

THE RADICAL RABBI: "A RADICAL HANDOUT" (Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11)

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INTRODUCTION

I recently heard about a lady named Inzali. She is a Christian woman having a profound impact for Christ in the southeast Asian country of Myanmar (formerly Burma). What is so cool about her is her awareness that her ministering the gospel in that strongly Buddhist nation (about 88% of the population) is attracting the attention of Buddhist leaders, who in turn are alerting the government to her activities - which could lead to her arrest (and who knows what else could follow that). But her response has been the understanding that her arrest would simply be a sign that her work in the name of Jesus Christ has been effective. Her words are priceless: "The more we share the gospel and preach the Word all over the world, the more trouble we'll have." Isn't that exactly what Jesus predicted for His followers? Matthew and Mark essentially recorded Christ's words as Luke expressed it: *Everyone will hate you because of Me - Jesus Christ, Luke 21:17*. And yet how do we see the apostles responding when they began to be persecuted for their ministry of the gospel? As Luke records it: *The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name - Acts 5:41*. Just like Inzali in her ministry, their "disgrace" was a sign that their ministry was having impact.

Today's story is one of those where three gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke - pretty much equally share in sharing this moment in Christ's ministry. Today's story will be about Christ once again having to answer for His activities on the Sabbath. But the impact of those activities will be seen in how His opposition finally chooses to respond to Him. But first, let's seek the Lord's wisdom and guidance in a moment of prayer.

TEXTS AND ANALYSIS

On another Sabbath [Jesus] went into the synagogue and was teaching – Luke 6:6a.

These first verses are almost allowing us to watch this moment like a play, the curtain opening to show us the main characters that we're going to be following in this story. This opening from Luke tells us a number of important things as he sets the scene for us:

- 1) It is a Sabbath, Luke making the point to warn us that the Sabbath itself will become a focal point, and
- 2) Because Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, we can know that whatever happens from this point forward, there are witnesses - people who will see and, if necessary, verify what is about to take place.

[A] man was there whose right hand was shriveled - Luke 6:6b.

An additional bit of Luke's scene-setting: In attendance that day in that synagogue was a man suffering with a withered, or shriveled, hand. Basically, the muscles and nerves in this guy's right hand had become inactive. We are not given any hint as to what might have happened to this guy to cause his condition but, whatever the cause, an incurable paralysis had set in, causing his right hand to become useless for him, thus putting him in a place where life was much more difficult. Obviously in the world of the first century, there was going to be no fix for this condition.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched Him closely to see if He would heal on the Sabbath - Luke 6:7.

The final bit of scene-setting: Along with Jesus being there, and a man in a helpless physical condition being there, we find out that some Pharisees are there as well. Wow, what a surprise! It

seems like, to borrow from a well-known nursery rhyme, "Everywhere that Jesus went, the Pharisees were sure to follow."

Now, it is so easy to hear these verses and come to a couple of quick conclusions. The first one: "Man, didn't those Pharisees and teachers have anything else to do?" And it is true; a huge number of gospel stories feature the Pharisees and their allies as they continually tried to derail Christ and His ministry. But this was actually a relatively large group of men. According to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, there may have been as many as 6,000 Pharisees at this time in Jewish history. So, it is possible considering that large a number that it was different groups of these leaders who were confronting Christ, and then maybe reporting to the Sanhedrin what they were learning about Him. Also, the fact that Jesus ministered in many different parts of the country may have contributed to different groups investigating Christ as He was in their area - meaning a pretty good likelihood that questions were going to be repeated, simply because they may have been unaware of how He had answered a particular question the first time.

Second conclusion that's easy to reach: "Hey, haven't we heard this story before?" And yes, this is the third in a series of three Sabbath events that have some similar storylines -that the Pharisees are confronting Jesus about His practices on the Sabbath - so yeah, in a way, been there, done that.

