

## **Stories of the Master**

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### **The Man with the Withered Hand**

Jesus was back in Galilee. The great festival and its celebration in Jerusalem were over. Jesus had returned to his home province to continue his work. It was the Sabbath and Jesus and his disciples had entered the village synagogue awaiting the start of the service and worship of God.

The building was filling with the inhabitants of the village, and everyone was wondering if Jesus would teach or do something special on this day – perhaps a miracle. But Jesus was deep in thought. He was thinking of his time at the festival in Jerusalem. He had healed a man on the Sabbath day during the festival – a man who had not walked for 38 years! The leaders should have rejoiced, but they only argued with him about keeping the Sabbath rules.

“Why,” Jesus wondered, “why, if God has given this special day for his people for rest and to remember his great deeds in delivering his people, why then can it not also be a day to celebrate the great works he is doing now!”

But most of the religious leaders missed the full meaning of this special day. For them, the full meaning of the Sabbath had been lost on the excessive rules they had created about what people could and could not do on this holy day.

Then, Jesus thought on what had happened earlier in the day.

Jesus and his disciples were walking through a field of ripening grain. His disciples were hungry and they plucked the heads of some of the grain to eat. It was fine for the disciples to do this from someone else’s field. The Law of Moses allowed this. But it was the Sabbath and when the religious leaders saw the disciples plucking grain from the field for a snack, they erupted in anger.

“See here! Look! Your disciples are harvesting grain, and today is the Sabbath!”

The Pharisees were men who were zealous to keep the laws of Moses. Many were highly regarded by the people and many were good men with good hearts who sought to obey the commandments of God and to help the people learn and obey the commandments of God. The Pharisees believed that Israel’s national disgrace was due to the nation not keeping the laws of Moses. If only everyone would adhere to the laws, brighter days would come. The Messiah would appear, the Kingdom would be established, the Romans would be defeated, the land would be cleansed from pagan pollution, and God’s true temple rebuilt. This was the hope of every man, woman and child in Israel – the coming of the kingdom of God and the Pharisees helped to nurture that hope. But sometimes their zeal for the laws was misguided and blinded them to the heart of God and how he would fulfill his plan for Israel.

And so ... when the Pharisees saw the followers of Jesus plucking grain, they were filled with anger that Jesus would allow them to do this.

“See here! Your disciples are harvesting grain, and today is the Sabbath!”

“Harvesting?” Jesus said. “They are only reaching out their hands for a snack.”

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“They are harvesting! Anyone, at any time who plucks grain is harvesting! They should know better. You should know better! If you were really from God your disciples would not be breaking the Law of Moses that says no harvesting, no work of any kind is to be done on the Sabbath!”

The Sabbath was one of the greatest laws in Israel. It was part of the charter covenant God had made with His people, part of the ten great commandments they were to keep, and their failure to keep the Sabbath and the other laws throughout their history the reason why God had brought his judgment upon them.

It was important that the people observe the Sabbath, but what did that mean and what was considered work? The Pharisees, in their zeal to keep the Laws of God, created hundreds, some say thousands of applications of the Sabbath law which defined what a man could and could not do on this holy day.

And of course, it would be against the Law for a farmer to reap his harvest on the Sabbath. He should rest on that day and he should rest his animals. But reaching out one’s hand to pluck off a few grains for a snack? Who, in his right mind, would consider that harvesting a crop?

Jesus wondered what kind of heart would think such things. But he wanted to help these leaders to understand and so Jesus called everyone to himself, his disciples, the Pharisees, and a few others who had observed the incident.

“Let me tell you a story about something that happened in the history of our people. You all know it. David and his men were in trouble. He and his men were running for their lives from King Saul, and they became hungry. They went to the house of God where the Ark of the Covenant was. They entered and the priests gave to David and his men some of the holy bread that was on the table in the holy place. This bread was changed every day and the day-old bread was food only for the priests according to the Law of Moses. David was not a priest. His men were not priests – yet the spiritual leaders of Israel allowed them to have this food because they were men in need – they were hungry.”

