

Mark 3:1-6 Withered Hand and Withered Hearts

3:1 He entered a synagogue again; and a man was there whose hand was withered. 2 And they were watching Him closely to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him.

--The healing of the man with the withered hand is the last of this series of conflicts that Jesus has with the Pharisees in His early ministry. Jesus prioritizes Justice, and Mercy, not blind rule-keeping. He's trying to get everyone to understand that God made the Sabbath as a blessing, as a day of rest when all the other cultures around them worked seven days a week. The Pharisees had instead turned the Sabbath into a merciless burden, heavy to bear, and indeed impossible to bear. Jesus is calling out their hypocrisy, and their lack of mercy for people who need healing. Jesus and his disciples returned from their controversial walk through the harvest-ready fields outside the town to attend the synagogue service of that same sabbath, most likely. Since only short walks were usually permitted on the Sabbath, that means that they were likely around Capernaum, and went to attend the Sabbath Torah reading there. And, so would those same Pharisees who had objected to the disciples' action of plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath. Talk about a charged atmosphere. It was an accepted principle that "any danger to life takes precedence over the Sabbath." The scribes, however, had determined precisely in which cases it was proper to speak of immediate danger to life, and to what extent aid could be granted. The enemy had twisted their mind so much that they didn't stop to consider that Jesus' healing of these people was a sign to them that they should know that He was from God, and that they should accept them, and Him! John makes this point, as the summary statement of his Gospel. John 20:30-31 **30 So then, many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you may have life in His name.**

Now, that congregation had already witnessed a remarkable display of Jesus' authority, not only in teaching but also in controlling a demon (1:21-28) and the post-sabbath healings which had followed it (1:29-34) and the memorable incident with the lame man (2:1-12), has prepared the ground for the expectation of a further display of power—and they were clearly happy that Jesus was healing—Sabbath or not, because they brought more people to Him.

The local Pharisees had seen many miracles of healing, deliverance, and cleansing by Jesus, yet they were unwilling to accept the evidence of their own eyes, because they had made up their minds that they weren't going to accept Jesus, but were rather going to kill him. So, when our verses say that they "watched" Jesus, this wasn't some casual observation. They were watching Him intently as hostile scrutinizers, looking for further evidence of Jesus' unorthodox, and they would say heretical teachings on the Sabbath. A paralyzed hand, not a life-threatening injury, would have been forbidden to be healed on the Sabbath. So, in their eyes, for Jesus to heal this man on the sabbath would be a deliberate violation of the accepted Sabbath teaching of the elders. They were looking to see if He would violate the Sabbath further, so that they could demonstrate that He had ignored their earlier warning, and that they would have an excuse to accuse Him officially of Sabbath violations worthy of stoning to death.

3 He said to the man with the withered hand, "Get up and come forward!"--Notice how bold Jesus is. He knows that the Pharisees are trying to trap Him, but instead there is no attempt to go off and heal the man in a corner, or behind the synagogue or somewhere less public place. That's what a hypocrite trying to hide what they're doing would do. That's what the Pharisees would do. That's what the world would do. But that's NOT what Jesus does. Instead he tells the **man with the withered hand, "Get up and come forward!"** Out in front of everybody. Jesus takes the initiative to demonstrate God's compassion for the man.

4 And He said to them, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do harm, to save a life or to kill?" Jesus emphasizes the importance of this witness to the Pharisees, not by hiding, but by

