

Mark 3:1-6 (ESV modified) - Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?

Again He entered the synagogue,
and a man was there with a withered hand.

² And they watched Jesus,
to see
whether He would heal him on the Sabbath,
so that they might accuse Him.

³ And He said to the man with the withered hand,
"Come here."

⁴ And He said to them,
"Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm,
to save life or to kill?"

But they were silent.

⁵ And He looked around at them with anger,
grieved at their hardness of heart,
and said to the man,
"Stretch out your hand."

He stretched it out,
and his hand was restored.

⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against Him,
how to destroy Him.

Just prior to this was a Sabbath controversy, that Jesus' disciples plucked grain on a Sabbath. Jesus used an Old Testament story about David and his men to make an astounding conclusion, that He is the lord of the Sabbath. But apparently Jesus wasn't done making His point because this story of healing on the Sabbath is much more direct and confrontational, a point raised by Jesus Himself rather than a question or accusation being brought to Him. The undertone of Jesus' words is much darker, however, than was immediately obvious, showing once more Jesus' understanding of the Pharisees' true intentions. This story marks a climax (for now) in Jesus' early ministry in the conflict that has risen to meet Him.

Again He entered the synagogue – On a Sabbath, as becomes immediately clear in the following verses. The "again" hearkens back to Mark 1:21 (when Jesus is teaching and a man with an unclean spirit calls out against Him), the last time Jesus was in a Sabbath teaching. We're not necessarily to draw the conclusion that this story happened one week after the exorcism, but just that it happened on a Sabbath.

a man was there with a withered hand – Very little is said about this man because he's not the focus. Then again, very little was said about the demoniac in Mark 1:21ff. either, and we probably have more questions about him than a man with a withered arm. The withered hand could be from a stroke or polio. Nowhere is it said that this man was present specifically for the purpose of asking Jesus to heal him. His healing comes at Jesus' own initiation. It is possible that the Pharisees were responsible for

making sure this man was in the synagogue with Jesus, but that is not a necessary component to the story. The point is that because this man is there, the Pharisees know without a doubt that Jesus will respond compassionately to him, while the Pharisees have zero compassion both for Jesus and this man who has been suffering.

they watched Jesus – This is another instance when the opponents of Jesus are unmarked specifically, but later revealed. In 3:6 the ones who are plotting against Jesus are the Pharisees and the Herodians (mentioned for the first time here). As the context indicates, they are not casual observers of what's going on, they are watching every little thing Jesus says and does to build their case against Him as they have already been doing.

whether He would heal him on the Sabbath – The dark irony here is that the Pharisees have already conceded Jesus' healing power/authority. In an indictment against themselves, they're not setting Him to see whether Jesus *can* heal a specific sickness. They know He can. What's being put on trial here is whether Jesus would do so on a Sabbath. There is a provision in the *Mishnah Yoma* 8:6 that one can "break" the rules of Sabbath in the case of mortal danger, to save a life: "Moreover, Rabbi Matya ben Charash said, If a person has a sore throat, it is permitted to put medicines into his mouth on the Sabbath, because of possible danger to his life, and whatever threatens to endanger life supersedes [the observance of] the Sabbath." But the case of a hand being withered is not an urgent matter of life or death. If Jesus heals this man, it would be a transgression of (the Pharisees' understanding of) the Law. So either Jesus is wrong, or they are.

Exod. 31:14 ESV You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.

so that they might accuse Him – The accusation is both straightforward and complicated. Since this story follows the accusation against the disciples for breaking the Sabbath by plucking grains of wheat, the logic is that to heal a person would be a violation of the Sabbath commandment. The complication is that whereas there were specific Jewish oral law traditions that stated that plucking grains was wrong, there was no such rule about healing someone. For obvious reasons, a rule against healing someone would have been unnecessary because to heal someone is not an activity a human normally does. It is a marker of divine activity. If Jesus heals on the Sabbath, not only is it not specifically forbidden either in the Sabbath commandment or the oral traditions of the Pharisees, but it would also be another sign of Jesus' divine power which would only further confirm Jesus' own words that He is the lord of the Sabbath! The very proof that Jesus will provide is not a ground for accusation, but rather a ground for praise and an acknowledgement that Jesus is the Messiah.

