

The Sabbath Setup
Mark 3:1-6
ABC 4/10/22

Mark has been giving us a series of short encounters between Jesus & the religious leaders of His day. Each one a little more intense. It provides a sense of climax to the growing tension between Jesus & the religious leaders. Like a novelist, Mark introduces this increasing tension into his plot, foreshadowing a deathly show-down to come. In doing this, he's building up to a conclusion, which we come to today. Jesus' words & behavior flew in the face of rabbinical traditions. Because of this, the scribes & Pharisees were watching, questioning, & criticizing Him. In spite of the miracles Jesus performed, the leaders only grew more & more resentful toward Him. They hated Him, not because He healed people or cast out demons but because He challenged their authority, violated their customs, & claimed to be the Son of God. In 2:7 Jesus forgave the sins of the man that was paralyzed. Having done so, the religious leaders thought to themselves, **Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?** The 2nd occasion where they criticized Him is in vs 16. Jesus called Levi to follow Him & Levi did so. He then had a party for his friends & for Jesus & His disciples. When the Pharisees saw Him eating with them, & they asked His disciples: **Why is He eating & drinking with tax collectors & sinners?** They were appalled at His contact with this type of people. Then in vs 18, the 3rd event, they ask, **Why do John's disciples & the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?** They were disgusted that Jesus & His disciples were feasting when they thought they should be fasting. In vs 24 we have the 4th confrontation: **The Pharisees were saying to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"** The pinnacle of the Pharisees' display of spiritual pride & hypocrisy was centered on the Sabbath. On that day, all their self-righteous legalism took center stage. Over the centuries, they'd developed scads of extra-biblical rules for Sabbath conduct. They overlaid rituals upon routines, rules upon restrictions, & requirements upon restraints. With pompous pride, they used the Sabbath as a day to parade their own self-righteousness. Meanwhile, the people were smothered under the crushing load of their legalism (Mt 23:4). They took a day designed for rest & refreshment & turned it into day of drudgery & oppression. The Pharisees hated Jesus because

He exposed them as hypocrites & denounced them as frauds. They were false shepherds, leading the people astray (Ezek 34:1–10). As the true Shepherd (Ezek 34:11–25; Jn 10:7–16), Jesus rejected them & the spiritual smokescreen they produced. They were advocates of spiritual darkness (Jn 3:19). Jesus, as the light of the world (Jn 8:12), spotlighted their errors.

1. The Context The 5th controversy is found in **1-6**.

To me, this seems to be a set up. The Pharisees up their game in their attempt to ensnare & trap Jesus as a transgressor of the law. While I can't prove it, I believe the Pharisees may have staged this as a trap for Jesus so they can accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath. One thing is certain, they saw this man with the withered hand as a test case for Jesus. We don't know whether he was there by choice or whether they'd planted him to lure Jesus into breaking their Sabbath rules. Either way, they should never have underestimated Jesus' knowledge of their intentions. Jesus always knew the hearts, minds, & motives of these religious rulers, as He does with everyone. They thought if they could get Him to heal this man, to fall for the bait, they'd have a case against Him & could condemn Him for breaking their Sabbath laws. Vs 1 tells us there was a man in the synagogue that Sabbath with a withered hand. Whether through accident, disease, or birth defect, his hand had become useless. Luke, the physician, tells us it was this man's right-hand (6:6). This disability affected him in his daily life & probably prevented him from making a living. Early tradition says he was a mason where the use of both hands was important.¹ It's said he pleaded with Jesus, saying, *I was a mason & earned my livelihood with my hands; I beseech thee, Jesus, to restore to me my health that I man not ... have to beg for my bread.*² **2**

They were watching Jesus to see what He would do. The **they** is the Pharisees (6) & Scribes (Lk 6:7).

