

(3:4,5). He knew that these people had followed Him looking for healing and had pursued Him daily since the beginning of His ministry, and He knew that the Pharisees were now standing nearby, looking on and waiting for Him to act. Was Jesus wanting the people to rise up and agree with Him about the justice of healing on the Sabbath day? Was Jesus upset because He saw that the crowds were cowed by the presence of the Pharisees and unwilling to confront their stranglehold on religious authority in the land? Was Jesus upset because the people themselves were not able to rise above their own prejudicial understanding of the Sabbath? We shall never know.

We do know that predictably, Jesus acted to heal and save the man with the withered arm. He commanded the man to move; he did so, and his arm was healed. Jesus affected the healing with a command which had to be met with a response, a common and scriptural method of healing (see Elijah's healing of Naaman – 2 Kings 5:1f.). However, once Jesus had healed, the Pharisees had all they needed to plot with others to bring about Jesus' downfall.

Application

In these stories we find the common threads of the authority of Jesus and the Sabbath day. However, there is one other thread which has not been commented upon so far. This is the work of Jesus to support those who believe in Him. In the first story, it was the disciples who plucked the grain from the fields and incurred the Pharisees wrath. Perhaps these men were used to plucking corn as they wished without the prying eyes of the Pharisees, Sabbath day or not. However, as newly won disciples of Christ, their actions mattered more than they thought; as private working men they could pick grain from the side of the road and no-one would take any notice, though perhaps an older person would 'tut-tut'. Now they found themselves at the centre of what appeared to be a great theological debate in which they were ill-prepared to take part! Jesus acted to take the pressure from them immediately, and crucially, he drew the sting of the Pharisees accusations upon Himself. In Jesus' great work of Salvation, this is what He does for us on a far grander scale, and it is fascinating to see it reflected in this passage.

In the second story, Jesus took the man with a withered arm and although He brought him to the front of the crowd, Jesus spoke for him; He knew what was needed. The man was not asked to make a confession of faith, or do anything which might draw the wrath of the Pharisees, or indeed the crowd, on himself. Jesus simply asked him to stretch out his hand. It was a simple request, but it was all the man had to do, and he did it. As a consequence he was healed. The message for us is straightforward. We must be prepared to place ourselves in the hands of the Lord and trust Him for what He will do for us.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How important is it to keep the 'rules' of the church to which we belong? How can we assess whether they are 'godly' or not?
2. Where have we gone wrong in our understanding of the Sabbath, if it does not centre upon rest?
3. What does the healing of the man with a withered arm tell us today about the healing ministry?

Discipleship

How many times has the Lord come to your rescue? It is easy to forget what the Lord has done for us, or forget how many times He has helped us with healing, for example. One way to help us remember these things very well is to give testimony to them amongst others, either in a time of public testimony at church (if that is the custom) or by telling other people purposefully. Make it your aim to do this, and tell other people about what happened the last time the Lord came to your rescue!

Final Prayer

Thank You, Heavenly Father, for Your work throughout history to bring us the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thank you for the evangelists, preachers, parents and teachers of past generations who have passed on the Good News, so that we may hear and benefit from Your work of Salvation now. Make us worthy of their efforts. AMEN

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, save us from ourselves, we pray, for we can often be our own worst enemy. Teach us therefore that love is more powerful than the gates of hell, that grace is more beautiful than power or prestige, that faith is rooted in Christ and nothing else, and hope is found in You alone. Lead us we pray, on this, your narrow path; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Pray today about some of the responsibilities of politicians:

1. International Defence
2. Safety of people at home
3. Providing health care
4. Regulating business
5. Governance of education
6. Planning for the future

You will be able to think of many others!

Meditation

When the Saviour comes – humanity is gloriously changed;

All is seen clearly in the pure light of His revelation.

When salvation comes – the spirit is given liberty;

The Lord of All has found another home on earth!

When forgiveness comes – the soul is re-aligned to God;

The Holy Spirit filters out the evil which has lain within.

When healing comes – the body is repaired, renewed;

Old wounds are cleaned and inner parts restored.

When assurance comes – the mind and heart are put at peace;

A light has been shone on the truth of human destiny.

When the end of time has come – the soul will meet its future;

The Saviour will take us to the Father's New World of Glory!

