

Withered Hearts And Withered Hands

Turn with me to Mark 3. We spoke last Sunday from Mark 2 about the paralyzed man and his four friends. This morning I want to look at another man who found healing in Jesus. This is the story of the man with a withered or shriveled hand. It meant the muscles and nerves had essentially withered and died and it had become totally useless. I thought of a number of titles for this message – Everyone needs a hand; Give him another hand; How about a hand for our friend here? You get the point. But there are some other folks in the story with their own issues, so I decided to call this message, Withered Hearts And Withered Hands.

Let's read the story beginning with **Mark 3:1-6** and then I want to make some observations this morning that I hope will prove helpful to us. (Read the passage)

If you recall from last week, Jesus was at home in Capernaum and his fame had been spreading. Consequently some of the Pharisees had come to see who this fellow was and what he was teaching. They weren't happy with what they had seen so far and were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus the bible says.

Let's talk for a moment about the Pharisees. These guys were devout followers of the Law of Moses. They started out as reformers of a sort, initially calling the Jewish people back to God and holiness and to the law. The name Pharisee actually means "separatists" - defined as those who "carefully kept themselves from any legal contamination, distinguishing themselves by their care in such matters from the common people." (ISBE). According to one source, the Pharisees were a "revival and reform effort in Judaism" created in part to "keep Judaism from being swallowed up into Greek ideas and Greek polytheistic mythology. The Pharisees arose as a party, which believed in revival, which believed in reform, which believed in a vital individual personal experience with God and which believed in the resurrection of the dead." Those things in themselves sound pretty good, don't they? The problem was as they received the law and begin to interpret it, they began to create rules and regulations that went beyond the Scripture. They wanted to force on everyone the purity laws that usually only applied to priests and the temple. In order to try to be holy as God is holy, they classified people, things and times into differing categories of holiness. They became the guardians of holiness. One source said they, "specified not only what might be eaten, but out of which vessel one might eat and with whom one might eat" and apparently when one might eat as well. So when the law said not to work on

the Sabbath, the Pharisees took that commandment and arrived at 39 categories of labor which were forbidden, 294 different things that could be considered working on the Sabbath. (Sowing, reaping, baking, tying a knot, untying a knot [you could if you could untie it with only one hand], writing, and even rules about healing. You couldn't do anything to make you better, but you could do something to make sure you didn't get any worse, waiting until the end of Sabbath.) They minutely defined everything, what could and could not be done, in an effort to make sure they didn't defile themselves or offend God. In the process they forgot who it was they were to honor and why. Eventually they were treating their man-made rules and traditions as having the same authority as Scripture.

In Mark 7 they asked Jesus, **“Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders?” Jesus told them, “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men... Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.” Mark 7:5-13**

The Pharisees saw their relationship with God as being about keeping the rules and regulations to the ninth degree. “Keep these rules and you are related to God.” Jesus spoke in terms of relationship. You must be related to God through the new birth, through salvation by faith and then you receive his holiness and his life – then you find the life behind some of the traditions.

It would require another message to talk more about the Pharisees and their criticism of Jesus over the Sabbath rules and healing on the Sabbath. I actually spent hours this week working on that, wrote a few other pages and finally realized I was missing the point the Lord had for this message. It wasn't about the Pharisees this morning, it's about the man with the withered hand.

The Pharisees separated themselves from everyone else for fear of being contaminated by them. They wouldn't eat with others because they were afraid their food had not been properly tithed or prepared. Their desire to be holy was commendable in one way and to be pitied in another. At times it would be almost laughable if it were not so sad. They lost the plot, blinded to the real reason for it all.

Eventually the traditions became the basis for judgment of others rather than a guide to holiness in their own lives. The traditions became the basis for separating themselves from everyone else. With no regard for the lost and hurting, the sick and broken, they built a wall to

keep themselves from being contaminated. Jesus came among the sick and broken, the sinners and the tax collectors. He came not to build a wall but to be the Door by which all can come and enter in to the Kingdom of God. Their traditions became focused purely upon the outward, the external, when Jesus and his kingdom focused upon the inward life. Finally, their zeal for their own traditions and their own place of influence caused them to join with the Herodians - a group they considered beneath them and contaminated in order to try to stop Jesus (v6). The Pharisees were blinded by their traditions.

