

**Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.**

**(Mark 3:1-6)**

## Introduction

Someone has titled this passage, "The withered hand, and the withered heart." Apropos. It summarises this episode perfectly.

This is a very rich passage, where the Lord of the Sabbath instructs his disciples about the heart of the Sabbath, as well as the heart on the Sabbath. In other words, Jesus teaches his observant disciples how to appreciate the purpose of the Lord's Day, and how to make the most of it. But more than this, fundamentally, Jesus teaches them about their hearts.

This scene portrays a very ugly demonstration of sin-hardened hearts. It also displays a very lovely demonstration of a grace-driven heart. Both were displayed at the same place, at the same time, on the same day – the Lord's Day.

In summary, what took place in the text before us is what may indeed take place on any given Lord's Day, in any given church, in any given location: Some gather to be helped, some gather to help, and some gather to exercise hostility. Which are you?

As we saw previously, the weekly Sabbath was a defining covenantal sign that the Jewish nation belonged to God. Therefore, it was a day that was especially guarded by those who boasted in being God's people. This, itself, was not bad, but unfortunately for the Pharisees, this blessed sign became a badge of spirituality. So much so that many of them could not see the reasoning that works of necessity (2:23–28) and mercy (3:1–6) were permissible on this special day. In fact, to fail to allow for these works was to violate the Sabbath, which was given by God for man's benefit, not for his hindrance. The Pharisees were zealous for tradition, not for the truth. When this is the case, mischief is not far behind. We see such mischief in this scene.

The Lord's Day (whether old covenant or new covenant) was to be a day of gladness, a day of reverent rest. It was, and *is*, to be observed with joy. It is a day to look forward to rather than a day to be dreaded because of prohibitions. Make no mistake: There is a fundamental prohibition—no work. What a pleasure!

However, the Pharisees had turned it into a day of rules. They had created so many fences that no one could enjoy the garden.

Though we may not suffer from the same problem today – and let's be frank, concern about sanctifying the Lord's Day is not even on the average Christian radar – nevertheless, there is a principle here that we dare not miss: On the Lord's Day, grace and mercy should be a welcomed characteristic as we gather with one another. The word of mercy, coupled with works of mercy, should be a huge part of our assembling—love, not hatred; helping, not hurting; curing, not cursing; healing, not maiming.

Unfortunately, however, for a certain group of Pharisees, the came to church on this day with a critical, cynical, murderous heart. This place of helping and healing, at least for these Pharisees, became a place of hating. And this was met with a heart of righteous anger.

As we commence, let's each consider what the Lord sees in our hearts as we meet on the Lord's Day.

## Sinister Scrutiny

The text opens with a hint of the sinister scrutiny that resides in the hearts of the Pharisees: "Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him" (vv. 1–2).

The opening words of this passage should stir compassion in our hearts. "A man was there with a withered hand." The word translated "withered" literally means "dried up." It was paralysed. This man could not function fully in life. Perhaps he was even unemployed because unemployable. We don't know. What we do know is that this man's body was not functioning as God had originally designed. And that is always reason for compassion.

But this man's malady was not merely physical, it was also spiritual. According to Leviticus 21:16ff, such a condition would result in him being cut off from temple worship. This human being, made in the image of God, was missing out on the fullness of why God had created him: to worship him. Perhaps he felt like an outcast, and yet on this Sabbath morning, here he was, faithfully gathering with God's covenantal people. Perhaps you can relate. If so, may you find the same compassionate grace that this man did.

## Anyone With a Heart

Anyone with a heart would be moved. Sadly, not everyone who was in church that day had a heart. At least, not a healthy one. This is clear from the next statement: “And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.” Not everyone who gathers for worship was there to worship. Not everyone who gathers on the appointed Lord's Day does so motivated by love for God, and therefore with love for her neighbour. Sometimes, people gather on the Lord's Day with sinister motives. So it was on this day.

As Jesus entered the synagogue “again,” probably in Capernaum (notice how the Lord regularly gathered with his people on the appointed day), the Pharisees entered with him. These guys were like a dog with a bone – better, like the self-righteous with an agenda.