They were watching Him in an ongoing & continuous action. This isn't a casual observation. It was an intense & sinister study. They were eager to find fault & were dissecting every move Jesus made. They're scrutinizing His words & actions to find fault. Outwardly, they pretend to protect the Sabbath. Inwardly, they want Jesus to break their Sabbath laws so they could discredit Him. What

¹ *Gospel of the Hebrews*, quoted in Jerome's commentary on Mt 12:13

² NT Apoc 1.160

were they watching for? Look at vs 2: **if He would heal him on the Sabbath so that they might accuse Him.** Notice they don't question His power to heal but they want to see if He'll do so on the Sabbath & violate their interpretation of the law. **Accuse** means to formally charge or to bring a charge publicly. If Jesus healed this man they thought they could take Him down. In their legalistic concern they'd forgotten the mercy & grace shown by God to man when He established the Sabbath. In the name of religion, they'd become insensitive to the purposes of God & to the sufferings of men. Here's the question we need to answer: Did these religious rulers have biblical grounds to accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath if He healed this man? In Ex 31:14-17 we learn that violators of the Sabbath were to be killed. But did Jesus break the Sabbath? The OT was positive in that the Sabbath was holy, a day of rest, together with the negative corollary that no work should be done on it. It was on this negative part that the debate centered. What was work? The Law said you couldn't work on the Sabbath. The Scribes & Pharisees defined what work was. What the law actually said & how these religious nitpickers interpreted & codified what it said, were very different. They had rules for everything. Legalism is never a matter of theology or biblical interpretation. It's a condition of the heart & rooted in self-righteousness. It's based in pride & always leads to condemnation of others. Legalism, & its self-righteousness, lacks mercy, grace, & compassion. Over the centuries, they had developed rules & restrictions on what level of care could be given on the Sabbath to those who were sick or injured so as to prevent anyone from working & breaking the Sabbath. Unless a person's life was at stake, doing anything to improve their condition was defined as work. The most anyone was permitted to do on the Sabbath was keep the sick person alive or maintain the status quo of their condition. Anything more than that was a Sabbath violation. Imagine how ridiculous this is in a practical scenario: Let's say that yesterday you were there when someone was hit by a car. But, because you believe the Sabbath laws these guys have created, the 1st thought that comes to mind isn't the natural instinct to help them, but to think, *Is this person going to die? If they're going to die, I'll have to do something to stabilize them until tomorrow. If not, they can wait.* In other words, *What can I do to save their life, but not do too much in order to condemn my soul?* It's idiotic, isn't it? Another example: If a wall or building fell

on someone, enough rubble was allowed to be cleared away to see whether the person was dead or alive. If he were alive he might be helped, but only to maintain his current condition. If he were dead the body had to stay there another day. A fracture couldn't be splinted because it wasn't life-threatening.³ You couldn't even pour cold water on a sprained ankle in order to relieve swelling because that was work. A cut on your finger, if it was bleeding severely, might be bandaged with a plain bandage, but you weren't allowed to put any ointment on it. When you put ointment on it that was defined as work. The mentality was an injury could be kept from getting worse, but don't make them any better. On that basis, if Jesus healed the man, He'd be violating the Sabbath. They obviously didn't care about the physical well-being of this man. Nor did they care about the divine power Jesus would display by healing him. Their only concern was with whether or not Jesus would break their traditions. If He did, they could indict Him as a Sabbath violator, a blasphemer who deserved to die. Jesus, of course, knew their hearts. According to Lk 6:8, He knew what they were thinking. He recognized this was a trap. But rather than avoiding the conflict, He sought it. As far as these Pharisees were concerned, this man with the withered hand had been living with it, probably for many years, & there was no need for Jesus to heal him on the Sabbath. It wasn't a life or death case. You've got to understand how deeply ingrained this Sabbath observance was in the Jewish consciousness in Jesus' day. It was so serious that a strict Jew wouldn't even defend his own life on the Sabbath. In the wars of the Maccabees, in between, Old & NT, when a resistance broke out among the Jews against the Syrians, some of the Jewish rebels took refuge in a cave. The Syrian soldiers pursued them, & Josephus tells us that they gave the Jews a chance to surrender, but they wouldn't. Josephus says,