Now understand, traditions aren't all bad or all good. It depends partly upon whether traditions honor God and his Word or not. Whether it is the traditions of the Pharisees, or the traditions of the Pentecostals like us, the question must be, **Do our traditions prevent people from receiving God's grace or do they open the door to God's grace?** Do our traditions pass the test of Scripture or are we also guilty of teaching the traditions of men as the word of God? Are our traditions submitted to the authority and Lordship of Christ? Are our traditions consistent with the nature of Christ? Are our traditions just about us or are they about furthering the kingdom of God? Do we judge others and their relationship to God on the basis of our traditions or upon the word of God? Do we try to impose standards on people that Jesus and his word never required? Jesus said of the Pharisees, "they tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." Matthew 23:4

Dare we look to see if there is any Phariseeism in our hearts, our judgments, our lives? Beware the leaven of the Pharisees.

So it was these Pharisees who were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. Last week in Mark 2:7, they accused him of blaspheming by telling the paralytic that his sins were forgiven. In 2:16 they questioned his choice of dinner companions, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Again, they assumed these people and their food were unholy. In 2:18 they questioned why Jesus' disciples were not fasting and in 2:23-24 they accused Jesus' disciples of violating the Sabbath. (The Pharisees saw this as harvesting grain which was prohibited but they were simply eating a bite of grain which was apparently allowed.)

In Mark 3 the Pharisees are still there, still looking for Jesus to slip up. They had come, not to worship but to watch, not to heal but to hinder. They didn't care about the man with his dead and withered hand, they only cared about whether they could find a basis to accuse Jesus of

Sabbath breaking and put an end to him and his dangerous teaching and ministry. Bear in mind that breaking the Sabbath was a capital offense.

Jesus had the man with the withered hand stand up before the entire crowd and then, with the man and his infirmity on display, he asked the congregation, **“Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.” Mark 3:4**

Matthew’s account of this same miracle adds something else Jesus said. **“If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Matthew 12:11-12.**

Some rabbis argued that you shouldn’t even feed your sheep and livestock on the Sabbath and others of course argued that you should and must. The issue was about doing good, about saving life or taking life. If it was a matter of life and death, then the rules of Sabbath gave way to saving a life.

Look at Mark 3:5. Jesus wanted them to recognize that the Sabbath was made for man. He wanted them to recognize that man was of more value than a tradition. When the people, the Pharisees and the congregation alike all remained silent, refusing to stand up and commit to life and to healing and to doing the right thing, doing good rather than doing nothing and allowing evil to prevail on the Sabbath, look what the passage says. **“He looked around at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts...” Mark 3:5**

Jesus was angry because these Pharisees who had studied the law had now entirely missed the point of the law. Their traditions had now frightened the congregation into an apathetic silence. It was a pretty simple question Jesus asked. Which is lawful - to do good and save life or to do evil and harm and kill? Really? They couldn’t answer that? If your theology is so complex that you can’t tell right from wrong or good from evil maybe you’ve gotten into the wrong theology.

Jesus was distressed at their stubborn hearts. The word translated as “stubborn” there is better translated as “hard-hearted”. It means they were calloused to the truth and were refusing to bow their will to God’s will. They were choosing policy over people, rules over relationships. The one man had a withered hand, but these people had withered hearts and withered souls. Isn’t a man created in God’s image worth more than a sheep? No wonder Jesus was angry.

In what one bible scholar pointed out as the only time Jesus healed someone without being asked, Jesus told the man to stretch out his hand and it was completely restored. In doing so, Jesus broke no Sabbath laws. He did no work, prepared no medicine, did no surgery. He simply spoke. The man only had to stretch out his hand in obedience and this too was not a violation of Sabbath law. Jesus showed the people and his disciples and the Pharisees the true heart and spirit of Sabbath - that it was to honor God and to enter into the rest he has given to us.

What about this man? One early church tradition said that this man with the withered hand was a plasterer. Obviously with his hand withered and useless, he could no longer work and there was little left for such a man and his family than to beg. This was a desperate situation and the miracle changed this man's life.

But there is something I want you to see beyond the Pharisees and the arguments about Sabbath keeping and all the other points of this story. I want you to see what Jesus did to this man.

Jesus told him to stand up in front of everyone. I mentioned a moment ago that the Pharisees and the people there had withered hearts, but no one could see their withered and hardened hearts. They weren't bearing outward embarrassment about their inward condition. But everyone could see this man's withered hand. All of us are rather intimidated and reluctant to have our weaknesses, infirmities or handicaps exposed. We don't want to do anything to draw more attention to our problem. If your hand suddenly became withered and dead and drawn up, most of us would try to hide it, wear long sleeves to cover it. We hope no one will notice and more importantly, we hope no one will stare, point or ask questions.