But there are also some differences that are actually quite significant. In the first Sabbath controversy, the man who had been an invalid for 38 years was healed by Christ at the pool of Bethesda. After his healing, while walking his mat home, so to speak, he was confronted by the Pharisees for doing something inappropriate for the Sabbath. The man eventually pointed them to Jesus as the one who had directed him to do such a thing. The second incident was last week, when Jesus' disciples were making themselves a snack from some heads of grain; the Pharisees were actually on hand to witness what they were doing, on the Sabbath, and then confronted them - and Christ - for such sacrilege. This week is going to be far more confrontational, with Jesus actually being far more the aggressor.

[T]hey asked Him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" - Matthew 12:10b.

There seems to be some awareness on the part of the Pharisees of this broken man becoming a point of Christ's attention, and of a condition that would seem to be asking for Christ's intervention. And their question effectively summarized their charge against Christ - breaking Sabbath law, and even encouraging others to do the same. Clearly they are confronting Christ through the filter of their own narrow definitions of what constitutes work on this holy day; therefore, even the kindness of healing when somebody's life is not in danger is beyond the limits of appropriate Sabbath conduct. ***But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there - Luke 6:8.***

This moment illustrates one of the great differences between this confrontation between Christ and the leadership and others we have seen. There is literally no attention being given to this man or his health issue, nor is there any acknowledgement of the people also present in the synagogue who are doubtless watching this drama unfold. This is a moment almost exclusively between Jesus and the Jewish leadership.

And lest it get overlooked, we have the somewhat ominous tone being set by Luke's words - at least for the leadership: "Jesus knew what they were thinking." Think about that: There was no place to hide - not their words or their thoughts or their motives. They were all literally an open book before this Nazarene. Wow: if they had only been able to appreciate how complete was his view of them. It just might have made them rethink their opposition - not to mention the utter

futility of their arguments. But it is also a reminder of what everybody needs to be aware of - a couple of verses that those Pharisees would have known very well, along with a verse that they would hear from Christ Himself that would connect the truths found in both testaments together:

- 1) ***"The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" - God speaking, 1 Samuel 16:7b.***
- 2) ***"My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from Me, nor is their sin concealed from My eyes" - God speaking, Jeremiah 16:17.***
- 3) ***"[T]here is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 10:26b.***

But it's also another picture of Christ's amazing grace - that even as He knows their thoughts, even as He perfectly understands their hearts, yet He continues to teach them, to reach out to them, even in the midst of their opposition and hate.

Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent - Mark 3:4.

Jesus is using the same Greek word for "lawful" that the Pharisees and teachers used in asking their question in Matthew's telling of this story. The idea of "lawful" means "permissible." He is presenting a scenario that creates a great difficulty for the Pharisees: If in fact the Sabbath was created for good - for worship and rest for the people of Israel - then how could doing good on the Sabbath be considered wrong?

"If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:11-12.

Jesus then presses their illogic by pointing out a scenario that would be considered a "no-brainer" for them: If somebody's livestock fell into a pit on the Sabbath, risking injury or death, you would attempt to rescue them from those circumstances; you wouldn't even think about it. You would put all that unquestioning effort into tending an animal in its need. And that awareness is completely in line with a scripture the Pharisees would have known: ***The righteous care for the needs of their animals - Proverbs 12:10a.***

Jesus then states a conclusion that really shouldn't need to be stated at all: "How much more valuable is a person than a sheep!" This also cuts to the underlying issue of motive. This is the Sabbath day, a day in which God is to be honored. On one side you have the Pharisees, actively trying to make an accusation against God the Son. On the other side you have Jesus, actively trying to make a broken man whole again for the glory of God the Father. Which side is doing the better job of honoring the Sabbath?

He looked around at them in anger, deeply distressed [Greek, "grieved"] at their stubborn hearts [Greek, "hardness of heart"] - Mark 3:5a.

Even in this moment of extreme frustration, Jesus reflects "amazing grace." The Greek tells us that Christ was "grieved" by their stubborn hearts. In other words, even in His anger, He is literally grieving, in sorrow, over their response to Him because He sees self-injury in how they are responding. They are hurting themselves - very deeply and possibly permanently - by their attitude towards Him. They are caught up in a process of hardening, suggesting in the Greek the process that is spiritually calcifying and petrifying their hearts, making them calloused to any spiritual perceptions. But despite everything behind those attitudes - arrogance, rebellion, selfishness, fear - they leave Him in grief; it brings Him sorrow and makes Him sad.