Jesus paused and allowed everyone to draw the parallel. The disciples were hungry, David’s men were hungry. David’s men ate food that the Law of Moses said was only for the priests, yet the priests saw a greater law at work – the law to love a neighbor and the law to assist someone in need. Could not the Pharisees see the same thing? Jesus’ men were hungry. They had sacrificed to journey with him to serve the people of God. Plucking a few heads of grain was meeting their need. It was not reaping.

Jesus continued. “Let me give you another illustration. I want to ensure that you understand. In the Temple, on the Sabbath the priests “break the law” all the time! Yes, it is true that no one should work on the Sabbath, but some of the Temple responsibilities must be performed on the Sabbath! The priests have to bake fresh bread and replace the old bread with the new. Isn’t that work? Every day the priests offer sacrifices in the Temple. That is work. But on the Sabbath, they have to offer twice the number of sacrifices! That is double work on the Sabbath! Yet, God commanded them to do these things on the Sabbath, to work on the Sabbath, but they are not guilty for their Sabbath work!

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“The work that must happen on the Sabbath in the Temple is a law that is greater than the law of the Sabbath. And truly, truly I tell you, there is something here even greater than the Temple.”

And with that Jesus resumed his walk with his disciples toward the synagogue.

The Pharisees were speechless. They could not reply to Jesus’ illustrations. Clearly he was right. Meeting human need was a law greater than merely keeping a rule on the Sabbath and Temple laws were greater than Sabbath laws. But what did Jesus mean when he said something greater than the Temple was present. What could be greater than the Temple laws?

As Jesus walked he called out to the Pharisees and said, “I know you are wondering about what I said, ‘Temple laws are greater than Sabbath laws and something even greater than temple laws is here.’ Let me help you understand. The prophet Hosea gives the answer. He said, ‘God desires compassion and not sacrifices.’ The sacrifices are part of the Temple laws, but God places compassion above them! If you had known what Hosea was talking about, you would not have condemned my innocent disciples when they reached out their hands and plucked grain to ease their hunger on this day! You would have been compassionate towards them.”

The group was drawing close to the synagogue. The disciples were finished munching on their grain. Others were streaming to the place of worship and learning and Jesus said, “I have one more statement that you must hear. As we prepare to worship on this Sabbath day, let us remember that God made man before he made the Sabbath. The Sabbath came after man! The Sabbath was made for man. Man was not made for the Sabbath. A human life is more important than the Sabbath. And you must know one final thing, I, the Son of Man am Lord of the Sabbath.”

As he sat in the synagogue, Jesus remained deep in thought on these events that had happened on that day. He knew the Pharisees were infuriated with him, and then he saw them enter the synagogue.

Everyone could see the anger on their faces, the anger with Jesus for what he had done and said on that day. The Pharisees were stunned by what Jesus said. Why did he say that he was Lord of the Sabbath? That was blasphemy! But they did not have time to respond. The synagogue service was beginning.

The synagogue official took his place at the front and recited the ancient Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

<sup>4</sup> “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! <sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Then, the 18 words of blessing began

"Blessed are you, O Lord, our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, the great, the mighty, and the fearful God—God Most High—who bestows kindnesses, and who is the Creator of all. You remember your love for our Fathers and you bring a redeemer for their children's children for the sake of your name in love. King, Helper, Savior, and Shield; blessed are you, Shield of Abraham."

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Two more blessings of praise to God followed. Then 12 words of praise and supplication for daily need followed by three more words of praise to God.

When they finished, it was time for Jesus to teach. He walked forward, read from the Word of God, and then sat on a chair on the platform to teach the people.

“God has given us his Law that we might keep it. The Law of God reveals his glory, and as we keep his Law we show his light to the nations. He has given us many laws and all of them were created to bring blessing to his people and the world. The laws were not made to enslave us. They were made to free us. They were not made to trap us. They were made to bless us. The laws were given that we might help one another come closer to God and to help one another in time of need.

