

Mark 3:1 And He entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a withered hand. **2** So they watched Him closely, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. **3** And He said to the man who had the withered hand, "Step forward." **4** Then He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they kept silent. **5** And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched *it* out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. **6** Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him. (NKJV)

The keeping of the Sabbath is becoming a theme. Jesus keeps pushing the issue and the Pharisees keep attacking, even though Jesus always shows superior reasoning and understanding of scripture.

In order to understand just how loaded this controversy was, it is helpful to understand how the Jews of the day thought about this issue. The following is a quote from the Gaebelin commentary. It was addressing last week's text, but it also applies to today's as well.

"In exilic and postexilic Judaism the Law was elevated above the Writings and the Prophets so that the regulations about the Sabbath were accorded the utmost seriousness. One of the most striking texts in this regard is [Jeremiah 17:24-25](#), where God promises that kings will sit on David's throne and that Jerusalem will never be destroyed if the people of Judah keep the Sabbath day holy by not doing any work on it. Several centuries later Rabbi Shim'on ben Jochai taught that Israel's redemption would come when all the people kept only two Sabbaths perfectly (Lohse 1971:8). By the time Jesus began to preach in the synagogues of Galilee, the Pharisees had developed an inflexible connection between the Sabbath traditions and the hope that the Messiah would come.

The question that the Pharisees put to Jesus was not a simple request for an informed opinion. It was an accusation that the disciples were acting outside the limits of the law. At issue was the commandment not to do any work on the Sabbath, and the disciples might have violated the Pharisees' tradition in either of two ways. Plucking a handful of grain could have been considered harvesting, something specifically prohibited in [Exodus 34:21](#). Alternatively, since most people had to walk to complete any kind of errand, the Pharisees had defined how far someone could walk on the Sabbath without working. A stroll of about half a mile was permitted, but a greater distance was considered work. The text does not say how much grain they plucked, whether they ate it or how far they walked. We simply read the accusation that the disciples did something unlawful on the Sabbath.

This is an important observation, for it shows that the controversy was not about the violation of a particular Sabbath tradition, but about the importance of the Sabbath itself. This controversy is part of the conflict between the old and new. In this case the new is Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom of God is near. The old is the expectation that keeping the law, especially the traditions about the Sabbath, is the factor that determines when the rule of God would appear on earth. For the Pharisees, it was inconceivable that the reign of God would be ushered in by someone who did not revere the law as they did."

The IVP New Testament Commentary Series - The IVP New Testament Commentary Series – Mark.

Now, just to give you an idea of what the Sabbath had turned into, this is from The Christ of the Gospels from J W Shepard

“Moses said “Thou shalt not do any work”. The Rabbi’s made out a system of thirty-nine works, which done, rendered the subject to death by stoning. Derived from these “father-works” were numerous “descendant works”. One of the “father works” was plowing; a son of this was digging. Wearing false teeth was a descendent of carrying a burden. Among the descendants of reaping were the plucking a head of wheat or the pulling out of a gray hair from one’s head. Lengthy rules were formulated about what kinds of knots one might tie on the Sabbath. The camel driver’s and sailor’s knots might not be tied or unloosed. Two letters of the alphabet might not be written together. To kindle or extinguish a fire was a great desecration, not being justified even in the case of an emergency of sickness. The Sabbaths had become a grievous burden by the thousands of such restrictions and rules too numerous to mention.”

I particularly like this rule. A person having a toothache might not gargle vinegar unless he afterwards swallow it. He might however dip his tooth-brush in vinegar. Now, naturally, when you have that many rules there will be loopholes. The Pharisees were amazingly adept at coming up with elaborately reasoned loopholes that allowed them to do what they wanted to do on the Sabbath, but the common man could not. Human nature never changes.

OK, so we go to our text.

Mark 3:1 And He entered the synagogue again,

So Christ enters the synagogue again. This is clearly what Christ does when He is in town. Here is an obvious application right off the bat. If Christ was in the habit of worshipping with other believers, how much more should we be? If anyone could have said how much more they worship in solitude and nature, couldn’t Christ have said that a million times more. And He even knew what was in the hearts of men. We might **think** we know. But He knew. And He still fellowshipped regularly.

a man was there who had a withered hand

We don't know if this was a birth defect, diseased, or due to an accident. But we do know that his problem was obvious.

