

Mark 3:1–6 Know Where You Stand

¹Jesus entered the synagogue again, and a man was there with a withered hand. ²They were watching Jesus closely to see if he would heal the man on the Sabbath day, so that they could accuse him. ³He said to the man with the withered hand, “Step forward!” ⁴Then he said to them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. ⁵Then he looked around at them with anger, deeply grieved at the hardness of their hearts. He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” The man stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶The Pharisees left and immediately began to conspire against Jesus with the Herodians, plotting how they might kill him. (EHV)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, fellow children of God,

I invite you to exercise your imaginations for a moment. Often when we read or hear an account from the Gospels like the one we just read, we mentally experience those events as an observer – someone who just witnesses what’s going on. But right now I encourage you to place yourself into this story as the man with the withered hand.

Now, Mark doesn’t tell us why the man was in the synagogue that day, but we can assume that he was – that you were – there for the right reasons: it was the Sabbath, and you wanted to be where you could hear God’s Word and worship him with your fellow believers in the Lord. But on this day some men who had never had much use for you and your imperfection were paying very close attention to you; they might even have encouraged you to sit or stand where you and your hand could easily be seen – usually they would have preferred that you keep out of sight.

Soon, though, you stop thinking about them or wondering why they’re interested in you, because Jesus of Nazareth enters the synagogue. You have heard about him, and have wanted to see him for a long time, but there’s never been a good opportunity. Maybe you got close a few times, wondering if he might heal you, but decided that there were plenty of people with more severe conditions and deeper needs who needed his miracles more than you did. Still, it would make such a difference to your life – especially your earning a living – to have the use of both hands like everyone else. But there really hasn’t ever been anything you could do about that.

And then Jesus notices you, and notices the men watching you, and he tells you where to stand: “Step forward!” He doesn’t want you back in the corner – he wants you in the middle, by him, where everyone else can see. So you listen, and you come. Of course, you do – you’ve heard that Jesus can heal anybody of anything.

But the next words he speaks ... are to the Pharisees who have been watching you. He asks them a question – it seems like an important one – but they don’t have an answer – you feel like you’ve stepped into the middle of a long-running argument. But then he speaks to you again. He doesn’t ask you questions to test your faith or to measure whether you’re worthy of his mercy. Instead, he simply says, “Stretch out your hand.” And, almost without thinking about it, you do, and as you do, you realize that all the muscle and bone and flesh and knuckles and nails and everything on that hand now feel and work just like your other hand – even better, in fact. Your heart is filled with wonder and joy – what you’d never dared to dream of is now reality: you have been healed.

Mark doesn’t tell us what you do next, but it’s reasonable to assume you find your voice and express your deep thanks to the man who has just made your useless hand useful. You’re probably ready now to believe what people have been saying about him – that he is a great prophet, or perhaps even God’s long-promised Messiah. You know where you want to stand: with him.

And the gracious act of healing that restored your – that man’s – formerly withered hand vividly illustrates a vitally important spiritual truth: God’s deliverance and blessings are not rewards for your righteous acts or proactive pieties, but are only and always gifts freely given from his love and mercy. Just as Jesus was the only one who could heal the man’s hand with just a few words and no effort or touch, so also Jesus is the only one who can rescue every sinner from the just punishment we all deserve, the only one who can make the unrighteous righteous, and the only one who can change our destiny from hell to heaven. We are all sinners who sin. We need what only Christ can give us. And just like that man in the synagogue that day, there’s nothing for us to do to merit or earn or arrange our deliverance: we merely hear and heed his invitation, and trust the Word by which he works the miracle of faith and salvation within us. We stand before him and receive his gifts, with thanks and praise and deep humility.

And what a contrast there is between that humble trust in Christ as healer and Savior, and what we see with the Pharisees in this incident and afterwards. Their self-righteousness – and the selfish desire to preserve their position and power over their fellow Jews – made them hate the very One God had sent among them as one of them to be their Messiah and Redeemer. They were going to take their stand apart from and *against* Jesus, no matter what it took – which meant conspiring with their political adversaries, the Herodians, to have this rabbi of the rabble killed.

That contrast between trust and contempt is just one of many contrasts that are exposed here. Christ’s words make clear that where you stand – with him or apart from him – makes the difference in all sorts of things that matter, or should matter, to everyone. The question he asked those waiting to catch him in lawlessness made the distinctions clear. By asking “Is it lawful?” he challenged them to take a stand: which were they in favor of – good or evil?

Now, it’s hard to imagine anyone saying out loud that he or she is “pro-evil” – even the worst despots and psychopaths will usually find a way to claim that they’re doing “good” – but just as these Pharisees were moved by Christ’s display of compassion and power to conspire to murder him, many people today think and speak and act as though they’re the good guys, when in reality what they favor and work toward is nothing but evil – because “evil” is pretty much defined by opposition to God and his will, and when you stand apart from Jesus or against what his Word has to say, you have chosen the wrong side.

So if you defend practices and people that unjustly take the lives of other people, it is not *lawful* by God’s standards, even if it is *legal* by man’s – you are advocating for evil. If you maintain that the Creator’s design for sex and marriage is outdated or ignorant or narrow-minded or just not for you, and if you’re in favor of easy divorce, cohabitation, “same-sex marriage”, pornography, and the general freedom to follow your urges whatever they are or wherever they come from, you do not stand with your Savior. God defines and commands what is good in his Word, and thankful believers, as the man with the healed hand surely became, happily and confidently choose *that*, and reject what comes from their own sinful desires, from the enticements of a corrupt culture, and from the temptations of the devil.