Sometimes our people have been in great conflict about which laws to keep when the laws come into conflict with one another. The Law tells us to rest on the Sabbath, but in the time of Antiochus, our people were assaulted by this monstrous man and our people fought on the Sabbath to protect the law and our freedom. They broke the law, so to speak, by fighting on the Sabbath so that they could protect the Law from being destroyed by others.

Those were difficult days. But they were days in which God worked mightily to free his people from tyranny, and I say to you that God is at work in our time to free his people from tyranny. But it is a different kind of tyranny. It is a tyranny of the heart, a tyranny that uses the good things of God to enslave his people in the worst kind of slavery. But I have good news to proclaim, good news I have been proclaiming throughout the land, “God’s kingdom is here. God is at work. God is freeing his people.”

One of the Pharisees stood and said, “Teacher, you are making great claims. You are saying that God is at work and the kingdom is here. I heard you say earlier that you were Lord of the Sabbath. Do not deny it. I and many of my brethren heard you say it with our own ears. Who are you making yourself out to be? What are you claiming for yourself?”

And Jesus replied, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. God is at work and on this day in which we rest, we also remember God’s great work to save his people, and God is now saving his people as the prophets have promised.”

Then Jesus stood up and called out. “Today, as I entered, I observed a man whose hand has withered away. It has no strength. He cannot work. But God will work for him on this day!”

“God will work?” the Pharisee said, “God will work? God does not work on the Sabbath?”

But Jesus ignored the Pharisee and said to the man with the withered hand, “Rise, and come forward.”

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The man with the withered hand hesitated. He felt ashamed. He felt the eyes of everyone in the synagogue upon him, upon his twisted, misshaped hand that he could not hide. And now Jesus was calling him to come forward in the presence of everyone.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus said, “Come forward and be at peace.”

The man looked around. He had no choice. He rose from his seat and slowly walked to the front of the room. And although he felt fear and shame at first, with each step, as he came closer to Jesus, his heart felt more and more at peace.

The Pharisee who had been disputing with Jesus all day came forward too and said, “Jesus, I have heard enough of your teaching to know what you are thinking and what you want to do. Do you believe it is lawful to heal someone on the Sabbath?”

Jesus looked upon the Pharisee. He looked at all the Pharisees and with anger and sadness in his heart he said, “Have you heard nothing of what I have been saying all this day? Does the Law permit good deeds on the Sabbath? Can a man go to war on the Sabbath and take a life but the Son of Man cannot give life on the Sabbath? If one of you has a sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! But so that you may know it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath ...”

Jesus turned to the man with the withered hand and said, “Stretch out your hand.” And when the man stretched it out, it was made whole in front of the eyes of everyone.

### Interlude

When Jesus healed the man with the withered hand, the man said, “Look! Look! Look at my hand! God has done great things for me. He lifted both hands in praise to God. Many in the congregation stood and rejoiced and shouted words of praise to God for his mercy, but the Pharisees were enraged and even though the service had not yet been officially completed, they stormed out of the synagogue, found a place to gather, and began to deliberate how they might destroy Jesus. No one bothered to question if their conducting a meeting on the Sabbath was breaking the Law!

What a day in the life of Jesus! On this day he defended his disciples from the silly accusation that they were harvesting a crop because they reached out their hands and plucked off a few grains to munch on. On this day he healed a man with a withered hand even though he knew he would pay dearly for this act as the Pharisees began plotting to kill him. Why would they do such a thing? We must remember that the Pharisees believed they were in bondage to the Romans because of the nation’s failure to keep the Laws of God. They saw Jesus’ actions as undermining the Laws of God and that he was leading the people astray. But nothing was further from the truth.

Jesus left the synagogue. He went to the Sea of Galilee to enjoy God’s beautiful creation, but there was no escaping notice. A great multitude from the area followed. In the days to come others from Judea and Jerusalem who had heard of his teaching and miracles began to arrive. Many even from

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Gentile areas began to come. People from Idumea to the south and east and people from Tyre and Sidon, to the north and west were flocking to him.

