

The Healing of a Withered Hand
Matthew 12:9-21
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In Matthew 12, the narrative shifts from the indifference of the people of Israel to their Messiah to the opposition of the religious leaders of Israel to their Messiah. In Matthew 11, Jesus condemns the residents of the cities of Galilee for not repenting in light of His miracles and in Matthew 12, Jesus responds to a series of rhetorical attacks from the Pharisees.

The first attempt to discredit Jesus is found in Matthew 12:1-8 and was to publicly accuse Him of allowing His disciples to break the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. Matthew 12:9-21 is the second attempt to discredit Jesus by publicly accusing Him directly of breaking the Sabbath commandment. This escalation of the conspiracy against Jesus by the Pharisees (Matthew 9:15-16) is for the purpose of fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah (Matthew 9:17-21).

The healing on the Sabbath (12:9-14)

Matthew begins this account of the healing on the Sabbath with the connective “*departing from there,*” which is more a reference to location than it is to time. Jesus moves from being outside in the field (Matthew 12:1) to inside a synagogue. This synagogue is referred to as “*their synagogue*” (cf. Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 13:54), as someone who was not associated with synagogues at the time of the writing would do.

Jesus encounters a man in the synagogue with a withered hand. Luke 6:6 includes the detail that it was the man’s right hand. The term “withered” could also mean “dried” but it was useless. This would affect the man’s ability to do most jobs and would be considered deformed. Though it is unclear how his hand became in such condition, most likely it was a congenital condition.

This account in the other synoptic Gospels (Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11) describe the Pharisees as “*watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so they might accuse Him*” (Mark 3:2; cf. Luke 6:7). This has led some to conclude they planted this man in the synagogue, but this is speculative. In the other Gospels, Jesus initiates the healing by telling him to “*Get up and come forward!*” (Mark 3:3; cf. Luke 6:8), which Matthew omits. Their desire to accuse Jesus is the main point, which appears in each synoptic gospel.

Their question, *“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath,”* is directed at Jesus. Implied in their question is a negative response. While rabbinic teaching allowed for rescuing a person if their life was endangered on the Sabbath (Mishnah m. Yoma 8:6), this man certainly did not have his life in jeopardy. Life saving medical help was allowed, but the concept of a miraculous healing is completely different.

Jesus responded to the Pharisees before He healed the man and He did so with His common style of asking a question. By asking *“What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out?”* Jesus puts them on notice that they have elevated animals over man. This argument, from the lesser to the greater, is if the Pharisees would rescue a sheep on the Sabbath, then surely healing a withered hand would not violate the Sabbath either.

Though the implication of this question by Jesus is clear, Mark 3:4 informs us that *“they kept silent”* and refused to answer. He bluntly stated the necessary conclusion, *“How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”* Men are much more valuable than animals. This is because *“God created man in His own image”* (Genesis 1:27). Animals should not be equated with humans, as only humans were made in the image of God. Human life was created by God and did not evolve from animal life. Matthew earlier recorded Jesus’ view of the superiority of people above animals (Matthew 6:26; 10:31).

Jesus declared that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Not only when a life was in danger, for neither the man, nor the sheep, were in jeopardy of death. The Mishnah would later record the rabbinical tradition and restrict healing on the Sabbath, *“And they do not straighten [the limb of] a child or set a broken limb”* (m. ‘Eduyyot 2.5). This was another erroneous extrapolation by Jewish tradition of what was considered “work” on the Sabbath..

There was debate among Jewish rabbis before Jesus about even praying for healing on the Sabbath. Rabbi Shammai, a very influential Jewish leader decades prior to this healing, argued that it was work to even pray for healing on the Sabbath, but later, there would be disagreement by Rabbi Hillel. However, since *“the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath”* (Matthew 12:8), Jesus has the authority to determine what is lawful to do on the Sabbath.

Jesus proceeded to heal the man with the withered hand. There are several aspects of this healing that are worth noting. First, Jesus asked the man to “*Stretch out your hand!*” and the man responded. So while there is no element of faith directly mentioned in this account, or in the account in Mark or Luke, there is a response where the man “*stretched it out.*” Sometimes the miracles of Jesus included faith, sometimes they did not, and sometimes there was some degree of response without faith necessarily involved, such as in this case. The miracles of Jesus did not follow a set pattern.