Perhaps Jesus and his disciples had just come out of the grain fields (see 2:23–28) and the Pharisees were keeping stride with them. Perhaps they were aware that the man with the withered hand was a frequent synagogue attendee. They knew that Jesus had deep compassion for those who suffered. They knew that he never encountered a need that he did not want to meet. After all, the Pharisees had observed, with increasing frequency, Jesus' delivering people from the oppression of demons. They had observed him healing people and embracing the otherwise hopeless, because religious and social, outcasts of society. In short, in a twist of irony, the Pharisees had detected a shepherd's heart in the Great Shepherd of the sheep! At least they got that right.

As they all entered the synagogue, the Pharisees were hell-bent, because hell-driven, to catch out and condemn Jesus once for all. If they could catch him in the act of breaking the law of God, they would no longer need to worry about his claim to lordship (2:28).

Perhaps as they looked up they could hardly believe their good fortune. There was this man, withered hand and all. Their adrenaline was flowing. On this Lord's Day, they had high hopes of catching out the Lord.

## Cynical Outlook

The phrase “they watched” is an extremely strong statement in the original language. It speaks of inspecting, but doing so insidiously. Every time the words are used in the New Testament, they are in a negative context (Luke 6:7; 14:1; 20:20; Acts 9:24; Galatians 4:10).

They watched with insidious intent to gather evidence by which they could “accuse” him. The word was a legal term used of a plaintiff who brings an offence to the authorities. It is always used that way in the New Testament. We find the term again in Mark 15:3 when Jesus was accused before the powers that be.

And just what is the offence they were hoping to witness? What evil deed did they desire to catch Jesus doing? Healing on the Sabbath. Having witnessed him allowing his disciples to break their law on the Sabbath, they now saw a perfect opportunity to catch Jesus himself breaking their law.

The Pharisees, as we have seen, had built all kinds of traditional fences around the fourth commandment. In their Mishnah, they adopted the law that it was allowable to perform medical work on a Sabbath if it was a matter of life and death. Thankfully, that included childbirth! But it could be convincingly argued that a man with a useless hand was not facing a life or death situation. What an opportunity to catch out Jesus. A law breaker!

Please don't miss the horror of this scene. Hatred is present – in church. A place of helping was, for some, a place of hatred. The gathering that was designed to heal had, for some, become an opportunity to hate.

## We Should Be Horrified

The Pharisees brought with them a murderous spirit as they gathered at the synagogue. They professed to be worshippers but were filled with ungodly wrath. They did not arrive to humble themselves before the Lord; rather, they came to criticise, find fault, and exert their lordship over the rightful Lord.

God's people had been under centuries of oppression. Many held on to the anticipation that Messiah would come and make things right. And here he was! He was proving that he could heal spiritually, and therefore in every other way. Messiah came with deep compassion for those suffering. However, rather than rejoicing, these "worshippers" could only criticise and condemn. People were being helped and healed, and these religious "shepherds" could only cynically plot against *him* and against *his*.

But being horrified at these men is not a sufficient take away from this passage. We must ask, what about you and me?

## We Should Be Warned

Sadly, this still occurs today – perhaps still in synagogues but, more urgently, in our churches. People arrive with murder in their hearts – enmity, malice, cynicism, fault-finding and rebellion.

We need to check our hearts as we gather with God's people. Why are we gathering? What do we hope to get out of the gathering? Better, what do we plan on contributing to the gathering?

Being with Jesus as we gather should transform whatever wrong motives we have. And this should be lived out long after the gathering. Let us be warned that gathering with God's people can sometimes be a dangerous thing. It can be painful. Let's each do our part to overcome this.

We will look at the underlying cause of this later, but, for now, let's move to the next set of verses.

## Sovereign Salvation

In vv. 3–5, we observe God's healing grace:

And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

(Mark 3:3–5)

Among other remarkable things, how wonderful it is that this man became a recipient of God's grace without even asking for it. Jesus took the initiative and the man was changed. This is gospel!

## A Sovereign Summons

"And he said to the man with the withered hand, 'Come here'" (v. 3). What a marvellous example of unconditional election, effectual calling, and irresistible grace. But more, it is also an example of incredible graciousness.

