

“Mercy Under Suspicion”

Mark 3:1-6

Turn with me in your Bibles this morning to Mark 3, where we will read beginning with verse 1. William Scott was a private in the Union army who became known as the ‘Sleeping Sentinel.’ And he was famously pardoned by President Abraham Lincoln in September 1861. Scott was sentenced to death for falling asleep while on guard duty. Officers and members of Lincoln’s own cabinet believed strict punishment was necessary to maintain discipline. In wartime, leniency was widely seen as a dangerous thing. But President Lincoln, hearing pleas for mercy, personally intervened to save him. However, his mercy did not go unchallenged and it was viewed with suspicion. Military leaders feared it would undermine order and encourage further disobedience. Political critics accused Lincoln of being too soft to lead effectively in a brutal war.

Lincoln was fully aware of these concerns and wrestled with whether he was being too lenient. And yet he often responded along these lines, “If a young man could be spared and restored, it was better to save a life than make an example of it.” In several cases, pardoned soldiers had returned to duty and fought courageously. William Scott himself later died in battle in 1862 at the Siege of Yorktown.

Of course, this brings up a valid question, “When and how is mercy a thing to be shown to another person? Is it ever inappropriate?” We would say that it is in cases where a major crime has been committed. The law demands that justice be done. The Latin principle of ‘lex talionis’ or just retribution, an eye for an eye, where punishment should correspond with the offense. It isn’t fair for someone to be pardoned when they have done something that is against the law. Some

would even go so far to say that mercy is 'unjust' in those situations. There is always a tension that exists between mercy and justice (what's right).

Mercy is one of those things that we all want for ourselves, but seldom want to extend to others who've come up short in some way. Related to mercy is forgiveness, for it comes from a merciful heart. Mercy is one of the Beatitudes that Jesus explained in Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Justice is a person getting what they deserve, and there is a sense in which we can all appreciate that. We want justice where there has been a crime. We want justice when restitution needs to be made. If justice is getting what we deserve, mercy is not getting what we deserve. And grace goes further in that it gives me what I don't deserve. Mercy is controversial. Mercy is one of those things that tends to raise eyebrows. That is why it is a character trait often viewed with suspicion.

We have already seen from Mark's gospel how Jesus was full of mercy in the way He related to other people. Every place He went, there were those who came to Him in need. Sick people in need of healing, demon possessed people in need of deliverance, broken people in need of a divine touch. And because He didn't do things the way that they thought He should, Jesus faced increasing conflict with the religious leaders. We've seen how this conflict is beginning to build in chapter 2, which leads to murderous intentions in chapter 3. The reason they hate Jesus so much is not due to the fact that He shows mercy to people. The reason is that He doesn't do it in ways that are in keeping with their religious traditions. They are more concerned about their procedures than they are other people. Their system had become legalistic, man-centered, and a thing of pride. In this passage, we can see how Jesus prioritizes human need and mercy over

rigid, man-made legalism. But the Pharisees were more interested in finding fault with Jesus than they are meeting a man at his point of need. (Read)

The Pharisees never knew what to do with Jesus. Think about the things He did which they hated. He was a friend to sinners, even ate with them, and they wanted nothing to do with that. He once came to the defense of a woman who was taken in adultery, while they wanted to stone her. He invited a tax collector to join His group of disciples. He ignored the social stigma of leprosy as He went out of His way to heal a man by a simple touch. People who were outcasts, who had bad reputations, those who understood their need, these were all drawn to Jesus who welcomed them. On and on it goes as Jesus kept breaking all of the Pharisees' legalistic expectations, something which caused them to seethe with hatred. We've seen that what began as curiosity on their part led to a spirit of suspicion, and the suspicion led to investigation, the investigation leading to an outright sense of hostility. That will be followed up with a determination on their part to do whatever they have to do in order to get rid of Jesus.

This passage ties in closely with the one which is before it, which we briefly considered last time. Mark tells us Jesus and His disciples had been going through the grainfields on the Sabbath, plucking heads of grain as they went along. The Pharisees accused them of doing what was not lawful for them to do on the Sabbath. And that word 'Sabbath' is mentioned seven times from 2:23—3:4. For the Pharisees, it was all about the Sabbath. The seventh day of the week was set apart under the Law of Moses as a day set apart for worship and rest. It followed the pattern established by the Lord Himself at creation. He 'rested' from His work of creation on the seventh day and set it apart.

But now Jesus and His disciples were walking through the grainfields, breaking off heads of grain and eating them. It 'irked' the Pharisees. Of course, God's law

had nothing to say about plucking heads of grain. Rather, it was later defined as a Sabbath violation by the Pharisees who had added their own stipulations. Jesus and the disciples had broken ranks with their man-made system, and it ticked off the Pharisees.

