

Mark 3:1-6, The Heart of God and Man

3 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. **2** And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. **3** And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." **4** 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. **5** 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. **6** The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

In our last lesson, we saw that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. This week we will see that God is good, that unregenerate men are wicked, and that conflict is the result.

I. The Divine Purpose of the Sabbath -

1. A Man in Need

a. The Setting - The occasion is another Sabbath Day at a synagogue. The particular location is not specified, but most commentators believe that the synagogue in Capernaum is meant (see Mk. 2:1; 2:13). Cranfield and France think that the phrase word "again he entered the synagogue" may refer back to 1:21.⁽¹⁾

b. The Man with a Withered Hand - The word "withered" means "dried up"⁽²⁾ or "stiff".⁽³⁾ Most scholars understand this to be a form of paralysis. The Translator's Handbook to Mark states that "what is indicated is a stiffness, an inability to use the hand."⁽⁴⁾ Because the disability is very noticeable, a degree of deformity seems implied as well. The Greek word translated "hand" "may itself even include the entire arm, but probably in this context the best correspondence is what we would probably understand by hand, wrist, and possibly forearm..."⁽⁵⁾

The lost apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews recorded an interesting legend about this man, which St. Jerome preserved by quoting in his commentary on Matthew's Gospel:

"I was a mason, who earned his bread with his hands. I beg you, Jesus, to restore to me my health, so that I need not beg for food in shameful fashion."⁽⁶⁾

Of course, this account is not in canonical scripture and there is no way to know for sure if there is any truth to it. R. Alan Cole makes perhaps the best case that can be made for it:

"Many of these extra-canonical details preserved in such sources may well be true; otherwise it is hard to see why they were invented, since they prove no theological truth. Much oral tradition about Jesus must have lingered in Palestine, at least until the cataclysm of AD 70."⁽⁷⁾

I include the story because I find it interesting, but also because it reminds us that this was a real man with a real story who was healed by Jesus, even if this story is not his.

c. Jesus' Rorschach Test - A "Rorschach Test" is a psychological diagnostic tool where patients are asked to look at ink blots and tell what they see. Jesus' version of this test is to call the man with the withered hand to stand before the people so they might reveal what they see in the man.

Synagogues were built according to the same basic plan. Whereas we usually build churches with all the seats pointed in one direction toward a pulpit or stage at one end of the room, Jewish synagogues of the time were built with seating all around the edges of the room, with a raised platform in the center of the room upon which the speaker would stand.

Jesus had probably moved to the center to speak, and he called the man to him. When Jesus says, "come here," the phrase in Greek means literally, "get up in the middle."⁽⁸⁾ Jesus wanted the Pharisees to look on the man and see if they saw what he saw: a man in the image of God who was in need of restoration to wholeness. What they saw was a sinner who probably deserved his

affliction, and at any rate could be healed on another day. But principally, they saw the man as a way to trap Jesus into doing something with which they could accuse him.

2. A Proper View of the Sabbath - A proper view of the Sabbath drawn from scripture informs us that God created the Sabbath for the good of his people. We are to restrict ourselves from ordinary activities in order that we might be physically and spiritually renewed for the coming week, and in that our heads might be lifted from the mundane to focus our attention on eternal things. The week becomes a pattern of existence; we look forward to an eternal "rest" at the end of our days, in which we will be delivered from temptation and sin, suffering, death and disease, poverty and hunger, etc. Therefore to free anyone from these things, even temporarily, is an appropriate activity on the Sabbath. The Sabbath celebrates our redemption and anticipates the consummation of our eternal life with God.

a. RESTRict - Restrict ourselves from the work and recreational activities that characterize the six ordinary days.

b. RESTrengthen - Restrengthen our bodies through resting from ordinary labor, refreshing us for another week of work.

c. RESTore - Restoring things to they way things ought to be: doing good, helping people in need, seeking justice, showing mercy, looking forward in faith to the eschatological Sabbath (Heb. 3-4; Matt. 25:31-46).

d. RESTimultate - Restimulate our devotion to the Lord by corporate worship and private prayers and singing, as well as reading the Bible and other spiritual literature.

II. The Pharisees' Understanding of the Sabbath

1. Keeping God at Bay - Some of the Jews who returned from exile in Babylon had developed an unhealthy fear of God. Fearing God is a good thing, but some took it to extremes. They would refuse to pronounce the covenant name of God, "Yahweh," for fear of profaning it. When reading the scriptures, they would substitute the word "Adonai" which means "lord" or "master". They were afraid of profaning the Sabbath as well. The aforementioned thirty-nine categories of Sabbath-breaking activities were created to try to "fence" the law and ensure no transgression of it. Instead it just made the Sabbath a burden.

2. Mark of Spiritual Pride - The Jews viewed the Sabbath as something that set them apart from other peoples. This is true, for Exo. 31:13 says, "You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.'" But this also became a pretext for some to think themselves better than others. Pharisees viewed those Jews who could not or did not observe their traditions of Sabbath observance as sinners. Gentiles were even worse, no better than unclean dogs in the minds of some.

3. Keeping Lawyers Busy - Being a scribe (lawyer) had its perks. Not all of them were wealthy, but it was possible to become so if one was able to attract many students. Being scribe was prestigious; parents would want you to marry their daughters, you would have a place of honor in the synagogue, you would be influential in the community, an important man who would find favor and open doors with those in power. Of them Jesus said,

"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." (Mark 12:38-40).

