



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 12:9–14; Mark 3:1–5

Gospel of Matthew

“The Man with the Withered Hand”

TRANSCRIPT

The Scripture reading today is found in Matthew chapter 12 verses 9 through 14, and I want to read, not only this passage but the parallel account the Gospel of Mark. There is also a parallel account in the Gospel of Luke. This is one of the incidents, the incident of the man with the withered hand, in which each of the Synoptic Gospels have an account. But since some of the points I want to refer to in the message are found in these other accounts, I think it would be good for us to read two of them. So we'll read the Matthean account and then the Markan account for the Scripture reading. Matthew chapter 12 verse 9 through verse 14:

“And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue:
And, behold, there was a man which had his hand paralyzed. And
they asked him, saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath days?’
that they might accuse him. And he said unto them, ‘What man shall
there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit
on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How
much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do
well on the Sabbath days.’ Then saith he to the man, ‘Stretch forth
thine hand.’ And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole,

like as the other. Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.”

Let's turn over now to Mark chapter 3, and I want to read the first five verses of that chapter for the conclusion of the Scripture reading. Mark chapter 3, verse 1 through verse 5:

“And he entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a paralyzed hand (by the way, Luke says it was his right hand). And they watched him, whether he would heal him on the Sabbath day; that they might accuse him. And he said unto the man who had the paralyzed hand, ‘Stand forth.’ And he saith unto them, ‘Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill?’ But they held their peace. And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, ‘Stretch forth thine hand.’ And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word.

The subject for today as we continue our exposition of the Gospel of Matthew is “The Man with the Withered Hand.” This incident on a practical level illustrates the fact that callousness of heart tends to produce ceremonial worship which issues in the divine caller. But since some of you may not know what the divine caller is, I will say it another way. Spiritual frigidity often leads to formalism in worship, and that provokes the fury of Jesus Christ.

Remember in the passage that we read from the Gospel of Mark, at the climactic moment, as the Lord healed the man with the withered hand, the text in Mark says that in the midst of the synagogue he looked round about upon them with anger. It is evident that the issues that are raised

in this brief account are issues that do lead to the anger of God, and a coldness which does often lead to formality in worship is one of the things that provokes the anger of God.

This passage also illustrates the power of sovereign grace to deal with human inability, and since we are all individuals who have human inability by virtue of the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden, it illustrates again how we may be delivered and saved.

The healing is one of the seven miracles that Jesus Christ performed on the Sabbath. Today, of course, we look at this and we are not nearly so much concerned as much as a Jewish man in the day of our Lord might have been concerned, for we do not think about the Sabbath day in which they regarded the Sabbath day. They regarded the breach of the Sabbath law as a very serious thing. And then in addition to the law of Moses, they had added to that Sabbath law a number of traditions of their own, and these were regarded as being on the same level as Moses and the Old Testament.

And the feelings that they had about it might be illustrated in an incident that occurred in the time of Judas Maccabeus before the time of Christ. There were certain Jews who had sought refuge in caves in the wilderness, and Antiochus Epiphanes sent forth men to attack them. And when the attack was made, it was made on the Sabbath day. And because of the holiness with which the Jews regarded the Sabbath day, they made no resistance at all to the attack and died without any defiance of the men under Antiochus.

And then later, the Roman general Pompey was able to take Jerusalem because the Jews insisted on keeping the day of the Sabbath, and would not, even in the midst of attack, fail to keep the Sabbath law. I'm sure that you can see from this that they regarded the Sabbath as a very precious thing.

And when the Lord Jesus performs these acts of healing on the Sabbath day, it was surely an issue that was designed to stir up any kind of opposition that might have existed in the hearts of the leaders. Now, the Lord's answer to their objections is so obviously a victory for him and a defeat for them, that it's not surprising that A. T. Robertson, one of the finest New Testament scholars of another generation said, “The poor, pettifogging Pharisees are left in the pit.”