Jesus was not using this man as a pawn, as the Pharisees were seeking to do. No, Jesus addressed this man as a person who was in need. Jesus was concerned about, to use a contemporary term, *social justice*. Yes, Jesus cared about alleviating suffering. The Pharisees cared about tradition more than truth. Jesus, however, cared about truth that leads to transformation.

If your "truth" does not enlarge your heart, then maybe you are not as truth-filled as you think you are. If your theology does not produce compassion, then your theology is heretical. As James Edwards thoughtfully says, "The test of all theology and morality is either passed or failed by one's response to the weakest and most defenseless members of society." The reason is clear: If we love God, we will love others.

## A Passionate Concern

I need to be careful when I address this, because sometimes my passions can take flight, but all this debate about whether the church should be involved in “social justice” – caring for the poor and disenfranchised – reveals that we just don't get the gospel. Yes, dead souls being raised to life is our priority, but healing dried limbs is not an either/or decision. Do both! Jesus did. As one author puts it, “For Jesus human need poses a moral imperative” (Edwards). It should for us as well. How can we say that we love God and yet not love those made in his image?

## A Public Response

I wonder how this man felt when Jesus summonsed him, “Come here!” He was now the centre of attention. It was probably the last thing that he wanted, but the very thing that he needed.

The man may have become weary of people staring at him. He had experienced that time and again in public. People who don't fit our norm are often the object of both attention and avoidance.

It is interesting that Jesus often did this. In no case was he being cruel; he was calling their attention to himself, but he was also calling attention those observing what he could do.

Each of us whom Jesus calls are also objects and trophies of his grace. Be glad for this, for his glory.

As this man stood up, and perhaps as he made his way towards Jesus, Jesus asked a question, like he did whenever he was confronted. The question was clever. It revealed incredible insight into the hearts and minds of the Pharisees. He knew what they were thinking. He knew that they were hoping to trap him. His response revealed his wisdom in avoiding a climactic showdown with the religious leaders. That day would come, but not yet.

Jesus' question went to motive; it went to the principle behind the fourth commandment. This is a lesson that we all need. And what is the principle behind the fourth commandment? *Restoration*. We might even say, *healing*. What a perfect day for a withered hand to be restored!

The weekly sabbath emphasizes rest: rest for oneself, for one's servants and even for one's animals. Rest is essential for healing of the body and the mind. The cycle of six days work, one day rest is God's gift for those who will submit to his lordship. At the end of a long week, we might feel dried up and withered, and rest is a wonderful means of being restored.

So, what better day of the week for someone to be healed of a withered hand. This man, being healed on the Sabbath was now in a wonderful position to be able to work the next six days of the week.

## Silencing the Scoffers

The Lord asks a question that forced the scoffers into silence. The question went to the principle, what is the purpose of the law? What is the principle that we need to consider when it comes to what we can or cannot do on the Sabbath? Yes, we are to rest. We all get that. But when it comes to what is allowable, we need to ask of the action whether it is a good, life-enriching activity or a bad, life-destroying action?

There were actually two questions. First, is it lawful to do good or harm on the Sabbath? Second, is it lawful to save life or to kill on the Sabbath?

The first question seems more appropriate to the matter at hand. But we need to ask, would it be harmful to not heal this man today rather than tomorrow? The answer, it seems to me, is that to refuse to do good when it is in the power of your hand to do so is to do harm. To allow one more day of suffering when you can relieve it now is to prolong misery and thereby to do harm. As English says, "To abandon the helpless man would be to cause him to remain crippled; this would clearly be to *do harm*."

Second, and related, there was no guarantee where Jesus would be the next day, and no guarantee that this man would be able to be healed the next day. Hence, to refuse to heal on the Sabbath would be to do harm. In any event, as someone has observed, "The issue is clear, it is not only permissible to heal on the Sabbath, but it is right to do so, regardless of whether it is 'lawful' to do so."

Of course, we need to keep being reminded that there was no law against healing on the Sabbath. There were only manmade rules against doing so. Jesus' answer was designed to show the folly of the Pharisaical fences. As Donald English explains, "He was not rejecting the law. He was rather looking behind it to see what principles lay there, and then applying those principles anew in the context of perceived human need around him."

