

Every Rule You Break, We'll Be Watching You

Mark 3:1-6 May 14, 2025

Would You Rather is a staple in our house. Would you rather be able to fly or be invisible? Would you rather fight 100 duck-sized horses or 1 horse-sized duck? Would you rather always have bad breath or always have BO? These are hard choices kids love to wrestle with at the dinner table.

I've got a different *Would You Rather* for us tonight: Would you rather have a hobbled hand or a dead heart? Both of those maladies are put on display in this text. But this story isn't just about a physical healing. It's about spiritual condition and whether you and I will respond to the Great Physician with obedience and faith or with resentment and fury.

Mark 3:1 - Jesus entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a shriveled hand.

This is the last of five stories Mark put together which show the growing conflict between Jesus and those Jews - particularly the religious leaders - who did not like what He was all about.

We would say Jesus went to church that Saturday.¹ Obviously this is a *Jewish* gathering, not a Christian one, but in many ways a synagogue service was similar to a normal church service.²

Worship in synagogues was *not* the same as worship in the Temple. There was no animal sacrifice in the synagogues, no priests there giving atonement. The Temple was in Jerusalem, synagogues were in any city where there were at least ten Jewish men. They developed during the Babylonian exile and were local gatherings for education, prayer, worship, and fellowship.³

That's what they were *supposed* to be. Sadly when Jesus went to synagogue, conflict and tension usually followed. In chapter 1, Jesus goes to synagogue and a demon confronts Him, saying, "What are *You* doing here?!?" In chapter 6, Jesus is in a synagogue teaching wonderful things unlike anything they had ever heard and the people say, "Isn't this that Nobody from Nazareth?"

And yet, despite the problems, Jesus kept going to services, week after week. He wanted to be there and, as always, He conducted Himself with patience and grace despite being misunderstood.

Churches are not perfect and some churches *should* be avoided because of the kind of damage they do to hearts and lives. But no matter where we go, we're called to be a part of the regular gathering of God's people, *knowing* that they bring their shortcomings with them and we bring our shortcomings with us. God commands us to dwell together in peace and harmony and growth.

¹ Clifton Allen *Matthew-Mark*

² Ben Witherington *The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*

³ Bob Utley *The Gospel According To Peter: Mark And I & II Peter*

That Sabbath, there was a man in the crowd with a shriveled hand. Luke says it was his right hand.⁴ It seems that, as a result of disease or an injury, his hand had become shrunken and paralyzed.⁵

Mark 3:2 - ²In order to accuse him, they were watching him closely to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath.

The “they” will be identified as Pharisees down in verse 6. Mark has shown us a withered hand, but from the start of this scene, the diseased paralysis of their *hearts* is absolutely astounding.

They *knew* Jesus could heal. They weren’t watching to see if He *could* heal the man, but whether He *would* on Saturday.

They were at synagogue that day, *not* to worship, *not* to pray, *not* to hear this historic Rabbi, Whose fame filled the whole region - they didn’t care that He was a miracle worker. No, they had seen and heard all they wanted, now all they wanted was for Him to go away.

In John 10, Jesus is talking to a group like this and He says, “Listen, if you don’t want to believe Me, at least believe the works I do.”⁶ But the Pharisees had made up their minds and closed their hearts to *anything* Jesus might say or do. They only watched Him in order to find fault. And the term used there suggests they *kept* watching Him, dogging His steps.⁷

Has anyone followed you so closely they give you a flat tire? Or in the store, they bump the back of your ankles with their shopping cart? That’s what the Pharisees are doing here.

This passage is not really about a broken hand, it’s about broken hearts. It always comes back to the heart. Will we let the Lord in? Will we allow Him to remove the heart of stone within us and give us a *new* heart, soft and alive?

Here we are - at church - dedicated to studying the Word and doing what’s right. That’s how the Pharisees would’ve described themselves. The question is: Have we so made up our minds about *everything* in the Word, in the spiritual life, that we’re unwilling to hear anything new from the Lord?

I’m not suggesting the essentials of doctrine ever change - they don’t. The Scriptures are complete and have been delivered once for all. But are we willing to accept that the Lord might say, “Cast your nets on the other side of the boat?” That He might have a new directive for our lives?