*...they fought against them, that's the Syrians against the Jews, on the Sabbath day, & they burned them as they were in the caves, without resistance, without so much as stopping up the entrance of the caves. They refused to defend themselves on that day because they were not willing to break in upon the honor they owed to the Sabbath, even in such distress, for our law requires that we rest in that day.*⁴

³ M Shab 22:6

⁴

Their over-emphasis on law destroyed the higher principle of loving & caring for people. Legalism always erodes love. To prove their legalistic point, the Pharisees & Scribes used this man with the withered hand as a pawn in a religious game. They weren't concerned about the man's predicament. They resented the fact that Jesus had the power to heal him. They wanted to use His divine power as the Son of God, their Messiah, against Him to condemn Him. This was the set up.

2. The Confrontation In vs 3-5 Jesus turns the tables. They put Him in, what they think, is a no win situation but He initiates the showdown. Jesus is determined to force the issue by a public display both of his healing power & of His status as Lord of the Sabbath.⁵ Not only was Jesus the Lord of the Sabbath in a general sense (2:28), He was Lord of this very Sabbath & everything that would take place. **3-4**

Picture the atmosphere, the tension & expectations that must have filled the synagogue. The amazing thing is the Pharisees knew Jesus could heal this man, yet they wouldn't believe in Him. How hard are their hearts? Note that Jesus made no attempt to avoid the trap. He could've easily said, *I'm not going to make an issue of this. It's not a hill to die on. Let's leave it until tomorrow & I'll heal him then.* But He didn't because He wanted to challenge & expose their legalistic traditions that were binding & destroying their people. Notice too that the man with the withered hand didn't initiate contact with Jesus. In fact, there's no record, outside of a dubious tradition I quoted earlier, the man ever said anything to Jesus. There's no indication he asked to be healed. It was Jesus who called him out of the crowd & said to him, **Get up & come forward.** In other words, *Step out where all can see you.* According to Matthew's account, it was the Pharisees who began asking Jesus about what He intended to do:

They questioned Jesus, asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—so that they might accuse Him. & He said to them, "What man is there among you who has a sheep, & if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it & lift it out? How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Mt 12:10–12).

Jesus responded to their question with a general analogy, arguing from the lesser to the greater. If it's permissible to help a sheep on the Sabbath, how could it be wrong to help a human being,

⁵ RT France, *The Gospel of Mark*,

whose worth far exceeds that of an animal? No Pharisee would've argued that sheep were more valuable than people, since human beings are created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27). Yet, in practice, the Pharisees treated their livestock with more compassion than they treated people. Incredibly, they would sooner suspend their religious traditions to help an animal than help a fellow human. Jesus turns the table on them in Mark by saying, **Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?** (4). Do you see what He's doing? Jesus frames the issue around doing good or doing evil, saving life or destroying it. The answer is obvious & doing good isn't to be limited to certain days. The way Jesus phrases the question recalls Dt 30 which says, **See, I set before you today life & prosperity, & death & adversity.... I have set before you life & death, the blessing & the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you & your descendants** (15, 19). Suffering may be alleviated at any time; doing good is always right. To refrain from doing good is harmful & is choosing death over life.⁶ By asking this, Jesus is revealing their wickedness. This is the whole point: They thought it was wrong to perform a miracle of healing on the Sabbath, but they didn't think it was wrong to plan the destruction of the Messiah on the Sabbath. It's bad enough that they left this man with the withered hand to suffer when there was One in their midst who could heal him. But worse than that, they would plot the destruction of the Son of God on this very Sabbath. Jesus' question was a powerful charge against them on at least 3 levels. 1st, it exposed the unlawful nature of their extra-biblical restrictions & traditions. Clearly, the OT law encouraged people to do good & prohibited them from doing harm. But the rabbinic regulations of the Pharisees caused harm to those trying to follow them. As such, it was the Pharisees & not Jesus who were violating God's law. 2nd, the question exposed their calloused attitude toward suffering & pain. They were more interested in bringing harm on Jesus than they were in helping the suffering man. Finally, the question targeted the Pharisees' plot against the Lord. How ironic that the self-professed protectors of the Sabbath secretly wanted the Messiah Himself to violate their rabbinic restrictions so they could put Him to death.⁷ No wonder they didn't answer but **kept silent**.