bringing up the very point of the controversy. Jesus commanded the man with the withered hand to stand in the midst of the assembled congregation, and then posed to his adversaries a rhetorical question: **“Is it permitted on the Sabbath to do good, or to do harm; to save a life or to kill?”** Formulated in this way, the question demands an answer in terms of the accepted understanding of the Law, according to the scribes and Pharisees. The tradition clearly asserted that the Law was not opposed to the saving of life on the Sabbath. The Pharisees refused to debate with Jesus. They couldn’t even admit that the Sabbath was a time for doing good, particularly for the relief of human suffering. Human need overrides the fence-building around the Sabbath law that the Pharisees were in the business of conducting. Human need was more important, but they ignored it. In the name of piety they had become insensitive both to the purposes of God and to the sufferings of men. They never even considered the well-being of the man with the withered hand. Instead, they were indignant because the healing of a paralyzed hand could wait until the next day. But, here’s the point—would it ever have occurred? The next day, the Pharisees would be busy running their businesses, and other activities, and they had no desire to heal the man anyway. Meanwhile Jesus would have been busy doing the work of God elsewhere. So the man would have never been healed. The lesson for us is that the time to do Good is NOW, when the need is presented to us **But they kept silent.**--They couldn’t even answer the simple question of whether it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath, because that would have been a trap for them. Their way of thinking about the Sabbath was completely off in terms of it’s priorities, but instead of reassessing their priorities, all that they could think about was killing the messenger, Jesus. The adversaries of Jesus are left silent before His sovereign Word. No wonder that they were silent! They’d been completely called out on their scheming, their hypocrisy, their lack of compassion for those they were supposedly leading spiritually, and their plot to murder Jesus!

5 After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, --And, of course Jesus is angry. And, what is at the root of His anger toward them? Their hardness of heart toward this suffering man. Not only that, He is angry at them because, although they knew the Law, they did not apply it to their lives. They were unwilling to perceive the truth of what God expected of them. Again and again we see that Jesus was angry because they could not perceive God’s priorities.

He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. --Jesus healed the man, demonstrating to everyone that His priorities, God’s priorities were to do good on the Sabbath. When Jesus restored the man’s hand he demonstrated what it means “to do good” and “to preserve life” on the Sabbath. Moreover, he provided a sign of the true observance and joy of the Sabbath. As Lord of the Sabbath Jesus delivers both the Sabbath and man from a state of distress. Jesus was willing to heal, and do God’s work, even at the peril of His own life, and He wasn’t afraid to show it. God’s work demands boldness, and often risk. The three Hebrew boys in the fiery furnace didn’t know that God would save them—they said “even if He doesn’t, we will serve Him”. Daniel didn’t know that God would shut the mouth of the lions when He was thrown in the lions den, but still, he kept his routine of praying three times a day toward Jerusalem, regardless of what the King’s ill-conceived edict had said.

God’s anger toward these Pharisees, and others who would not accept them was expressed in the fact that they witnessed these miracles, and still would not accept Jesus as their Messiah. And, when they stand before God, these things will be called as a witness against them, and it will not go well for them. So, I ask you as well—what has God clearly done in your life? What miracles has He done? And, what was your response. If you are a believer, then He has performed the miracle of saving your wretched self! Have you shown Him that you appreciate it, by the way that you live your life. What are you doing with your life? Where are your priorities? Are you fulfilling the mission, the ministry that God has given you to do?

6 The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might put Him to death.--

The decision of the Pharisees to conspire with the Herodians to destroy Jesus demonstrates just how far the Scribes and Pharisees had deviated in the oral law, compared with what was actually in the Scriptures. As the Word incarnate, Jesus was going to obey the Law as God had given it. And, of course, since the Scribes and Pharisees had mis-interpreted the law so badly, then this automatically brought Him into conflict with the authority of these religious leaders, the self-appointed interpreters of the Law. Jesus' entire attitude toward the oral law, the Scribal mis-interpretation of the law was, correctly, that He, Jesus, God, had no obligation to respect the laws of men. In their opposition to Jesus they had the support of the Herodians, who are mentioned also in Ch. 12:13 in association with the Pharisees. They had an allegiance to Herod in a country where large numbers of people chafed under his rule; these were the politicians. Undoubtedly they lent their support to the Pharisees because they saw Jesus as a threat to the peace and stability of the kingdom of Herod.