

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father. You understand the complex situations and circumstances in which we find ourselves trapped, and though we do not always see it, you are able to guide us through our difficulties. Strengthen us, we pray, so that we do not become downhearted at our trials, but lift our eyes towards the greater things stretching out before us. We praise You, God of eternity and grace: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Internet Church

In prayer, ask the Lord to use internet churches to generate greater understanding between people who live in different countries. May God's people be truly international!

On-going prayers

- *Pray for the people and government of Afghanistan*
- *Pray about the economic problems felt by your country*
- *Give thanks for small children and the joy they bring families*

Meditation

You call me ever onwards Lord Jesus Christ, my Saviour!

If I must change, may I do so, and remain firm in faith:

If I have sinned, may I repent and return to Your love:

If I need to act, may I have wisdom beyond my years:

If I must speak, may I live the prophetic Word:

If I have been silent, may I open my heart to speak:

If I need to listen, may I truly hear both the spirit and soul:

If I must challenge, may I offer Your words within mine:

If I have to show courage, may I be strong through grace

If I need to wait, may I be patient with everything around me:

You call me ever onwards, Lord Jesus Christ.

Bible Study - Matthew 12:9-14

⁹ *Going on from there, he entered their synagogue, ¹⁰ and a man was there with a withered hand. In order to accuse him, they asked, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?'* ¹¹ *He said to them, 'If any one of you has a sheep and it falls into a ditch on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?'* ¹² *How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! It follows that doing good is lawful on the Sabbath.'* ¹³ *Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.'* *As he stretched it out it was healed, and became as healthy as his other hand.*

¹⁴ *The Pharisees then went out and began to plot against him, in order to destroy him.*

Review

When the crowds responded to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (7:29), it was the authority with which He spoke that impressed them. They recognised that Jesus had a command of everything that was not merely intellectual, but moral and spiritual; and they had seen such authority before. So from the beginning of His ministry Jesus drew large crowds, all waiting

to see what He would say or do (8:18, 9:18f. 9:35f.). Others were more sceptical, and the Pharisees were the prominent face of that opposition. The Pharisees were not priests, they were more like a 'party' of Jews with a common religious commitment to the strictest regime of Jewish life possible, according to the Laws of Moses and the extensive legal codes based on the Law which had been built up over time. It was their express intention to dominate the life of the Jewish people and police their adherence to the Law, and it was in this capacity that they constantly appeared wherever Jesus was teaching and healing. Jesus knew what they were doing and as we saw yesterday, and He was willing to confront them even though few in His day were prepared to this.

The story of the healing of the man with a withered arm is fascinating, because the healing is only part of the story; it is also a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. The story begins with the Pharisees noticing the man in a synagogue and bringing him to Jesus' attention (12:10). However, their reasons for doing this had absolutely nothing to do with his welfare. We know nothing about the feelings of the man himself; we do not know where he came from, whether he wanted to be healed, or whether he even knew who Jesus was. He was a pawn in the hands of the Pharisees who wanted to test Jesus in public about His attitude to the Sabbath laws. Jesus had just won their dispute about plucking corn on the Sabbath (12:1-8), but the Pharisees would not give up; clearly, their concern for Mosaic and rabbinical law was far greater than their concern for a man with a withered arm!

Jesus replied by making a comment about helping out an animal in danger on the Sabbath. It makes good sense to us, but the issue raised was one of great dispute within Judaism. The background to this is straightforward. The Jewish legal codes in the Mishnah (Yoma 6:8) stated clearly that only a matters of life or death could be dealt with on a Sabbath; but there were differing scholarly opinions about what this meant. Some rabbinical schools said that all animal suffering should be avoided even on the Sabbath (see the Talmud Shabbath 128b), but others said that an animal in trouble should not be rescued on the Sabbath but on the next day! Jesus' words may well have been intended to inflame debate amongst His opponents!

After this, Jesus gave His full attention to the man and his withered arm, calling on him to stretch out his hand. His healing happened in three distinct phases. Firstly, he stretched out his hand (12:13) and in so doing showed faith in Jesus. Secondly, his arm was 'healed', and was better at that instant. Thirdly, Matthew describes the arm as 'healthy', a word meaning more than 'healed', more like 'made whole'. The importance of this word does not come across well in English, but the text is telling us that what took place was a complete and total healing; it 'became as healthy as the other hand.'

What Jesus did in both his words (v11,12) and His deeds (v13) was also to expose the Pharisees. They were not interested in this miracle and had seen Jesus do this before. They left with nothing to do except vent their wrath and plot to kill Jesus. He had out-argued them and shown them to be uncaring individuals with no power or authority before God. The Pharisees thought about doing away with Jesus because they knew instinctively that Jesus had the upper hand, and that His authority would destroy the very fabric of their religious and social order. His power was too much for them.

We should be careful when reading this story, however, because although we naturally sympathise with Jesus and side against the Pharisees, all people have a tendency to be like the Pharisees. Our churches easily become deadlocked with rules and regulations about even the smallest details, and people become trapped by them rather than find freedom in Christ. We still have to confront the spirit of the Pharisees lurking around the churches today, but if we keep close to our Lord, we will be victorious!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Are you aware of miraculous healings that have taken place that are similar to the one described in our passage today? If so, share it within your group.
2. How can we prevent the spirit of the Pharisees dominating the life of the church?

3. Is there any faith showed within this story of healing, and if so, by whom and to whom?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This story shows in contrast the compassion of Jesus and the harshness of the legalistic debate about the Sabbath. I find it saddening that even though we do our best to be like Jesus within our churches today, it is too easy for some to succumb the legalism of the Pharisees and end up preventing the ministry of Jesus taking place. I am not suggesting that we accuse others of this, rather that we watch ourselves very carefully.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Can you think of a time when the rules of the church have prevented something from happening which would have been to the glory of God? Reflect on what happened and do your best to work out whether there was any Pharisaic attitudes involved. Pray about whether the Lord is asking you to do anything about this.*
- *Write down a pray which asks the Lord for healing for your own ailments, both minor and more significant illnesses you have either had or are dealing with.*

Final Prayer

My prayer dear Jesus, Saviour of the World, is this. Bring hope to the world; bring love to the world; bring faith to the world; and bring peace to the world. Fulfil Your promises and complete Your work on earth in Your good time, I pray. AMEN