Jesus watched as they came. Some were blind and were led by others. Some were too sick to walk and were carried on stretchers. Some came with dangerous fevers. Others were wracked with pain. Jesus' heart grieved as he saw what calamity sin had caused in his world. Silently he prayed, "Father, the needs are so great. May your kingdom show its mighty power bring light into this darkness."

One by one they came to Jesus, and one by one Jesus healed them. The blind saw. The sick were made well. The lame walked. Those possessed with evil spirits would fall before him and cry out, "You are the Holy One of God!" And Jesus would silence them and command them to leave.

Great rejoicing and praise ascended into heaven before the throne of God. And the disciples of Jesus watched closely, assisted, and watched in amazement as Jesus healed them all.

One of them, Matthew-Levi, the tax collector, or should we say, the former tax-collector, for he was now a follower of Jesus, was in the crowd that day, and many years later he would look back upon that event and tell us that all this healing took place in order to fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah. The prophecy is found in Isaiah 42:1-4 and it says this:

- <sup>1</sup> "Look at my servant, whom I strengthen.  
He is my chosen one, who pleases me.  
I have put my Spirit upon him.  
He will bring justice to the nations.
- <sup>2</sup> He will not shout  
or raise his voice in public.
- <sup>3</sup> He will not crush the weakest reed  
or put out a flickering candle.  
He will bring justice to all who have been wronged.
- <sup>4</sup> He will not falter or lose heart  
until justice prevails throughout the earth.  
Even distant lands beyond the sea will wait for his instruction." (NLT)

Such beautiful words – and they teach us many things about Jesus, who he is and why he came.

First, they teach us that Jesus came as a servant. "Look at my servant," God said through the prophet. Do you remember the story of Jesus' baptism? When Jesus was baptized, the Father in heaven quoted from this passage in Isaiah and from Psalm 2. Psalm 2 is about kingship. This passage, Isaiah 42 is about servanthood and in combining the two the Father was saying the kingdom of God was coming into the world like a servant to meet the needs of people. This is why Jesus healed the lame man on the Sabbath in Jerusalem. This is why he healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath and the Sabbath was the best day for God to show his mighty power to rescue his hurting people and the best day for Jesus to show that he was Lord of the Sabbath.

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Second, the passage teaches us about the faithfulness of God. It says that he will bring justice to the nations. The justice of God is his faithfulness to his promises. Because God keeps his promises we can say that he is a righteous and just God and the prophecy is that Jesus would proclaim this justice, this keeping of God's promises to restore the world.

Third, it tells us that Jesus would go about his work in a quiet and loving way. He was not a revolutionary. He was not out to raise an army. He was not a political leader making speeches and campaigns. You would not see him in the streets causing trouble. As it says, he would not shout or raise his voice in public.

Fourth, it tells us that he would give even the weakest, another chance and that they should not lose hope. He would not crush the weakest reed. God is comparing his people to plants beside a river that have been stomped on by the boots of warriors, politicians, and tradition-keepers and who have been stomped on by their own sin. Jesus will carefully tend to that plant, protect it, cultivate it, and raise it back up.

Jesus compares people to candles that have all but lost their flame. Their wick is too small. The wax is building up and the flame is flickering and just about to go out, but Jesus will come to that candle and rather than snuff it out, he will carefully trim it so that the light can once again shine brightly.

This is the same Jesus who defended his disciples from the silly accusation that they had broken a Sabbath law. This is the same Jesus who healed a man on the Sabbath. This is the same Jesus who healed multitudes who came to him from Israel and the surrounding countries. This is the same Jesus who is alive today and who wishes to come to you, to your family, and to your nation and to bring the healing power and blessing of his kingdom. He is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the Lord of all.

Have you met him? Do you know him? Will you come to him and let him give you life?