

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 12:1-21
“Jesus And The Hardheads”

November 22, 2015
(Christ The King/ Bible Sunday)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

VA4: MATTHEW 12:1-21 "JESUS AND THE HARDHEADS"

Is Jesus Faithful? What Does Sabbath/Rest Mean?

1A) 12:1-8 SABBATH CONTROVERSY OVER WORK.

Hostility/Opposition Increases, 11:1 Jesus Travels In Obedience //Mk. 2:23-28 + Q, Lk. 6:1-5

Occasion **a) v.1 Introduction: Disciples Eat On The Sabbath.** 1ST Conflict, 2 Examples Of *Light Yoke* Of 11:30
 1 At that time **Jesus** went through the grainfields on the **sabbath**; Allowed, Deut. 23:24-25, *Mishna Sabbat 7:2 reaping*
 his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. **Link To v.3a hungry, What Is Work?**
In Urgent Situation, Jesus Overrides The Law, Spring

b) v.2 Disciples Declared Guilty By Pharisees. Mk. 2:24 Has Question, *m. Sabb.7:2*
 2 But when the PHARISEES saw it, they said to him, **Direct Accusation To Master, Official Warning**
 Criticism "Look, your disciples are doing **what is not lawful** to do on the sabbath." Ex. 20:8-11, 31:13, 34:21, Deut. 5:14
Sabbath Was Sacred National Symbol, Similar To Flag

c) vv.3-4 Jesus' First Question From Scripture: David's Example. [*Former Prophets*]
 3 Q He said to them, "**Have you not read** what David did, when he was hungry, (2x) 1 Sam. 21:1-7
 and those who were with him: (4) how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence,
 which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?
1:1, Jesus Greater Than David Yet David's Son

c') vv.5-6 Jesus' Second Question From Scripture: Priests' Example. [*Torah*]
 5 Q Or have you not read in the law **In Service Of God, Lev. 24:5-9, Num. 28:8-10**
 how on the sabbath the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are guiltless?

6 I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.* **Kingdom Mercy, From Lesser To Greater**
9:14-15, Jesus' Work/Mission/Authority Greater Than Temple!

b') v.7 Disciples Declared Not Guilty By Jesus. **Critical Of Their Knowledge Of Scripture**
 7 And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' //9:13, Hos. 6:6, **God's Own Words**
 you would not have **condemned the guiltless.** **Law Of Love, Not Guilty Of Infraction In v.2b**
Sabbath Law/ Greater Temple Law/Greatest Law Of Love, [Later Prophets]

a') v.8 Conclusion: Jesus Is Lord Of The Sabbath. **Summation, One To Whom Given All Things, 11:27**
 8 For the **Son of man** is lord of the **sabbath**.* **Jesus Towers Over Temple/Sabbath = Right To Act, Extreme Authority**
Is God Liberating Mercy? Or Legalistic Will?

1B) 12:9-15a SABBATH HEALING AND CONTROVERSY: MAN WITH WITHERED HAND.

Continues Travel! *Lord Of Sabbath*, 12:8, 1/7 Sabbath Healings

Setting **a) v.9 Travel Report: Jesus Enters Their Synagogue (Note Of Hostility).** //Mk. 3:1-6 + Q, Lk. 6:6-11
 9 And he **went on from there**, and entered *their* synagogue. **Assumes Same Sabbath v. Mk., Is Jesus Loyal?, Ex.20:8-11**
24:20, The Synagogue (Mk. 3:1, Lk. 6:6)

b) v.10a Man With Withered Hand. **Pharisees Acknowledge Jesus' Ability**
 10 And behold, there was a man with a withered hand. **Lit. dry = Withered/Paralyzed, 1 Kgs. 13:6**
Not Life Threatening, Not Necessary On Sabbath

c) v.10b Question: Legality Of Sabbath Healing. **Keep Sabbath//Honor Flag**
 Q1 And they asked him, "Is it **lawful** to heal on the sabbath?" **D.D., Acknowledge His Power To Heal!**
 so that they might accuse him. **m. Yoma 8:6 On Sabbath & Life Threatening Situations**
Jesus Not Follow This Rabbinic Principle, They Initiate