Sinclair Ferguson — *“The Pharisees were like a committee at a golf club which had beautiful fairways on which to play. But in order to preserve the fairways from being cut up with divots, they insisted that golfers always play their shots from the rough grass at the side. But golf courses, like the Sabbath, are meant to be enjoyed, not preserved as living museums!”*

What were the Pharisees doing out in the grainfields? That is what I want to know. Why are they even there? They’re spying on Jesus and the disciples. They’re watching them under close scrutiny, trying to find something they can use to accuse Him of something. Reminds me of Paul’s words:

Galatians 2:4—“...false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery.”

Some folks make it their mission in life to go around looking for splinters in everyone else’s eye. And so the Pharisees come and say to Jesus, “Why are Your disciples breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath?” Jesus says, “Stop right there. It is not the law that they’re breaking, but your tradition.” He then mentions the example of David who went into the house of God and ate the bread that was reserved only for the priests. Mercy trumps the procedural requirements.

Jesus says in verse 27, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” As in, “Who do you

think gave the law in the first place?” And it was at this point that their hostility toward Jesus multiplied in leaps and bounds. So much so that they are now watching Him with a nitpicking sense of scrutiny. That’s what is happening here in these verses as we come to the third chapter. Notice first:

1—A broken MAN in need of mercy (3:1)

“Again He entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand.”

Now, they are in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and there in the crowd is a man who has a ‘withered’ hand. And the word there means shriveled, dried up, or stiff. The idea is that it had become atrophied to the point it was no longer able to be used. There is no mention of ‘how’ this man’s hand had become so atrophied, whether he was born with the condition or whether it had become this way through injury. In much first-century Jewish thought, many people commonly assumed that physical deformities, sickness, disability, and personal misfortune were direct results of sin in a person’s life or an indication of God’s judgment. While certainly not true, popular religious thinking often simplified it into a strict formula—pain meant guilt, prosperity meant righteousness. If there was any amount of suffering in your life, then you must have done something to offend God.

And it is the same rationale of Job’s friends whom we read about in the book of Job. You remember that Job was in a place of profound pain in his life. His losses were piling up on top of each other—his family, his fortune, and even his physical well-being. His wife said that it would be better for him to curse God and die. That’s how bad Job’s situation was. Then in Job 2:11, his three friends come to see him. And at first, they do some good. They come to show their support, they sit with him in his pain, and they stay with him for seven days and

seven nights without saying a word. If that was all they did, it would have been enough. But they begin to counsel him, and they begin to surmise why things had happened to him the way that they had. Essentially, their overarching belief is that Job was suffering because he had done something wrong. So that as a result, they repeatedly encourage Job to admit his wrong and repent so that God would bless him again. It was an incomplete theology. But the fact of the matter is that there are some things that we experience by way of suffering and pain that have no real explanation outside of living in a fallen world. God has not promised to shield any of His children from suffering.

So here is a man in the synagogue with a withered hand. We have no idea how it became that way. But the ‘how’ is not really the issue as much as the ‘what.’ Here is a man who has a need in his life. His hand had been rendered useless, which had impacted his life in other ways I’m sure. What he doesn’t need is a lecture on hands and why we all need them, he doesn’t need a pep-talk by some of the well wishers in the room. What he needs is mercy. What he is in need of is for someone to treat him as the image bearer he is, though broken. Will he find mercy at the synagogue?

God’s mercy, grace, and patience are frequently mentioned together in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament. For example, when God revealed His name to Moses, He said:

Exodus 34:6—“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

David says of the Lord in:

Psalms 103:8—“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

These three can be seen as individual characteristics of God's goodness. God's grace is His goodness toward those who deserve only wrath. And God's patience is His goodness in withholding wrath toward those who sin over a period of time. God's mercy is His goodness toward those in misery and distress. One person explains it this way:

John Feinberg—*“The concept of mercy is closely related to grace, and of course it is an expression of God's love and kindness. However, there is a significant difference between grace and mercy. Both involve unmerited favor, but the difference is that whereas grace may be given to those who are miserable and desperately in need of help, it may also be given to those who have no particular need. On the other hand, mercy is given specifically to those whose condition is miserable and one of great need.”*

One can only wonder what the comments are that he hears from those at the synagogue or perhaps the stares he gets. Or perhaps there are those who look through him as if he does not even exist. I'm inclined to believe that was more of his experience. But the point I want to make is that here is a broken man in need of mercy—no matter his problem, or his appearance, or how he became that way. Merciful eyes look past the glaring problems to see the need in the lives of other people.

Matthew 9:36—**“When [Jesus] saw the crowds, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”**

It is the same word used in Mark 1:41 to describe the way that Jesus responded to the leper who came to Him. Its a verb that means to be moved deeply from within. It doesn't stop there, but is expressed through action. That is what mercy

is. It is compassion moved to action. It isn't simply an emotion felt, but is a compassion shown. And the Bible says that God is full of mercy. Nowhere is His mercy more clearly seen than in the person of His Son. But then notice:

2—A silent CROWD having no mercy (3:2-4)

“And they watched Jesus, to see whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. And He said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Come here.’ And He said to them, ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent.”

As Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, the man with a withered hand is there, and so are the Pharisees. It seems obvious that this is a ‘set up’ operation, because of how verse 2 says ‘they watched Jesus,’ to see whether He would heal the man on the Sabbath so that they could have reason to accuse Him.

“Watched” — *the Greek word is an imperfect tense verb that speaks of a continuous action*

The idea is that they kept on watching Him. In other words, they were bent on finding fault, they were scrutinizing every move of Jesus at this point. They couldn't care less about the man with a withered hand in need of mercy. The only thing they are concerned with is whether or not Jesus stays within the bounds of their procedure.

It is important to remember God's purpose in establishing the Sabbath. It was originally given to restore men and women, to ensure that they had a healthy amount of rest and spiritual reflection each week. And when observed in this way, it was intended to be a day of joy. However, the Pharisees had so

encumbered it that they made it a burden with their endless list of man-made rules. Here is but one ridiculous example:

Ray Stedman—*“The Pharisees held that it was acceptable to spit on a rock on the Sabbath, but if you spit on the ground, that made mud. Mud is mortar for bricklaying. If you spit on the ground an made mortar, you were working on the Sabbath. So it was forbidden to spit on the ground.”*

The Jewish Talmud devotes 24 chapters to nothing more than laws regarding the Sabbath. God simply said that His people were to keep the Sabbath holy. It is a day of rest, a time for them to cease from their daily labors. But they had turned it into such a list of rules and regulations that they worked harder on the Sabbath to keep the rules than they did at their job through the week! And that is the way it is with legalists. Here it is exposed for us so that we see it for what it is—a man-made trap that misses the heart of God.

The attitude of 'religious nitpickers' can be summed up for us in Matthew 15. You'll appreciate what Jesus is saying here in Mark 3 when you see it in the light of that text. He confronts it head on. Let's turn there for just a moment...

Any time you confront a religious legalist, they're going to be offended, and no matter how much you do it out of love. The reason is that it is dealing a blow to their pride, which is something they can't handle. That's the way it always is with religious nitpickers who are so bent on their own rules. We may laugh at some of the stuff they come up with, but in legalistic circles, let me tell you they're not laughing.

They had come up with an elaborate 'fence' of restrictions to protect the Sabbath, but that actually made it a burden. And their unnecessary legalism is what Jesus has been confronting in this text. What could be a greater physical blessing to

this man than to heal his withered hand? The Pharisees taught that only if the man's life were in danger was healing on the Sabbath permissible, but not otherwise. And yet Jesus raises this point—why should the Sabbath, of all days, be the one day on which He refrained from bringing blessing to this man in need?

In Matthew's account of this same story, He confronts them with a question:

Matthew 12:11-12—“He said to them, ‘Which of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.’”

Not a one of them would let their sheep die in a pit on the Sabbath. They would not hesitate to lift it out, even though it required effort. By their own behavior, they showed that preserving life and preventing suffering was more important than a rigid, technical observance of Sabbath restrictions. And so Jesus then draws the conclusion, “How much more valuable is a man's life than a sheep!” They have more thought for a sheep than a fellow image bearer of God. That's the level of their hypocrisy. The point is that human beings, made in the image of God, have far greater worth than animals. Therefore, doing good—especially an act of mercy and restoration—is always appropriate, even on the Sabbath. God values mercy over legalistic restriction.

And so there is a broken man in need of mercy, a silent crowd without mercy, and then notice third:

3—A loving SAVIOR full of mercy (3:5-6)

“And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand

was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against Him, how to destroy Him.”

Verse 5 says that Jesus look around at them with anger. It is an astonishing thing. His heart was grieved because of their unbelieving, unmerciful state of heart that was getting worse and worse, to the point of putting Him to death on a cross. Nowhere is it said that Jesus became angry with the tax collectors and the sinners. Isn't that interesting? He never became angry at them, but He did express anger toward the self-righteous Pharisees, toward the legalists of His day.

Why is He so angry? Why is He so grieved? Because of the fact that they're more concerned that their procedure is followed than to see a poor man healed. That is something that makes Jesus angry! He says to the man, "Stretch out your hand." Upon doing so, the man's hand is immediately restored and made whole. And not a single Pharisee in the bunch rejoices. Instead of being overjoyed by the fact that a miracle of mercy had taken place in a man's life, they are filled with hatred because their rules were broken. It was a step too far for them. And it marks a turning point. Verse 6 says they immediately went out and held counsel with the Herodians against Him, how to destroy Him.

