

THE HAND THAT WAS HEALED

Mark 3:1-8

Christ said certain things that we call parables. Christ did certain things that we call miracles. But, surely, if we look at the miracles with any liveliness in our seeing, we must say that they too are pictures of truth, reflections of reality, that run far beyond their literal details. In the one, Christ took truth and spoke it out; in the other, He took truth and acted it out.

Near the close of the second year of His earthly ministry dark clouds were gathering about our Lord. While "the common people heard Him gladly," the rulers were bitterly opposed to Him. They were against Him because He failed to meet their cherished views of the Messiah, because He denounced their pet sins and because He disregarded the burdensome precepts which they attached to the Sabbath.

On a particular Sabbath, Christ entered an unnamed synagogue, which was probably in Capernaum. He went there to participate in worship, as was His custom. There a large number had assembled. In the group was a man upon whom Christ performed the miracle to which our attention will be devoted.

I. The Condition.

"There was a man there which had a withered hand." We do not know much about this man. We do not even know what caused his hand to wither. His condition might have been the result of an accident or of some contracted disease such as infantile paralysis. His withered hand was devoid of feeling and strength. Having lost the use of his right hand, he was handicapped greatly. Although he was able to move about and associate with other people, he could not do manual labor. Tradition says that he was a bricklayer, and quite probably that was true. If so, he did not entertain any hope of working again at his trade. With his working days over and his source of income gone, think of what a trying and bitter experience that must have been in a day when there was no insurance of any kind. However, we are impressed by the fact that he attended the worship services in spite of his disability and handicap.

This afflicted man might have been in the synagogue with the hope of meeting Christ Jesus. Doubtless, he had heard many things about Him, and especially was he aware of Christ's habit with reference to attending the services in the synagogue. It is possible that he had heard of the wonderful cures which Christ had wrought on others and had come to the synagogue on this particular Sabbath to receive healing from Him, although the record does not state that he was seeking a cure.

When we turn to the Bible, we find that the hand is associated with certain aspects of Christian experience. What is the significance of the hand that was withered? This withered hand speaks to us of a life where:

1. The hand of fellowship is impaired.

When Paul was just getting started in a good way in the work of the Lord, there were those who regarded him with suspicion. Then it was that Peter, James and John gave to him and Barnabas "the right hands of fellowship" (Galatians 2:9). We always count it a joyous privilege to extend "the right hand of fellowship" to those who unite with our church. How searching, therefore, comes the question to you and me as Christians, have we maintained this hand of fellowship, comradeship and helpfulness? Has the bond of fellowship between you and another Christian been broken? Is your hand of Christian understanding and comradeship withdrawn, withered and useless?

2. The hand of prayer is impotent.

In the Scriptures the hand is associated with prayer. In writing to Timothy, Paul said, "I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting" (I Timothy 2:8). So frequently the place of prayer is forsaken. The hands that were once lifted in prayer are no longer lifted.

"Every morning lean thine arm awhile
Upon the window sill of heaven
And gaze upon thy God.
Then, with the vision in thy heart,
Turn strong to meet thy day."

But, let's face it, too many of us do not take time to "lean" the "arm" "upon the window sill of heaven." As a consequence, that arm lacks strength for the day. The hand of prayer has withered and, therefore, is powerless.

3. The hand of service is ineffective.

Obviously the hand stands for work and service. Christ said, "The man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). "Hand to the plow" spells work--hard, useful and productive work.

Thus the ineffective hand of service is clearly suggested by the man whose once useful member was now withered. Tell me, Christian and church member, has all of the aggressiveness gone out of your service? Whereas, once you were "fired up" to perform a task, to reach a goal, to serve in Christ's name, the push and the drive and the zest have all died out of your work. Or, tell me this: has all the attractiveness been lost from your Christian service? After all, a "withered hand" is a clumsy, bungling, pathetic thing. Some Christians who may not have lost their aggressiveness have nevertheless lost their winsomeness in service and are leaving behind them a trail of wounded hearts and damaged souls.

"There's somebody near you who's lost on the way,
Struggling, bewildered, alone;
Somebody who's tired and weary, to whom
The love of the Lord should be shown;
Reach him a helping hand."

That is exactly what we should be doing. But, alas, the saddest thing about us is the ineffectiveness of our service. "Withered!"

This story presents a condition that could not be concealed. That withered hand was a subject of comment by his friends. They talked about it. I wonder if some of us suffer from a spiritual disability which is a subject of comment by our friends? When they talk about us, is it about our hand that is withered? They don't talk to us about it, but they make remarks about us. It may very well be that your name is quite frequently mentioned in a certain circle, and the one topic on which they will talk about you more than any other is the withered hand. They all know about it; they all see it. It cannot be hidden.