Secondly, this man’s hand was obviously deformed. This was not a case of subjective pain but rather objective physical impairment. There could be no question regarding the reality of this miracle, for this is not a malady that could heal itself over time. Furthermore, people would have known him in the synagogue and would be familiar with the difficulty this defect had brought to his life. This should have moved people to recognize that Jesus was from God and should be followed.

Also, Matthew emphasizes the completeness of the healing when he wrote, “*and it was restored to normal, like the other.*” His description makes the point that the hand was now fully functional. There was no process or delay or physical therapy involved.

Jesus healed the man’s hand with words. He healed the man in the synagogue. His healings did not require a person to come to Him. He went to where the man was and there was no prearranged time, no healing service to bolster the excitement, no stage or effects. This healing stands in stark contrast to anything seen or claimed in modern religious healing services. The miracles of Jesus could not possibly be fabricated.

It seems that the miracles of Jesus often include a spiritual meaning. Jesus raised the dead physically as a foretaste of our ultimate resurrection to eternal life. He who gave sight to the blind and made the deaf hear (Matthew 11:5) also said, “*But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear*” (Matthew 13:16). By healing the withered hand in the synagogue, there may be a spiritual meaning that just as the Jews were spiritually blind and deaf, they were also not functioning as God intended in their service to Him. Just as this man’s ability to work with his hands was crippled, so the Jews’ work for God was also crippled and required supernatural healing.

The response of the Pharisees was to leave to conspire to kill Jesus. This probably involved Exodus 31:14-15, *“Therefore you are to observe the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall surely be put to death.”*

Luke informs us of their emotional rage against Jesus and of a discussion that took place regarding what they might do to Jesus (Luke 6:11). Mark 3:6 includes the Herodians in this conspiracy. The Herodians were influential Jews who supported the Herodian dynasty, and thus the Roman rule over Israel. They were not allies with the Pharisees, however, they now shared a common threat from Jesus to their relative position of power among the people.

This conspiracy escalated the conflict with Jesus and would hasten the opposition which would lead to the crucifixion. The antagonism had climaxed as they had concluded that Jesus must be destroyed. As Matthew would later say about Pilate, *“For he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over”* (Matthew 27:18). All that remained was to plan how to eliminate Him successfully without any harm to their own standing among the Jewish people.

The fulfillment of prophecy (12:15-21)

Matthew 12:15-16 is a recurrence of what had occurred prior. Many had followed Him earlier and seen many miracles (Matthew 4:23; 9:35). While earlier He had healed every kind of disease, and here *“He healed them all.”* His healing ministry was extensive and this is not the only time He would warn those whom He healed to not tell others about Him (cf. Matthew 8:4; 9:30; 16:20; 17:9). It is doubtful that those whom He healed cooperated with His warning any more than previously (cf. Matthew 9:31).

As Jesus encountered growing opposition, He would withdraw (cf. Matthew 4:12; 9:24; 14:13; 15:21; 16:4). The ongoing cycle of ministry followed by opposition by certain religious leaders, followed by the withdrawal by Jesus and various followers, followed by additional healing and teaching by Jesus would continue until the crucifixion. Matthew explains the reason for such opposition, *“This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet.”* Even the sinful attack of these Pharisees had a greater God-ordained purpose to prove that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel.

Matthew 12:18-21 is a reference to Isaiah 42:1-4 and is the longest Old Testament citation in this book of the Bible. Usually, New Testament writers quote the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint. Matthew did not directly quote from this Greek translation, nor did he exactly follow the Hebrew Old Testament text. It appears that Matthew made his own translation of the text of Isaiah.

Matthew 12:18-21	Isaiah 42:1-4
<p><i>"BEHOLD, MY SERVANT WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN; MY BELOVED IN WHOM MY SOUL IS WELL-PLEASED; I WILL PUT MY SPIRIT UPON HIM, AND HE SHALL PROCLAIM JUSTICE TO THE GENTILES. HE WILL NOT QUARREL, NOR CRY OUT; NOR WILL ANYONE HEAR HIS VOICE IN THE STREETS. A BATTERED REED HE WILL NOT BREAK OFF, AND A SMOLDERING WICK HE WILL NOT PUT OUT, UNTIL HE LEADS JUSTICE TO VICTORY. AND IN HIS NAME THE GENTILES WILL HOPE."</i></p>	<p><i>"Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or raise His voice, Nor make His voice heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed Until He has established justice in the earth; And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law."</i></p>

Isaiah 42:1 had previously been alluded to at the baptism of Jesus, "and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'" (Matthew 3:17). This passage in Matthew 12:18 goes beyond identifying Jesus as God's beloved Son, by replacing Isaiah's "whom I uphold" with "whom I have chosen." God chose the Son as the Suffering Servant of Israel (cf. Isaiah 43:10; 44:1). Interestingly, the Greek word for "servant" (PAIS) can also mean "son." Yet since the Hebrew word in Isaiah 42:1 means "servant," it is appropriate to translate the Greek word in Matthew 12:18 as "servant" also.