d) vv.11 Counter Question & Analogy: Sheep. 6:26, 10:31, **Counter-Question**
 11 He said to them, **vs. Damascus Document 11:13-14(Strict) v. b. Sabb. 128b(Loose)**
 Q2 "What man of you, if he has **one sheep** and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, //Lk. 14:5
 will not lay hold of it and lift it out? **Jesus And Pharisees Agree Against Essenes**
Yet Jesus Was More Liberal Than Pharisees On This Issue

d') v.12a Argument From Lesser To Greater: Sheep. **Argument Form // v.6**
 12 A2 Of how much more value is a man than a **sheep!** **Less To Greater Argument**
At Center Is Rabbinical Debate

c') v.12b Answer: It Is Lawful To Do Good. **Shift To Sunday, Ignatius Magnesians 9:1**
 A1 So it is **lawful** to do good on the sabbath." **Ruling, Question (Mk.) To Statement/Conclusion**
Principle: Sabbath Is For Restoration/Doing Good/Healing

Reactions **b') v.13 Withered Hand Healed.** **Word, Not Work, Enactment Of Principle Of v.12b**
 13 Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." **9:6, Healing Shows Authority Over Sabbath, 12:8**
 And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, whole like the other. **Joy! Proof Of Approval, 12:7**
Love/Mercy's Call Overrides Boundaries

a') vv.14-15a Travel Report: Jesus Exits And Avoids Confrontation (Note Of Hostility).
 14 But the PHARISEES went out and took counsel against him, how to destroy him. **They Wither, Murders //Mk. 3:6-7**
 15 Jesus, aware of this, **withdrew from there.** **Not Generate Faith, Pharisees Control Their Synagogue, v.9 Above**

2) vv.15b-21 HEALING SUMMARY AND CITATION FROM ISAIAH (Servant Song).

No Active Resistance vs. Pharisees, Withdraws To Kingdom Work

a) v.16 Healing Summary.

No Retaliation; Instead Jesus Heals = God's Response To Violence
Summaries: 12:5-21, 14:34-36, 15:29-31

And many followed him,
and he healed them all,
and ordered them not to make him known.

9:35-38, 4:23-25 //Mk. 3:7-12 + Q(Greatly Abbreviated)
Hidden From Leaders Works Quietly, Continues Healing
Avoid Premature Arrest, Death

b) vv.17-21 Citation (Is. 42:1-4, 9; 41:18, 44:2, Ps. 2) Loosely Cited.

Provides Rationale:
Announcement, Longest O.T. Quotation In Matthew
Non-resistance, Command To Silence

7 Descriptors

This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

v.18a Who He Is: Servant, Chosen, Beloved (Servant/Son Christology).

Pause And Reflect

"Behold, my servant (son, *pais*) whom I have chosen,
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.

Jesus Is Meek, Not Weak, Avoids Wrangling
Differs From MT/LXX, Free Quotation
Ps. 2, Baptismal Scene // 3:16-17, 17:5
He Sacrifices Himself To Save Others

vv.18b-21 What He Does: Proclaim/Enact Hope.

Person: Bearer Of The Spirit (vv.17-18a)

I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.

Continues His Work Unabated, Meekness Is Not Weakness
v. 12:28, Jesus As Spirit Bearer, Work Of Justice (vv.18b-21)
Turn To Gentiles, Ideal =Wise Philosopher, See Lucian *Demonax* 7
Brings Justice Not By Force/Violence

b- He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will any one hear his voice in the streets;

11:29, Withdraw (12:15), No Striving, Explains Jesus' Behavior
This Is How God's Meek Servant Operates
11:7, Not Damaged By Rough Touch

b'- he will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick,

Jesus Is 1) Chosen Of God, 2) Bears Spirit, 3) Announces Justice
4) Is Humble, 5) Heals The Useless/Weak, 6) Open To Gentiles
Broken In Body (Reed), Depressed In Spirit (Wick)

till he brings justice to victory;
and in his name will the Gentiles hope."

Hab. 1:4, Resurrection/Victory, His Method Wins
28:16-20, Great Commission Preview, Non-Political Messiah
Ends With A Portrait Of Jesus Drawn From Isaiah!

God Is Honored When The Kingdom Goes Forth And Mercy Prevails Among All Peoples, Jesus Is Determined

JESUS AND THE HARDHEADS

“...he will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick.”

Jesus is the picture of kindness to those broken in body or in spirit.

