

THE SCROLLS

Bridges: Connecting the Gospel with Everyone We Meet | Matthew 12:9-14

Life Lesson

True faith prioritizes Christ-like compassion over rigid, man-made rules. It is dangerously easy to hide behind a mask of religious routine, becoming more concerned with checking the right boxes and appearing holy than with loving the people right in front of us. Jesus calls us to a revolution of grace, inviting us to stop using our traditions as barriers and instead transform our gatherings into places of genuine healing and freedom. Ultimately, we must be willing to abandon our self-righteousness, expose our hidden brokenness to the Lord, and allow His power to restore us so we can freely extend the same liberating mercy to others.

Examine Scripture

Read Matthew 12:9-14

As you read Scripture, slow down and ask these three questions to move from information to transformation:

1. *What does this passage reveal about who God is?*
2. *How is God calling you to grow or change?*
3. *What is God leading you to do or who is He calling you to be in your everyday life?*

Invitation: Practicing Hospitality

When we think of Jesus, it is tempting to picture a safe, mild-mannered teacher offering gentle moral advice. But the Gospel writers paint a far more disruptive picture. Jesus did not enter human history merely to tweak the religious habits of His day; He came to ignite a revolution. By definition, a revolution is a “sudden, radical, or complete change” intended to overturn a broken system. In the first century, the religious status quo was suffocating. The religious elite had constructed a system of empty religion and legalism that sought to keep people in bondage and to choke the life out of them.

Today, as in the first century, people often reject Jesus because their “preunderstandings,” the things they already blindly believe or assume to be true, stand firmly in the way of believing the gospel. For modern skeptics, those assumptions might concern science or culture, but for the Pharisees, their fatal preunderstanding was their rigid, man-made interpretation of the Sabbath. They were so fiercely devoted to their traditions that they entirely missed the God those traditions were meant to honor.

In Matthew 12:9-14, the collision between the letter of the law concerning the Sabbath and the living Lord of the Sabbath reaches a breaking point. As Jesus enters the local synagogue and encounters a man with a shriveled hand (paralyzed or with a physical deformity), He launches a direct assault on the Pharisees’ hypocrisy. Jesus shows that God does not want us burdened by the crushing weight of legalism; He wants us to receive mercy, grace, and freedom. As we dive into this passage, we must examine our hearts and ask: Are we clinging to our own empty religious rules, or are we ready to join Jesus in His revolution of grace and hospitality?

“Moving on from there, he entered their synagogue.”

After a controversy in the grain fields over what constituted Sabbath work, Jesus stepped directly into the community’s religious center. “Synagogue” literally means “gathering-together-place.” Synagogues were established during the Jewish exile in Babylon, when the Temple was destroyed. They were built wherever at least

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ten adult males lived. They were meant to be places to gather for worship and instruction from Scripture, yet they became places of judgment and hypocrisy.

However, Matthew's deliberate use of the possessive pronoun "their" in reference to the synagogue is interesting. Geographically, Jesus was likely in Capernaum, which served as His base of ministry; yet Matthew hints at a growing rift between Jesus and the religious establishment. The Pharisees held a leading, domineering role in the local synagogue.

The full context of "their synagogue" is unknown, but Matthew seems to distinguish between the synagogue's current state and its intended purpose of gathering God's people. Perhaps Matthew was simply describing this gathering of those certain men as a synagogue; therefore, it was "their synagogue." But there seems to be more to it. Either way, Jesus invaded their space to illuminate their dark understanding with the light of truth. Jesus sought to free them from their religious bondage and hypocrisy.

The Puritan Richard Baxter wisely warned, "We are in great danger of making a custom of our religion, and of losing the life and power of it in the very use of the means." The Pharisees had done exactly this. They controlled the religious space but had entirely lost the heart of God. This is a challenge to us today! When we gather to worship, is it a place of judgment, tradition, and hypocrisy, or is it a place of invitation, grace, and freedom?

"There he saw a man who had a shriveled hand, and in order to accuse him they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?'"

It is interesting that a man with a "shriveled hand" happened to be in the synagogue. Perhaps he came seeking redemption or forgiveness, since Jewish tradition taught that his deformity was the result of either his sin or his parents'. More likely, these Pharisees and men invited him in another attempt to trap Jesus. He has already challenged their views of the Sabbath in the previous verses, so they are likely attempting to corner Him. But again, a comforting truth is revealed: what man means for evil, God uses for good (Gen. 50:20).

Matthew provides no details about the man's background or faith; he serves merely as a foil for the Pharisees to set up their theological trap. Their question, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" was not born of a desire for spiritual truth. Notice the general nature of the question; they did not even point to the man and say, "Would it be lawful to heal this man with the shriveled hand?" They were trying to use Jesus' compassion to trap and accuse Him. They knew His compassion would not let Him ignore this man.

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The Greek phrase “hina katēgoreō autou” (ἵνα κατηγορέω αὐτοῦ) means “in order to accuse him.” According to their strict rabbinic interpretations, as found in writings like the Mishnah, healing on the Sabbath was forbidden unless a life was in extreme, immediate danger. To them, a chronically shriveled or paralyzed hand could wait one more day. They attempted to trap Jesus by exploiting His compassion, while they themselves had none.