We also see an allusion to the Trinity in Matthew's use of Isaiah 42:1. God the Father has chosen His Beloved and will put His Spirit upon Him. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are active in the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy of opposition by the Jewish people.

God's Spirit not only empowered the miracles of Jesus, it empowered Him to proclaim justice to the Gentiles. These miracles were done among both Jews and Gentiles. According to Matthew, justice will be brought forth by means of proclamation. This anticipates the coming ministry of Christ to Gentiles (Matthew 15:21-28; 27:54; 28:19-20).

The opposition to the Messiah is implied in Isaiah 41:2-3 because of the response He will give to these attacks. In each of the characteristics found in Isaiah 41:2-3, we can see the fulfillment in the conduct of Jesus Christ in the face of hostility. This also serves as an example for us to follow, *"For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously"* (1 Peter 2:21-23).

Jesus did not quarrel with His opponents. He did not shout contentious rhetorical sound bites to win over His hearers. He stated the truth and left it for them to contemplate. *"The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged"* (2 Timothy 2:24). We will not be able to argue or debate anyone into the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus did not cry out. *"He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously"* (1 Peter 2:23). He did not demand that anyone sympathize with Him in His suffering, much less rescue Him. He knew He could trust His Father, *"Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"* (Matthew 26:53).

No one heard His voice in the streets. This does not refer to His silence as He obviously was sent to *"proclaim justice to the Gentiles."* Rather, He was not a brash, arrogant rabble-rouser. He came *"gentle and humble in heart"* (Matthew 11:29). He did not lead protests or incite crowds (as the Jewish leaders feared).

Matthew 12:20 includes a double metaphor of a reed and a wick, which communicate parallel concepts. The Messiah will not break off a reed that has been battered, nor will He put out a wick that is only smoldering. Both the reed and the wick are weak, either damaged from beating or only able to produce smoke from a low amount of oil.

The application to the Messiah for these metaphors is that He does not break off or snuff out what is weak. Instead, He lifts up and serves the needy. As Jesus said when being criticized for eating with tax collectors, *"It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick"* (Matthew 9:12). Those who are in spiritual need should be viewed with compassion (cf. Matthew 9:36), and not beaten down with condemnation.

Jesus was different from the Jewish leaders in His humility. His compassion will be acted upon as Matthew 12:20 concludes with what Jesus will do in the future, *"until he leads justice to victory."* Isaiah 42:3-4 makes it clear that this justice is the judgment coming in the kingdom of God, *"until He has established justice in the earth."* Jesus will ultimately triumph in His second coming.

The reason *"in His name the Gentiles have hope"* (Matthew 12:21) is because *"He will faithfully bring forth justice"* (Isaiah 42:3). Matthew chose to summarize this concept in verse 21 and to highlight the ministry to the Gentiles, which is the sense of Isaiah's use of the word "coastlands" in 42:4. The mission of the Messiah is clearly stated as not simply to the *"lost sheep of the house of Israel"* (Matthew 10:6) but also to the nations. This hope for the Gentiles is accelerated by the rejection of the Jews, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah.

Conclusion

The account of the healing of the man with the withered hand in the synagogue shows us that the healings of Jesus were not only for the purpose of serving those in physical need, and not only for the purpose of validating the Messiah, but also to fulfill Old Testament prophecy in the rising opposition to the Lord's ministry. These miracles brought conflict with the religious leaders who perceived Jesus as a threat to their authority. Therefore, they conspired against Him.

Those desiring religious authority have also plagued the followers of Jesus ever since the first century. Once people ascend to possessing spiritual authority over others, there is the great temptation of empowerment. The human spirit longs for control and there is satisfaction in exercising authority (cf. Matthew 20:25-28). If we are serving the Lord, we will humbly teach the word of God is serving others rather than ourselves. In the words of Paul the apostle, *"not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy"* (2 Corinthians 1:24). It is far better to serve with our fellow believers than over them.