M A T T H E W 1 2 : 2 0

Some years ago, the publishing house Grosset & Dunlap brought together twenty-eight scholars whose task was to agree on the hundred most significant events of history, then rank them. After long debate, the panel reported the discovery of America and the opening of Europe to the new world as the most significant event ever. Second was the invention of movable type by Gutenberg and the mass production of books that followed. Eleven events tied for third. In fourth place was the U.S. Constitution, the development of ether for surgical anesthesia, the x-ray to see inside the body, the invention of the airplane, and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus tied for fourth with fourteen events ahead of him.¹ Dr. James Francis has a different opinion, and I quote from his reflection known as *One Solitary Life*:

“Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never owned a home... never wrote a book... never held an office... never had a family... never went to college...never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born.

He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself. While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth, His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.” Then these words:

¹ Edited from PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 12:1-21.

“Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today He is a centerpiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has *that one solitary life*.”²

That’s more than eloquent; it’s a valid assessment of the historical impact of Jesus. One solitary life, lived out for three years in public before twelve eyewitnesses who guaranteed the validity of the story with multiple testimonies for which many of them died.³ One life, three years, twelve witnesses and *four gospels* because the church soon agreed that no one telling of the story was sufficient to cover the nuance and depth of who he was. One solitary life, three action packed years, twelve eye witnesses, four complementary biographies, and *one common conviction*: that Jesus is our window into the outer workings and inner life of the mysterious Tripersonal God, a unified communion of self-giving love into which we are invited to come back home after our long wandering in the history of sin.⁴ In the face of Jesus we see God at ground level, and it is a spectacular thing as Jesus daily unfolds the kingdom of God in word and deed. In trusting and following him we are brought back into communion with the One who made us and offers us a share of his work. In Jesus the curse of sin is broken, the cruelty of evil healed, our cognitive capacities cleansed and restored, our loves reordered, over time our character changed in the direction of loving God and others fully and wisely. We receive heaven at death as a first installment of our fulfillment, and then a resurrection body when the kingdom comes as a final installment. After that, it’s life face to face with God forever. Jesus is the means and the model of our transformation. In Jesus– the Son sent by the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit– we see all the God that can be poured into human flesh. Not just a prophet or teacher but the unique personal agent of the one God of Israel who does not bubble up out of life but comes to us from inside the divine life.

² www.anointedlinks.com/one_solitary_life.html.

³ R. Bauckham, *Jesus And The Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁴ Gerald O’Collins, S.J., *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), particularly Chapter 2, “The History of Jesus and Its Trinitarian Face,” 35-49.

This is one of the key differences between classic Christianity and traditional Islam.⁵ The Koran speaks of Jesus as *Isa* and puts him in the category of a prophet, in their view one who speaks for Allah and points to a greater prophet yet to come in the future; you guessed it: Muhammed! Muslims also believe Jesus was virgin born and that he performed signs and wonders so there is some common ground. But their book, written five hundred years after the new Testament, denies Jesus died on a cross.⁶ Drawing from an early Christian error that crept into Arabia, they teach he was replaced by another who died in his place— perhaps Simon who carried the cross, or the traitor Judas— and that Jesus was exalted to heaven without death.⁷ Honored by God, but not resurrected because he never died. In that move, the Koran undercuts the whole of our faith and demotes Jesus to the next-to-last prophet. How skillful!

And if no death, then no self-sacrifice for the sins of the world, and— as yet— no peace with God. We still await an atonement; we are not yet forgiven. There is as yet no assurance God is fully for us. And if no cross, no resurrection is needed, and so the fullness of Jesus identity is not validated by God post-mortem; he’s just one more messenger paving the way for the final prophet— Muhammed- and a better revelation in the Koran. On their reading, Jesus is not God in flesh, not the suffering Savior, not the risen and returning Lord, not the effective end of divine revelation after which everything else is commentary and ethics. Jesus was a noble man to be sure— and with a special mother— but not who the church claims him to be based on the testimony of eyewitnesses.⁸ It’s important to be clear about these two readings

⁵ For an introduction, see C. Moucarry, “Islam,” in W.C. Campbell Jack, *The New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: 2006), 358-364. On the contrast between the Jesus of the Koran and the Gospels— including his death— see Timothy George, *Is The Father of Jesus the God of Muhammed?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002, Chap. 5, “Jesus with Freckles,” 89-104; more recently Craig Evans, Jeremiah Johnston, *Jesus and the Jihadis* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny, 2015), Chap. 6, “Highjacking Jesus,” 69-79, Chap. 7, “The Quran vs. The Gospels,” 81-90.