Our Lord pierces through to the heart of the issue and makes it clear that the Scriptures of the Old Testament never did forbid what he was doing, and that it was really the traditions of the Pharisees and Scribes which forbade that. He had gone from his ministry just preceding this into the synagogue to teach, Luke tells us in his Gospel. And as he went into the synagogue to teach, there was there present a man with a withered hand, with a paralyzed hand.

Whether he was set before the Lord Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees in order to provoke their opposition to them, and to make him do something by which they might accuse him, these three accounts do not specifically tell us. But it does seem as if it was an occasion specially designed to catch him in which they could legitimately, they thought, ensnare him.

You learn from this that just as today there are people who attend religious meetings but not necessarily to hear the Word of God—it may be possible there is someone here this morning who is not here to hear the Word of God—there are people who attend religious meetings but attend them out of curiosity. And then there are those who attend religious meetings out of a desire to criticize. And then there are those who attend religious meetings out of a deep concern to hear God speak to them through the Word of God.

Now you would think that reading these incidents, there would be no need to prove such from this incident, because the Pharisees, evidently, were present here not so much to hear the Word of God as to find something wrong with Jesus of Nazareth, that they might criticize him, and furthermore, by this time, that they might put him to death.

In Acts chapter 10 verse 33, there is a text which we have used on our bulletin. It is at the top of the order of service, and it is the word that is spoken with reference to Peter’s coming to give the message to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius. And you’ll remember that it reads something like this. I think I have it before me: “Now, therefore, are we all here present before God to hear all things that are commanded thee of God.” I don’t know of any better text in all of the Word of God to express the attitude that we are to have when we come into a meeting such as this. Now are we all here present before God to hear all things that are commanded Thee of God.

Now that is very good as an expression of the attitude of those of you who are in the pew on Sunday morning or at any other time where the ministry of the Word of God takes place. And I might also say that that is a very challenging thing for a teacher of the Word of God, too, because it says, now are we all here present before God—and it lays a great deal of stress upon the fact that the man who stands up to minister the Word of God, wherever he may minister the Word of God, he stands up to minister the Word of God under God, and he should recognize the responsibility to teach the Word of God and not the word of man. I am sure that the attitude that is reflected there in that meeting would produce an improvement not only the congregation, but also in the pulpit itself.

Well, they were there, and they were there for criticism. And undoubtedly there were some who were there out of deep concern and anxious to hear Jesus of Nazareth or any other teacher of the Word of God who truly taught it.

Well, Matthew says after they went into the synagogue, and look—for that is the essential meaning of the word, behold—and look, there was a man who had his hand withered. The Scripture points this out as a notable fact. It’s almost as if the Holy Spirit is drawing attention to the fact that there is a man in the meeting who has a paralyzed hand. What a different way of looking at things. We would be inclined to pass over something like that. After all, it was something of a deformity as a result of paralysis. And we often feel very embarrassed in the presence of someone who has some form of physical deformity.

But Scripture points this out with special attention. We do not read, “Look, there are the Pharisees.” We say these things in our meetings, too, you know. We say, look, there’s the mayor sitting over there. Well, look, there’s one of the Dallas Cowboys! Or, look, there is Professor Infallible Science over there, and Dr. Almighty Philosophy talking with Dr. Pompous B.—I said for Bombastic—Preacher. [Laughter] But with God, it is not the mighty who are a concern for him, but it is the poor and the needy—or the needy, let’s put it that way—those who have a need, these are the ones with whom the Spirit of God was concerned. And the text says, look! There was a man with

a withered hand, and it's evident from the context of this—though he never speaks a word—that he was a man who not only had a physical need but above all, he had a spiritual need.

Now Luke says that it was his right hand. That is, it was his most important hand we assume. Years ago, I asked my wife, in connection with this, what do think this means? What's the meaning of the withered hand and the withered right hand, because all of these things, I think, have spiritual significance?