But that said, we see another side of Christ, rarely seen but just as real and relevant as His love and grace - His anger. We saw it when He cleansed the temple because of what He saw as desecration of His Father's house. And we see it now. The Greek suggests that Christ was literally growling under His breath as He looked at His opponents, so intense were His feelings. So, what was making Him so angry in this moment?

- 1) **They refused to see who Jesus was.** Jesus was the living, breathing word of God, coming as a fulfillment of all of God's promises. But instead, the Pharisees and their allies only saw in Jesus a threat to their positions of privilege and power. Therefore, they responded to the Son of David in exactly the same way as enemies responded to the original David: *All day long they twist my words; all their schemes are for my ruin. They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, hoping to take my life - David, Psalm 56:5-6.*
- 2) They refused to see what their ministry was. Through the prophet Jeremiah, they had been given God's words as to their responsibility with his message: "[L]et the one who has My word speak it faithfully" - *God speaking, Jeremiah 23:28a.* But instead, they made the word of God say what they wanted it to say. The many additional commands they had added to God's original law distorted both its message and its intent - despite specific scriptural warning against adding anything to God's word: *Do not add to His words, or He will rebuke you and prove you a liar - Agur, Proverbs 30:6.* As a result, they wound up fulfilling what Isaiah had prophesied some 700 years before: *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight - Isaiah 5:20-21.*
- 3) **They refused to see the condition their own hearts were in.** They were the masters of seeing sin and fault and evil in everybody else's lives, but Jesus' life and ministry uncovered the truth of their own hearts, as prophesied by the prophet Zechariah: "[T]hey refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and covered their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by His Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the Lord Almighty was very angry" - *God speaking, Zechariah 7:11-12.* Their godlessness had then infiltrated the people, making seeing the truth of God in Christ that much more difficult, as Isaiah had so accurately foretold: *"These people come near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. Their worship of Me is based on merely human rules they have been taught" - God speaking, Isaiah 29:13.* And anything that distanced people from the truth of God filled His Son with an incredible rage.

[Jesus] said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored [just as sound as the other] - Mark 3:5 [Matthew 12:13b].

As if just the miracle of restoring a withered hand wasn't enough, Jesus used a form of the word for "stretch" which suggested stretching out his arm to its full length, thus giving incredible evidence of the miracle which had occurred.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus - Luke 6:11. [They] began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus - Mark 3:6.

This marks a turning point in the viewpoint of Christ's enemies. Whereas before their threats may have been more veiled, largely out of frustration, it now became an open threat that would color

the remainder of Christ's ministry - going from a general "We've got to get rid of this guy" to a far more determined "We are getting rid of this guy."

APPLICATION

So, are there modern-day examples of a Pharisaic attitude? I've seen some: I'm old enough to remember when guitars started coming into church, and then drums - and the rhubarb that caused. Aren't pianos and organs the only godly instruments for the church? I remember when a pastor changed the order of service and the bulletin had a new look. You'd have thought he had rewritten the 10 Commandments. I've been in a church where to sit in someone else's seat was blasphemy. I still see heads butting each other over worship music - hymns vs. contemporary praise music. Basically, a Pharisaic attitude means any tradition that is placed on a par with Scripture.

So how do we reflect Christ when those kinds of attitudes come into our church? Well, it starts with recognizing that everything, literally everything, that happens in church is meant for the honor and glory of God, "hallowing" His name as the Lord's Prayer states. It's all about Him, not us. Second, know the Scriptures; that's our instruction manual for how to reflect Christ to those around us. Which leads to a third idea: Know what matters and what doesn't. We always need to make God's "have-tos" our "have-tos" - and then know the difference between the two. Rooting for my favorite team? Cool. Rooting for somebody else to fail? Not cool. Not biblical. So, don't do it. And last, pray for wisdom. The apostle James wrote: ***If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you - James 1:5.*** Wisdom coupled with the love of Christ will cover a whole lot of bases.