⁶ Sura 4:157-158. See “History of the Qu’ran,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Quran.

⁷ Alister McGrath, *Heresies* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2009), Chap. 10, “Heresy and the Islamic View of Christianity,” 223-239.

⁸ Summarized from Michelle Vu, “Christian Convert: 10 Things Everyone Needs to Know About Islam,” www.christianpost.com, Wed. Nov. 29, 2006.

of divine revelation. They are incompatible; as contradictions, both cannot be true. For Christians, the human Jesus is God the Son—fully human and fully divine—so his actions and words are God’s words and deeds in our midst. We have divine revelation because the Son represents the Father as his alter-ego and mirror image. To Muslims this is polytheism, a return to the multiple deities of the paganism they rejected, but our confession is not three gods but *one God in three persons*, a blessed Trinity— as we sing every week. One God and three gods is a contradiction; both cannot be true at the same time. Same with one person and three persons, but *one God in three persons* is not a contradiction because numbers and persons are not the same category. Instead, it is a divine mystery revealed throughout the life of Jesus.

Within the limits of language, and subject to misunderstanding— as always, we use carefully chosen words to point to the revealed mystery of the One and Triune God. God the Father does not have a boy or a son of a different generation as we might. Father and Son language is a metaphor from family life, but it is an image chosen by Jesus to match his person and mission, and so of unique authority for our speech about God. The Son is called Son not because he is any less deity or any less eternal than the Father but because he is the One who comes among us as ambassador and personal agent, just as sons did for their fathers all over the Middle East. In that world to deal with a son who was sent was to deal with the father who sent him with full authority to do business as his authorized agent. Jesus is— in effect— given the Father’s power of attorney, and what he acts out in his commission, the Father backs through the Spirit’s power, thus the sheer abundance of miracles. Christians and Muslims are both philosophical monotheists; we confess One God, not many, but the stories we then tell about the activities of God and about the identity of Jesus are not the same; they lead down very different paths. So choose based on a careful reading of the evidence. We can no longer afford to be isolated and ignorant. Islam— in both its peaceful and violent forms— is now all around us. This week I ordered a bio of Muhammed and an introduction to the Koran; I have work to do!

Now because of who we confess Jesus to be, we read the gospels with loving reverence and intellectual curiosity. This is the one on whom we bet our futures. We bring to bear the tools of scholarship; we train pastors to guard and deliver the riches; we believe the same Spirit who illumined Jesus illumines us that we may *see more* of who he is and *believe more* of what he said and *act more in line* with his agenda.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

_____ It's hard for us to understand the immense value of the Sabbath for the Jews. How we treat the flag and how the British treat the queen is how Jews felt about Sabbath. It was an emblem of their history with God. A day to rest and honor God, a day different from all others and a preview of the life to come. They were called once a week enter a sanctuary within time and honor the God who rescued them from Egypt and gave them the law. Unless there was a day to stop and remember, the stories of who they were would be lost. For most, Sabbath was a delight.⁹ Animals rested, slaves rested, Gentiles in their midst rested. But for those with the mentality of religious accountants—the sect of the Pharisees—this was not enough. They asked, What does it mean to work? What kinds of work are allowed? So around the gift of Sabbath was built a protective fence of regulations passed on orally like unwritten case law: you can only walk so many steps; you can only offer medical help if the situation is life-threatening. After all, our people need such boundaries if they are to remain faithful, and we will police their practice.

So one Sabbath, when Jesus and his entourage were on the way to the next kingdom appointment, they had not eaten. No one had food, and an army does not march far on an empty belly— even a spiritual army, so the disciples plucked some golden heads of wheat and rubbed the kernels loose in their hands much as you might eat some peanuts. The ripeness of the grain tells us it was late spring. Such grazing was allowed in the book of Deuteronomy and was not considered stealing but a form of charity. Their offenses against the prevailing traditions were three: 1) unnecessary travel, 2) reaping, and 3) preparing food. On went the blue light, a verbal citation was issued, and since Jesus was in charge, they spoke to him. Verse 2, “But when the Pharisees *saw it*, they said *to him*, ‘Look! Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?’” Jesus and his friends were violating rules, disrespecting God’s day, setting a bad example.