Now, if you have even the least amount of human kindness in your heart, the kind that humans apart from God are capable of, what would you have been thinking at this point? Wouldn't you have thought, wouldn't it be nice if Christ heals this guy? Wouldn't that be a positive thing?

Well it didn't escape the Pharisee's attention that Christ might heal this guy.

2 So they watched Him closely, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath,

Oh, isn't that nice. They must want this man to experience the mercy and grace of God. They must really care about their parishioners. Well, no not really.

They watched to see if Christ might heal him **so that they might accuse Christ.**

Evidently they want to see Christ do something that very clearly violates their Sabbath laws. That is what they are waiting and watching for.

Does it strike you just how utterly evil this is? They could care less about the man with the withered hand. They could care less about the pain that he experienced in his life. It didn't matter at all to them. They only cared about themselves, and their pride, and their institution, and their power. Oh how they hated their Messiah.

This is the nature of human religion. It doesn't really matter which one. The Muslim religion gets front and center attention with how its radicals violently murder and maim. But ultimately all religion that finds its source in the hearts and minds of men will end up in the same place if given the right circumstances.

Judiasm was a religion based on words that were revealed and delivered by God to man. Yet look at its history. Over the centuries it was constantly guilty of killing the prophets. And when the Son of the originator of the religion showed up, He was brutally murdered.

Religions that originate in the hearts and minds of men will exhibit the evil of men when the circumstances prompt it. Because that is what comes out of the heart of men. It doesn't matter what title the religion has.

But true faith, that is something completely different. True faith finds its source completely outside of the human mind and heart. It is a gift from God. And it changes a person from the inside out. True faith would see the man with the withered hand and bring that person to Christ for healing. It would act like Christ acted.

So the scene is set. The man with the withered hand is the bait. The Pharisees are watching so they can spring on Christ when He takes the bait. And the trap is the law of the Sabbath.

3 And He said to the man who had the withered hand, "Step forward."

Now, if we were with Christ, wouldn't we have said, or at least thought, Jesus, why not just wait until tomorrow. You can know for sure that this guy will come back if you tell him to. Just one day. What difference will it make?

But instead of that, Christ shows his utter contempt for what the Pharisees call religion. He calls the man front and center. While the Pharisees slink about in the shadows carrying out their wickedness, Christ will have nothing to do with that. The Pharisees make their points like the Devil does. Insinuation, implication, accusation. He accomplishes most of his work in the dark.

But Christ brings everything to the light because He IS the light of the world. Let's get this issue on the table. Let's get it right out in the open. Let's talk about the real issues. Christ would not have tolerated the "elephants in the room" that we often dance around. He takes the elephant and puts it front and center. So let's discuss the Sabbath. Let's talk about it.

4 Then He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"

Evidently, this way of framing a question was something that was common in the middle eastern culture. It is a question using the extremes of both sides to make the point. Either you actively do good for a person, or you are passive, withholding help and are complicit in whatever negative outcome occurs. So which is the Sabbath for? Doing good or withholding good and doing evil? This could also have been a reference to the fact the Pharisees wanted to kill him. Is it lawful to do the good that Christ wants to do or to murder like the Pharisees wanted to do to Christ. Had they been thinking, they may have realized the Pharisees were under the greatest condemnation. They were making plans to murder on the Sabbath.

Jesus was not willing to allow the Pharisees shallow thinking to stand. He would not accept an evaluation on their platform. He was going to lay out a framework of truth. He was going to grant **God's perspective** instead of **man's perspective**. Fundamentally, what is the Sabbath for?

The Pharisees were completely wrong about their view of the Sabbath. They had it calculated to the place that it was sheer bondage to the Jews. They would have dreaded the Sabbath because they would have had to watch their backs on that day. They would have had to concern themselves about what the neighbors saw their kids doing. Most play would be considered work. The Sabbath Nazis were always right around the corner. They had turned that which was designed for man's good into just another thou shalt not.

We can thank our God that this is not what He is like. This is what the devil implies and infers. But that is not what our God is like.

So Christ asked the question. Philosophically, what is the Sabbath for? Man's good or his detriment?

The Pharisees know they are in a bind. They have been outwitted. They cannot say good, or they give permission to Christ to do the healing. They can't say evil, because everyone would know they were fools. So by their silence they give implicit permission.