To the man himself, the withered hand was an object of concern. He knew that his hand was withered. Moreover, this man was an object of compassion by Christ. Fellow-Christian, if you are concerned about your withered hand, you may rest assured that Christ is far more concerned about it.

II. The Command.

When Christ entered the synagogue, the Pharisees immediately linked Him in their thinking with the most needy person in the crowd, the man with the withered hand. They expected

Him to heal the man, so they watched Christ with hard eyes and sour faces. As custodians of the law, they considered it their business to see to it that He did not desecrate the Sabbath. By their very attitude they were saying to Christ, "Don't you dare heal this man on the Sabbath."

Conscious of their opposition, Christ commanded the afflicted man to stand forth in the midst. His command in modern speech would be, "Stand up and come out here in front," or "Rise and come forward." That challenge was humbling. It is one thing to have a withered hand, but it is another thing to display it before others. Then, Christ asked the Pharisees a question, "Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill?" That was a simple question, and they knew the answer, but they maintained a stony silence. Christ then commanded the man to stretch forth his hand. So, instead of throwing up a mental block that said, "I can't, and that's all there is to it," the man said, "I can if He says so, and I will." It was certainly reasonable for the Lord to tell him to do what He was enabling him to do. Christ never makes an unjust exaction of anybody. He always gives the strength which is necessary to obey His.

III. The Consequences.

How impossible a request! How immediate a response! How instant a remedy! "And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other." The miracle had been performed. Upon hearing the command of Christ, there was a venture of trust in Him, and he immediately found that in that act he was enabled to do the thing that was impossible. As he in obedience made contact with the power of Christ, that strength became his emblem. There were things which resulted from the hand that was once withered:

1. It became a healed hand.

There was a change from disease to health, from weakness to power and from uselessness to usefulness.

When Moses was forty years of age, he tried to take a hand in correcting the wretched conditions under which the Israelites were living and laboring. His hand was withered, however, in the fires of a raging temper. He failed. But, God healed that withered hand, and, at eighty, Moses was ready to do business for God.

Peter tried to protect Christ when He was arrested. But, Peter's hand was withered with self-confidence and self-assertiveness. He failed so shabbily that he denied his Lord. Yet, he was healed. Peter's restoration has brought hope to more defeated Christians than a census-taker could ever enter in his records. Yes, there is healing for the withered hand, even if it be yours.

2. It was made a helping hand.

The healed hand is not for admiration. It is for dedication and utilization. The man put his healed hand to work. He did not use his hand for admiration, but for achievement. It was not to be pampered, but it was to be made productive.

A Scottish minister, John Robertson of Glasgow, underwent the experience of the withered hand. He was defeated in his ministry. The glow faded from his soul, and the power drained from his preaching. With his mind made up to resign from his church, one day he prayed: "O God, Thou didst commission me forty years ago, but I have blundered and failed, and I want to resign this morning." As he prayed, the brokenness and penitence of his soul shook him. The sob of his heart was hushed, however, when he heard the Voice within saying, "John Robertson, 'tis true I commissioned you forty years ago; 'tis true you have blundered and failed, but John Robertson, I am not here for you to resign your commission. I am here to re-sign

your commission." That morning the withered hand was healed, with the result that John Robertson entered upon the most helpful, empowered and fruitful phase of his long ministry.

Yes, God will heal the withered hand, but only on the understanding that it become the helping hand.

This man whom Christ healed became a vehicle for the blessing of men. That is what every Christian should be. You may be a blot, you may be a blessing, but you cannot be a blank. Who wants to be? Do you want to be a vehicle of God's blessing to men? Then become a miracle of His grace. Trust and obey Him, and you shall go out to be a vehicle of blessing to men.

This man whom Christ healed 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 the Lord had healed it. Out of gratitude to Him, he resolved to use it for the glory of the Lord. Do you want to become a vehicle of glory to the Lord? I cannot conceive of any aim that is more glorious.

3. It remained a humbling hand.

This is a thought that we must not leave out. However sound, strong and serviceable that hand now is, every time the man looks at it he must remember how ugly and useless it once was and how, apart from the healing Christ, it still would be just that-- ugly and useless.

Yes, the withered hand can be healed, thank God. But, in the healing there's nothing over which I can glory, for the power of restoration lay not in me but in Christ working in me.