Jesus’ defense is rather sophisticated; it tells us how serious he was about Scripture, and how much he wanted to convert hardheads to his kingdom agenda.

⁹ For a review of first century Sabbath observance, see Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2006), 30-33. On contemporary Sabbath keeping, see Mark Buchanan, *The Rest Of God: Restoring Your Soul By Restoring Sabbath* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2006); Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to a Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2014); Dan Allender, *Sabbath: The Ancient Practices* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2009).

That he answered them at all is an invitation for them to become his followers. Jesus had a way of turning every debate into an altar call. He began— as well-trained rabbis did— with a story, in this case from the *former prophets*.¹⁰ The soon-to-be-king, David, was fleeing from the anger of King Saul. He and his band of ruffians were famished, so they went into the holy shrine and ate the twelve loaves that were part of worship and reserved for the priests alone. Jesus parallels his actions to the great king, “In an emergency, I’m only doing what David did.”

But since every rabbi understood that no ruling could be based on a story that was not in the Torah, meaning the first five books of the Bible, Jesus’ second example is that the priests carry out their duties on the Sabbath and are not counted guilty. He then makes the application to himself, and though indirect, the point is clear: he is the embodiment of God’s kingdom. Verse 6, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here,” and by logical extension, “And someone greater than David is here as well,” both of which were breathtaking claims to supreme authority. Greater than David? Greater than the temple where God dwells? Who does this man think he is?

To finish off his case, Jesus drew a favorite quote from Hosea, one of the *later prophets*, and delivered a zinger, “And if you *hardheads* had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (meaning his disciples).” He flatly accuses the Pharisees of ignorance of Scripture and of misordering the attributes of God’s character, the first of which is mercy:

“Yes, the Sabbath is important,” he implied, “but the worship of the God who gave the Sabbath is even more important, and the character of the God who is mercy is most important of all, and that is where I take my stand, not with regulations but with the heart of my Father which has mercy for hungry disciples and whoever happens to be ill at the other end of today’s trip! And I have the perfect right to do so because of who I am and who I represent. Greater than David, greater than the temple.”

And then, in the ultimate offense— and one that made them furious— Jesus declared himself to be *lord of the Sabbath*, verse 8: “For the Son of man is lord of the Sabbath.” Jesus is Lord over the gifts of God and their rightful interpreter. Getting the kingdom to the next audience mattered more than keeping the Sabbath in a narrow

¹⁰ On the method of rabbinic argument see John Meier, *Matthew* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1980), 128-130.

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sense. It was a day to bring joy. And he had the right to do so because he was a king greater than David; he was more the presence of God than the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple; he was the very embodiment of divine mercy, and finally, he was the Son of man with authority over all God's laws. The humble Jesus speaks of himself this exalted way as if it's the most natural thing in the world. It is!

On most Saturdays Jesus kept Sabbath, but this Sabbath it was necessary to go where the Father said go, and there were hungry bellies to feed along the way. The person of Jesus and the mission of the kingdom of God trump all other concerns. He is the new center around which everything is organized; all else is negotiable. Traditions and rituals and guidelines are inevitable, and in their place helpful as holy habits. But keeping the main thing the main thing is always a challenge. Sin makes us want to put secondary things first and first things second. What matters more? That all the grammar in the bulletin is correct, or that the people worship God? That all the little rules and traditions are kept, or that people experience love and acceptance? Your answer will identify you as a Pharisee or as a disciple. Imagine the spiritual blindness of issuing Jesus a sabbath citation! Didn't they know who they're dealing with? Apparently not. But Jesus made it clear, and then they had a decision to make, either for or agin' him.

So please avoid the accountant mentality, except— of course— when doing accounting! Give up being spiritual police. Don't try to control other people. Nurture the virtue of mercy. Keep first things first, and for us that always means the person of Jesus and his kingdom mission. Yes, it's a dangerous way to live, but then, who is more dangerous than Jesus, God's wild and free ambassador?

1B) vv.9-15a Sabbath Controversy Over Healing.

It's not until the next story begins that we see where Jesus was heading and why it was important. It's time for worship at a local synagogue, and in that congregation is a man who can't work. His hand is as good a dead— withered and drawn— and today is the day to watch God's kingdom raise his hand from the dead.

