

Good or Harm?

1 Samuel 21:1-6, Luke 6:1-11 (ESV)

January 2, 2005

“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?” Therein lies the question. “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” Therein lies the good news. When Jesus Christ is Lord, every day is a good day for doing good. Thanks be to God!

Consider the healing in today’s reading. It was not an emergency. The man in church was not bleeding to death. He was not having a heart attack. He was not in respiratory failure. The man had a withered hand. It could have waited another day. Jesus healed him anyway. He told the man to stand up right in front of the whole congregation, and he healed his hand. Jesus did not have to wait for an emergency to act. Any day was a good day for healing someone. Any day was a good day for doing good. Any day was a good day for saving life. And by this healing, Jesus took another step closer to the cross. His Sabbath healing inspired the undying fury of those who eventually killed him.

Part of the good news is that God was in Jesus Christ breaking through the world’s restrictions to heal, to do good, and to save life. That is the great joy in this reading. It was against the law to harvest on the Sabbath, as the onlookers were quick to point out. But Jesus is Lord over the Sabbath. It was against the law to practice medicine on the Sabbath, as the onlookers were waiting to see. But Jesus says it is always legal to do good and to save life.

Those particular laws are foreign to us. And yet, there are other restrictions that bind and constrict our lives as much today. There are other boundaries set up for us not to cross. Jesus steps across them to reach us and to heal us. God breaks through all the barriers to make us well and whole and to reclaim us as his own. Is that of interest to you? God in Jesus Christ has paid the price for healing the gone-wrongness of our lives. And that healing is not cheap. As Christ bore away the sin of the world, it cost him his own life. He has already paid the price for healing the gone-wrongness of our lives. What a shame it would be for us to reject the healing, or to neglect it and so let it slip away, when Jesus has already paid that terrible price.

By way of contrast, there is also a deep sadness in this reading. Jesus did not heal the hardened hearts of the Pharisees. He did not soften, warm, touch, or convert their poor, shriveled up hearts. Instead, the Pharisees remained suspicious, accusing, and angry to the end. It is very sobering to ponder their unwillingness to rejoice in

his doing good. It is frightening to consider their fury at his saving life. Their refusal to accept Christ is incomprehensible. Their hearts must have been harder to heal than the man's withered hand! More to the point, in not admitting their sickness, they did not want Christ to heal them. The question for us is, What are we doing? How are we responding to the ministry of Jesus Christ? What direction shall we go this new year? Pray that God will spare us the kind of hardness of heart that is incurable. Pray that God will unfailingly turn our hearts to himself and hold us safe for all eternity.

One of the hard realities of life today is that Jesus does not heal all of our sicknesses. Despite the miracle in today's reading, he does not take away all the diseases of our loved ones. God does not alleviate all the suffering of the world, let alone prevent it, as we have learned again this week. We do not know why God allows such horrible things. So, what can we say about this? How can we read this gospel about healing so that it is not simply a cruel reminder of something that is beyond our reach? Let me offer four considerations about this.

First, we must say there are healings still today for which there is no other explanation than the mercy of God. There have been times when healing has come after the doctors and nurses have said there was nothing else they could do. In fact, a proper understanding would be that God is the source of all healing. Sometimes God works through medical care. Sometimes God works beyond it. So, to admit that God does not heal all of our sicknesses is not to say that God does not heal at all. We continue to pray for healing with good hope, and with confidence in God's mercy and power.

Second, we do not know how much suffering God has prevented. Nor do we know how our prayers have been involved in that. The suffering we have seen in the world has been massive, even incomprehensible. But who is to say that it could not have been worse? And we will not know until the end of time how our prayers have availed. So, until then we will pray without ceasing.