Now, the Pharisees knew Jesus did a *lot* of healing. *But* they said you can’t heal on the Sabbath. Of course the Law doesn’t say that - just their convoluted interpretations of the Law. Actually, the

⁴ Luke 6:6

⁵ Marvin Vincent *Word Studies In The New Testament*

⁶ John 10:38

⁷ Vincent

Pharisees didn't fully agree. *Some* Pharisees allowed for medical treatments on the Sabbath, others didn't.⁸ They even disputed whether you were allowed to *pray* for sick people on the Sabbath.

They thought these rules made you right with God. Meanwhile, think about the absurdity of fallen men telling *God* what He could and couldn't do! They didn't think Jesus was God, which is why Jesus told them, "*I'm* the Lord of the Sabbath." Still, they wanted Him to bend to their system.

We do not tell God what to do. It's popular for people fighting on social media these days to talk about what Jesus would and wouldn't do. Wouldn't you know it, Jesus *always* aligns with the views we already hold! At least that's the message you get from people. But we don't tell God what to do. *Not* my will, but *His* be done.

Mark 3:3 - ³He told the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand before us."

Jesus knows *exactly* what was going on. He knew what the Pharisees were thinking. He knew their scheme. He knew in the crowd there was a man who needed healing. He knew it all.

We've all seen the scenes where a person who is being followed turns the tables on the watchers. The walk up to the surveillance van and knock on the window. That's essentially what Jesus does. He asks this fellow to come stand right in the middle of the meeting so everyone can see him.

Now, from what we can tell, this man did not expect to be healed. He didn't *ask* to be healed - he just went to church. But the Savior met him there and was about to change his life and *use* his life.

Most of us are regular attenders of church. Life-changing things don't necessarily happen to us every single Sunday or every single Wednesday, but the encouragement here is that God *might* change our lives today. He *wants* to interact with us, He *wants* to transform us, and He works in a special way when His people gather together.

I'd like to share part of a testimony we received just this week that illustrates this very thing: "*I used to go to church with my step mom...after a while I stopped going and it always left me with this feeling of something missing. But...I remember waking up on a Sunday morning and I felt like asking my stepmom if I could go to church with her. Of course, she said yes. So I got dressed and off I went to church and as soon as I stepped into the church and sat down that feeling of something missing immediately lifted off of me and I knew that what I was missing was Christ.*"

That didn't happen because of something we did. It was *God's* doing. God *wants* to work in your life. And, like this fellow in Mark 3, He wants to *use* your life as an object lesson for others. Jesus spoke directly to him, but it's obvious that He was *also* speaking to everyone else. Teaching them. Showing them His power and His compassion *through* this man's life.

⁸ Craig Keener *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, 2nd Edition*

He asked the man to come to the middle.⁹ It would've been a scary moment, but the Lord wasn't going to embarrass or take advantage of him. He *only* had *good* planned for him. But for this wonderful object lesson to play out, the man would have to trust and obey. Which is what he did.

Mark 3:4 - ⁴Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent.

The Pharisees cared about the Talmud, Jesus cared about the Torah. The Torah is the five books of Moses. The Talmud is a huge collection of rabbinic discussions and interpretations of the Torah.

In my Bible, the Torah is about 270 pages. The Talmud, by contrast, is more than 2,700 pages!¹⁰ *Ten times* as long! They were convinced they had figured out spirituality through systems and boxes. It didn't seem to bother them that God had been silent for 400 years. "What do we need to hear from God for? We've *solved* the equation." But what a terrible irony that the people in the room who spent the *most* time and effort being religious were *furthest* from the Lord.

Jesus asks this question in an effort to show them that their whole perspective on spirituality was skewed. They broke everything down into the minutiae of how many steps you can take and how many pounds you can carry and how you need to portion out your spices in order to please God. But here Jesus says, "Zoom out. Let's not talk about cumin or sewing needles. Does God want you to do *good* on the Sabbath or do evil?"

This line about saving life or killing is interesting. Pharisaism developed from the Maccabean revolt. One of the major incidents of that time was when a thousand Jews were slaughtered because they *would not* fight on the Sabbath. After that, Jewish leaders decided you *can* kill on the Sabbath if you're being attacked.¹¹ The group that became the Pharisees were a key part in that fight.