_____ One of the characters in the movie *Seabiscuit* is a broken-down, unemployed cowboy named *Tom Smith*. Millionaire Charles Howard has a campfire interview with Smith; he asks why rescue an old, lame horse who will soon be dog food..

Tom's reply? "You don't throw a whole life away just 'cause it's banged up a bit."

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Together they purchase Seabiscuit, a horse whose shortcomings make it an unlikely prospect. Tom's method of training is tailored toward curing the horse of its inner demons, a byproduct of neglect by previous owners.

Tom hires a second-rate jockey named *Red* Pollard. At 5'7", Red's too tall to be anything but a bad match for an undersized horse. But Tom notices an almost mystical connection between Red and Seabiscuit.

But Red has another problem. He's blind in one eye; he conceals the handicap fearing track officials would not let him race. During a race at Santa Anita, Red's limited vision lets a competing horse overtake Seabiscuit on Red's blind side, costing them the victory. Tom is outraged. In a burst of emotion, Red shouts, "I'm blind!"

Stung by the betrayal, Tom urges Mr. Howard to fire Red. To his surprise, Mr. Howard lets Red remain. Dumbfounded, Tom demands a reason. Mr. Howard says, "You don't throw away a whole life just because it's banged up a bit."¹¹

A broken-down cowboy, a half-blind jockey, a damaged horse, a bunch of losers and has-beens. Is that how the man with the withered hand felt? The message of Jesus and of his church is that you don't throw away a whole life just because it's banged up a bit! Jesus and his band are on a mission to be at the synagogue at just the right time so that a man with a withered hand can be restored. It's a divine appointment, and there is nothing I like any more than a divine appointment.

I wonder if the man with the withered hand was a *plant*? I speculate this was the case, because immediately after the man is introduced, the Pharisees ask, "Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath?" so that they might accuse him." They were ready. Their question— interestingly enough— presumes both Jesus' ability to heal. The question is not *if* but *when* he ought to. Couldn't he just wait till tomorrow? No.

Jesus' response is instructive. He reasons with his opponents using a short parable in the form of a question. It's a gracious appeal and an opportunity for their attitude to change. He hopes they will repent. It is not hypothetical but personal, "*Which man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?*" And the expected answer is, "Any of us." A man with a single sheep is a poor man. It's all he has, and if it's dead, his family suffers. The force of the question rides on the fact of a poor man owning one sheep. If you have a thousand, you can afford to be a theologian and argue about the details of Sabbath custom, but if you have only one it's not theoretical, "*Which man of you....*"

¹¹ Edited from PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 12:1-21.

Footnote. It is our job to help animals. God put them under our care. People who abuse animals had better hope God does not threaten them the same way. It is a sign of a sick character. How much more those who abuse women or children. God did not design men to control women; God did not design women to be punching bags. And if you are a giver or receiver, verbal or physical, you need help.

But Jesus did not leave the question to stand by itself. He added a comment, “Of how much more value is a man than a sheep?” and expected everyone to agree. The Pharisees saw the man with the bad hand as prop to be used. To them he was an object, to Jesus a subject. Do we have any idea how precious people are to Jesus, and even more so the handicapped. The world ignores them; not Jesus.

There is an intellectual current out there known as *deep ecology* or *eco-ethics*. It sees the earth as such an interrelated unity, such an organic whole that nothing may be counted as of more value than anything else. A human foetus has no more inherent dignity than an dolphin foetus. Perhaps this thinking has penetrated further than we think when it is a crime to disturb sea turtle eggs but not to abort human beings. But Jesus said, “Of how much more value is a human being than a sheep?” So why are some more concerned about homeless cats than homeless people? I’m a bit nervous about people who care more for their pets than their neighbors. It is an inversion of biblical values. All the wonderful array creatures great and small are not made in God’s image; that dignity is reserved for us alone. And once that is established, you can go about the business of joining the local humane society and eating free-range chicken and joining a Lab rescue. But please check out the philosophy and implicit theology of any organization you join, and if they believe all creatures are of equal worth, the vision is pantheist, not Christian. Learn to think! Learn to discern! Ideas matter.