Some of you may have had a problem like this your whole life. You've been the recipient of stares and looks and comments. You know how this man may have felt and how difficult it must have been for him to stand up in front of the Pharisees with their self-righteous attitude - no doubt looking down on him. Standing there before the whole crowd, the object of the Pharisees scorn and the congregation's pity, but this is what Jesus told him to do. Stand up here before everyone and then he told him to stretch out his hand in front of all of them! **“Stretch out your hand!”**

I can imagine him standing there, holding that hand, keeping it drawn up under his coat, his garment, up and under his sleeve. And then Jesus says in essence, “Show me your hand.” Stretch out that wounded, dying, withered, weakened hand before me. Show me your hand.

And this week as I worked on this message I heard the Lord speaking to my heart about this man, and about my weakness and my struggles. I felt the Holy Spirit whisper to me that this was the key for me and for all of us – that all of us have a withered place in our life. We may not all have a withered or crippled hand, but we all bear some kind of weakness, some kind of sin or struggle or ongoing battle. We are to take those areas of our life - those areas of weakness, the areas we want to hide from everyone else, those parts of our life of which we are most ashamed, those areas that produce guilt and shame, those areas of failure and inadequacy, that source of our deepest fear, that place, that part of our life that we are sure no one would love us if they knew about....we are to take that place, that weakness, that area and show it to Jesus. Give it to him. Submit and surrender it to him.

You don't have to confess your sins to me. I don't want to know your weakness or your sins if I don't have to. But it's time we stop trying to hide our spiritual condition and our sins and the withered places of our heart and spirit and life from Jesus. We can't hide it any way. Stop trying. Stop acting like everything is all right and you've got it all together. Stop and give it to God. Stop and stretch forth that broken place, that un-surrendered place to Jesus. Show him your hand.

Your heart has begun to wither and shrivel up and die. You've been giving yourself to things that you know are separating you from fellowship with God. Your lifestyle and choices are grieving the Holy Spirit of God and it's time you stop running, stop hiding. Jesus says, "stand up in front of me and dare to be honest. Bare the hidden places to me. Grant me access to the farthest reaches of your heart and mind and let me be lord of all. I will restore what is broken and dying and withered and missing in your life. But it starts here and now, with you obeying my word and being honest. **Show me your hand.** Show me your weakness."

The bible says when the man obeyed Jesus his hand was completely restored. Isn't it time for restoration in your life? Isn't it time to show your hand?

Maybe it's your heart, your soul, your spirit, your marriage, your attitude, your life that seems to be withered and dying. Maybe it's addiction, maybe it's some life controlling problem that is crippling you. Stretch it out to God and let him heal and restore and deliver. Show him your hand.

"Oh but I can't. It's awful. What I've done is so wrong. It's hideous. I can't let God or anyone else know how wicked, how messed up I am." And Jesus says, stand up and show me

your hand. Bring your wicked, messed up broken self to me and watch. “But I’ve spent too many years running, too many years hiding, too many years lying and deceiving, I can’t.” And Jesus says, “bring it to me. Come to me and stretch out your life before me and let me restore and make you whole.”

“But Jesus, it’s shameful. I can’t expose my sin and the source of my shame to you. I can’t expose my sin and my inadequacies to you. I was taught never to show weakness, never to cry. What if I just fell apart before you or before these people?” “Show me your hand.”

Why did you come today? Was it to watch and judge and criticize like the Pharisees? Was it to look for hypocrites among us? If you are looking, you’ll likely find some. Most folks find what they look for, whether it is good or bad. But you made the effort to be here and I don’t believe it was an accident. I believe the Lord brought you here to hear this word today. It’s time to show Jesus your hand.

Of course you can just tug on that sleeve one more time and hope no one notices. Do like Bob Dole used to do with his war-injured hand and put an ink pen in it, ignore it, but it won’t change the reality. You’ve got a withered hand, a withered heart and a cover-up is not the answer. The only solution is to do what Jesus said. Show him your hand. Expose your weakness, your heartbreak, your sin, your struggles, your burdens to Jesus. Don’t be afraid.

(V10 - Pushing forward to touch him.

V11 - It’s human beings that try to hide our sin and weakness. Demons run to him and fall before him. They don’t hide, they just tremble.)

Show him your hand. Greed. Jealousy. Envy. Coveting. Lust. Pornography. Homosexuality. Adultery. Lying. Stealing. Occult. Gambling addiction. Alcoholism. Drug addiction. Pride. Rebellion against parents. Weaknesses of every kind.

Sickness. Chronic illness. Depression. Fear. Anxiety. Mental illness. Heart disease. Cancer. Discouragement. Doubt. Grief. Sorrow and sadness.

Show him your hand and watch his complete restoration!

