

Mark 3:1-6

Christ delivered certain messages that we call parables. Christ did certain things that we call miracles. If we look at His miracles with any liveliness in our seeing, we will recognize that they too are pictures of truth and reflections of reality that run far beyond their literal details. In the parables Christ took truth and declared it in words; in the miracles He took truth and acted it out in deeds.

On a particular Sabbath Christ entered an unidentified synagogue, which might have been the one in Capernaum. He went there to worship, as was His custom. A large number assembled there for that service. In the group was a man upon whom Christ performed the miracle to which our attention will be devoted in this service.

I. The Cripple.

The Scriptures say: "There was a man there which had a withered hand." We do not know much about this man. We do not even know why his hand had withered. His condition might have been the result of an accident or of some contracted disease such as infantile paralysis. His withered hand could have been the result of some sin, though not necessarily so. In I Kings 13 we have a record of one 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 of 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 man's 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 or stonemason, which was probably true. If so, he certainly 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.

We are impressed by two things about this afflicted man -- his physical disability and his presence at the house of worship in spite of his condition. Fortunately he had not allowed his calamity to embitter him. Notwithstanding his disability and handicap, he was in attendance upon the service of worship at the synagogue. Evidently his trust and his hope were in God more than ever before. Surely he must have thought that God would either heal him or sustain him through all of the difficult days and years ahead. It is possible that this afflicted man had heard of some of the wonderful cures which Christ had wrought on others and, anticipating that He might be at the synagogue on the Sabbath, as was His custom, had come on this particular day in the hope that he might receive healing from Him. However, the record does not state that he was seeking a cure.

This man was typical of some whom we know and observe. One of the saddest things that we see is the withered lives of men and women, who, highly endowed of God and fitted to be of great influence and power in blessing those about them, have dried up, and, though they have not yet been buried, ~~and~~ are living in a state of withered uselessness. Many people who attend church services have a withered hand in the sense that they do only a part of the work which they should; they are working on only a fraction of their possible power; they are self-handicapped.

Some church members dream and plan, but somehow they never quite have what it takes to carry out their dreams. Some have wanted to become active in the work of their respective churches and make their lives count for more, but somehow they keep putting off

doing so. They can't quite take the step. They have the right idea, but their hands are withered. So many have numerous good ideas in mind, but they never put them into deeds. Look into your own mind and see how many good intentions you have there. But as yet you haven't had time, you haven't had the opportunity, you haven't had enough training, or you haven't felt like it -- all these excuses are just other names for your handicap of a withered hand. You mean well, but you simply don't act.

II. The Cure.

When Christ entered the synagogue, His attention was drawn immediately to this man whose hand was atrophied. In the eyes of Christ this laborer, whom no employer would think of hiring, was the most appealing figure in that assembly. 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.

When this man, who realized his need and utilized his opportunity, stood in the presence of Christ, he typified sin. Sin always impoverishes and weakens. This man's withered hand was the object of the comments of his friends and associates. They talked about it. Do you have some spiritual disability which is a subject for comment by your friends? If they talk about you, it will be about your hand that is withered. They won't talk to you about it, but when your name is mentioned the one topic that they will talk about the most is your spiritual weakness. You cannot hide it from them. This man's withered hand was an object of concern to himself. Furthermore, it was an object of compassion to Christ. The condition that was a matter of comment on the part of his friends, and an object of concern to him, was of much greater concern to the compassionate Christ.

In dealing with this afflicted man our Lord uttered two commands -- "Stand forth" and "Stretch forth thine hand." It was an exciting moment when Christ told the man to "stand forth," or to "rise, come forward, and stand in the front of the room where all can see you." That challenge was humbling. It is one thing to have a withered hand, but it is another thing to display it before others. Christ's command was a call to separation. It was as if He were 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 command, he stepped forth and separated himself from the others. He did not have any power in himself to better his condition, and all the others were powerless to help him. One has gone a long way toward victory when he realizes 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.

Naturally, the Pharisees, who were present, expected Christ to heal the man, so they watched Him with hard eyes and sour faces. They had appointed themselves to see to it that Christ did not desecrate the Sabbath. By their very attitude they were saying to Christ, "Don't you dare heal this man on the Sabbath." Turning to these 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 simple question, and they knew the answer, but they maintained a stony silence. Not to do good when one can is to do evil. Not to save a life when one can is to kill.

Now observe what follows. Christ looked-round-about on them. His eyes swept the room all around, 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. The hardness of their hearts was the cause of Christ's anger and grief.

Christ commanded the man to stretch forth his withered hand. Instead of throwing up a mental block that said, "I can't, and that's all there is to it," the man reasoned, "I can if He says so, and I will." It was certainly reasonable for the Lord to tell him to do what He was going to enable him to do. The man tried to do what Christ commanded him to do, 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 of anybody. He always gives the necessary power when there is an effort to obey Him. As children of God we have the ability to do many things that we never do. Emerson said, "You never know what you can do until you try." Under the inspiration and through the power of Christ we can accomplish many things that we never dared to try before.

As a result of his faith in Christ and obedience to Him, the man received a perfect cure. Think of the joy that must have filled his heart when he saw that his hand was well and strong. It was cured because he had fulfilled the condition, which was faith and obedience.

III. The Consequences.

Upon hearing the command of Christ, there was a venture of trust in Him, and the afflicted man immediately discovered that in that act he was enabled to do the thing that had been impossible humanly speaking. As he in faith and obedience made contact with the power of Christ, that strength became his enablement. Out of gratitude to Christ for healing him, the man resolved to use his hand in the service of the Master and for the glory of God.

This miracle of Christ should have wrought a change in the minds and attitudes 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.

Three things should be said about the man's hand after he obeyed the command of Christ.

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.