

In this study we will explore the relationship between two Biblical truths:

1. The kingdom of heaven is not divided.
2. The kingdom of heaven is divisive.

I am going to guess that right about now you are trying to decide if you agree with the second truth I am proposing. It may need some clarification. But I am going to argue that not only are both of these true, but they are also good. These truths display the beauty of the character of God and they apply powerfully in our lives.

When we combine these truths in their proper relationship to one another we discover the main point of today's message, *the kingdom of heaven is divisively undivided*.

The Kingdom of Heaven is Divisive

In our study of Matthew so far, we have covered Jesus' genealogy, birth, temptations, and his message that "the kingdom of heaven has come". We also covered the teachings of the kingdom, the healing in the kingdom and what it means to be sent for the kingdom. By the time we get to chapter 11, people have heard about Jesus. People are forming opinions about Jesus. And it is about this point that we start to see conflict and division about Jesus in nearly every story.

Perhaps the statement "The kingdom of heaven is divisive" is itself a divisive statement. The Oxford Learners Dictionary defines divisive as "causing people to be split into groups that disagree with or oppose each other"¹. The kingdom of heaven does that.

We will start with the truth that the kingdom of heaven is divisive because that is what the text emphasizes first.

Matthew 12:22-24

²²Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. ²³And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" ²⁴But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."

Jesus did something wonderful in healing the man with a demon. And the miracle divided the people. Some were seriously considering the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah. Others were looking for any logic by which they might reject Jesus as the Messiah. The real issue behind every division that the kingdom of heaven brings is whether or not people will accept God for who he is. The reason that the kingdom of heaven is divisive is that *sin does not want to accept God for who he is*.

Division is the normal response when a group of people experiences God for who he is. Here are a few examples.

John 7:40-43

When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet."⁴¹ Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee?"⁴² Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?"⁴³ So there was a division among the people over him.

John 9:16

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them.

John 10:19-21

¹⁹ There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. ²⁰ Many of them said, "He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?" ²¹ Others said, "These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

Acts 14:3-4

So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. ⁴ But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles.

In each example Jesus does something great that reveals the power of God. It is not the action that divides the people but what that action suggests about who Jesus is. Again, the core issue is *who God is*. This is one of the reasons why we care so much about knowing and reflecting the character of God. It is the rejection of the nature of God that is at the root of division. If we can be united in who he is, we will be united in all the ways that matter.

When the world sees the truth about who God is there is division. Remember back in Matthew 10:34 when Jesus said he did not come to bring peace but a sword? There is a similar verse in the book of Luke that actually uses the word "division" instead of "sword".

Luke 12:51-52

Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵² For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three...

When he speaks of bringing a sword, he is not promoting violence but admitting that there will be division when he is revealed as he truly is. Jesus knew that people would have a divided response. So he tells us that he didn't come to bring peace on earth. He does bring peace to earth but does not bring peace on earth. He admits that he will not accomplish this. We will not

find peace on earth we will find peace only in Jesus. The only peace on earth is the peace we have in Jesus.

We see further evidence that *sin does not want to accept God for who he is* in the common occurrence of Jesus offending people in the book of Matthew. When Jesus taught in his home town the people were astonished and “they took offense at him” (Matthew 13:57) because they thought they already knew who he was. When he was presented in the fuller light of who he is they were offended.

Once, after Jesus taught some hard truths, the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” (Matthew 15:12). They were trying to soften his public image because it was offending people and Jesus didn’t seem to pick up on it. Do you have any friends like that? They thought they had a better sense of public relations than Jesus but Jesus was simply revealing who he really is and it was offensive to them.

Go back to chapter 11 and notice a bit of dialogue.

Matthew 11:2-6

² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ⁴ And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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 good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

The question was “are you the one”? They are asking about who he is. He tells about the great things he was doing as evidence of who he is. And Jesus knew that when they saw the dead being raised and lepers being cleansed there would be some who would be offended. So, before his questioners had a chance to respond to his answer, he told them that there is a blessing for the one who is not offended. Shouldn’t they have rejoiced when the dead were raised? Well, some did. But people are always divided when God is revealed for who he really is.

After Jesus described himself as the bread of heaven the disciples found it a hard teaching to accept and Jesus said, “Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?” (John 6:61-62).

Peter recognized that Jesus was the prophetic fulfillment of “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” (1 Peter 2:8)

In Matthew 11 and 12 Jesus describes a bit of why people were offended. He helps us to see the offense through the lens of disappointed expectations. They had disappointed expectations about John the Baptist. Jesus asked them what they went out into the wilderness to see (vv. 7-

8). His questions suggest that they were looking for something different in the forerunner of the Messiah. Jesus taught that John was the Elijah “if you are willing to accept it” (v.14). We see disappointed expectations in verses 16-17. They expected that when they played the flute Jesus would dance. They expected the kingdom of heaven to fit into their own kingdom. Their expectations were disappointed when John didn’t eat (v.18) and disappointed again when Jesus did eat (v.19). And when Jesus didn’t keep the Sabbath the way they expected the Messiah should, we read that, “the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him (12:14). Division takes place when we have predetermined expectations about what Jesus should do. Division takes place when we want to be in control of the power of God. Why? Because some people are going to see the beauty of God for what it is and others are going to be offended because it is not what they thought it would be.

