

## Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You have given us many good gifts. Open up our hearts to see the possibilities created by this grace of Yours. May we recognise the gifts You have given us, and may we use them wherever possible. May we use them throughout our lives for Your glory, and Your glory alone. We ask this in Your name, Lord Jesus: AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

Open your Bible and read it. Think about what it means to do this and think about what you mean by 'God's Word'?

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the courts of justice:** Pray for prosecutors, who have the heavy burden of advancing the public interest and pursuing justice
- Pray for those who work in the building trade, especially small builders who rely on the domestic market for house improvement
- Give thanks to God for your friends, and then pray for your enemies

## Meditation

For gentleness, see the joy and care  
with which a grandparent plays with a grandchild;

For faithfulness, see the endless romance  
of two lovers lost in the pathways of passionate love;

For patience, see the self-control of a parent  
who never gives up hope on a lost or struggling child;

For kindness, see the reassuring smile  
of one who visits you unexpectedly when ill in hospital;

For graciousness, see the honesty and love  
which holds together true and lasting friendships;

For goodness, see those who are all these things  
who show in their lives the fruit of the Spirit of God;

For all that's best in life, follow the advice of the Creator.

## Bible passage - Luke 6:6-11

<sup>6</sup> On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there who had a withered right hand. <sup>7</sup> The scribes and the Pharisees watched Him closely to see if He would cure on the Sabbath, in order to find some accusation against Him. <sup>8</sup> But He knew what they were thinking, so He said to the man with the withered hand, 'Get up and stand in front of us.' He got up and stood there. <sup>9</sup> Then Jesus said to them, 'I ask you, is it right to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?' <sup>10</sup> After looking around at them all, He said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He did so, and his hand was fully restored. <sup>11</sup> But they were filled with fury and began to discuss with each other what they might do to Jesus.

## Bible Study

### Review

In general, Jesus performed miracles in order to demonstrate His authority and power. He did this early on in His ministry when He healed some people (5:12-31), and He also demonstrated His authority over evil by evicting demons (4:33-41). But now, it was time for Jesus to show the Pharisees that He had divine approval for saying that He was *'the Lord of the Sabbath'* (6:5), and He reinforced this claim by healing the man with the withered arm.

We can read this story as if it is only about Jesus' compassion and mercy towards the sick, but it is much more. It is proof that Jesus acted on earth with God's authority and approval. The Pharisees could not accept this, and the story demands that we decide where we stand. Do we accept Jesus' authority or not?

The incident is certainly dramatic. Jesus went into the Synagogue and became aware of the presence of a man with a withered hand (6:6). The man was presumably a worshipper, but he may have been following Jesus in search of healing (4:42, 5:15). His presence presented Jesus with a difficulty. He may have wanted to heal the man simply because of his physical need, but he knew that the Pharisees would make something more of the situation.

The Pharisees controlled everyday life within the Jewish community by applying hundreds of supplementary regulations to the basic Old Testament law of Sabbath rest. They banned every form of definable work and watched to see if Jesus overstepped the mark. They were prepared to pit their encyclopaedic knowledge of rabbinic law against Jesus' Messianic claims, believing that if they could catch Jesus out, they would be able to say to the Jews; 'He's not what you think!' They were not interested in the real needs of individuals, they were only interested in pursuing their own objectives, and Jesus knew that they were trying to trap him. It is extraordinary that people who presented themselves as being the defenders of true religion should be so indifferent to illness and suffering.

Jesus rose to the Pharisees' challenge by openly defying them, and he had good grounds for doing so. He knew that both the Old Testament and the rabbinic laws of Judaism said that the saving of life was more important than any definition of what constituted 'work' or 'rest' on the Sabbath day. The Law said that God had called people to rest on the Sabbath day, but for centuries, it had been accepted that the giving of life and health was more important than such a law, and the giving back of life through healing reflected the loving nature of God as creator. So when Jesus asked the question *'is it right to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or destroy it?'* (6:9) the Pharisees had no answer.

If we look carefully, we will find that Jesus introduced an important new idea. His words imply that to choose not to heal the man would be tantamount to harming him (6:9). This is a crucial insight, and it highlights the fact that much harm can come from inappropriate neglect. For example, unattended disease or injury can leave people dangerously vulnerable, and those who have lost some of their faculties are often among the socially deprived in any society. The Kingdom of God must surely be proved to be better than this, so Jesus demonstrated God's love by focusing upon the need of the man with a withered hand. To leave him without healing was ungodly and destructive neglect (6:9).

The healing itself is dramatic because of its simplicity. In an instant, Jesus spoke and the man was healed. The Pharisees might have argued that healing involved work, but Jesus did not touch the man or do any perceptible 'work'! He simply spoke to the man, saying *'stretch out your hand'* (6:10). In this way, Jesus made His authority over the Sabbath clear, and the Pharisees were *'filled with fury'* (6:11).

