich, poor, or middle class, as soon as they perceive there is a threat to their money, or that a situation is not going to benefit them financially, they check out in an instant. But the challenge is, Jesus isn’t here for your personal enrichment. He explicitly says, “You cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 6:24). Jesus cannot be used by you. He is not a pawn. He’s the King! Unless you are willing to humble yourself and exalt him, you will forever have a cap over your eyes, preventing you from being able to see him in all his glory and majesty.

We want good vision! We must stay humble if we truly want to see Jesus.