A book by Charles Erdman says The Sabbath law does rest from labor. But that law must yield to the law of love. Work must be avoided on the Sabbath, if possible, but works of mercy are not only innocent but their voluntary refusal is sinful.

And what was the Pharisees response?

But they kept silent.

Don't you hate that? These guys are the religious know it alls. And they are the religious power brokers. And they are the religious elite. But they lack a very substantial quality. The truth. So they can never make an authoritative stand on God's word. They have to poise their attacks in political power or monetary power. They cannot take on a spiritual adversary toe to toe because they are on the wrong side of truth. They will insult. They will accuse. They will berate. They will belittle. But they will not debate an issue on any kind of level ground.

This is always the ground of the moral legalist. They are right because they are right. But they do not have to submit themselves to a sincere and logical question. Legalists are always the same. What they lack in reason they make up for in venom.

The Pharisees kept silent because they knew anything they would have said would have been demolished by Christ's truth.

Matthew adds to this story.

Matthew 12:11 Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? 12 Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." (NKJV)

Naturally Jesus reasoning is rock solid. Now look at what he appeals to. He appeals to what every single one of his listeners would do if their wealth was threatened. Every one of them would do the work that it would take to lift a sheep out of a pit. Now sheep can get pretty heavy. There are plenty of sheep I wouldn't want to have to lift out of a pit. This could turn into real work. But no one is going to leave a sheep die because it happens to be the Sabbath. Everyone would either think that surely God would not want that sheep to die because of the day it is when it fell into the pit. Or they would think, surely God will forgive me for this trespass because I don't want to lose the value of this sheep due to an accident.

That is the precedent. And probably every single one of these Pharisees knows this to be the absolute truth. They might say one thing. But in reality this is how they would decide.

Then Christ takes this truth and builds on it. You already show that you would do work on the Sabbath for a sheep. Now, which are more important? Men or sheep? Case closed.

No one would refuse to save a life of a sheep on the Sabbath. A man is more important than a sheep. Therefore no one should refuse to save the life of a man on the Sabbath.

Wow. How are you going to argue with that?

Therefore it is lawful to do a good thing to a man on the Sabbath.

With Jesus' enemies absolutely silenced now, Jesus begins.

5 And when He had looked around at them with anger

Some people believe that anger is always evil. That is impossible. Christ was angry. The word used here is of a fruit swelling with juice. It is normally used for anger, wrath, indignation.

Christ was very angry with these gutless religious hypocrites who only did harm to his people and never did them good. The word used means that His anger was very short lived. He looked around at them giving them plenty of time to respond. But they did not respond, because they were snakes. They feigned sincerity and concern for truth, but all they wanted was what this life and flesh could provide.

being grieved by the hardness of their hearts,

But Christ had mixed emotions. He was also inwardly grieved. The tense of this word is something that stayed with Him. He was continually grieved. The tense of the word means it was continuous.

These people were untouchable, unreachable. They had a position and they were not going to change.

Now, why would Christ feel this way knowing that these people were destined for wrath? Frankly, I don't know. But He does serve as our example. This is how we should feel for those who are so hardened against truth, those who prove to want to be our enemies. Even those who want to destroy us like these men wanted to destroy Christ.

The Christian life isn't real easy to figure. We know we will have enemies. We know even why it will happen. We know our enemies are at least, in some senses, powerless to do otherwise. And it angers us. And we feel grief along with that anger. When that happens we should not be surprised. That is exactly what Christ experienced.

He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand."

Now Christ is ready to display His power. Now watch what happens. No one could say that stretching out your hand violates any Sabbath law. But Christ tells him to.

And he stretched *it* out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other.

Here is another good example to follow. This man did not allow his fear of the Pharisees to change His obedience to His Savior. He had to know this was a loaded situation. But when Christ said “Stretch out your hand”, he stretched. Now as we read this, we realize that Christ did nothing that could be perceived as work. He didn’t even speak anything. He told the man to reach out. The man reached. The man was whole.

Wow. This is amazing.

The man that was healed had to feel like rejoicing at this point. A wonderful life changing event had just happened to him. He was never going to be the same again. Christ had shown him an amazing bit of grace. He was whole. It was impossible, but it was true.

Those in the synagogue had just seen another showdown with Christ and the religious big shots. Christ made utter fools of them. He shut them up. He spoke with His normal authority and his reasoning could not be argued against.