The second question may be a hint that Jesus knew what they were up to (see v. 6). They planned to accuse him of violating the Sabbath so that they could charge him with the capital offence of blasphemy (though of course to break the Sabbath law could also result in a capital verdict). Jesus was saying, "You who are so concerned about the law, who are so concerned about keeping the Sabbath as a means to honour God, is it allowable for you to have murder in your heart?"

Again, Jesus was going to the principle of the matter. He was deeply concerned to restore the Sabbath to the healing and happy purpose for which God established it. So, yes, Jesus would heal this man on the Sabbath – because there was no better day to do so.

“But they were silent” – as well they might be. The word used here sometimes carries the meaning of being silenced; that is, being stunned into silence. They were stunned into silence – either by the awareness that Jesus knew what they were thinking and what they were plotting, or because of the incredible authoritative wisdom that he revealed. Jesus has a way of getting to our hearts. As Edwards comments, “For once, an argument from silence is conclusive.”

## The Sound of Silence

The silence of the Pharisees was met by anger from Jesus. He was silent, for a moment, but his silence shouted.

Jesus “looked around” at them. This word speaks of a penetrating gaze (see 3:34; 11:11). It must have been a piercing look. That is certainly the conclusion when you consider the next words: “with anger, grieved.” What a woeful combination. Walter Wessel explains, “The looking ‘around at them in anger’ was momentary (aorist tense), but the being ‘deeply distressed’ was continuous (present tense). Jesus’ distress was caused by their ‘stubborn hearts,’ i.e., their consistent failure to recognize who he really was.”

The word “anger” conveys the meaning of abhorrence, indignation, or vengeance. It is used to speak of the wrath of God (Matthew 3:7, etc.). Jesus – God – was angry with them. But he was also deeply “grieved.” The word means “sorrow,” and this is its only occurrence in the New Testament. Jesus was grieved to the point of indignation at the silent response of these religious leaders. They may have come to church that Sabbath, but that would not help them to escape the wrath of God.

And you? You may have sing the songs and bow your head in prayer, but are you under the wrath of God? What does he see in your heart? A heart of belief, or a heart of blindness?

“Hardness of heart” speaks of a callousness or blindness. It communicates the idea of a dulled or blunted perception. It speaks of a stubbornness, which is not willing to understand. It is not an innocent hardness. As Jesus will say later, truly the blind were leading the blind, and both were heading for a ditch. But Jesus would rescue at least one of them.

This is truly a disturbing scene, for as William Lane writes, “The rejection of Jesus entails the rejection of life and redemption and leaves men prey to distress and death. This is the bitter fruit of that hardness of heart which provoked in Jesus both anger and godly sorrow.”

## Spiritual Cardiology

Like our physical hearts, our spiritual hearts need to be cared for. Healthy habits contribute to both.

If you don't want a heart that hardens to God, then be careful about your *diet*. Regularly consume a combo meal: prayer and the word of God.

Exercise your heart by engaging with one another in the body of Christ. Gather with God's people. Minister to another. Have regular check-ups. Make yourself accountable to another. Gather to hear God's word, placing yourself in the position where the Holy Spirit, like a CT scan to the body, will identify issues below the surface.

## Spiritual Statins

Sometimes, we need a dosage of spiritual statins to help to reduce the threat of hardness of heart. Friends may well serve this need by meeting with us and encouraging us to love and good works. Ongoing counselling is sometimes called for. Don't skip the dosage that your condition requires.

## The Word Saves

Jesus commanded, the man complied, and he was cured. So simple, and yet so profound.

It is interesting that Jesus did not touch the man. Rather, he spoke and the man was healed. That, even by a Pharisee's definition, could not be labelled work. Jesus had outwitted these wicked men.

We see here several things worth considering.

First, consider the compassionate courage of Jesus, who would not leave this man in a broken condition. He loved this man and therefore restored him. This is what the Great Shepherd does.

