

For the five weekends in the month of June, we are going to cover some examples of Jesus's miracles and teachings. Today let's give our attention to the account of Jesus healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath day. Listen to the account as Mark recorded it in Chapter 3 of his Gospel:

**MARK 3:1–6.** (EHV)

Jesus entered the synagogue again, and a man was there with a withered hand. They were watching Jesus closely to see if he would heal the man on the Sabbath day, so that they could accuse him. He said to the man with the withered hand, "Step forward!" Then he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. Then he looked around at them with anger, deeply grieved at the hardness of their hearts. He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." The man stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees left and immediately began to conspire against Jesus with the Herodians, plotting how they might kill him.

We should first review what the Sabbath day was and what God had actually commanded about it. The word *Sabbath* is a Hebrew word that refers to resting. The first resting Scripture describes is God's resting on the seventh day of the first week, what we know as Saturday. When God later gave the Ten Commandments, he told the Israelites that they were to do all their work the first six days of the week, but rest and do no work on the seventh day. Not even their servants or animals were to do any work (Exod. 20:8–11). God also stipulated that that day was to be a day of sacred assembly (Lev. 23:3), that is, a day when the Israelites gathered together in their respective communities to listen to God's word, to confess their faith in God, to sing their praises to him, and to pray to him.

It's worthwhile to note that God commanding them to do no work on the Sabbath and to gather together for worship on the Sabbath were not contradictory. The very fact that he commanded them to gather together for worship on the Sabbath means that worship of the true God is not work. It is rest. Their refraining from physical labor gave them rest for their bodies, and their worship of God, revolving around his word, gave them rest for their souls. This could only be true if their services primarily focused on God's promises of forgiveness, deliverance, and salvation, and not on God's law with its commands and prohibitions, since if God's law is the primary focus, it only wears out souls rather than refreshing them.

When Jesus entered the synagogue on this particular day, he knew that he was surrounded by people who misunderstood what the Sabbath was all about. The Pharisees and other Jewish scholars put all the emphasis on the external observance of the Sabbath. Over time, the rabbis had come up with thirty-nine chief works that were forbidden on the Sabbath. They came up with them on the basis of the work needed to set up and operate their tabernacle in the Old Testament. These chief works included plowing, harvesting, and kindling a fire. They also included kneading and baking, shearing, spinning, and sewing, snaring, slaughtering, and skinning, writing, building, and hitting anything with a hammer. Not such a bad list—these things clearly involve work, don't they?

But that wasn't enough. The rabbis also came up with secondary works under each one of the thirty-nine chief works. For instance, the chief work of harvesting included harvesting, vine-dressing, olive gathering, clipping, fig gathering, and plucking, like the kind the disciples were doing in the account right before this one when they picked heads of grain to eat them.

And it didn't even stop there. The rabbis added even more works to these chief and secondary works, so that eventually it was forbidden to climb a tree, ride a horse, take a swim, get engaged, dance, pay your taxes or give an offering, or slap your hips on the Sabbath (which was the way people showed they were excited), and many other things. And a person was only permitted to travel 2,000 cubits, or about three-quarters of a mile, in any direction from his Sabbath resting-place on the Sabbath, though there were various qualifications for that regulation.

Jesus realized that the focus on all these regulations meant that the people had forgotten what the Sabbath was all about. They were observing the letter of the law, but had forgotten all about the spirit of the law. In the synagogue on this Sabbath was a man with a withered hand, and they were all watching Jesus closely to see if he would heal the man on the Sabbath. If he did, they would consider him a Sabbath-violator, since anything that could be done on a day other than the Sabbath was supposed to be done on a day other than the Sabbath.

But Jesus told the man to step forward into their midst. Notice how, while the Jewish leaders are being shady and sneaky in their plans, Jesus puts this man right in the middle of the synagogue for everyone to see, and he addresses everyone: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" If the primary focus on God's promises of deliverance, forgiveness, and salvation had not been lost, the focus on the chief godly virtue would also not have been lost, namely love. With his regulations for rest on the Sabbath, God never meant to quell opportunities for showing true godly love. In fact, since the Sabbath was to celebrate God's love for them, it should have been the chief day for showing such love to others.

But the Jewish leaders were silent. They didn't like Jesus's either-or question. Their hearts were hard, so they thought he didn't understand and was simply looking for any excuse to violate God's law. So Jesus looked around at them with anger, deeply grieved at the hardness of their hearts.

But their stubborn attitude and hateful plans for him weren't going to stop him from doing good on the Sabbath. "Stretch out your hand," Jesus told the man. Imagine a dull, drooping, wilted lily suddenly standing up straight, with its petals widening, brightening, and spreading out. That's what happened to this man's hand. He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. He had full use of it. But rather than rejoicing with him at his miraculous recovery, the Pharisees and scholars left and immediately began to conspire against Jesus, plotting how they might kill him.

Now it should be noted that, ever since Jesus died, rose, and ascended into heaven, the legal shell of God's Sabbath day commandment is no longer valid. Paul tells us in Colossians 2 that the rest of the Sabbath day was meant to point to Christ. Now that Christ has come and has completed his work and has won for us eternal Sabbath rest, we no longer need to refrain from work on Saturday, and no one can judge us on the basis of Sabbath observance (Col. 2:16-17). Because of this, it is clear that from early on after Jesus's ascension, Christians freely chose

Sunday as their new regular day of worship, not Saturday, in order to commemorate Jesus's resurrection from the dead on a Sunday (Rev. 1:10; *Didache* 14).

But the kernel of God's Sabbath day commandment remains valid. God still wants us to regularly gather together with other Christians to listen to his word, to confess our faith in God, to sing our praises to him, and to pray to him. And he still wants the primary focus of our worship to be on the forgiveness, deliverance, and salvation he has won for us in his Son, Jesus Christ. And if God formerly commanded that the people still waiting for his promises to be fulfilled should gather together for worship once every week, it would be good for us who know that his promises have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ to consider that a minimum (cp. Acts 2:46–47).

But as the Christian teacher Martin Luther emphasized, God doesn't just want us to go through the motions, to listen to God's word just like we would any other entertainment, to go to church and leave when it's done purely out of custom, so that, when the year is over, we know just as much, or rather just as little, as we did at the end of the previous year. If we do that, we are no better than the Jewish leaders of Jesus's day, who were merely concerned with external observance. We also aren't doing any better than they did if we are on the way to church and have the opportunity to help someone in need and pass them by because, after all, "We're on the way to church and we might be late if we stop to help," or if we have the opportunity to help someone or show love to someone at church and don't because it's not part of our routine. Since our worship on Sunday is meant to celebrate God's love for us, it should be our chief day for showing such love to others.

Above all, let's not miss the main character of this story—Jesus Christ, who lives to do good to us, not evil, who lives to save our lives, not to kill us. Let us entrust our bodies and our souls to his care. Let us hold his saving word in high regard and not give up meeting together around it. Let us put our faith in him in this life, that we may fully see his goodness and salvation in the next. Amen.