

Is It Lawful to Heal?

Exodus 20:8-11, Luke 14:1-24 (ESV)

August 14, 2005

“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” Thus Jesus responded to the carefully watching Pharisees. It strikes me as a very strange question for him to ask. It assumes, of course, the power to heal, either on his part or someone else’s. It names the issue, before his detractors articulated it, of the propriety of certain activities on the Sabbath. That in turn raises the question of the nature and purpose of the Sabbath itself. And all of this together leads me to ask, “What does this have to do with us?” Sabbath keeping seems very esoteric or even quaint. What does this have to do with you and me, on Sunday, August 14, 2005, as we gather for the worship of God?

“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” Again and again in the Gospel according to Luke, we have found that the questions have pointed us in the right direction and have led us to the good news of Jesus Christ. It is my contention that this question will do the same thing. “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” The negative assumption here, of course, is that there is a reluctance on the part of his hearers for healings to be conducted on the Sabbath. Apparently it was regarded as a form of work. I note for the record that there is not a word in the Ten Commandments forbidding healing on the Sabbath. So these hearers were overzealous and far too strict in their application of the law to the lives of the people, especially other people. That is clearly part of what is going on here. However, I cannot see how that applies to us today. So, let us move on.

“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” The positive affirmation being made here, the good news toward which this question points, is that the will of God is for human well-being, even when it involves healing on the Sabbath. The will of God, articulated and lived out by Jesus Christ, is for human well-being, for the healing of the gone-wrongness of humanity. This is good news, indeed. It is *good* to know that God is for us and not against us. And it is *news* to find out that God is for us and not against us, because that is not at all obvious when we look around the world. Despite the number of things in the world for us—food and drink, air and light, friends and family—there are a tremendous number of things that work against us—disease, decay, decline, and death. These things can tend to make us doubt the goodness of God.

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articulated and lived out by Jesus Christ, is for human well-being, for the healing of the gone-wrongness of humanity. Since this is not immediately obvious, it is good that Jesus teaches this to us. This is something we can learn. This is something we can receive. This is something we can hang on to. This is something we can hold close. The will of God is for human well-being. The will of God is for our well-being. The will of God is for your well-being and mine. And if God is for us, who can be against us (Romans 8:31b)? Now, it may be that God's understanding of what ails us and God's understanding of our well-being are far different from our own. We will get to that in a moment. For now, rejoice in the good news that God wills our well-being.

It is more than the question that points to the good will of God. When no one would answer the question which Jesus asked, he took the sick man who had come among them, healed him, and sent him away. Jesus backed up his words with actions. Jesus backed up his teaching with healing. Jesus backed up the good news of God's good will with the reality of a man made well. One would think this would have convinced them. One would think this would have moved them. One would think this would have impressed them. One would think such a miracle would have led them to faith. But it seems only to have hardened them. "They remained silent." And Jesus said to them, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" "They remained silent." "They could not reply to these things."

This exchange, or the lack thereof, brings two things to our attention. The first is that the negative example of hardened hearts stands as a warning to all of us today. That is not the right way to respond to Jesus. Distrust, dislike, arrogance, contempt, disdain, the presumption of moral superiority, disregard for human well-being, standoffishness, and stony, hard, cold silence are not the right way to respond to Jesus. We have no interest in belittling the Pharisees two-thousand years after the fact. That is not the point here. But the point is that what they did inappropriately continues to stand as a warning even for us, here on the other side of the world, all these centuries later. What a wonderful privilege it is that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been given to us! Let us not squander this gift by acting as if it were of no significance.

The second thing brought to our attention by this healing, despite the failure of its witnesses to appreciate it, is that Jesus is the agent of God's good will for us, which is to say that Jesus Christ is God with us and God for us. The question of the lawfulness of healing on the Sabbath, followed by just such a healing conducted by Jesus, leads directly to this good news: Jesus is the agent of God's good will for us, which is to say that Jesus Christ is God with us and God for us. God has not remained silent. God has not remained hidden. God has not remained far away. God

has drawn near to us and come to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God is here! There is no more doubting. There is no more questioning. There is no more wondering or imagining. God has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ.

At this point, our reading takes an odd twist and turn. Having healed the man and sent him home, Jesus goes right ahead with dinner, observing human behavior and teaching, almost as if nothing had happened. He begins with what has always seemed to me to be his most *unremarkable* teaching. It is good and useful and interesting, but it seems to be based entirely on common sense and so to have no specifically religious content: “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.” That makes sense. It is even good advice. But is it gospel?

The significance of the teaching is made clear in the two additional concluding lines: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Suddenly we are far beyond the wedding feast. We are far beyond table manners, as good and as important as they are. We are far beyond social strategies of how to be honored instead of embarrassed. Suddenly the teaching has been universalized to apply to all people, including us. And the teaching has been placed within the ultimate context of final judgment, of eternal humiliation or exaltation. Self-exaltation and arrogance here, such as unbelief in, rejection of, and disobedience to God, will be dealt with supremely harshly in the world to come. Self-humbling and service here, such as faith in, acceptance of, and obedience to, Jesus Christ, will be dealt with very graciously in the world to come. The stakes are high. The gospel contains both warning and promise. Which will it be for us?

Then Jesus turned from the guests and offered an even more pointed teaching to their host: “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.” Is this for real? Well, yes, I think it is. And it undercuts the reciprocity which we value so highly. And yet, the conclusion of this teaching also carries far beyond this world: “You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” There is a context of ultimacy. There

is a teaching from the great world beyond. There is a word here spoken to us from outside and beyond us. Jesus Christ speaks on behalf of, and therefore as, God.

Finally, Jesus builds on his teaching of what a dinner should be to tell a grand parable of that most wonderful banquet of all, the very kingdom of God. Someone else brought up the topic: “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” But Jesus said to him, “A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry.” So far, so good; this makes perfect sense.

But it is precisely at this point that common sense is left behind and a strange, heavenly kind of logic begins to take over: “Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’ And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’ And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.’” And this, I submit to you, is the gospel answer to our initial question. “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” “Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.” Thanks be to God!

“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” That is the question. The positive affirmation being made here, the good news toward which this question points, is that the will of God, articulated and lived out by Jesus Christ, is for human well-being, for the healing of the gone-wrongness of humanity. “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” Here is the answer, the concrete form of the positive affirmation: “Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.... Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.” The greatest illness from which we all suffer is our horrible estrangement from God. The great banquet which God provides, the very kingdom of God, is a breathtakingly broad, surprising, and startling reconciliation, reaching out to include the least among us and the most unlikely to be invited, and so it is healing for the deepest wound of our estrangement.

Yes, that is the purpose of the Sabbath, to bring us close to God. That is why we are here today. Yes, that is the content of the gospel, that God has come close to us and that God brings us close to himself. That is what we preach. Yes, that is the good news of Jesus Christ, that he is God with us and God for us. He has come to the streets and the lanes of this city to find even us. He has come to the highways and hedges of this city to find even us. He is determined that his house will be full. This gives us good reason to live. This gives us good reason to believe and to obey. This gives us good reason to carry Christ's invitation to all the people of the world. Yes, it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. And God himself is doing that for us, lifting us out of brokenness and death and restoring us to himself. Join me in rejoicing in this great goodness of God toward us.

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org