⁶ David E. Garland, *Mark*, The NIV Application Commentary, pp 108–109

⁷ John MacArthur, *Mark 1–8*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, p 155

What could they say? If they agreed that it was lawful to do good & save a life, then they'd be unable to accuse Jesus of any wrongdoing. Acknowledging that truth would have contradicted their traditions while at the same time approving His act of healing as acceptable. If they claimed it was lawful to do evil & to kill, they'd put themselves at odds with the OT. Besides that, they would've publicly admitted their own hateful wickedness. They found themselves caught in a contradiction resulting from their own unbiblical customs. In the end, they did the only thing they could do. **They kept silent.** Jesus backed them into a corner. They knew what the OT said. They knew the intent of the Sabbath was for good & not harm. Jesus' question forced them to grapple with the real issue. Who was honoring God? Was it the One who desired to show mercy & compassion toward people? Or was it those who ignored the suffering of others in order to keep their own man-made regulations? Because He turned the tables on them, we see the outcome of their unbelief. Vs 5 says that Jesus, **after looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart...** **Looking around** means He saw with a penetrating gaze, quickly taking it all in. What He sees makes Him angry. It's not often we see Jesus angry in the gospels. Though Jesus was certainly angry at other times (Mt 21:12-13; Jn 2:15-17), this is the only place where the text specifically states He was angry. The **looking around** was momentary but the being **grieved** was continuous.⁸ In the same way that God was angry at the hard-heartedness of Israel in the OT (Num 11:10; Josh 7:1; Ps 2:1-6), Jesus became angry toward the unbelief of the Pharisees. In particular, He was **grieved at their hardness of heart.** The heart was the place where one made decisions. **Hardness of heart** had a moral & religious meaning & referred to a lack of understanding, a hardness of mind that made one immune to spiritual truth, as well as being scornful disobedience to God's will.⁹ The withered hand of the man is nothing compared to the withered souls of these legalistic lawyers. Jesus was angry toward their coldhearted unbelief. Yet, His anger was intermingled with sorrow & sadness because of the damnation He knew would come upon them. Even in His anger toward them, He was filled with pity, knowing the eternal destruction that awaited them on account of their rebellion

⁸ Frank E Gaebein, DA Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol 8

⁹ In the biblical idiom it's synonymous with a fat heart, a stiff neck, blind eyes, & deaf ears.

(Mt 23:37–38; Lk 19:41–44). Jesus' heart was grieved because of their unbelieving, unmerciful state of heart that was getting worse & worse to the point of wanting to destroy Him.

A buzz of excitement must have shot through the congregation, most of whom would've known the man with the withered hand. Not only were they amazed at Jesus' preaching & His willingness to openly defy the Pharisees, but He also performed an undeniable miracle. **Stretch out your hand,** Jesus commands. The man must now make a choice. He may refuse & spare himself humiliation. But by doing that he'd be like the religious leaders who refuse to open themselves to the word of Jesus. Or he may take the risk of faith & act on the command of Jesus. **He stretched it out,** says Mark, **& his hand was completely restored.** The cure was instantaneous & complete. No more treatments or check-ups were needed. In opening himself to Jesus he is healed. Once again Mark describes faith without using the word. Jesus could have said, *Your sins are forgiven*, as He said to the paralytic, but that's assumed here when the man has faith enough to obey His command. The implied forgiveness of sins & Jesus' power to heal underlies what He does but it isn't stressed here. The focus is on what Jesus' actions mean for the observance of the Sabbath. Clearly the Messiah hasn't come to commemorate the Sabbath, as they thought He should, but to do good.¹⁰ In that moment, feeling surged back into the man's hand. His strength returned & his grip was as good as it had ever been. Full use returned & the flesh was filled out & the paralysis & palsy disappeared. The wonder of it all is that none of them could have pointed their finger & said: *You've worked on the Sabbath.* Do you know why? Because there were no visible means used, no implements, no bandages, no ointments, all He did was speak. Jesus was doing good & saving lives while the Pharisees were doing harm & plotting to kill.