And Christ’s “Is it lawful ... to save life or to kill?” compels another choice: between life and death. Jesus knew where the hearts of his enemies were headed. They cared little or nothing for the health or the long-term interests of the man with the withered hand – or of pretty much anyone else they saw as beneath them. They liked their own lives, and wanted to protect what they thought was good about them, whatever it took. And if that meant preferring that a man with a disability remained that way, or meant killing a gracious miracle-worker for making them look bad, well, so be it.

Of course, people today don't have the same opportunity to arrange for the Messiah's execution, but many are still choosing death over life. Although pro-lifers in America were encouraged last summer by the Supreme Court overturning the *Roe v Wade* decision that had legalized abortion throughout the US, subsequent events have made it abundantly clear that the struggle to protect unborn life in the womb is far from over – abortion advocates are still presenting self-interest as paramount and power as prerogative, and babies are still dying by the thousands. And much less in the public eye we also have those who argue for assisted suicide and euthanasia, claiming that we, not God, should have the right to decide whose lives are worth living, and when those living with pain or problems or disease or disabilities should be made dead.

But those who stand with Jesus choose life, not death, because we love the God who loved us first and we love our neighbors. And since Scripture makes clear that God alone has the power and the authority to initiate and terminate life, we understand that neither doctors nor mothers, no matter their reasons, are *right* to end the lives of children in the womb, nor are scientists or specialists right to experiment with or eliminate embryos in a lab. Instead, we stand up for and speak up for the voiceless and defenseless, whatever their size, location, or age – and that includes the suffering and elderly and disabled who are too often told that their lives are worth less because they are weak or tired or something other than perfect.

This, of course, is the primary concern of my organization, *Christian Life Resources*. We educate, equip, and organize believers who want to stand with God and his people for life and against the culture of death so common in our society today. We operate a national network of pregnancy care centers and have a home for single mothers in Milwaukee, *New Beginnings*. We also provide a wealth of resources on a wide range of life and family concerns, so that Christians like you can be prepared to speak, to act, to explain, and to advocate in whatever situation you find yourself or whatever challenge you might face.

Which brings to mind another line of division that this account reveals, though perhaps not so obviously. While the religion of the Pharisees was all about strictly obeying a strict set of laws – this incident, along with plenty of others in the Gospels, shows that in things that really mattered they were more about *inaction* than action. What they obviously thought was the “right” thing to do that day would have been to *do nothing* for the man with the withered hand – that's why they thought they could “catch” Jesus healing on the Sabbath. Similarly, they prized – and thought that God valued – things like fasting and fastidious tithing over acts of love and mercy toward their brothers and sisters and neighbors – even their mothers and fathers. They were satisfied with *looking* holy and having the right positions on important issues, even if they never followed through with *doing* all that their Lord had given his people to do.

Sadly, this attitude hardly died with the Pharisees. In fact, it's quite common among Christians today: “Hey, I believe the right things, I take the right positions, and I'm not actively doing the wrong things, so God and everyone else should be happy with me.” But Christ's call to follow him is a call to action, not inaction – it's not enough to not do wrong, we want and need to do right. So the believer who is concerned about not making waves, not risking her comfort, not outing himself as a Christian, not being labeled as “one of those pro-lifers”, more than he or she is concerned about the things that matter to God, like good and evil, life and death, mercy and love and service to your neighbor, well, that believer is not standing squarely with Jesus. Because what do we see, in this incident and everywhere in the Gospels? We see Christ actively, positively, mercifully *doing something* whenever there is something that love shows must be done.

And when and where we have opted for inaction over action, and whenever we have aligned ourselves with evil instead of good, and in any way in which we have chosen death instead of life, even with abortion, we can still have the assurance, even the joy, of knowing that, despite our sins and failures, Christ has chosen *us*, which is the only way we could ever be pardoned for these things. He came from heaven to take our place in obeying God and in paying the price of everyone's disobedience to God – he went to the cross, suffering unimaginably in body, heart, and soul, to save sinners – you and me and everyone. Put your trust in him, and him alone, and your every sin is forgiven forever – even the sins that make you shiver with shame every time you remember them. Because even with our iniquities and imperfections, in love and mercy Jesus stands with us – he takes away what we deserve, and gives us instead what he has earned: new life, salvation, and eternal bliss.

And this is why we never want our work or our words on life or family issues to put up walls that keep the people who are watching or listening from hearing and trusting the gospel that tells them about Jesus their Savior and the forgiveness of their sins. We want even our “enemies” in the culture, just as Jesus wanted his, to stand with us today at the foot of the cross and know Christ's grace and truth, so that at the end of all things we all can stand together before his throne in paradise in joy and praise and bliss forever. So we aim to build bridges instead of walls.

Which also means choosing belief over unbelief, and the path of wisdom over the path of folly. That's a final contrast our text today reveals. The man with the withered hand, probably without even thinking much about it, does what makes sense not just spiritually but personally and practically: by trusting Jesus, he gets his hand healed and, effectively, a new and better life. But Christ's adversaries show the irrationality of their evil and unbelief. They could have recognized his compassion as a good thing to be honored, even imitated, but instead they counted on it as a tool to trip him up. And when he healed the man, without a touch, they should have fallen to their knees, realizing that the One who had such power and used it so consistently, effortlessly, and mercifully could only have it from God, or *be* God. Seeing what they saw, knowing what they knew, the wise response from them would have been fear and faith and honor, but they foolishly received him with contempt and conspiracy instead.

So it should be clear where the wise will want to stand: with Jesus, in faith, with love toward God and love toward our neighbor, combined with a devotion to and reliance on his Word and truth. And with him beside us, we will choose good over evil, life over death, action over inaction, and the Lord's blessing over sin's curse. Trust Christ, cling to the Lord, be useful as he has made you, and choose wisely. Take your stand – in the middle, not a corner.

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