"Come here." – The emphasis is completely on Jesus. He was neither asked nor approached about healing this man, rather Jesus drew the man to Himself. The Pharisees so far have said nothing (but Jesus knows their thoughts (see Mark 2:8)). This man has not approached Jesus at all (unlike the paralytic who was brought to Jesus by his friends (Mark 2:3) or the man afflicted with leprosy (Mark 1:40)). It is Jesus who calls this man to come to Him, which is more akin to Jesus' words to His disciples ("follow Me!" Mark 1:17 and 2:13). While the faith of the man is not necessarily highlighted by any other words, that he follows through on Jesus' command, shows the same kind of faith that others have had in Jesus. If Jesus is trying to fly under the radar, this is an obvious example of the opposite.

And He said to them – The referent is still vague. People probably thought He was asking a question of everyone who was in the synagogue, but the context implies that He is specifically directing this question to the Pharisees who were waiting for Him to break their Sabbath rules by healing this man.

"Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" – Jesus' question is actually much broader than the previous story of plucking the grains. There Jesus seemed to be speaking rather specifically about His disciples' actions. Now Jesus speaks not necessarily of Himself, but of anyone, are good works forbidden on the Sabbath, or not? By asking this question, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. If rules have forbidden helping another person, and the Sabbath was made for people, then the rules have been shown to be ill-founded and must be rejected. Jesus' question though leads us to consider a much more sinister application. Jesus puts before the people two options of what is right on the Sabbath: doing good or causing harm. The question should have been simple, because causing harm is wrong on any day, just like doing good is the proper thing to do on any day. But if you consider this question in a very narrow sense, it really is asking for judgment between Jesus and the Pharisees themselves. For on this day, Jesus will do good, by healing the man with a withered hand. Likewise, the Pharisees on the same Sabbath day will begin their own plot to destroy Jesus. Two divergent paths are laid before the reader: which way is really the correct one? You must decide for yourself whether Jesus is who He says He is, or whether the Pharisees are right. Jesus is the new wine which will not be contained by the old wineskins, the new fabric that will not patch the old cloth.

But they were silent – In rhetoric, silence in the face of the opposition is defeat. If you have a response, you speak it. If you have no answer, you have tacitly approved that your opponent has the winning argument. This is a case where the Pharisees knew that whatever answer they would give would show their own error. If they agreed that it was right to do good on the Sabbath, they would eliminate the grounds on which they wanted to accuse Jesus. But if they said one could do harm on the Sabbath, they would be shown to be morally bankrupt, for such actions were indefensible. Jesus is

not just putting the man with a withered hand on display, but also the hearts and intentions of the corrupt Pharisees. A third path of repentance was theoretically possible. It was open for these Pharisees after hearing with their own ears Jesus' demonstration of their own wicked hearts to confess their sins before Him and follow Him as the tax collectors and other sinners did, but this option also was unacceptable to them.

He looked around at them with anger – Recall the last episode of Jesus' anger in Mark 1:41 (depending on reading anger/compassion) and 1:43. This is the only other place in Mark's Gospel where anger is specifically attributed to Jesus. Here his anger is easily understood because the next sentence explains the cause. He is not angry for sinful reasons; his anger is a righteous one. If you were in the presence of a great evil committed, it would be more inappropriate to have no reaction than to be angry at the atrocity committed.

grieved at their hardness of heart – Though Jesus is angry at the people who thought that Jesus' healing someone would be a transgression of God's commands, nevertheless, His anger is also joined with compassion at their rejection of God's Word and work. He is angry for a moment, but it is His grief and distress that gets the greater emphasis as He responds to the ongoing work of the Pharisees against Him. It's not simply a matter of not believing Jesus, they are actively working to destroy Him. In the Old Testament, the most famous instance of hard-heartedness was Pharaoh (Exo. 4:21; 7:3; 8:15). It refers not just to spiritual blindness, but an active resistance to God's purpose and will.