From Jesus' point of view, His ministry was beginning to fall into place. The Pharisees were scandalised, however, they were beginning to gather evidence with which to charge Jesus with blasphemy.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Further comments about Old Testament law and rabbinic law on the Sabbath
- The details of Jesus' healing of the man with a withered arm
- Salvation and healing

## Notes on the text and translation

### **Important words**

#### **V9 *'is it right ...'***

The Greek word for this is 'exesti', meaning *'is it right ...'*. However, this refers to religious law, not moral law, and to what is permitted or forbidden by the law of God. This is why some translations have *'is it lawful ...'*. However, I have avoided using the word 'lawful' because the word is easily misunderstood by Christians who think of all law as being superseded by grace. This phrase simply means *'what is right before God.'*

## **Significant phrases**

### **V8 'get up and stand in front of us'**

#### Other translations:

'get up and stand in front of everyone' (NIV)

'come and stand here' (NRSV)

The Greek says literally, '*Get up and stand in the midst*'. The various Bible versions indicate different attempts to make this sound more natural in the flow of the sentence. The phrase '*in front of us*' captures the sense of Jesus' command, which requires the man to stand in the sight of everyone present. The healing is intentionally public.

## Going Deeper

### ***Further comments about Old Testament law and rabbinic law on the Sabbath***

This was not the first time that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath day. One of His first miracles was performed after He had spoken for the first time at the synagogue in Capernaum (4:31-37), where the eviction of an evil spirit was dramatic enough for people to forget rules about the Sabbath. As Jesus' ministry progressed, the issue of Sabbath Law became more important, because this was a fundamental principle for the Pharisees. These and other laws enabled them to keep control of the Jewish people.

There is no doubt that the rabbinic law of Jesus' day contained a large number of regulations forbidding all forms of work on the Sabbath day. Regulations had also been written down in a document called the Mishnah identifying deeds of healing as forms of work, especially such actions that were not a matter of life or death. To this extent, and to this extent alone, healing was indeed forbidden on the Sabbath day, but we should not imagine that the Old Testament has ever contained such laws. There is nothing within its pages to forbid any form of healing on the Sabbath day. The Bible speaks about the Sabbath in terms of rest and cessation from work, and little else. The dispute here is about rabbinical law, not the Bible as we know it.

What we do know is this. Rabbinic law does indeed say that '*whenever there is doubt as to whether life is in danger, this overrides the Sabbath*' (Yoma 8:6). It is possible to argue about whether Jesus' healing of the man with a withered arm constitutes saving his life, as if Jesus was indeed trying to overcome the Pharisees with a greater or better understanding of their own laws. This is doubtful. The Sabbath was itself supposed to be an example of the Messianic age, and what Jesus did was to show something of the meaning of God's rule on earth. God's Kingdom would be one in which people would be healed. The Pharisees were unable to get out of this age!

### ***The details of Jesus healing of the man with a withered arm***

The story of Jesus' healing of the man with a withered arm is recorded in both Matthew's and Mark's Gospel (Matt 12:10-13 and Mark 3:1-6). Luke's story is hardly different, though he does mention that the withered hand was a right hand. We do not know exactly what kind of disease caused the withered hand, and we can only guess that it was some kind of muscular atrophy.

Luke mentions the man's right hand, which suggests that it was important to him, perhaps it was the hand he used to work. This is confirmed by one of the other apocryphal Gospels (not Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John), which suggests that the man was a stonemason who wanted to work. The Pharisees may have objected to the man's desire to work being expressed on the Sabbath, but it is hardly worth exploring this idea, because it is only incidental to the main themes of this part of Luke's Gospel. The idea that the man was a stonemason merely helps us understand how important it was for any man to have his full faculties, if he was to fulfil his own place in Jewish society. He needed to be healed.

One part of the story has attracted considerable attention, which is Jesus' call to the man to 'stretch out' his hand. The man's healing occurred almost instantaneously, and some think that this 'stretching out' was a means of the man's healing. By doing this, the man showed faith in Jesus; he obeyed Him, and was therefore healed. Of course, Jesus used many techniques in His healing ministry. For example, He healed blind people in a number of different ways, by speech (Mark 10:46f. ) and by touch (Matt 9:27f. 20:30f.). Jesus never seems to place much emphasis on general technique. Perhaps it is best to think of Jesus' call to the man to stretch out his hand as a pure and natural invitation. The man obeyed Jesus and was healed.

It may also be that the Pharisees regarded the stretching out of the man's hand as some form of work done in order to obtain healing. This is not what scripture says, but it is a theory that some think worth considering. The idea has little mileage, however, for Jesus was only ever interested in healing the man as a demonstration of God's authority in His Kingdom. There was therefore no room for compromise or for partial

healing; Jesus would not countenance any result other than complete healing. God's ultimate purpose was to heal and to save.