Jesus did not say that animals were unworthy of care; he simply said that people were worth so much more! So when you buy dog food, buy some canned goods for our food pantry. When you board your dog for a vacation, consider giving to the homeless shelter. Pets can be wonderful companions and reminders of our responsibility to be wise stewards over all the world. From time to time I pray for people’s sick animals and lay hands on them. Not long ago Lori and I had a great visit to the *Happy Cow Creamery* between here and Greenville, even took a private tour of the milking operation! I love books and ideas; Lori loves children and critters. Visiting a zoo reconnects us with the larger world and all the amazing diversity. But every person matters to God as if they were the only one; each human being is

irreplaceable. It's precisely why Jesus asked the question the way he did, "What man of you, if he has *only one sheep*..." We see numbers; Jesus hears names. We see crowds; Jesus sees individuals. With him there is hope for every life, however marred and smudged, discounted and devalued. There are no disposable people. Lots of difficult people, no disposable ones.

Jesus answered their question in verse 12, "So, in conclusion, gentlemen, it is lawful to do good on the sabbath, to a dumb sheep in a ditch and to a magnificent man with a useless hand." Mercy in the face of distress is always in style. Sabbath is about rest is also about love, and with Jesus love has power to make a difference.

Jesus has now bested his opponents in argument, but there's still a man who can't work, a man who's lost his place in life. The way the healing happens is so clever, so like God. Jesus does no work. He does not use his hand; he does not touch the man or apply medicine. He speaks, and God the Holy Spirit is the only one who works, and that invisibly. Whether Jesus saw the limb made whole in his mind's eye or responded to a verbal prompt is beside the point. He knows ahead of time what will happen. Jesus looked at the man and said, "Stretch out your hand. Do what you cannot do." Verse 13, "And the man stretched it out, and it was restored." The verb is passive voice— *was restored*— which indicates divine action. At this point Matthew add a comment to make sure we get the point that the tissue and muscle had been fully restored; it was now *whole, like the other*. A flat-out miracle of re-creation, God supplying divine energy for a rapid regrowth of what had been atrophied. The one who made DNA turned it on from the inside, it was rebuilt before their eyes.¹²

Have I ever seen such? Not yet! Am I skeptical? No, I've heard and read too many similar reports.¹³ If in our world it happened once, it can happen again. I am willing to let Jesus be my teacher for what is possible and impossible in this world. Science deals in probabilities based on the observation of a closed cause-and-effect universe; Jesus deals in possibilities drawing on the invisible resources of the kingdom of God in an open system. That night the withered hand touched his wife's cheek to wipe away a tear of joy; the next morning he went back to work.

¹² See Dr. Chester Tolson and Dr. Harold Koenig on the healing ministry of Jesus in *The Healing Power of Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 25-28.

¹³ The definitive work is now Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 Volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

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But while our friend is healed of paralysis, a polio of the soul is withering the muscles of compassion in the Pharisaic heart. To resist the grace of God is not to stay the same but to be hardened another degree. For these men it was near the end of grace; their response was not joy for the healing; rather, they went out and conspired how to do him in. Verse 14, “But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, *how to destroy him.*” Religious men— the best of the day— become agents of the Evil One. The shadow of the cross is already falling across the Galilean ministry. All because Jesus messed with their notion of what ought and ought not to happen in church on the Lord’s Day. Their God was in a box; Jesus blew the box open. Apart from Jesus and his corrective influence, religion is deadly: Jewish, Catholic, Methodist, Baptist. And religious leaders need continual correction.

2) vv.15b-21 Healing Summary And Isaiah Citation.

There are some disturbing verses in the gospels, and verse 16 is one of them, “And many followed him, *and he healed them all....*” Just not the Pharisees who were too busy issuing citations and plotting an assassination. Please do not sign up to be an accountant or policeman. Be a disciple; try to keep up with Jesus. It’s a lot more fun.

Matthew’s loves to comb the Old Testament and highlight what describes Jesus by way of forecast. We call them *fulfillment citations*, as in verse 17, “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet long ago....” And when you’ve known Jesus and seen him operate, how could you miss the description from Isaiah?

My servant, chosen, beloved, well pleasing, the one who bears the Spirit and welcomes outsiders, not loud or brash, always looking beyond the bruises to the person and beyond the smoldering wick to the fire that once burned, the one who gives hope to all.

CONCLUSION

Jesus is as gentle as his work is deep, so let us be a place of mercy and welcome. Don’t be one of the hardheads.