3. The Conspiracy One would think that even the Pharisees would have responded in faith after witnessing an amazing miracle like this. At the very least, it should have made them rethink their rules. Instead, their fury against Jesus escalates. According to Lk 6:11, **They themselves were filled with rage, & discussed together what they might do to Jesus.** They're incensed when Jesus does good on the Sabbath but they have no problem doing harm & plotting death on the very same day.

¹⁰ David E. Garland, *Mark*, The NIV Application Commentary, p 108

Fuming, because their authority has been publicly challenged, & unwilling to tolerate any such threat, they act quickly because they couldn't take it anymore. **6**

Mt (12:14) & Lk (6:11) don't mention the Herodians. Apart from passing references in the NT (Mt 22:16; Mk 3:6; 12:13), the term *Herodians* is absent in ancient literature. The reference in Josephus to *partisans of Herod* may refer to this group.¹¹ In a separate reference, he notes that Herod *showed special favor to those of the city's populace who had been on his side while he was still a commoner*.¹² These allusions suggest the Herodians weren't a distinct sect or political party as were the Pharisees, Sadducees, & Essenes, but were sympathizers & supporters of Herod's cause & the Herodian dynasty.¹³ They were an Hellenistic group of Jews that supported the rule of Herod &, by extension, Rome itself. These secular Jews were viewed by their countrymen as traitors to their own religious heritage. Here we see the Pharisees in an unholy union with their enemies, the Herodians, to do away with Jesus once & for all. Keep in mind that the Pharisees would have nothing to do with Gentiles. Beyond that, they'd have nothing to do even with people like Levi the tax collector because he was working for the Romans. He was unclean to them even though he was a Jew. The Herodians supported the rule of Herod under Rome & they were continually coming in contact with Gentiles & dealing with them. Yet all of a sudden, to destroy the Son of God, the Pharisees strike a deal with those they hate. An alliance of enemies to kill a Man, yet they wouldn't make an alliance to help a man. Do you know what the Pharisees must have been thinking? Herod had arrested John the Baptist & would kill him. Maybe his followers, the Herodians, would be equally successful in destroying Jesus. These enemies unite because of their common enemy, Jesus. That's the outcome of their unbelief. It's always the outcome of unbelief. You're either for Jesus or you're against Him. & so, unlike Jesus, who works in the open, they plot in secret. Their pact to destroy Him will culminate in Mk 15:1, **Early in the morning the chief priests with the elders & scribes & the whole Council, immediately held a consultation; & binding Jesus, they led Him away & delivered Him to Pilate.** The Pharisees hated Jesus because He openly opposed their hypocritical system of works-

¹¹ *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.447

¹² *Antiquities*, 152

¹³ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, pp 101–102

righteousness. The Herodians hated Jesus because His popularity with the people made Him a potential threat to the power of Herod & of Rome (Jn 6:15; 19:12). Consequently, both groups reject God's Son.¹⁴ There's not only that irony, but the fantastic irony that all this was done on the Sabbath.