### **Salvation and healing**

Stories such as this within Jesus' general ministry, are usually all about demonstrating the Kingdom of God. It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of stories about the Sabbath day occur here in Luke's Gospel. The Sabbath had long been regarded as a special gift of God, and in Jesus' day, people thought that the Sabbath was a sample of God's rule on earth. Therefore, each and every story about the Sabbath day can tell us something about the kingdom of God.

With this in mind, our story today tells us that God's intention is to heal and to save. It also tells us that God will defeat his enemies, for they stand in the way of His Messiah. Jesus came to save not to destroy, but if people like the Pharisees reject God's generous love, then they called destruction down upon themselves. Here in this story, the Pharisees were filled with fury (6:11), and their rejection of God is clear. Yet again, they showed their intent to do harm to Jesus, although this is implied rather than said explicitly in today's text. Even early on in verse seven, where the Pharisees are described as watching Jesus, the Greek word for 'watching' suggests a sinister meaning, perhaps false reasoning (see Rom 1:21, 1 Cor 3:20).

In the midst of the dispute, Jesus had looked around him (6:10) before healing the man. In this way, He gave those around him an opportunity to respond, but we get the impression that the Pharisees simply sat and looked at Him. Others would have taken their cue from them. God is always giving people the opportunity to respond to His grace, and Jesus does not heal without extending this invitation. Those who dismiss or oppose the idea of God's grace and the healing ministry of Jesus oppose the liberation of humanity from suffering and distress. If this is not evident within our story, then what is? The task of God's people must surely be to make sure that the institution of the church follows the liberating path of the Holy Spirit as found in Jesus, and not the stultifying blindness and legality of the Pharisees.

## Application

It is sad that people even today will place institutional regulations about life above the humanitarian need for help, whether such help is in the form of healing, support or practical help of those in need. In this story, Jesus shows contempt for those who oppress God's people rather than liberate them into the service to which they are called, and He clearly toys with the Pharisees in order to make a mockery of them. When will we learn that the way we create rules, customs and standards for doing things in the life of the church are secondary to the principles of the Gospel and the nature of God as found in the Bible. We must always check the things we do against the fundamental principles God has revealed in His Word.

For example, many churches have such a tightly regulated concept of Christian ministry that they are unable to offer any other formal vocation than that of being a minister or deacon. So in an age when God is clearly calling people to a wide range of ministries, the church is tragically unable to find a way of structuring its formal ministry that relates effectively to either the needs of the world or the way in which God is calling His own people to work for Him today.

This is a big subject and an important one. Moreover, just like the healing of the man in our story today, it is not a casual matter even if it may appear to be so. As long as our churches think only in terms of full time ministry for priests, ministers deacons and the like, then it fails to develop the gifts God has given to His people to extend the Kingdom in new exciting and refreshing ways. There are signs that churches are becoming more open to the ways of the Spirit, but too much is held back by argument, division, questioning and suspicion, and those who are looking to follow the Spirit too often have to move outside of the suffocating environment of church regulation. Why can we not recognise Pharisaism?

Healing ministry has always lain at the heart of the Gospel and the proclamation of the Gospel to the world. Medicine does a powerful work of God for many people, but it can never offer the complete 'shalom' of the soul granted by God to those who are healed by Him. We may be complete novices in this ministry, but all that is required is a heart of love for those who suffer, and the desire to bring them to the Lord in prayer. I am naive enough to believe that God will guide people from there to do the works of power by which people are healed and saved, appropriate to their circumstances. This is how the Gospel is declared by deed as well as word.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups. There are)

1. What can we learn from this passage of Scripture about the healing ministry of the church today?
2. How do we stop the Holy Spirit from working in our midst by adhering to outmoded rule and regulation?
3. How can we save life today, and bring hope to thousands of people living all around us? Is it reasonable for us to imagine that the Gospel can break through in power through us and our own ministry?

### **Personal comments by author**

*All of us struggle to understand the way in which our accumulated rules and regulations hinder the ministry of the church. It is obvious that rules and regulations have their place within the life of the church at any time and place, but why do we have such difficulty moving on? How can we find godly ways of determining what it is right for us to retain and what must be left behind? Who will address these issues without prejudice and offence, and with care and integrity? All things are possible in Christ, we say, but do we really believe this when it comes to the 'tough stuff' of organising the church for what lies ahead?*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Read this passage carefully several times, and let it speak to you about what the Lord can do through you and through the life of your church. Let God speak to you through the Holy Spirit and be ready to hear His Word.*
- *Pray for people, perhaps people you know, who find it hard to let go of those things of the world and of the past that are not required by the Lord for His mission in the future. Pray for yourself, and for your own difficulties in this. Pray for the Holy Spirit to break through in power.*

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## Final Prayer

Jesus, You can see the truth within each situation and You can perceive the rights and wrongs of each moment of our lives. Help us to seek Your judgement on all we experience in this life so that what we say and do is aligned with Your Gospel and Your Kingdom. Make us worthy of our call, we pray, and make us 'doers' of Your Word. AMEN

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