Everyone would have known who the expert was and who the novices were. Christ had healed a man. Only Christ, in this showdown, really cared about the good of the common man. Only Christ was willing to face the enmity of the religious power brokers in order to heal the man with a withered hand.

And on top of that, Christ had done something that was absolutely impossible. He had healed a condition that could not be healed. But it was, none the less.

So, to the crowd this was wonderful.

To the healed man this was wonderful.

Now, if the Pharisees cared a lick about truth, if they cared a lick about spiritual realities, if they cared at all about knowing who the Messiah was and preparing for Him, they would have thought this was all wonderful.

They could have easily thought, you know, I have been approaching this all wrong. I was trying to expose Christ. But what happened was **it was me** that was exposed.

I can see that my assumptions are wrong about the Messiah. My motives are wrong in trying to serve God. This man is the Messiah, the Son of God. This man loves people and heals them. Maybe He will love me if I respond to His call on my life. Maybe my soul can be healed like this man’s hand was healed.

But no. That is not at all the response that they had.

The response they had was the most insidious response one could imagine.

6 Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him. (NKJV)

I watched a tv interview once with Neil Young. He is far from a theologian, but someone asked him about world peace. He said the only thing that would unite the world would be a common enemy. I am sure I don’t have the quote verbatim but it struck me as being profound.

The Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Herodians all hated each other. The Pharisees hated Pilate. But in the end, all of them came together for one thing. They came together to kill Christ.

In Revelations it appears that the same thing will happen to this wonderful family of man. They will all come together to fight God at Armageddon. And they will be instantly defeated.

And what had Jesus done wrong?

He was healing everyone who came to Him.

He was preaching the truth about salvation.

He was holding out hope for sinners.

He was casting out demons.

He was looking out for the little guy.

He was bringing together all the niches of the society under the umbrella of worshipping Him.

And He was displaying the Holiness and Power of God everywhere He went.

So naturally He needed to die for that.

It is really impossible to understand the world without believing in a God and a Devil. People could not be just this stupid all by themselves. To conclude that Christ must die based on all the good things Christ had done had to come from another source. It had to come from evil that is more than natural. It would have to be supernatural.

To join all these sworn enemies in this one common goal had to come from a greater source than human origin.

There is coming a day when all the peoples of the world will unite in the defiance of the one true God. This goes beyond stupid. It is truly evil.

That is the world we live in.

The wording in this passage implies that the decision to kill Christ had been made previously. The only thing new is the coalition forces being formed.

For application this morning, it seems to me we would do well to search ourselves for the kind of evil legalism that the Pharisees displayed. Whenever our desire is greater **to punish a brother for their sin** than to **rescue our brother from a sin**, we are guilty of this evil. When what we would prefer to see is suffering for sin over forgiveness of sin, we have the Pharisee's disease. Think about it. Are there people who you watch like a hawk, and if you are honest, what you are looking for are flaws in them that will make you feel better about yourself? That is the same kind of evil the Pharisees were displaying. When we see those things, we need to

call them what they are and bring them to the light of God's presence. We need to confess that sin and repent of it.

Another application is found in the example of Christ. Look at what **He took on** in order to do good to this man. He took on the whole religious establishment and He put his own life in greater peril. What would we do in that setting? Would we shy away, being unwilling to face the consequences? Would we leave the man in his suffering because the cost to us would be too great? That is not what **Christ** would do. And that is not what **Christ in us** would do.

And a third application is in regard to how we think, how we decide right and wrong. There is a law of love that needs calculated into our decisions. Scripture really did have some things to say about the Sabbath. The point about carrying a burden would have been the one most directly applicable to the man who was healed of his illness and picked up his cot and walked. But the law of love was of a higher priority than the Sabbath technicality at that point. The curing of the man's illness was a wonderful act of love, and it allowed for a freedom to carry this small burden to his home. No one in that circumstance could really have called that work.

As Christians, we must be able to discern what sin is. Christ doesn't go soft on sin. But He does show an incredible willingness to forgive it. One day He promises that He will punish it if it is not covered by His sacrifice. So we can't go soft on sin. It is serious. But we need to consider it from the framework of thinking that Christ gives us instead of the Pharisees framework of thinking.

That should give us enough to apply this week.