We see here the clash of these 2 ideals of spirituality: Law & grace. They aren't compatible but completely opposing. We see these men whose religious existence was to obey rules, laws, & regulations. Because Jesus & His disciples broke their laws & their rules, they were convinced they were evil. They believed that because they were addicted to their traditions. Like people today who believe that religion consists only of going to church, praying before meals, tithing, & daily Bible reading, but that's as far as it goes for them. They therefore, go to great lengths in carrying out external acts which are looked on as religious. Yet it never reaches their hearts. Many of these people would never put themselves out for anyone else. When a man is in need, like this man, would they do anything to help? Many today, even those who claim to be Christians, are without sympathy. They don't want to sacrifice anything to help anyone. They're sincere in their religious orthodoxy yet they're deaf to the cry of the needy, of the blind, of the naked, the hungry, the dying, & the damned. That's a living death. Life is found in grace, in the love of God. & that love of God, when received by faith, outflows in a love for mankind. For Jesus the most important thing wasn't a correct performance of ritual, but a spontaneous answer to the cry of human need.

This Sabbath day setup was an operation of the religious elite. But there's still a satanic setup trying to tangle each of us in the bondage of man-made laws that squeezes the life & joy of God out of us. I implore you, don't be in that yoke of bondage. Instead live the life of the Spirit, in the law of the life of the Spirit in Christ Jesus which has set us free from the law of sin & death (Rom 8:2). Don't fall for Satan's trap.

The mercy Jesus displayed toward this man in the synagogue is in stark contrast to the hatred displayed by the Pharisees toward their own Messiah. So intense was their fury toward Him that they joined forces with their enemies to plot His demise. They were willing to do whatever it took

¹⁴ John MacArthur, *Mark 1-8*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, p 158

to get rid of Jesus. According to Mt 12:15, the Lord knew what they were plotting: **But Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there.** Nonetheless, storm clouds had begun to gather on the horizon. They'd soon descend on Him on a hillside outside Jerusalem called Golgotha where He'd give His life for us. Even in death, Christ would triumph, paying the penalty for sin & rising from the dead in victory. Because of that sacrifice, the Lord of the Sabbath offers heavenly rest to all who believe in Him (Heb 4:9). The Son of God has come among men. He's taught the truth with astonishing authority & then authenticated His message with works of breath-taking power, works that invariably helped people, forgave them, healed them, delivered them, & made them happier than they'd ever been before. Jesus rescued them, restored them, & gave them back their freedom. But none of this mattered to the Pharisees or the Herodians. Jesus didn't follow their roles & He didn't flatter them. What was worse, He was loved by the people & they weren't. It doesn't take an expert in human nature to imagine that envy & jealousy were motivating their hatred of Jesus & this becomes clearer as the story proceeds. In a fury of spite, they sit down & talk about destroying Him. Imagine the conversation as they talked about how this might be done, who might do it, & how they might cover their tracks. Imagine them justifying what they plotted to do. It was, of course, a conversation held in secret. Only the participants knew it had occurred or what was said there. This conspiracy of the Pharisees & the Herodians points forward to the Passion narrative which we commemorate this week. With His entire road still before Him, Jesus now must conduct the rest of His ministry in the shadow of the cross. The reference to **the bridegroom being taken away from them** (2:20) & the plot against Jesus' life (3:6) lay the cornerstone for the passion & death of God's Son.

If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, if your heart hasn't been transformed by the Spirit of God so that you love Jesus, God sees you as a hater of His Son. Whatever you may think about yourself, however highly you regard yourself, & you have a much higher view of yourself than anyone else does, God thinks of you as a hater of His Son. You may mask that hatred, even from yourself, but God knows the truth. But it's not too late... Like this man with the withered hand, you can take Jesus at His word & put your faith in Him because He came to die for you.

If you find yourself a lover of Jesus this morning, by the grace of God & the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, then rejoice as the man with the withered hand must have rejoiced to find himself healed. As that service in the synagogue ended, 2 kinds of people left, the only 2 kinds of people there ever are in this world, the only 2 kinds that will leave here today. Some left rejoicing in the power & grace of God that had restored that man's life. Others left gnashing their teeth at the One who'd done such a kindness. Which group are you in?