

CHRIST'S POWER TO RENEW WITHERED LIVES

Mark 3:1-12

These verses contain the record of a very interesting and instructive miracle which was wrought by our Lord Jesus Christ on the Sabbath, and which offended the prejudice and increased the hostility of the Pharisees. On that particular Sabbath Christ entered a synagogue, in a place which is not mentioned by name, in order to participate in the worship of God with those who were present.

In that assembly was a man with a withered hand. We do not know much about this man. Probably he was there in the hope of meeting Christ, of whom he had heard many things, and of whose habit of attending the services in the synagogue he was aware. It is also quite probable that he was a regular attendant at the synagogue, notwithstanding his disability. It is possible that he had heard about the wonderful cures Christ had wrought, and had come to the synagogue on this particular Sabbath hoping to receive healing from Him.

We do not know why the man's hand had withered. It might have been the result of an accident or of a disease. It could have been the result of some sin, though not necessarily so. In I Kings 13 is a record of a man's arm withering because he lifted it against God's purpose. Jeroboam was angry because God sent His prophet to interfere with him. When Jeroboam raised his hand in defiance against God, and ordered his officers to arrest God's prophet, instantly his arm withered and stood out helpless, so that the wicked king could not even drop it at his side.

This story of Jeroboam and the story of the man in our scripture lesson are typical of what we can see about us every day in the higher realm of the intellectual and the spiritual life. One of the saddest things we see is the withered lives of men and women, who, highly endowed of God and fitted to be of great influence and power to bless men and women about them, have dried up, and, though not yet buried, are living in a state of withered uselessness. Many people who go to church have a withered hand, that is, they do only half the work they should; they work with one hand only; they are working on only half their possible power; they are people self-handicapped. It is that sort of thing which accounts largely for the ineffectiveness of many churches. Only fulness of life and sacrificial service will convince a critical world.

Two things about this man are impressive — his disability and the fact that he sought the place of worship. When Christ entered that synagogue His attention was immediately drawn to this man whose hand was atrophied. He was moved with compassion toward this poor fellow, whom tradition says was a stone-mason, who had lost the use of his right hand, and with that had lost all hope of ever being a useful member of society again. In the eyes of Christ, the most appealing figure in that whole assembly was that laborer whom no employer would ever think of hiring. There may have been various people of importance in the synagogue that day, men of means, men of culture and men of influence, but only one was selected for the favor of Christ. It was not his greatness that attracted Christ, but it was his weakness. His only claim to notice was his need. The concern of the Saviour is not with the man who is whole and who has need of nothing, but with the poor, the friendless, the afflicted and the outcast.

Therefore, our most attractive feature in God's sight is our need. How many of us would fain be distinguished by other things, such as wealth, culture, rank, etc.! But our Lord does not look upon the outward appearance. If we catch His sympathetic eye, it will not be due to any of these things. Our sure claim to the divine compassion is the fact that we are crippled or bowed down beneath burdens which are too heavy for us to bear.

This afflicted man realized his need. There were so many things that he could not do. He was in the right place to be blessed, namely, in the recognized place of worship. The critics were there too. People go to church for different motives; some are moved by curiosity, some by concern and others by criticism. These long-bearded hypocrites kept

watching Christ in order that they might accuse and criticize Him. They were justified in watching Christ, but their motive for doing so was wrong. Actions must be interpreted and judged by motives. Actions in themselves have no moral value. Moral quality is given to them by the intention. Seemingly virtuous acts may have vicious motives behind them. It is always risky to judge the motives of people, but we should always carefully examine our own motives.

What ground were these men seeking for accusation against Christ? It was whether or not He would heal this needy man on the Sabbath. While our Lord looked upon this afflicted man with divine compassion, the Pharisees regarded him with malicious glee. They thought that Christ would heal the man, and by such a work would break the Sabbath law and thus make Himself liable for arrest. The occasion for which they had been hoping had come. Surely no better day could be chosen on which to do good to any one than the Sabbath, but these ecclesiastical sticklers did not think so. They spent the worshipping time in watching. They tracked Christ like bloodhounds. Did He heal a palsied man? They asked "why?" Did He eat with sinners eager and needy? They still asked "why?" Did His disciples pluck some grain to eat on the Sabbath? Again they asked "why?" They were great at interrogation. They developed their critical faculty at the expense of their common sense, their superiority had sapped their sympathy.

