

HEALING of the WITHERED HAND

Context: Doing Work on the Sabbath

Matthew 12:1-8

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. **2** And when the Pharisees saw *it*, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!"

3 But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: **4** how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? **5** Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? **6** Yet I say to you that in this place there is *One* greater than the temple. **7** But if you had known what *this* means, '*I desire mercy and not sacrifice,*' you would not have condemned the guiltless. **8** For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

Matthew 12:9-14

9 Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. **10** And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" – that they might accuse Him.

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." **13** Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched *it* out, and it was restored as whole as the other. **14** Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.

Mark 3:1-6

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.

Luke 6:6-11

6 Now it happened on another Sabbath, also, that He entered the synagogue and taught. And a man was there whose right hand was withered. **7** So the scribes and Pharisees watched Him closely, whether He would heal on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against Him. **8** But He knew their thoughts, and said to the man who had the withered hand, "Arise and stand here." And he arose and stood. **9** Then Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one thing: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy?" **10** And when He had looked around at them all, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. **11** But they were filled with rage, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

On a certain Sabbath (date unknown), Jesus entered a synagogue (place unknown), and healed a man there who had a withered hand. The scribes and Pharisees, seeing an opportunity to accuse Him of breaking the law of the Sabbath (which would be cause to stone Him), asks, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day?"

Jesus knew their motive and asks,
"Is it lawful to do good or evil, to save life or to kill?"

Jesus looked with anger! (Mark 3:5) Being grieved at their hardness of heart!
Then He asks (Matthew 12:11) Sheep? Man? Wherefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath! And He heals the man's hand by a word, thus no "work."
They seek to destroy Him (Matthew 12:14)

The context of all three Gospel accounts is immediately following Jesus' disciples plucking and eating grain on the Sabbath. Thus Jesus is teaching the true law of the Sabbath.

Luke calls this "another Sabbath," i.e. the second Sabbath after Passover and Jesus and His disciples pass through a field of grain on the Sabbath. His disciples casually pick some grain and rub it together and eat. The Pharisees accuse them of "harvesting and threshing." The Jews had taken the Sabbath which was intended to be a day of rest and joy and so restricted it that it was oppressive.

As an historical note, it was abuse of the Sabbath that was largely the reason for the Babylonian captivity, so the reaction was to the extreme! During the captivity, rigid observance of the Sabbath was about the only expression of religion they had left. There was no temple! All the festivals centered on Jerusalem.

The Law:

Exodus 31:12-17

¹² And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹³ "Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: 'Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it *is* a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that *you* may know that I *am* the LORD who sanctifies you. ¹⁴ You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for *it is* holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does *any* work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. ¹⁵ Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh *is* the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does *any* work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. ¹⁶ Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations *as* a perpetual covenant. ¹⁷ It *is* a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for *in* six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.'"

2 Chronicles 36:17-21

¹⁷ Therefore He brought against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, on the aged or the weak; He gave *them* all into his hand. ¹⁸ And all the articles from the house of God, great and small, the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his leaders, all *these* he took to Babylon. ¹⁹ Then they burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions. ²⁰ And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, ²¹ to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

The scribes and Pharisees took the narrowest possible view of “work,” e.g., you could not eat an egg laid on the Sabbath unless you killed the hen. The hen must be “punished” for violating the Sabbath.

On a philosophical note, men who reject the Bible in many parts, are often most severe in the parts they want to follow. Also, where there is little or no religion of heart and life, there is often extreme attention to ritual and form. In our time it is radical Islam.

So the Pharisees could “devour widow’s houses and make, for pretence, long prayers.” They could make the law loose or binding at their own choice.

Jesus meets the Pharisees position on the Sabbath with five arguments:

1st Argument: A similar incident happened in the life of David. (1 Sam 21:6)

David and his men, weary and faint, come to the tabernacle on a Sabbath. The priest gives them the old shewbread (which was only lawful for the priests to eat). It is better to relieve suffering than to keep to the letter of the law.

