**Matthew 12:9-14**

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-12/matthew-129-14/>

Matthew narrates the second of four confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees set a trap for Jesus relating to the healing of a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath.

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 3:1-6 and Luke 6:6-11.

Matthew then moves to the chapter’s second confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. It appears to occur immediately after Jesus declared to them that “the Son of Man was Lord of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:8). This event appears to immediately follow what was just said because Matthew writes that Jesus was departing from there and He went into their synagogue. And the account Matthew retells also took place on the Sabbath. If so, this would likely be the second round of the same argument between the same group of Pharisees and Jesus.

By going into their synagogue, Jesus is entering the Pharisees’ turf. Synagogues were like community centers of social gathering and worship, and functioned as the local headquarters for each town’s group of Pharisees. Synagogues were the building and community through which the Pharisees taught the law and their customs. It was through the synagogue system which arose during (but especially after) the Babylonian exile, that the Pharisees’ influence and authority spread. Many synagogues that would have been functioning during this era have been found in archeological digs throughout Israel, including the towns along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, such as Capernaum.

When Jesus went into their synagogue, Matthew tells us, a man was there whose hand was withered. This man was likely very poor because his withered hand would have made it difficult for him to find work or earn a living. He also probably endured a measure of social rejection because it was a common belief in those days that the reason a person was handicapped was because of some sin that they had committed against God, and that their disability was God’s punishment against them. The following quote from the Gospel of John illustrates the pervasiveness of this general belief:

“And His disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?’” (John 9:2)

 This man with a withered hand was likely a part of the synagogue community. And in this case the Pharisees knew this man. He was under their teaching and spiritual care. It was their job to minister to him. In this instance at least, instead of ministering to him as a man, the Pharisees used this man as a spring in their trap. They treated him as a humiliating prop in order to ensnare Jesus.

And they questioned Jesus, asking, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” Matthew comments that they asked Him this so that they might accuse Him. The trap was multi-layered.

On the one hand Jesus just told them that “the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:8). And that “I say to you that something greater than the temple is here (Matthew 12:6). The Pharisees correctly understood that Jesus meant that these bold claims were about Himself. And they are calling His bluff. In essence, they are daring Jesus, “Okay, so-called ‘Lord-of-the-Sabbath’ since you have authority over the Sabbath, answer for us whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? If Jesus did not heal the man’s withered hand, then it would prove that Jesus was a blasphemous imposter. But if Jesus did heal the man, then He would violate the Pharisees’ rules in their own synagogue in front of all the people. This would be a socially bold thing to do, because they could immediately condemn Jesus as a lawbreaker (and therefore a blaspheming imposter) in front of everyone.

Whichever way Jesus acted the Pharisees had Him pinned. Or so they thought.

Jesus masterfully reframes the issue. And He said to them, “What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? The construction of His question implies that there is none among them who would leave his sheep in the pit until after sundown. Every one of them would care enough for his sheep that they would trouble themselves on the Sabbath to take hold of his sheep and lift it out of a pit. It is clear that Jesus’s question infers that this was a common and approved practice among the people. None among them would hardly think twice about doing so. The welfare of the animal required this sort of compassion.

In like manner, God did not forbid people from helping others on the Sabbath. As teachers of God’s Law, the Pharisees should have known this, and while they would have immediately rescued their endangered sheep, their rules prevented people from loving a man by helping him with his infirmity. It is clear the concern of the Pharisees was focused upon themselves.

Because the Pharisees did not answer Jesus’s question, Jesus answered it Himself. How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! There is no comparison. A man is made in God’s image and is immeasurably more valuable than a sheep. Instead of entrapping Jesus so they might accuse Him, Jesus turned the tables on the Pharisees. He shamed them and publicly exposed their hypocrisy and lack of compassion in their own synagogue.

Jesus finished His response to the Pharisees by explicitly drawing the necessary conclusion, “So then, (we are in agreement about this, aren’t we) it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Jesus established this truth and the goodness of God’s perfect Law and its superiority over the Pharisees’ Sabbath rules. Jesus had reframed the question and completely flipped the trap back on the Pharisees. But He wasn’t done yet.

Jesus turned to the man with the withered hand and said to him Stretch out your hand. The man stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like his other hand. The man was now whole.

In this miracle Jesus at once accomplished three things. First, He showed compassion for the man whose hand was withered. This man could now use both hands to work, earn a better living, and have the respect of others. Second, through this display of power Jesus proved that He was who He claimed to be. Jesus is “Lord the Sabbath.” And as the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus determines its rightness. The third accomplishment of this miracle was that Jesus exposed the hollowness and backwardness of the Pharisees’ teachings. Jesus had undermined their power over the people.

Humiliated and embittered by Jesus’s truth and love, the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy Him. Matthew had given tense encounters before, concerning the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 9:2-8; 9:9-13). But this is the first time he indicates the murderous intent lurking in their hearts. Luke reported that the Pharisees “were filled with rage” from this humiliation (Luke 11:6). They were offered the opportunity to be humbled and repent. To return to the true meaning of the Law, and shift from serving themselves to serving the people they were charged to shepherd. Instead, they doubled down on their opposition to Jesus, ignoring the mighty power they had just witnessed.

**Biblical Text**

**Departing from there, He went into their synagogue. And a man was there whose hand was withered. And they questioned Jesus, asking, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse Him. And He said to them, “What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.**