Third, by following the example of our Lord in doing good and saving life, we can help to alleviate much suffering. That is the purpose of, for instance, our Five Cents Per Meal Alms that go to combat hunger here and around the world. John Calvin had a good insight from this reading about the importance of doing good and saving life. "He who takes a man's life is guilty of doing evil, but those who do not trouble to help the needy are little different from murderers."¹ That is strong

¹John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas W. Torrance, vol. 2, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Vol. I*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B.

language. To withhold from the needy what they need is little different from killing them. And as Fred Craddock has written in our own day:

Jesus poses the issue so as to make inactivity before human need no real option at all. One will be *doing* something: to act is to do good (save life); to refuse to act is to do evil (destroy life). The choice is not whether to do or whether not to do but *what* will I do? Jesus answers his question by his act of doing good: he heals the man. The message is clear: it is never the wrong day to help another, to minister to human need.”²

Fourth, the word of God in this reading applies not only to physical healings but also to spiritual healings. There are millions of times as many people who suffer from withered souls as from withered hands. Are you one of them? Is your soul withered and wasted away and almost useless? Is your heart hard and cold? Is your life reduced to nothingness? Are your relationships strained and broken? God can work in Jesus Christ to break through everything that is crushing your heart and soul and life and relationships. God can restore them to what he means for them to be. Jesus Christ came to earth and went to his death on the cross to heal you and me and to make us whole again. Is that of interest to you? Is that something you might want for yourself, for your loved ones, for your neighbors, for your world? If it is, you are in the right place. Here we speak again the good word of God’s love, Christ’s forgiveness, and the life and power of the Holy Spirit.

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Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 2:32.

²James Luther Mays, ed., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, vol. *Luke*, by Fred B. Craddock (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990), 82.

the value of human life and property. So, oddly enough, the true application of the reading today might run exactly opposite the reading itself.

In Christ's day, some people intended to obey the law even if it meant that others went hungry and suffered. In our day, people break the law just because it is there. They would as soon shoot you as look at you. It is a different world. Jesus broke the law to do good and save life. Today, as his followers we need to uphold the law in order to do good and save life. Our society is impersonal, brutal, crushing, and despairing. We need to teach our children, and all the children, the value of life and law.

Thus, we remind ourselves that human life is valuable because God values each of us as a child of God. If we base our value on our economic worth, that can be taken away. If we base our value on our work, that can end. If we base our value on our social standing, that can change. If we base our value on our race or our party or our nationality, those of different races and parties and nationalities will challenge it. But when we realize that our lives are valuable because God values us, nobody can take that away from us. God's valuing of us provides the only viable basis for human family, society, civilization, and well-being.

Another application has to do with remembering this reading not only as history but also as a warning to the church. The church is always in danger of ossifying and fossilizing. Have you ever seen fossilized dinosaur bones? They stood still too long. They died and they turned to stone. We do not want that to happen to the church. The Pharisees maintained the letter of the law even at the price of the hunger and suffering of other people. The church runs the risk of focusing on itself while disregarding the suffering of others. As we try to be faithful today and tomorrow, we will extend the healing ministry and gospel of Jesus Christ to other people. We need to be on the move. We need to be on the lookout. We need to reach people whom we have never reached before. We need to bring here as many people as we can for Jesus to heal.

Another application has to do with the spiritual healing we have received from God through the ministry of Jesus Christ, the restoration of our withered souls. Our sin has been forgiven. Our life has been renewed. We who were lost have been found. We who were dead have been made alive. We have been made whole again. This is the same healing that we are now to extend in Christ's name to all those about us. Christ set the example of doing good and saving life so we might follow his example and extend his ministry. Ben Johnson, former Professor of Evangelism at Columbia Seminary, has written, "Evangelism is that peculiar task of the church to communicate the Good News of God's love to persons, so that they may

understand the message, put their faith in Christ, become loyal members of his church, and grow in discipleship.”¹

It is the joyful task of the whole congregation to share the good news of Jesus Christ, his healing, doing good, and saving life, with all those about us. Everyone needs this healing. Everyone needs to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not all will respond positively. Nevertheless, we all need it. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Jesus has already paid the price for the healing of us all. Far be it from us not to tell others. Far be it from us not to share with others. Far be it from us to restrict, restrain, and distort the ministry and gospel of Jesus Christ. We do not want to behave as if our hearts were still cold and hard and shriveled! And remembering that the healing of the withered hand took place within worship encourages us to bring people with withered souls into the worship of the church of Jesus Christ. Here we can expose them to his gospel, love, healing.

The Word of God read and preached today calls for a decision. Do we rejoice in the radical freedom of doing of good? Do we accept Christ’s costly healing, and go about gladly doing good and saving life by sharing his healing with others? Or, do we keep our familiar but shriveled old hearts and souls?

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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