Principle:

When two obligations seem to conflict, the higher suspends the lower. E.g., children are to obey their parents. But if obeying parents results in disobeying God, then they should obey God. So, relieving suffering (mercy) is a higher priority than rest on the Sabbath. When a thing is necessary, or involves an act of mercy, do it, even on the Sabbath.

2nd Argument: The priests themselves “work” on the Sabbath and are excused. Sacrifices were to be offered and other duties were performed.

3rd Argument: Matthew 9:10-13 quotes Hosea, answering the charge of “eating with publicans and sinners.” “I will have mercy and not sacrifice.”

Matthew 9:10-13

¹⁰ Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, *that* behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw *it*, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹² When Jesus heard *that*, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ But go and learn what *this* means: *'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'* For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Principle:

Mercy is the spirit of the law; sacrifice is the letter of the law.

Whenever carrying out the letter of the law violates the spirit of the law, the letter should give way.

The spirit of the law of the Sabbath is the promotion of health and well being of man. So, when the letter of the law interferes with the spirit, the spirit must be kept.

4th Argument: epigrammatic aphorism of the principle of #3.

“For the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

Epigram: a concise poem dealing with one thought, satirical, with an ingenious turn of thought.

Aphorism: terse formulation of truth.

The keeping of the Sabbath was not the reason man was made! The Sabbath was ordained to be kept that man might glorify God. The Pharisees had lost this truth and were radically wrong in their manner of Sabbath-keeping.

5th Argument: The relation of Son of Man to the Sabbath. The Son of Man is Messiah. His disciples can not be wrong when the Representative Man-Messiah-who is Lord of the Sabbath endorses the disciples' actions on the Sabbath.

He has full authority over the Sabbath.

All five of these arguments and their principles are important for us today.

All five are illustrated by the Lord in the healing of the man with the withered hand.

The Pharisees then ask, "Is it lawful....?"

Jesus calls the man forward for all to see and asks, "What man among you shall have one sheep....?" How much more is a man worth?
(So much for "animal rights")

If it is all right to help a sheep on the Sabbath; how much more to help a man?

"Is it lawful to do good or evil, to save life or to kill?"

The question is not working on the Sabbath, but doing good or evil. The Pharisees were seeking to kill Jesus! And He is not saying He would be doing evil if He did not heal the man's hand.

But Jesus is using the extreme to show how ridiculous is their "law." If nothing called "work" can be done on the Sabbath and they failed to help a man and he died then the Sabbath which was ordained for man's health and good would become a curse.

Mark, who often gives more of the feelings, gestures, and looks, adds "He looked upon them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts."

Anger here is righteous indignation. But, blended with grief for their sin, and knowing the awful consequences which it would bring upon them. Paul said, "Be angry and sin not." We may be angry if we don't lose the compassion for the sin that is at the root.

Then the Lord commanded the man, “stretch forth thine hand...” And in spite of all that they heard and saw, they were mad with hatred for Him. Tradition is often stronger than truth.

LESSONS FOR OUR LIVES:

1. Jesus went to worship (synagogue) every Sabbath! He is still at worship services when we meet. “Lo, I will be with you always.” We exclude ourselves from great blessing when we neglect public worship. What if this man had stayed home that day? Consider the evil of the “electronic church.”
2. Works of necessity and mercy are lawful on the Sabbath. The example of the apostles changed the seventh day (Sabbath) to the first day of the week (Sunday). Also, the Mosaic restrictions were lifted (Colossians 2:11-17).

Colossians 2:11-17

¹¹ In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with *Him* through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. ¹³ And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, ¹⁴ having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. ¹⁵ Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

¹⁶ So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷ which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

We are governed by the spirit, not the letter of the law. Don't be ensnared by the legalistic, neither be frivolous nor a stumbling block to your neighbors and family.

3. See what bitter antagonism to holiness there is in the unholy heart. What inconsistency. Mad with hatred for Him, supposedly to honor the Sabbath, they want to murder Him!

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