

The Storm in the Synagogue

Luke 6:7-11

It was a bright, breezy Sabbath morning. The sky above the synagogue was powder blue. Little waves lapped at the shore. And birds swooped and swirled in the winds that wafted in off the lake.

A white limestone synagogue sat on a hillside, looking placid and peaceful. But behind the stone pillars, a storm was brewing. Stung by their defeat in the barley field, temple scribes and fundamental Pharisees seethed with anger.

Inside the stone synagogue, the Savior was surrounded by a stony wall of stern faces. And as Jesus looked around at those Pharisees, there was fire in His eyes and fury on His face.

And He looked around at them with anger, Mark 3:5 (ESV)

For two thousand years, artists have painted the face of God's Son. Some have pictured Him smiling, surrounded by children. Others have depicted Him beside sickbeds, His eyes full of pity and compassion. But no one has painted Jesus as He appeared that morning in the synagogue.

The scribes who seethed inside the synagogue spent their lives studying the scrolls. So they should have remembered the many times God burned with anger at their fathers as they wandered the barren desert wilderness of Sinai.

But for some reason, it seemed to slip their minds. Maybe that is why, there in the synagogue that Sabbath morning, they repeated their fathers' foolish error.

...they provoked Him to anger with their deeds, Psalm 106:29

There is a stern warning in those words. After all, if God's people infuriated the Lord in the wilderness and others angered His Son in the synagogue, it is more than merely possible that we too might arouse His anger.

Countless generations have lived and died since that Sabbath morning. And much has changed. People fly jets and drive automobiles instead of riding donkeys and driving oxen. But not everything has changed. Our God still gets angry. And that which maddened the Master in the synagogue, still angers Him today.

Lack of Pity

Wearing richly embroidered robes and long perfumed beards, the Pharisees filed into the synagogue that morning as they always did. But they did not really come to worship. They came to spring a trap they were sure would catch the Carpenter.

They baited their trap with a man ancient stories say was a stonemason. Somehow, the man had been wounded. But that was some time ago. Now his hand was not only limp and paralyzed; it had grown weak and withered.

On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him. Verses 6-7

It was at trap, plain and simple. Our Lord's enemies planted the man in the congregation. Then they waited.

They sneered at the very thought of following Jesus as disciples. But they had watched Him work and listened to Him speak. So they knew Him better than most modern skeptics do.

And it was obvious to them that His heart was overflowing with compassion. They were smug and sure the Savior could not and would not allow that man to go home without two strong arms.

They had selected the man with careful, calculating thought. Rabbinical Sabbath regulations only allowed medical treatment when a person's life was in danger.

So they selected a man whose arm had withered and wasted away. Yes, he had an infirmity that caused suffering. But his limp, lifeless arm did not threaten his life.

The scribes heard the words the Carpenter spoke that morning as He taught in the synagogue. But they were not really listening to what He had to say. They were too busy watching and waiting.

They knew it was merely a matter of time before He took the bait. And they were right. Sometime during the service, the Savior's eyes fastened upon a man with anguish in his eyes and a hand that hung as limp as a leaf on windless day.

Make no mistake. From the moment He walked in the synagogue Jesus knew exactly what was going on. The scribes' clever scheme was not a secret with the Savior. He could read their thoughts.

But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, "Get up and come forward!" Verse 8

That was what the Pharisees were waiting for. Almost as one, they stood and gathered around Jesus.

And they questioned Jesus, asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" Matthew 12:10

They offered the question with a sly smile. But it was not really a question at all. It was a challenge.

Jesus looked at the smug, stony faces all around Him and fire glinted in His eyes. No, the fact that they were plotting against Him was not what sparked his anger. What enraged Him was that they had no pity for the man.

That was why Jesus had the man stand up in their midst. The Master had healed men who were miles off. So Christ could have easily healed the man's hand while he was still seated. But Jesus wanted His enemies to look at the man.

Could they not see the suffering in the man's eyes? Unable to work, he lived in poverty and walked the ragged edge of starvation. His children curled up on their sleeping mats with empty stomachs each night. And that broke the man's heart. But there was nothing he could do about it.

In that tense moment there in the synagogue, Christ could not see the slightest shred of compassion or pity in those Pharisees' eyes. And that kindled a holy anger within Him.

Do not be deceived. It still angers and enrages our God when His people look with cold eyes and callous hearts upon someone who is suffering.

In all the world no one weeps without our God's concern. Indeed, He numbers every tear we shed.

And He expects His people to share that same sense of compassion when they see people who are weak and wounded or suffering with pain and problems.

Lack of Priorities

Jesus looked at the man. Cradling his withered arm, he looked nervously at the fierce faces all around him. Christ could see the fear in his eyes. So He spoke the command softly.

After looking around at them all, He said to him, "Stretch out your hand!" And he did so; and his hand was restored. Verse 10

For long years, the man had tried to flex the muscles in his right arm. And each time his hand felt like a stone. But this time as he stretched the hand out, it became full and firm and strong again.

The man was healed. But questions remain. Why did Jesus insist on healing the man when He knew it was a trap? Why deliberately enrage his enemies?

Why not wait a few hours? When the sun drifted down and hid itself behind the western ridge, the Sabbath would be over. The man's hand was withered, so we know he had lived with the paralysis for a long time. Surely, he could wait a few more hours.

