

The Sabbath (Part 2) - Mark 3:1-6

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As in our last story, our story today centers around the Sabbath. It takes place on the Sabbath, and the topic of discussion is appropriate conduct on the Sabbath. The main issue is whether or not it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. You may wonder, "How did this even become an issue?" It may help if we consider what was taught by the Jewish leaders at this time. A distinction was made between chronic sickness and cases involving immediate danger. Someone in the nursing home was seen differently from someone in the ER. If the person's life was not in immediate danger, then any healing was supposed to be postponed until after the Sabbath. You MIGHT be able to find some validity in this, but the result of this teaching was that people were taught to pass by those in need on the Sabbath. They were instructed not to relieve suffering. Jesus mentioned in Matthew 12:10-12 that the Jewish leaders were quick to help an animal in need on the Sabbath. If one of their animals fell into a hole in the ground, they immediately rescued it, lest they should suffer financial loss. The hole that Jesus referred to was most likely a cistern which was used to collect rainwater. So, the value of an animal compared to that of a person had been confused. The teaching at this time led to hypocrisy and confused values. This type of mentality is what Jesus was fighting against in our story today. I invite you to bow your heads with me for prayer.

Here is a summary of our story:

On the Sabbath Jesus returned to the synagogue. A man was there with a withered hand. The Pharisees came to see if Jesus would heal this man on the Sabbath. Angered and grieved by the hardness of their hearts, Jesus publically restored the man's withered hand. Immediately the Pharisees left the synagogue and began plotting Jesus' destruction.

We will begin by considering what Jesus experienced in our story. First of all, He experienced being scrutinized. He was being spied on. Mark says in Mark 3:2 that the Pharisees "watched [Jesus] closely whether He would heal [the man] on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. They were looking for evidence to use against Jesus. They were sitting in judgment of Jesus Christ. The word Mark uses, "accuse" is the verb form of the word translated "Satan", who is the "accuser of the brethren" (Revelation 12:10). Mark also says in Mark 3:5 that Jesus "looked around at them". As He scanned the crowd he saw them mingled in, as if they were spies.

Jesus also experienced strong emotions. Mark says in Mark 3:5 that Jesus looked at the Pharisees with anger. This strong emotion was evident in His expression. The word Mark uses here is from a root word which means "strong desire". It gives the picture of an emotion that results from an unfulfilled desire. The word "frustrated" might better describe the emotion. Mark also says that Jesus was "grieved". This word means "to be sad with". It is a sympathetic emotion. Jesus' strong emotions were instigated by the Pharisees' unwillingness to respond and repent. In Mark 3:4 when Jesus asked the Pharisees a question, they "kept silent". They refused to reason with Him. They had found they couldn't win, so they refused to say anything. In Mark 3:5 it is the "hardness of [the Pharisees] hearts" that instigates Jesus' grieving. The word translated "hardness" means "dried up" or "petrified". In their hearts they were unable to repent. They were void of any spiritual life. The wording that Mark uses reveals that Jesus' anger was short lived, but His grieving was ongoing. Jesus' ongoing grieving momentarily flared up into anger and frustration. For a moment He got really hot, because of the Pharisees' actions. On that Sabbath in the synagogue they were so stubborn and lifeless. They simply refused to be reasoned with. They showed no signs of spiritual life.

Third, Jesus experienced restoring wholeness. In Mark 3:1 Mark says there was a man in the synagogue that Sabbath who had a "withered hand". The word translated "withered" means to be "dried up". It gives the picture of a leaf withering in the hot sun. In Luke's account (Luke 6:6) he says it was the man's "right hand". In Mark 3:3 Jesus asked the man to "step forward". He directed the man to the front where everyone could see him. What Jesus was about to do was going to be done out in the open. Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus acted publically. He was not trying to hide anything. In Mark 3:5 Jesus instructed the man, "Stretch out your hand."

The man had been unable to do this for years. We know he had been like this for a while, because it was chronic illnesses that the Pharisees believed should not be healed on the Sabbath. As the man responds to Jesus' command, his hand is immediately restored. He is healed as he acts in obedience. His healing was like that of the paralytic who was healed in the act of standing up in response to Jesus' command.

Last of all, Jesus experienced death plots. Mark says in Mark 3:6 that the Pharisees went out "immediately". They left before the service was over. They had seen the evidence they had been looking for. They resolved that Jesus was destroying the very fabric of the nation, and must be stopped. They were no longer trying to destroy His popularity only, but Jesus Himself. Their goal according to Mark 3:6 was to "destroy" Jesus. This word pictures complete destruction. This same word was used in Mark 1:24 by the demon who asked Jesus, "Did you come to destroy us?" Jesus used this word in Mark 2:22 when he was talking about the wineskins. If someone was to pour new wine into old wineskins, the wineskins would be "ruined". The Pharisees wanted to ruin Jesus. They wanted to get rid of Him completely. Mark says they "plotted with the Herodians...how they might destroy [Jesus]." The Pharisees and the Herodians have been rivals. The Pharisees campaigned for the separation of church from the state, while the Herodians were a Jewish political party who supported King Herod, an Edomite (descendant of Esau). They had long been enemies, but they now work together to destroy Jesus. According to Luke 6:6 Jesus was the one who had been asked to teach that Sabbath in the synagogue. So while the Pharisees are plotting His death, Jesus continued to lead out in the service. He continued to teach.