But these men had met their superior this time. Christ took the opportunity to administer to His enemies a severe rebuke. He spoke to the afflicted man and said, "Stand forth," or "Stand in the middle of the room where all can see you." That was an exciting moment. The man obeyed, for his legs were all right. If all of your faculties are not what they ought to be, thank God for the ones you have.

This command was a call to separation. When Christ said, "Stand forth," He seemed to be saying, "Get out of the crowd, come away from your former environment." It was also a call to the negation of human aid. As long as the man stood in the crowd, he would be tempted to trust in others, to lean upon them and to follow their suggestions. At Christ's call, he stepped forth, separating himself from them. He had come to the place where he did not have any hope in man. Man had never been able to heal him, or even to help him. He did not have any power in himself to better his condition, and others were powerless also. We have gone a long way toward victory when we realize the inability of human beings. So long as we think we can do it, or that someone else can do it, we will never achieve victory.

Turning to the Pharisees Christ asked, "Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill?" That was a devastating inquiry which Christ spoke to those religious spies. Not to do good when one can is to do evil. Not to save a life when one can is to kill. If a man is in need, and you have the power to help him, the thing to do is to help him. By such reasoning Christ silenced His enemies. "They held their peace."

Now observe what follows. Christ looked-round-about on them. His eyes swept the room all round, looking into the face of each, with anger, being grieved at the same time. The situation stirred two emotions in Christ, anger and grief, but the anger was momentary (aorist participle), and the grief was continuous (present participle). Not to be angry in some circumstances is a sin, but even righteous anger should be tempered with grief. How greatly our emotions need discipline! In too many situations we sin twice, by exhibiting anger when we should not, and by not grieving when we should. The reason for Christ's anger and grief was the hardness of their hearts. Such a state is something to be feared greatly.

Christ spoke to the afflicted man and said, "Stretch forth thine hand." That was a human impossibility. The unfortunate man might have said, "I cannot do what you tell me; all the vitalities of my hand are dried up, and I am powerless to do as you wish." But he did not speak thus. He tried to do as he was told, and with the effort to obey Christ came the power. Christ enabled him to stretch forth his hitherto helpless hand. Christ never

makes an unjust exaction. He always gives the necessary power when there is an effort to obey Him. Think of the joy which must have filled that man's heart when he saw that his withered hand was well and strong. It was cured because he fulfilled the condition, which was faith and obedience.

After Christ performed this miracle, this man became a vehicle for the blessing of men. Dr. Chalmers used to say: "You may be a blot, you may be a blessing, but you cannot be a blank." And who wants to be a blank? Do you want to be a vehicle of God's blessing to others? Then become a miracle of His grace. Trust Him and obey Him, and then you can go out to be a vehicle of blessing to men. Only God can measure what can be done with your life if you will hand it over to His control and for use in His service. This man also became a vehicle for the glory of God. When he looked at his hand which Christ had restored, he was impressed with the fact that it was well because He had cured it. Out of gratitude to Him for this wonderful blessing, the man resolved to use his hand for the glory of God. I cannot conceive of any more glorious aim or any finer thing than to be a blessing to men and to bring glory to the Lord. Do you want to do that?

This miracle of Christ should have wrought a change in the mind and attitude of His critics, but it did not. They went forth and struck up a friendship with their enemies, with the intention of destroying Christ. But no combination can be effective against Christ. The most stupid thing under the sun is to suppose that you can get rid of truth by taking the lives of its champions. Such a course has the opposite effect. The death of Stephen resulted in a great spreading of the gospel of Christ, and in the conversion of one of the greatest men in human history. The blood of the martyrs has ever been the seed of the church.

Verses seven to twelve form a transition from one period of Christ's ministry to another. Up to now He has been immensely popular, notwithstanding the growlings of the religious authorities, but now there is a definite plot to put Him to death. Because of this Christ left the synagogue and went down by the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He was followed by great throngs of people from a widespread area. People were aroused throughout the entire land. Christ was the sensation of the hour. Many came out of curiosity, having heard the great things which He had been doing. Others came to listen to His message. Still others came to be cured of their diseases.

Mark singles out for special mention the demoniacs. They were the most pitiful of all. They threw themselves down at the feet of Christ and exclaimed "Thou art the Son of God." It is a sad fact that there are church members today, who profess to be Christians, who deny what the foul demons affirmed, namely, that Christ Jesus is the Son of God. Some religious people of His day said that He had a demon, but no demon ever said that He was one of them. Christ charged these evil spirits or demons to be silent, for He would not permit them to proclaim His deity and His work.