“Herodians” — *those who supported Herod the Great and were politically aligned with Rome*

The two groups make for strange allies. Remember, the Pharisees had accused Jesus of being a friend to sinners like tax collectors who worked for the Roman government. Now, they are conspiring with others in power to get rid of Jesus. Sort of like, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." They accused Jesus of violating the Sabbath, who only spoke a few words to give life to a man. Yet they

have no problem violating the sixth commandment (do not murder), along with the great commandment to love one's neighbor.

Blaise Pascal—*“Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”*

Athanasius said that the Pharisees are ‘withered in their minds.’ The man in the synagogue had a withered hand, but they have withered hearts. Atrophy of the heart was their problem. And so it always is with the heart of the person who has been blinded by legalism. Which is why legalism is a deadly trap that must be avoided in our lives. The legalist who ignores mercy for the sake of procedure has completely missed the heart of God.

Let's consider some things by way of application as we finish this morning...

- **Mercy meets needs, while legalism only identifies them**

It is one thing to identify a need. It is another thing to go out of your way to help meet the need. Rather than being mere words, mercy is compassion in action. Mercy is the hands and feet of Jesus in another person's life. Perhaps the greatest illustration of this is the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10).

- **Mercy sees people, while legalism only sees procedure**

Mercy and legalism differ not just in what they do, but in how they see. Mercy sees people in their frail humanity—bearing the image of God, weighed down by weakness, and in need of salvation. In mercy, Jesus always moves toward the individual: the sick, the outcast, the sinner. We see it over and over again in the gospels. And here in this passage, He doesn't see a Sabbath violation waiting to happen. He sees a man with a withered hand whose life can be restored.

Legalism, on the other hand, tends to depersonalize. It sees situations primarily

through the lens of rules and procedures. Its first instinct is not, “Who is hurting?” but “What does the rule say?” The Pharisees are not moved by the man’s condition. They’re more interested in watching Jesus, evaluating whether He will conform to their expectations. The man becomes secondary to the procedure.

- **Mercy is tender, while legalism only hardens the heart**

In contrast to the tender mercy of Jesus, the Pharisees are hardened in heart. They shut up their heart to compassion in this situation because it violates their procedure. Friend, that’s the way it always is with legalism. And it hardens the heart because it resists humility. It thinks righteousness is achieved through effort, leaving no room for recognizing one’s own need for grace. A person who doesn’t see their need for mercy will struggle to extend mercy to others.

Matthew 5:7—“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

As a result, that person’s heart becomes just as rigid as the Pharisees—less teachable, less compassionate, and more defensive. Instead of being softened by God’s grace, it becomes hardened by pride. And so ask yourself these questions that are designed to make you think, maybe even make you squirm a bit:

Do you allow legalism to control you? Are you in its grip, so much so that rigid procedure is more important a matter to you than showing mercy?

Can you discern between God’s instructions and another’s expectations? There is a difference. God’s instructions are given for our benefit, for our spiritual well-being. But don’t ever conflate them with someone else’s expectations which are meant to control you.

Are you becoming an instrument of mercy? Compassion in action. Going out of your way to do what you can to meet another person at their point of need.

There is only one place where the tension between mercy and justice is solved— at the cross of Jesus! God’s justice demands that sin be judged. It is not a minor thing, but is a real offense against His infinite holiness. And it requires a just penalty. But at the same time, God’s mercy desires to forgive and restore sinners rather than destroy them. At the cross of Jesus Christ, these two attributes meet one another. Justice is satisfied because the penalty for sin is truly paid, yet mercy is extended because that penalty is paid by Christ in the place of sinners. Hallelujah! Jesus willingly took upon Himself the judgment that divine justice demands, allowing God to remain just while also justifying those who have faith (Rom. 3:25-26). The cross, therefore, is not a compromise between mercy and justice, but the fullest expression of both. God’s perfect justice is upheld without exception so that His precious mercy is also offered without condition to those who trust in Christ. And it is this precious mercy which we all desperately stand in need of!

Do you remember the song “People Need the Lord” by Steve Green? I’ve not heard it in years, but the lyrics to that song remind me of just how important it is to stop and meet people where they are.

*Everyday they pass me by
I can see it in their eyes
Empty people filled with care
Headed who knows where
On they go through private pain
Living fear to fear
Laughter hides their silent cries*

Only Jesus hears

*People need the Lord, people need the Lord
At the end of broken dreams, He's the open door
People need the Lord, people need the Lord
When will we realize people need the Lord?*

*We are called to take His light
To a world where wrong seems right
What could be too great a cost
For sharing life with one who's lost?
Through His love our hearts can feel
All the grief they bear
They must hear the words of life
Only we can share*

*People need the Lord, people need the Lord
At the end of broken dreams, He's the open door
People need the Lord, people need the Lord
When will we realize that we must give our lives?
For people need the Lord, people need the Lord*