And speaking of the love of Christ, it is such an incredible thing to watch, and it will continue to be there for our viewing pleasure during the whole of Jesus' ministry, and it's this: While His enemies are trying to trash Him, He continues to try to teach them. Even knowing the murderous intentions found in their hearts, He never deviates from the mission of His Father that brought Him here. "Amazing grace" is not just something that held Jesus to the cross. It is a fundamental part of His being and character that He reflected 24 hours a day every day of His life. So, that amazing grace from Him is an amazing challenge for us, and it is found in three takeaways from the example Christ showed us today:

First, amazing grace was found in His continuing to forge ahead with His words and His works while in ministry to what the Old Testament referred to many times as an "obstinate" or "stiff-necked" people. Christ's only concern was with impacting people with the life-changing power of the gospel. Their responses never impacted His efforts. It should remind us of a powerful truth that Jesus would share with His disciples: ***"[H]e who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Luke 10:16b (NKJV)***. Knowing that He was here exclusively by the will of His Heavenly Father allowed Him to focus Himself on communicating God's message, regardless of reception. And remember in the Garden of Gethsemane when Peter hauled his sword out, ready to do battle to protect his Master? Remember what Jesus said to him? ***"Do you think I cannot call on My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 26:53***. Folks, that option was always there - every moment of Christ's time on earth. But amazing grace kept it locked up in heaven. Jesus, as He said, was not about doing His will, but rather the will of Him who sent Him. Likewise, we are not in business for ourselves but very literally for Him who sent us. Rejecting us when we share is ultimately rejecting what has been shared with us - the powerful living gospel of almighty God. We need not be beholden to how people react, but rather by our faithfulness to the word and to the ministry to which God has sent us.

Second, amazing grace was found in His faithfulness to His Father's mission, to go to all and preach to any (Mark 16:15). Likewise, we are to be faithful sowers of the seed. As Paul said so well to the Corinthian church: *[N]either the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow - Paul, I Corinthians 3:7*. Our efforts are always about God; He's the one who justifies; He's the one who sanctifies, and He does all that on His schedule, as He sees fit. We get to "plant the seed" by telling the story of how Christ saved us, and what life in Christ is like. God takes that moment of His message into somebody's heart - and a new life begins, on His schedule and not ours.

CONCLUSION

And the last point of amazing grace as we close: Christ was grieved by the lack of repentance in the hearts of His opponents; it saddened Him to an unbelievable degree. Now we live in a time where having enemies is almost seen as a badge of honor. But Jesus never saw it that way. His focus was always on the hearts of all those around Him, whether friends or enemies, it didn't matter.

That brings up a very important question: Does it grieve us, does it make us sorrow that, every single day in the United States, just under 7,500 people pass away? Jesus literally sorrowed over people not pursuing life in Him. How do we feel about it? I'm not just talking about people we know - family, friends, colleagues at work, and so on. I'm talking about a much larger number - people we don't know. Do they get that same passion?

Now obviously a good number of those people die while in the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, in whose presence they will enjoy life with him for all eternity.

But the latest estimates for born-again Christians in America would indicate that maybe no more than 15% of those 7,500 deaths are joyous "home-goings" - meaning somewhere between 1100-1200 people. What about the other 63-6400 people? What about their eternity? Does that bother us, does that keep us up nights? I think it's supposed to. The unsaved certainly bothered Paul.

Remember when he was waiting in Athens for Silas and Timothy to join him? Luke wrote: *While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols - Acts 17:16*. Seeing sinners bothered him. That's what's so wonderful about God's words through the prophet Ezekiel: *"I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak" - God speaking, Ezekiel 34:16a*. God isn't content to let the wicked die. He asserts Himself; He goes after them. What a great picture!

God has placed us here, in this place, in this time, for His purpose - reaching the spiritually dead with the life of Christ. What is going to make a huge difference in the success of our efforts is whether nonbelievers get our anger or our agony - that it bothers us right to our core that they live outside the life that God has graciously poured on us.

Jesus showed us the way, showed us what that looks like. So, let's claim it, let's follow it, let's do it. It's what kingdom work is all about. Let's pray!