

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 than 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.