Lawyers, like everyone else, are into self-preservation. If the laws are too simple, a lawyer is not needed. Taking the Sabbath as an example, the Bible prohibits working on the Sabbath, but contains very few demonstrations of what is considered work (kindling a fire, Ex. 35:3; gathering sticks, Nu. 15:32-36; travelling, Ex. 16:29; bearing a burden, Jer. 17:21-22; sowing and reaping, Ex. 34:21). The scribes created thirty-nine categories of work prohibited on the Sabbath,⁽⁹⁾ each carefully defined with further rules. And that is just one area of law! No wonder Jesus said of them,

"Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers." (Luke 11:46).

By contrast, Jesus said of himself,

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28).

4. Plotting Murder - On the occasion in our text, a strong contrast is drawn between Jesus and his enemies. Jesus has come to do good and to save life. But the Pharisees come to synagogue that Sabbath morning with the express purpose of harming and killing Jesus. This is hinted at by a couple of details in the story, and made explicit of course in the last verse of our text.

a. Watching closely - The Pharisees had set up their case against Jesus in Mark 2:24 by warning him that he was in violating the Sabbath (as they understood it). The next step was to find him in contempt of that warning, have him arrested, tried, and executed as a Sabbath-breaker. The word for "watching" can have the sense of "to lie in wait for."⁽¹⁰⁾

b. That they might accuse him - The word "accuse" means "lay a charge against"⁽¹¹⁾ and is "a technical term meaning to bring charge in court against someone."⁽¹²⁾

c. How to Destroy Him - The Pharisees immediately found some of Herod's men (Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee ca. 4 BC - 39 AD) to plot the execution of Jesus. They needed the approval of Herod in order to carry out a capital sentence.

III. The Heart of Man and God

1. The Heart of Man - We should not view ourselves as by nature better than the Pharisees. If we differ from them at all, it is by grace. Like our progenitor Adam, we are prone to the desire to be God (Gen. 3:5). When things don't go our way, we get angry and like Cain we desire to strike out at God (Gen. 4:1-8). Lacking the ability to do so, we direct our wrath to those in God's image, particularly those who have been given authority over us.

There was a time in the earth when "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually...and the earth was filled with violence" (Gen. 6:5, 11). This was before the institution of true government (Rom. 13:3-5), after which the threat of execution restrained men somewhat from violence. That is our heart in its fallen state, devoid of grace. The Westminster Confession of Faith describes our nature after the fall and apart from both common and saving grace as "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil" (WCF 6.4). Paul, quoting from the Old Testament, puts it this way:

"For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one."

"Their throat is an open grave;

they use their tongues to deceive."

"The venom of asps is under their lips."

"Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."

"Their feet are swift to shed blood;

in their paths are ruin and misery,

and the way of peace they have not known."

"There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Romans 3:9b-18).

In another place, Jesus made clear that the murderous desire of the Pharisees stemmed from their conformity to the will of that same serpent that brought about the fall of our first parents:

42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. **43** Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. **44** You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him (John 8:42-44).

When one of the great Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn painted the crucifixion of Christ, he depicted himself raising Jesus on the cross. This expresses the profound theological truth that in fact all our sins caused the death of Christ. If our desires are different than the Pharisees, it is because God has changed us in Christ by his grace and has adopted us in him as sons:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, **4** even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love **5** he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, **6** to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. **7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, **8** which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight **9** making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ **10** as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:3-10).

2. The Heart of God - We see in the text that when Jesus perceived the hardness of heart of the Pharisees, he responded with both anger and grief. This is the heart of God, made visible in the person of Christ. Though he was angered at the evil desire of the Pharisees, he also grieved over their sin. On this passage Calvin wrote:

"This is true moderation of zeal, to be distressed about the destruction of wicked men, and, at the same time, to be filled with wrath at their ungodliness. Again, as this passage assures us, that Christ was not free from human passions, we infer from it that the passions themselves are not sinful, provided there be no excess. In consequence of the corruption of our nature, we do not preserve moderation; and our anger, even when it rests upon proper grounds, is never free from sin. With Christ the case was different; for not only did his nature retain its original purity, but he was a perfect pattern of righteousness. We ought therefore to implore from heaven the Spirit of God to correct our excesses."⁽¹³⁾

Notes

1. Cranfield, C. E. B. The Gospel According to St. Mark [The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary], p. 119; France, R. T. The Gospel of Mark [The New International Greek Testament Commentary], p. 149.
2. Alexander, J. A. The Gospel According to Mark [Thornapple Commentaries], p. 56.
3. Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark [The Pillar New Testament Commentary], p. 98.
4. Bratcher and Nida. A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark, p. 103.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
6. Quoted by Lane, William L. The Gospel According to Mark [New International Commentary on the New Testament], p. 122.
7. Cole, R. Alan. The Gospel According to St. Mark [Tyndale New Testament Commentaries], p. 75.
8. Brooks, James A. Mark [The New American Commentary], p. 68.
9. The list of the categories from a modern Jewish source can be found at: <http://ou.org.s3.amazonaws.com/publications/kaplan/shabbat/39.htm>.
10. Guelich, Robert A. Mark 1-8:26 [Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 34a], p. 134.
11. Gundry, Robert H. Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross, p. 150.
12. Bratcher and Nida. A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark, p. 104.

13. Calvin, John. Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Vol. II, p. 55.