Through many examples we have seen that division happens when God is revealed. The response is to accept him as he is or to reject who he claims to be. In eternity, when God is revealed, it will ever inspire worship. In this world, when God is revealed, it will always incite division. The kingdom of heaven is divisive, and the reason why is that ***sin does not want to accept God for who he is.***

The Kingdom of Heaven is Not Divided

In the transition from the truth that the kingdom is divisive to the truth that it is not divided, notice the accusation of those who were rejecting Jesus. They didn’t simply say, “he is not the Messiah”. They said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.” Their division, again, is due to a denial of who he is. They know that if it was by the Spirit of God then Jesus was the Messiah.

Notice, they don’t just have a neutral response to the miracles of Jesus, they attribute his miracles to an evil power. The kingdom of heaven is divisive in such a way that many of those who are offended are not content to be agnostic, they are compelled to be antagonistic. They don’t just want nothing to do with it they want to speak as much bad as they can about it.

Now listen as Jesus dismantles their illogical argument.

Matthew 12:25-29

Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. ²⁶ And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. ²⁸ But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 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.

Jesus called out their illogical rejection of him by showing how ridiculous it would be for Satan to be against himself.

On the path to proving that the kingdom of heaven is not divided Jesus argues that the kingdom of Satan is not divided. Our enemy is not stupid. Moments earlier they had all seen a man who could not speak and could not see because there was an evil power possessing him. A divided kingdom would not have such power. Our enemy is undivided in his opposition of Jesus and all who love him. Satan is the “strong man” that Jesus was speaking of. In the book of Matthew, we are reminded that there is a personified evil. It is not just some vague force out there. There are evil beings in an evil kingdom. We find ourselves in a great controversy. There were demons preventing that man’s voice and eyes from working. That kingdom is not divided. That kingdom is strong. One of the reasons we should take the kingdom of heaven seriously is that the kingdom of darkness is real and undivided.

The gospel is declared in this verse when Jesus describes another undivided kingdom that comes with power to bind that strong man. The kingdom of heaven plunders the goods of the strong man, not as a criminal thief but as a king taking back what has been taken from him. The kingdom of heaven is not divided. Jesus did not need to go into partnership with the devil. He doesn’t need to negotiate with him or use him or get permission from him. He binds and plunders him.

If it is not the spirit of Satan that drives out Satan, then what Spirit is it? Jesus sets them up in a logical dilemma where they would have been forced to recognize that they were looking at the Messiah.

We have seen much division about who God is but there is no division within who he is.

Unity is an attribute of God. We are created in his image. He restores that image in us so that those who are in the kingdom are united.

John 17: 20-23 I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

We are warned not to be divisive and to watch out for those who are.

1 Corinthians 1:10

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

Romans 16:17

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

Titus 3:10 As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him.

Jude 1:19

It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.

Yes, the kingdom of heaven is divisive, but it is not the spirit of God or his people to be divided.

We have seen that the reason the kingdom of heaven is divisive is that ***sin does not want to accept who God is***. The reason that the kingdom is not divided is that ***God will never change who he is***.

How an Undivided Kingdom Reflects God's Character

When we see God's undividedness as his unchangingness it reflects so beautifully on his character. For those who accept God as he is there is a wonderful assurance that he will never change. We take comfort in words like consistent, uncompromising, trustworthy, and solid. We might take offence at words like narrow, stubborn, inflexible, unaccommodating, or rigid. But when we apply those to the truth that God will not change, they are beautiful attributes. Praise God that he is too narrow to change, that he is too stubborn to compromise his character, and that he is too inflexible to give up his glory.

Don't mistake God's grace toward us with flexibility concerning himself. God is graciously inflexible. God is not being mean by being narrow. He is being kind by never changing. It is love that makes him rigid about who he is. God's grace is not that he changes for us but that he changes us. He does not divide his kingdom by changing the standard for the kingdom. Rather he graciously lifts us up and fits us for the kingdom. He is flexible and accommodating in his work with sinners but never in his faithfulness to being who he is. There is no division in the kingdom of heaven. We either try to change God, and so reject the kingdom, or let him change us, and so enter the kingdom.

The kingdom is not divided because ***God will never change who he is***.

The Relationship Between the Two Truths

The two truths we have studied are:

1. The kingdom of heaven is not divided.
2. The kingdom of heaven is divisive.

The main point is that *the kingdom of heaven is divisively undivided*. Do you see that now? The reason why the kingdom is divisive is precisely that it is undivided. It is God's refusal to change who he is that causes division in the world.