Really the answer is simple. But it was not because Jesus was determined to heal the man in defiance of the Pharisees. Neither did He heal the man in spite of their anger and animosity. He healed the man because He loved him and wanted him to be whole and happy.

It is our nature to avoid confrontations and conflict. So we sometimes delay doing or saying what we know we should to keep critics from being upset.

But Jesus never did that. He always did what He knew was right and good and pure. He neither changed nor delayed His work because of any adversary.

In the end, Jesus was faced with a choice. On one hand, He could keep the old rabbis' traditional Sabbath regulations. Or he could heal the man then and there. It was all a matter of priorities. What was really most important?

That is where Jesus and the Pharisees disagreed. They believed nothing was more important than keeping rites, rituals and regulations. Yes, they would say, it is right and good to help people. But everything in its own time. Tradition must come first.

Confronting that mind set, Jesus leveled a question at the Pharisees.

And Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?" Verse 9

The Master referred to a maxim in ancient rabbinical writing. To fail to save a life, rabbis insisted, amounted to murder.

Suppose for instance, that a man is drowning, and another person is standing on the shore. But the second man neither throws the drowning man a lifesaver to cling to nor swims out to bring him back. The man on the shore, the old rabbis wrote, was as guilty of murder as he would be if he held the man's head under the water.

Sometimes, the Savior reminded His enemies, to do nothing is a sin. And that presented the Pharisees with a dilemma. On one hand ancient traditions forbade medical treatment on the Sabbath. On the other, there was a man who needed help.

Even according to their own scrolls, the Master insisted, if He refused to heal the man in order to keep the Sabbath tradition, He would be sinning by doing the man harm.

In the end, the Savior's decision was based upon what is the most important. With God, mercy always comes before rituals.

And to the Jews, no ritual was quite so important as offering animal sacrifices. But again and again, God insisted that what He really wanted was mercy and kindness.

I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. Hosea 6:6 (NKJV)

To do righteousness and justice is desired by the Lord more than sacrifice. Proverbs 21:3

Skewed priorities cannot help but breed hypocrisy of the highest degree. And when the Pharisees left the synagogue, they proved that beyond any argument.

But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy Him. Matthew 12:14

As soon as the Pharisees left the synagogue, they began plotting to destroy Jesus. So the same scribes who refused to help a hurting man on the Sabbath were perfectly willing to plan the murder of an utterly innocent man on the same Sabbath.

But getting our priorities backwards also angers God for a much more basic reason. Putting mercy and kindness in the backseat violates our loving God's very nature. He never wants us to keep church traditions at the expense of showing kindness and compassion to people.

People our Lord loves so much He died for them.

Lack of Piety

Jesus was angry there in the synagogue. But as He looked at the stony faces that ringed Him, His anger was mixed with deep grief.

After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, Mark 3:5

Our Savior had great pity for the man whose hand He healed. But He loved the men arrayed against Him no less.

He could see what they could not. The path they had chosen to follow would lead them to an excruciating eternity of agony in Hell.

Those men had often heard Christ preach. In fact, that very morning they sat and listened while He taught in the synagogue.

Then the Savior stood the suffering man before them that they might look upon him and see him as God saw him. Finally, He challenged them with a principle from their own scrolls. But the only answer He received in return was a stony silence.

That silence was a begrudging acceptance that the Carpenter had done nothing wrong, even by their own standards. The old scrolls did not specifically prohibit miraculous healing because there was no expectation of healing by a mere command.

Instead, rabbinical regulations prohibited specific medical treatments on the Sabbath. And Jesus never touched the man.

But that was not the only reason why the Pharisees answered Christ's question with sullen silence. They simply had no answer for our Lord's argument. They knew He was right.

But rather than admit their hearts were hard and their priorities were twisted, they said nothing at all. And the moment they left, they began to plot His murder.

Their hearts were so encrusted with calluses, they were past feeling. They could not feel compassion for the suffering man. They could not and would not face their own sin. Worst of all, they were able to look into the very face of the Son of God and continue relentlessly toward their own destruction.

And that is surprising. After all, they had the makings of a genuine faith in Jesus Christ. They knew He was a man of infinite love and compassion. More than that, they had no doubt that He possessed miraculous powers.

Yet in spite of all they had heard, all they had seen, and all they knew, they still refused to respond to Christ with confession and commitment.

Instead, they chose the deepest deafness of all: resolutely refusing to hear. And they so closed their eyes, they lived in a darkness deeper than the blindest beggar knew.

Our Savior's purpose at the synagogue was not to defeat the hard-hearted men who hated Him. No, He wanted to win them over.

Our Lord loved those Pharisees every bit as much as He did the man He healed. And He wanted them to trust in Him and experience His fountains of joy and oceans of peace.

But like the hardhearted people of Jerusalem, they simply would not. They were but another chapter in the tragic history of God's pleading with His people.

*All day long I have stretched out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.
Romans 10:21*

God still stretches out His hands to people. Both through His Word and His Spirit, He urges us to turn from our sin that He might pour His blessings into our lives.

When we stubbornly refuse to listen, we are choosing our own death, defeat and destruction instead of His light, life, and love.

And that always breaks His heart.