This is the essence of hypocrisy. The Greek word “hypocrites” (ὑποκριτής) means an actor wearing a mask to play a role. Outwardly, the Pharisees appeared holy, but their hearts did not align with their actions. Empty religion led them to prioritize their rules over the person of Jesus and the suffering of a fellow human being. To them, religion was a path to slavery, not freedom!

“He replied to them, ‘Who among you, if he had a sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn’t take hold of it and lift it out? A person is worth far more than a sheep; so it is lawful to do what is good on the Sabbath.’”

Instead of answering with a simple “yes,” Jesus used a rabbinic method of argumentation to expose the flaws in their legalism. Legalism adds human traditions to Scripture, ultimately challenging the doctrine of Scripture’s sufficiency. So Jesus used their own methods against them. In keeping with rabbinical rules for argument, He answered a question with a question.

As usual, Jesus illustrated his point with a story: “Who among you, if he had a sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn’t take hold of it and lift it out?” Jesus, familiar with rabbinical traditions, knew that most Jewish interpreters of the time agreed that relieving an animal’s suffering overrode the Sabbath regulations. Though unspoken, the Pharisees likely agreed with this traditional interpretation.

Hooking them with the “stranded sheep argument,” Jesus applied an undeniable “how-much-more” logic: “A person is worth far more than a sheep.” Jesus then shifted the paradigm from a specific act of healing to a universal principle: “It is lawful to do what is good on the Sabbath”. In other words, Jesus was asking, “Which is the greater good? Helping a stranded sheep? Honoring the letter of the law while ignoring suffering? Healing a suffering man?” Jesus answered that doing good fulfills the law! One scholar commented on this reality, stating: “The Sabbath was not appointed for the purpose of hindering us from doing good, but that, being freed from all earthly cares, we might devote ourselves entirely to God.” This includes glorifying God by doing what is right and good.

Personal Reflection

1. What cultural, personal, or religious assumptions might you be holding onto that keep you from fully experiencing Jesus's revolution of grace?
2. When you gather with your church or small group, do your attitudes and actions foster an atmosphere of legalistic judgment or one of invitation, grace, and freedom?
3. In what specific areas of your spiritual walk are you tempted to "wear a mask" to gain others' approval rather than seeking genuine heart transformation?
4. How can you better recognize when you are prioritizing your own religious traditions or preferences over the immediate needs and dignity of the people around you?
5. What broken, "shriveled," or paralyzed area of your life is Jesus commanding you to expose and stretch out to Him in faith today?

Commentaries

*Expositor's Bible Commentary
(Abridged Edition): New Testament*
Edited by Kenneth Barker

NIV Application Commentary:
Matthew by Micheal Wilkins

Matthew by John MacArthur

Mt. Zion's Mission

*Mt. Zion Baptist Church exists to
MAKE, MATURE, and MULTIPLY
disciples of Jesus Christ.*

"Then he told the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' So he stretched it out, and it was restored, as good as the other. But the Pharisees went out and plotted against him, how they might kill him."

Having shut down the Pharisees' empty religion, Jesus "puts his money where his mouth is" by addressing the man with the shriveled hand. He commands the man to do the very thing he is completely incapable of: "Stretch out your hand." In that moment, the man did not argue his inability; he responded in faith. His hand was not merely improved but completely restored. Charles Spurgeon powerfully captured the power of Christ's commands: "The word of the Lord is accompanied by the power of the Lord. He gives the command to the dead, and the dead arise; He speaks to the paralyzed, and the withered limb is stretched forth." Where legalism chokes the life out of people by demanding they perform on their own strength, the grace of Jesus provides the power necessary to obey His commands.

The narrative ends on a tragic note, starkly contrasting Jesus' actions with the Pharisees' response. Jesus had just delivered a masterful defense of Scripture, grounded in undeniable logic and a miraculous display of compassion. Yet the Pharisees' hypocrisy held them in a powerful grip, leaving them entirely unpersuaded. Rather than celebrating the man's restoration, they were enraged. Legalism inevitably breeds arrogance, making people dangerously defensive when their false assurance is threatened. They would rather protect their man-made rules and plot a murder than accept the liberating truth of Scripture. The Puritan Thomas Manton summarized this tragic state: "A hypocrite is a secret atheist. He lives as if there were no God to search the heart, and so he rests in the outward shell of duty."

Ultimately, this profound confrontation in the synagogue compels each of us to examine the true foundation of our faith. Jesus became the Pharisees' ultimate target because His revolution of grace directly threatened everything their man-made system had established. Tragically, they allowed their rigid preunderstandings to blind them to the Messiah, choosing to plot His death rather than abandon their flawed traditions.

We must recognize that God never intended His people to be crushed beneath the suffocating weight of hypocrisy, empty religion, and legalism. Instead, Christ invites us to step out of that bondage to receive His boundless mercy, grace, and freedom. Let us not repeat the Pharisees' fatal mistake by clinging more tightly to our own rules than to our Redeemer.