Bible Study - Mark 2:23-3:6

²³ One Sabbath, Jesus was passing through the fields of grain, and on the way, His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to Him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not allowed on the Sabbath?' ²⁵ He said to them, 'Have you never listened to the reading about what David did when he and those with him were hungry and in need of food?' ²⁶ How he went in to the house of God when Abiathar was High Priest, and ate the bread offering that could only be eaten lawfully by the priests, moreover, he offered it to those with him?' ²⁷ Then He said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.' ²⁸ That is why the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath as well.'

^{3:1} He went into the synagogue on another occasion and a man with a withered hand was there. ² They watched him closely to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath so that they could bring a charge against Him. ³ Jesus said to the man with a withered hand, 'Come out in front of us.' ⁴ Then He said to them, 'What is lawfully right on the Sabbath, to do good or evil, to save life or destroy?' But they remained silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger, deeply distressed at their hard hearts, and then said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored! ⁶ The Pharisees left immediately to conspire with the Herodians about how they might get Him killed.

Review

Jesus' ministry grew rapidly from the moment He began to heal people (1:25,29,32). Indeed, healing and deliverance from evil spirits formed the substance Jesus' ministry for most of those

who came to Him in the early days, and as the Gospel unfolds, the pattern does not change. Today, however, Jesus used this ministry to raise some important points about the Sabbath day, not just because of the importance of the Sabbath to God's plan for the world, but because the Pharisees used it as a means to control people's lives. When Jesus challenged their ideas about the Sabbath and reinforced God's ideas, He brought down their wrath on His head, and they immediately plotted to kill Him (3:6).

The incident in which the disciples of Jesus plucked corn on the Sabbath is well known. Apparently, Jesus did not pluck Himself, so when the Pharisees began to attack Jesus and His followers for this petty and debatable breach of Sabbath rules, He replied with detailed Scriptural knowledge that put His accusers to shame. The Pharisees had only just begun to oppose Jesus openly (see yesterday's conflicts about 'eating with sinners' and fasting – 2:13-22) and on each occasion, He had defeated them.

In this story, Jesus' command of Scripture enabled Him to run rings around the Pharisees with considerable ease. For example, His detailed knowledge of the stories of David in 1 Samuel is clear from verses 25 to 27, but His final conclusion 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' is extraordinarily insightful. The point Jesus made is this; God made the Sabbath day as part of His plan of Creation (see Genesis 2:1-3), and its purpose was to enable people to honour God by having a rest. At that time, there was no connection between the Sabbath and worship, as we imagine today! The Sabbath was God's gift of rest, no more, no less, and Jesus' point was that the Pharisees had built regulations around it to the point where it had become a burden on people rather than the gift it was intended to be. Few would have not agreed with Jesus that the original purpose of the Sabbath had been sadly lost!

A similar point emerges from the next story. It is in the next chapter of Mark, but it is obvious that the theme of the Sabbath connects it with the story that went before. The division between Jesus and the Pharisees was about whether healing was work and should be banned on the Sabbath, so Jesus made His point through a healing miracle. What happened surely touches all who hear of it as an example of Jesus' humanity, because He challenged the very basis of the debate; how could helping someone be reduced to a discussion about work? Surely, no-one could be so cold as to deny someone healing on the Sabbath! Jesus had been healing people constantly since the beginning of His ministry and He was not prepared to play a game with people's lives over 'regulations'. Nevertheless, the Pharisees were determined to maintain the strict codes of their beliefs, and they were not going to allow Jesus to pull down the edifice of religion they were so dedicated to upholding; so they decided Jesus would have to go (3:6).

If you were to read these two stories in Matthew's Gospel (12:1-14) or Luke (6:1-11), you would find extra material that makes the stories a little longer. However, they are clearly linked and there is no doubt that they show that Jesus' healing ministry was done both because of people's need, but also to make significant points about what God was doing in the world and the salvation He brought through Jesus, the Messiah. In this instance, what Jesus did compares with the petty legalism of religion of His day, which had become an evil to be challenged; but the price of this challenge would be high. Those who seek to control people in God's name have always found it hard to accept the true liberty of salvation.

Going Deeper

I have already written about these stories separately in my notes on Matthew's Gospel, and if you click here: [Matthew 12:1-8 – Matthew 12:9-21](#) you can access the 'downloads' for those days which will cover some details which may be of interest. Nevertheless, the way in which these passages work together to tell us about Jesus' approach to the Law and the Sabbath in Mark's Gospel is distinct, as we will now find out.