So Jesus tries to get them to think about the *heart* of the issue and, more importantly, the heart of God. Not what *they* think is best, but what does *God* intend? But they remain *silent*.

Their silence is absurd. *They're supposed to be the deciders of all Sabbath debates!* They're the ones that exist to answer these questions. But they refuse to respond. Why? Because they *can't* answer. Any answer they give will betray their jealousy, their *self-righteousness*, their inconsistency.

By the way, if your doctrine can't stand up to questions, that's a red flag. The Pharisees *frequently* could not answer the questions Jesus posed to them because it was about tradition not truth.

Mark 3:5 - ⁵After looking around at them with anger, he was grieved at the hardness of their hearts and told the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

⁹ James Brooks *The New American Commentary: Mark*

¹⁰ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3347866/jewish/What-Is-the-Talmud.htm

¹¹ Sigve K. Tonstad *To Fight Or Not To Fight: The Sabbath And The Maccabean Revolt*

Jesus was angry, He was grieved, He was moved with compassion. This verse makes it crystal clear that the Lord cares about what's going on in our lives, He cares about what's going on in our hearts, and He cares about our choices. He is actually, personally, emotionally invested in your life.

Now, the man was *also* silent in this text, but he acts with obedience and faith. Jesus told him to stretch out his hand. That's the one thing he *can't* do - not naturally, that is. But he believed Jesus had the power to do the impossible for him. So he stepped out in faith, cooperating with God.

His hand was restored. Sadly, the Pharisees' hearts remained hard. The term there refers to a kind of marble.¹² Stone. Calcified and callous.¹³ That's the one thing you *don't* want your heart to be.

The saddest part is that their hearts could've been healed just like the man's hand. They could've been like the Grinch, whose heart grew three sizes. They were also given a chance to believe.

The difference was they didn't think they needed healing. The man knew his hand was withered. But they thought their hearts were fine. They felt no need to have anything restored.

They needed to reckon with the fact that they were wrong. Their righteousness, their religious efforts, their intellectual dedication could not save them. They needed to stretch out their hearts toward Christ. That term also refers to casting out an anchor.¹⁴ Anchoring your life on what? On the Lord Jesus Christ. On His truth. On His command. On His restorative, redemptive work. Choosing to build our lives not on our best ideas or our traditions but on *His* leading and revelation.

Mark 3:6 - ⁶Immediately the Pharisees went out and started plotting with the Herodians against him, how they might kill him.

You know what was *definitely* not lawful? Conspiring to murder on the Sabbath! But that's how hard their hearts were. Luke tells us they were full of rage at what they had seen.¹⁵ They were so upset they made a partnership with Herodians. That was a group that supported Roman occupation and thought Herod was a great guy.¹⁶ Seriously? You support *Herod*? The Pharisees would rather join *them* than admit that they needed adjustment - that God still had something to say to them.

And so we see this dramatic movement. The crippled man is drawn to Jesus and his life is restored. The Pharisees retreat from Jesus and toward death. Why? Because of the hardness of their hearts. It's always about the heart. That's what was fueling their choices, their emotional responses, their anger, their unkindness, their compromise, their behavior. Hard hearts that *would not* surrender.

¹² Vincent

¹³ Utley

¹⁴ *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary Of Old And New Testament Words*

¹⁵ Luke 6:11

¹⁶ Utley

So here we are, at church. Though Christ isn't bodily in front of us, He promises to be with us in a special way, walking in our midst. And here He is, speaking through His eternal Word.

The questions are: Why are we here and what are we watching for? Are we here because it's our tradition or do we believe that the God of heaven and earth *also* attends church so He can change us and bring change through us? Do we believe that God might transform us when we gather together?

And, as we come into the Lord's presence, what are we watching for? The Pharisees were watching for all the wrong reasons. We don't want to be like them. So what are we watching for? Are we watching for the commands of God and the diagnoses and the changes that God wants to work in our lives? The restoration He wants to accomplish as we anchor ourselves onto Him?

Faith and obedience was the difference in this text. That's always the difference. So whether you need a hand healed or a heart healed tonight, respond in humility and faith and obedience. God can do the impossible. He *wants* to change your life and use your life. Would we rather be restored or full of rigor mortis?