

7.25.09 / Mark 3:1-6

This passage follows directly after last week's.

What did it mean for those who first heard it?

Two important cultural items are present here: first, what were the rules about healing on the Sabbath? Second, who are the Herodians, and what is their relationship with the Pharisees?

Our information on first-century rules about healing/medical treatment on the Sabbath comes from second-century sources, which we assume have the same rules. These sources tell us that only action required to save a life could be taken on the Sabbath. Anything less than life threatening had to wait to be treated.

The Herodians are, rather clearly, people who side with Herod. They appear in two instances in the Bible: here, and in the question about taxes (again along with the Pharisees). Josephus suggests that the Pharisees and Herod were on fairly bad terms, since the Pharisees represented set-apart Jewish nationalism to the extreme, and Herod strove to integrate Israel into the Roman world.

Within this framework we would expect the Pharisees to defend the Messiah against the Herodians. The Hellenized Herodians have no use for a Jewish king to replace Herod, while the Pharisees are looking to see Judaism and Israel restored to its proper place by the Messiah. The Pharisees' willingness to plot with the Herodians signals a complete rejection of Jesus, and potentially a "selling out". In modern terms, this is as against the way things should be as the FBI teaming up with the mob to kill an important witness. See "How Do We Know?" for a more complete background.

1) Why the synagogue? Why the Sabbath? Is Jesus reacting to a situation that just comes up, or is he staging a confrontation? If He's setting things up for this fight why?

2) Why the question from Jesus? What answer might we expect from the Jewish leaders? Given their reaction they disagree with what Jesus does, but how might they answer him? Would they object to the choices given in the question, or would they say it was better to do harm than good on the Sabbath? Why don't they answer at all?

3) What is the purpose or purposes of this miracle? Miracles don't exist just to show us that Jesus has superpowers – they say something about who he is beyond that, as well. So what's the point or points here?

4) Why do the Pharisees immediately go plot with the Herodians? Imagine yourself as a Pharisee – what's going through your head here?

What does it mean in our current context?

1) What is the Sabbath for? Think about last week's passage and this one, and all the rest of the Bible besides. What should we be doing on the Sabbath? What shouldn't we be doing? If your group is looking for concrete examples, perhaps discuss the issues of stores being open or closed on Sundays, and move from there.

2) This is, depending on how you count, the fifth healing story in Mark (Fifth story, not healing – one story is about how Jesus heals a lot of people.) Why? What does this say about God? Does this say anything about God today? Does it say anything about what we should do, or pray for, or how we should act? How does a God Who heals our bodies think about bodies and the physical world? How should we?

3) The Pharisees vs. Herodians contrast invites some modern comparisons. If the Pharisees were the religion-for-my-own ends group who are the Pharisees today (or, if the examples help, from more recent history)? How should they be handled? What reaction might we expect them to have when confronted with the truth of Christ?

- 4) If the Herodians are the people who follow the fashions of the world, and pay lip service to God, who are they today? Whose culture would they be following? What would it look like? How should they be handled?
- 5) How can we avoid either of those mistakes?

Weekly Questions to Ask the Group

What do we notice about God's desire and capacity to do good in this passage?

What about this passage confronts our lives head on and calls us to something more?