Further, Jesus acted with courage. He knew that his actions would put his life in jeopardy. He knew that he would be criticised. Nevertheless, he acted on behalf of this man. This is why we call him the *Good Shepherd*. And those who are his sheep should follow suit. We too need to actively pursue the improvement of others. How can we say that we love God and yet be careless about the sufferings of others? John Calvin insightfully wrote, "He who takes away the life of a man is held to be a criminal; and there is little difference between manslaughter and the conduct of him who does not concern himself about relieving a person in distress."

Think about that when you are deciding whether to attend the church's weekly prayer meeting. Think about that when you see someone unjustly treated. Think about that when you see the social injustices in our land.

Second, consider the power of the word of God. The fact that Jesus spoke and the man was healed makes it very clear that this was not the work of mere man; it was the work of God. And God does work on his Sabbath (see John 5:16–17).

The word "restored" requires little explanation. It simply, and remarkably, means that his hand was now in the condition in which it was originally intended to be. By the power of the word of Christ, he was fit to enter the temple to worship God (Leviticus 21:16ff). This is gospel!

By the message and the word of Christ, we too can enter the presence of God and worship him (Romans 10:13–17). By the power of Christ's *word*, we can become a part of the temple of God (Ephesians 2:19–22). By the power of Christ's word, we can be restored; we can have vitality. By the power of the gospel of Christ, we can have *life*.

## Sovereign Grace

Perhaps today you find yourself "withered." You find no vitality in life. You are dried out in your soul and have no relationship with God. But perhaps there is something stirring in you. Perhaps it is the voice of Jesus calling to you. Answer that call. Stretch out your hand today to him and he will save you.

It has been observed that Jesus was the only one who could restore this man to the fullness of joy that God intended for the Sabbath. That remains true in our day. Only the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath, can provide the grace that we need for our sin-withered souls. And once we experience that grace, we, of all people, should look to our weekly Lord's Day as an opportunity for further joy, coupled with further restoration and healing.

This man was put on the spot, and his conversion was very public. That is how it is for all who will call upon the Lord. We need to openly own him. Will you? Like this man, obey the call of the Lord and, by his merciful healing, be restored to what you were created for!

## Satanic Scheme

Finally, we see, in v. 6, a Satanic scheme: "The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."

As the scene comes to an end, the man with the shrivelled hand was restored, and those with the whole bodies but shrivelled *souls* were enraged. Satan was at work. And for the

first time in Mark's story, the audience is made fully aware of the shadow of the cross that follows Jesus as he obeyed the will of God.

Many have noted that the Herodians were a sect of which very little is known. Outside of the New Testament and a brief mention by Josephus, we don't know much about them. We do know that they were a group loyal to Herod Antipas. So, why does Mark mention them? Clearly, to highlight the hatred of the Pharisees.

It is hard to imagine two groups more diametrically opposed than the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees despised this Edomite King. And yet those loyal to Herod and those who loathed Herod conspired together to kill Jesus. Though holding diverse ideologies, both groups shared an enmity to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Both groups were opposed to God's rule. As Grogan describes, "people with daggers drawn are united in their opposition to Jesus and the gospel."

Yet, in this darkness, there was also good news. For the fate of this man and that of Jesus are intimately and inextricably combined. To help the one, the other must die. "By bringing the new life of God's rule to bear, Jesus risks losing his own life" (Witherington).

Every healing, every deliverance, every miracle of restoration done by Jesus was costly. They would cost him his life. These problems underscored the ultimate problem: a sinful world that needs to be saved from our sins; a sinful world that needs to be forgiven. This sinful world needs the Son of Man to give his life a ransom for our sins (10:45).

## Light in the Darkness

Amidst an ugly scene like this, the gospel nevertheless shines through. Yes, even when ugliness sometimes rears its head in a place and people of worship, the gospel can shine bright.

Don't write off the gospel because of those who, through blindness and hardening of the spiritual arteries, behave in a hostile, even hateful, way. Rather, ask the Lord to give you a new heart that you might believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved.

Christian, this is the heart of the Lord's Day: restoration and rest from our sins as we find and experience our rest in the Saviour, the Lord of this Day, the Lord of the Sabbath. He is our Sabbath, he is our rest. Come to him, stretch out your hand to him, and be restored today.

AMEN