Plucking grain on the Sabbath

The Sabbath day was one of God's first gifts to humanity (see above) and a unique sign of the people of God (Deut 5:12-15 etc), therefore, as part of the Pharisees' attempts to reclaim Israelite culture and stem the juggernaut of Greek and Roman culture, they set out rules which identified what could and could not be done on a Sabbath day. All forms of reaping were banned as 'work' (see Deut 5:14, Ex 20:10 and Ex 34:21) including the plucking of corn. One exception was the first cut of the harvest which was subsequently offered to God (Leviticus 23:10). One grey area, however, was the rule in the Old Testament which forbade the harvesting of cornfields to the very edge, precisely so that the poor and the needy could glean the pickings at the side of the road (Leviticus 19:9, for example). Some have argued that this is

what Jesus' disciples were doing, and so did not deserve the wrath of the Pharisees. This is not the point, however. Although Jesus was not plucking the corn Himself, when the Pharisees said, 'Look, why are they doing what is not allowed on the Sabbath?' they were purposefully challenging His authority.

Jesus' reply was to describe an incident in the life of King David, himself a 'Messianic' figure, and this choice would not have gone unnoticed. Everyone would have seen immediately that by choosing this text Jesus likened Himself to King David, in other words, the Messiah. It was not likely that the Pharisees would respond positively to this! The original story is found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6, and the gist of it is this. David was on the run from King Saul and was in a desperate state. In order to feed Himself and the band of men with them, he demanded, and received, the holy 'bread of the presence' from where it was placed at the side of the altar at Nob. It is not mentioned in our text, but scholars of Jesus' day assumed that this was where the ark of the Covenant resided back then, inside the 'Tent of the Tabernacle'.

A plain reading of the passage shows that the priest accepted that David's humanitarian needs outweighed the holy requirements of the shrine, and this was a matter of much debate in Jesus' day. To put it bluntly, in order for the Pharisees to justify themselves and tie down every part of Scripture to cover their strict interpretation of the Law, scribes of the day found a way of manipulating the text. They claimed that in 1 Samuel 21:6, the brief mention of weekly changing of the bread (which is really just a straightforward explanation), implied that David and his men had the old bread which was about to be discarded, so the holiness of the shrine was not compromised by David because what he ate was replaced by fresh bread!

Jesus would have none of this and ridiculed the arguments used by the scribes. This is not something we spot today because it is not on our scriptural 'agenda', but the Pharisees would have spotted this immediately! In addition, Jesus' words 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.' (2:27) would have sounded to the Pharisees as if Jesus was telling them not to play with what Scripture said about the Sabbath! He went on to confirm His authority by saying, 'That is why the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.' We have already seen how Jesus called Himself 'Son of Man' (2:10) when healing the paralytic, so whether or not the Pharisees thought of this title as belonging to the Messiah, Jesus certainly used it to speak with authority, and there is no doubt that in this reading, Jesus claimed personal authority over the laws of the Sabbath, above that of the scribes.

The healing of the man with a withered arm.

There is a simple quality to the story in Mark of the healing of the man with a withered arm. In Matthew's Gospel, the Pharisees brought the man to Jesus as if to test Him, and Jesus discussed a number of legal precedents (about rescuing animals on the Sabbath – see Matt 12:11), but here, the man is simply present in the synagogue. Most of us understand quite well that if the incident in the cornfield was a triviality used to trump up an argument, then what happened in the synagogue was not trivial at all.

The tragedy of the setting is confirmed by Mark who says that the Pharisees 'watched him closely to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath so that they could bring a charge against Him.' What is most appalling about this is the fact that the Pharisees had already decided that scoring points against Jesus was more important than the future of the man whose arm was withered. A man who was not able to work because of a withered arm was, in Jesus' day, a man who could not function properly as the head of his household and could possibly suffer the indignity of seeing his wife and children move back to his wife's parents extended family because of his disability. It is too easy to forget in any generation how cruel disability can be. The Pharisees were not interested in the man or his healing, but only in whether they could find a reason to get at Jesus through whatever happened.

As Jesus and everyone else in that place knew, the Jewish law had clear rules which allowed for the compassionate work of healing on the Sabbath where it was a matter of life and death, as the Mishnah (Yoma 6:8) clearly states. Jesus then took the initiative and called the man into the midst of the assembly. He called out to everyone 'What is lawfully right on the Sabbath, to do good or evil, to save life or destroy?' (3:4). In this way, He challenged everyone present to believe that for this disabled man, his withered arm was indeed a matter of life and death, and He, Jesus, was prepared to put what He believed into action and heal the man.

Mark then records something which is not in Matthew or Luke's account of this story, which is that Jesus was deeply upset by the silence from the assembly when He challenged everyone