If you are still not in agreement that the kingdom of heaven is divisive, I will admit, it is not technically the kingdom of heaven that is causing the division. It is the people's response to the kingdom of heaven that causes the division. It is not the nature of God to be divisive. But people are divided in response to his unchanging nature. But if the kingdom valued peace over truth, it could stop the division. Jesus could have been more sensitive to not say certain things around certain people. Jesus could have been a bit more flexible about what he insisted on and what he was willing to let go of for the sake of unity. If the kingdom was divided Jesus could have not offended those Pharisees. He could have been what they wanted him to be. He could have changed the gospel requirement; he could have compromised his character.

Let us praise God that the kingdom is not divided. One day God will divide the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). That will not be a fun experience for a loving God. But we can rejoice that he is willing to divide people in order to keep his kingdom undivided. If the kingdom were divided, God could just let the sheep and the goats all in. That would be the gracious thing to do, right? No! We would live in a divided kingdom for eternity. Jesus is too good to not divide.

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

God's willingness to divide is the power behind our sanctification. He is continually setting us apart. He is removing that which is unfit for the kingdom. I am so grateful that sin will not be in the kingdom. Praise God that he divides and that his kingdom is undivided.

Application

How not to apply this message

This is a dangerous message, and it needs to come with a warning. The message of division has been hijacked by some teachers that don't reflect well the character of God. In preparing this message, almost every article I read on the topic of God being divisive and dividing made me

mad. Because many of them come from a church culture that uses their spiritual authority in abusive ways. They are strong on the message that we should hate evildoers and not associate with those with false teachings. They praise the faithfulness of churches that will shun evildoers and emphasizes those verses about God bringing division to the conclusion that we should not even try to not offend. These are the types that hold unloving signs outside of abortion clinics and think that God is honored in their offensiveness. These are the types that call you out for your sin but not to help you spiritually, only to keep themselves spiritually pure . They don't want your blood on their hands. They don't want to associate with you. One of the articles I read, after slamming our culture of effeminate Christian sissies and stringing verses together to celebrate God's divisiveness, concluded "there are many more verses that could prove this point. But this should satisfy the righteous." As if to say, those false believers don't deserve any more convincing if they still don't see the calling to offend the world in the name of Jesus. They quote verses like "blessed are you when men hate you" as if we should seek that. They denigrate modern Christians as "love freaks". I agree that Jesus wants purity over peace and faithfulness to him over unity with everyone else. It is not the spirit of God to go out and pick fights in the name of truth. So when we recognize today that the kingdom is divisive we are not suggesting that we should live in an unnecessarily offensive way.

I must urge caution in the application of this message. The divisiveness of the kingdom does not give Christians permission to be unnecessarily offensive. Listen, the gospel is offensive enough. It exposes our sin and calls us to forsake it. This offense is necessary. We must remove any additional barriers to the gospel. Don't water down the gospel. And don't do anything beyond the gospel to offend. If they are offended, let it be an offense at who God really is and not the unloving way we presented him.

There are apologies and reconciliations needed in this way. Someone felt that the narrowness of the gospel gave them permission to unlovingly impose narrowness on others. And those others no longer feel welcome in this church. I personally offer my apology. If you have ever been offended by the unloving way people have applied the truth to you, I am sorry.

The kingdom of heaven is divisive. But don't you go out on a mission of division.

The right response to the undivided kingdom is acceptance and repentance!

Matthew 12:30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

There are two sides. Jesus is not saying that the default is to be against him. Mark 9:39-40 sounds a lot like this verse, only opposite, when Jesus says, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us." In Mark it sounds like the default is to belong to the kingdom. But the point is not which is the default but that we must choose the kingdom. There is no "kinda with Jesus". There is an undivided kingdom of darkness and undivided kingdom of

heaven. We are either with him or against him. Verses 33-37 take this thought further. A tree is known by its fruit. It is not divided. It is what it is. Either you are in the kingdom or out.

There is a narrowness to God. The evidence that we have passed through the narrow gate is that we live in the narrow way. There are many who claim the kingdom of heaven but they live just like the world. This is a divided life. But his kingdom is undivided. We are called higher.

The verses just after verse 30 describe the unpardonable sin. Notice what this is saying in the context of what we have studied.

Matthew 12:31-32

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³² And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

The unpardonable sin is the refusal to accept who God is. If we label the spirit of God as the spirit of Satan we will never be open to it. Rejection after rejection leads us to a place where we no longer respond to God.

The good news is that we don't have to reject him. We can accept and repent. Notice this theme of repentance throughout chapters 11 and 12.

In the next section about the sign of Jonah, they ask for a sign. What did they make of the healing of the demon possessed man who couldn't speak or see? They didn't need another sign, they needed to repent from the signs they already saw. Then in verse 41 and 42 it says, "The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here." The difference was not seeing the sign but repenting.

Matthew 11:20-21

Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. "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."

The difference is repentance. So Jesus has an invitation for all.

Matthew 11:28-30

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

¹ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/divisive>