Jer. 13:10 ESV This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own heart and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing.

said to the man, – Jesus' miracle of healing here is accomplished only by His speaking. Jesus could heal people in a lot of different ways, but here because He did not physically do any work nor require the man healed to do any, He healed on the Sabbath and also did not technically break any of the Pharisees' rules against doing work on the Sabbath.

his hand was restored – The healing of this man is called a restoration. This is an apt description of Jesus' ministry and the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus has come to restore creation to its state before the Fall into sin. Jesus' work of redemption is to put an end to the old through His own death and bring forth the new creation through His resurrection.

Mk. 8:25 ESV Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

Mk. 9:12 ESV And he said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?"

Rev. 21:5 ESV ¶ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

held counsel – The ESV translation is given here, but most other English translations focus on the preliminary nature of these discussions, something like “proposing a resolution” or “proposing advice,” At this point in the story, they probably would not have definite steps in place, but what is alarming is that they all agree on the conclusion: that Jesus must be destroyed! There is no room for trial. They have already made up their own mind and have convicted Jesus of crimes worthy of death (e.g. blasphemy and desecrating the Sabbath).

The irony is that Jesus has done nothing deliberately in secret. The reason He has been so quickly accused is because everything He has been doing has been out in the open, in view of His followers, but also His enemies. The Pharisees and the Herodians, however, plot their own plans in secret behind closed doors for they fear the reactions of the crowds and know they could not win in the open. Even in the very end, Jesus’ trial is planned in secret, rushed in the overnight hours and false witnesses are produced because no real-life witnesses could say anything that would condemn Him.

Mk. 14:1-2 ESV ¶ It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him,² for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people."

Mk. 14:55-56 ESV Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none.⁵⁶ For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.

with the Herodians – So far it has been the scribes and Pharisees who were depicted as targeting Jesus with their criticisms and accusations. This is the first we hear of another group that allies against Jesus. Unfortunately it’s impossible to say exactly who these Herodians are (only named here and Matt. 22:16 and Mark 12:13). At its root, the word Herodian means people who were adherents or supporters of Herod (just as Christians were supporters and followers of Christ. Given that this takes place in Galilee, the Herod being favored would have been Herod Antipas (who imprisoned and later executed John the Baptist) who held control over Galilee and Perea (the land on the east side of the Jordan River). This same Herod is briefly involved in Jesus’ trial (Luke 23:7ff.), though ultimately Pilate had the final say in Jesus’ condemnation. The Herodians would have been supportive of Herod’s rule (which was ultimately pro-

Roman since Herod governed at the permission of Rome). Ultimately, it would take both Jewish and Roman voices to condemn Jesus to death.

how to destroy Him – While our interpretation of this verse is colored by our knowledge of how the story ends, it is fair to note that the word “destroy” is not “kill.” We should not necessarily assume that their aim is to kill Jesus, but to destroy Him, which would entail bringing shame and ruin on Him and His personal reputation to completely undermine the ministry that He has set Himself on.

We should not miss the ultimate irony of this event. Jesus is being framed in the Pharisees’ mind to see if He desecrates the Sabbath by healing a man who has been suffering. Jesus turned their accusations into a more black and white question: is it better to do good or cause harm? Jesus would go on to do good, by healing the man with the withered hand, but the Pharisees would do the opposite, by beginning their plans to destroy Jesus! Jesus’ words about the bridegroom being removed (Mark 2:20) find their basis and Mark as the narrator wraps up the opening section of Jesus’ ministry as he began it, by revealing the allied powers actively working against the coming of the kingdom of God.

Mk. 1:14 ESV ¶ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God,