How does this story reveal Jesus as our example? How do we know from this story what a healthy and dangerous Christian looks like? First of all, Jesus reveals what a healthy and dangerous Christian looks like in that He did not bend under pressure. When Jesus healed the man's withered hand, He knew what the results would be. He knew that the Pharisees would use the healing as an accusation against Himself. In spite of this, He acted confidently and openly. He asked the man to step forward for everyone to see. His healing was an act based on principle, not fear. He honored the Sabbath by "doing good" and by "saving life" (Mark 3:4). He did what was right knowing that it would be used as a reason to plot His death. I don't have to tell you that the world today is full of people who bend under pressure. It's in the news all the time. If they're offered enough money or threatened sufficiently, people often do what they know isn't right. I would like to read a quote from the book Education by Ellen White. It is found on page 57.

"The greatest want of the world is the want of men - men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall."

Jesus was this type of man. He did not bend under pressure. He did what was right regardless of the consequences. In this He is our example of a healthy and dangerous Christian.

Secondly, Jesus is our example in that He taught principles of Sabbath observance. The Pharisees had written down and taught hundreds of rules on how to keep the Sabbath. Jesus didn't do that. He taught simple biblical principles. One of these was mentioned in our story last week in Mark 2:27. He stated that the Sabbath was made for man. It is a day to be blessed and in which our spirits are restored. It keeps us from losing our focus on God. Jesus taught a second principle in our story today. In Mark 3:4 He states that the Sabbath is a day on which we are to be a blessing. It's a day to "do good" and to "save life". These are two principles on which we can hang all appropriate Sabbath conduct. And the given implication follows: don't do anything that would keep either of these principles from being lived out. I have been raised in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And I have seen what a challenge this has been for our church. The question, "What is appropriate Sabbath conduct?" has been a hot topic. I remember a few of the activities that were debated while I was growing up: swimming, sports, and going out to eat. If Jesus were here, He wouldn't make a list for us. He would point us back to these two principles. A healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who follows Jesus' example. It's someone who stays focused on these Biblical principles, and teaches them instead of making a long list of prohibitions and stipulations like the Pharisees did.

Last of all, Jesus is revealed in today's story as our example of a healthy and dangerous Christian in that He cared enough to get emotional. Mark pictures Jesus as having an expression of "anger" and as "grieving" (Mark 3:5). The reason for His emotions was the "dried up" condition of the Pharisees' hearts. It grieved Him that there was no spiritual life in their hearts. There was no response to His love for them. I invite you to turn with me to 2 Peter 3:9. (Read) Jesus doesn't want anyone to perish. He wants everyone to repent. This is a strong desire in Jesus' heart. But this desire for the Pharisees was unfulfilled. And because Jesus cared, He experienced strong emotion. He got frustrated. He experienced ongoing grief. Today our society has become over stimulated. People watch countless violent TV shows and movies. And as a result we have become desensitized to people's suffering. People walk or drive by people who are suffering without giving them a second glance, because they have seen these types of scenes so often. There's no response in their hearts. Turn with me to Romans 9:1-3. Like Jesus, Paul cared enough to get emotional. He experienced sorrow and grief because His fellow Jews would not accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah. We learn from our story today that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who grieves over the lost. Seeing people who have no hope beyond the grave awakens strong emotions in the heart of a healthy and dangerous Christian.

As I have read about the history of the Pharisees, I have learned some new things about them. I may share some of this in a future sermon. The Pharisees did a lot of good things. In a day when Greek paganism was filtering into the Jewish culture, they stood up to fight. They worked to preserve the Law among God's chosen people. But in our story today we find them "dried up". Their hearts had no spiritual life in them. The experience of the Pharisees reveals the danger of focusing our attention on teachings, doctrines, and beliefs. In the midst of their zeal for God's law, they lost their connection with the God who gave them the Law. This lack of spiritual life was revealed in how they kept the Sabbath. They replaced their relationship with God with a long list of do's and don'ts.

What about us? Do we have a connection with the truth or the One who is the way the truth and the life? God is real. And He wants us to have a real experience with Him. He doesn't want our Christian lives to be a lifeless form of rules and behavior. Being a Christian is not a religion. It's a relationship. If you lose the relationship, you lose Christianity. And you lose a meaningful Sabbath experience. There is no spiritual life without a relationship. A relationship is not built by meaningless repetition. Even a child knows that. God wants us to be real with Him. If we're not enjoying our Christian experience, God isn't either. If we don't look forward to the time we spend with God on Sabbath, God doesn't either.

I have found that my prayer life is the most revealing part of my spiritual life. If I'm not being real with God in my prayer life, that's my first red flag that something is wrong. It means I'm losing my connection with the Source of Life. Prayer has to come from the heart. It has to include the good, bad, and the ugly. It has to be an expression of how I really feel or what I really want. If I only say what I think God wants to hear or if I'm saying the same things over and over, it's not real. If I talked with my wife that way, it would be a waste of our time. I am learning that God is real. He is personal. The Christian life is not a religion. It's a relationship. If I lose the relationship, I've lost everything. I want to stay connected to the Lord. The best way I've found to do that is by being real with God in my prayer life. God is real and He wants to be real in your life.