She said, why it means that he's not doing any work. And I think that is involved in this. Here is a man who is incapacitated in the physical sphere. He cannot do any work. Tradition, incidentally, says that he was a stonemason, and he asked the Lord Jesus to heal him in order that he might not have to spend his life as a beggar. So even the tradition, lying back of this story—which we have no evidence for as far as its historicity is concerned—stresses the fact that by the picture of the man with the withered hand, we are to picture someone who cannot work. In the spiritual sphere that would mean that he is unable to please God by anything that he does.

Now over and over again I have been trying to stress the fact that men are unable to please him. Over and over again, I've made reference to inability. Now I hope you will not think I have overdone it. I do not think that I have. The reason that I do not think that I have is that I think this is the most fundamental thing we can learn as a member of God's universe—that we are unable of ourselves to please him.

And I have quoted several times the passage from Romans chapter 8 in which the Apostle Paul says, “Because the mind of the flesh is enmity against God”—naturally, we are enemies of God. We actually hate God of ourselves. Paul continues, “For it is not subject (that is the mind of the flesh) to the law of God, neither indeed can be.” He not only says that men are not subject to the law of God, but he states they have absolute inability—neither, indeed, can be. These are Paul's words, incidentally, not mine.

And then, in order to stress it further he says, “So then, they that are in the flesh”—and every one of us is in the flesh—“cannot (not do not) please God.” So every single individual of

themselves cannot please God. We cannot be subject to the law of God. Now, put in theological terms, that states that men are unable, of themselves, to please God.

So, the great stress of this incident is upon the inability of man of himself to please God—to do anything that might be pleasing to the will of God. How different is the attitude in many of our professing churches. We have someone who comes in to our meetings. He attends the meetings for a while. He doesn't seem to be responding particularly to the gospel of Christ, but we're so anxious to have him on the rolls of the church that we say, let's give him something to do. Perhaps if we give him something to do, he will become interested and in that way we can gain him.

Now that is precisely the opposite way of doing things. A man who is not a believer in Jesus Christ cannot do anything that is pleasing to God. “What he needs is not a boost from below,” as Vance Havener used to say, “but to be born from above.” And we are too inclined to give them boosts from below, not allowing God the Holy Spirit to face men with the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, the man with the withered hand—what a beautiful picture of man in his inability.

Now, the Lord Jesus is in the synagogue, and in the presence of this man, and the Jewish men desiring to catch him pose a very tricky question for him. They say, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day? because they want to provoke him to some response which they can legitimately criticize. That word translated “watched him” in one of the other accounts means “to watch narrowly with sinister intent.” In other words, they were looking at him very carefully in order to criticize him, in order to justify a reason by which they could condemn him.

It's a beautiful testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ, that in spite of all their attempts to criticize him, legitimately they never were able to make one charge stick, for he never did anything but keep the law perfectly. Now, he did break some of their traditions. But pointing to Scriptures, he pointed out that Scriptures were contrary to the law of God.

Here are men who spend the worshiping time, supposedly, the worshiping time—or the time that should have been spent in listening to the Word of God—here are men who spent that

worshiping time in watching him. Yes, it's possible to sit worshipfully in a meeting with murder in the heart. That is exactly what happened.

Now the Lord Jesus, again according to Luke, knew their thoughts. And so he called for the man to stand forth. “Rise up and stand forth,” he said. And then in answer to their question, he himself posed a question, and his response is in the form of a rejoinder. He saith unto them, “What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?” Now this illustrates the fact that the Lord Jesus not only knows their intentions, but he provokes their response to their own question in order to reveal to them the fact that they are contrary to the Word of God.

Well, the bait had been set for him, but in this case the fish caught the men rather than the men catching the fish. You know, it's a curious state of mind, it seems to me, that men can get into a state of mind in which they can actually desire a miracle and can believe that the Lord Jesus could perform such a miracle, not for the sake of pity, or not for the purpose of strengthening the faith of those who were in the audience, but actually, they could believe and could ask him to perform a miracle in order that they could make an accusation.

It's an amazing thing that a man could be in the state of mind that he could believe that Jesus Christ could perform such a miracle, and that knowing that he could perform such a miracle, they then, on the basis of this action which could only be done by a person in unity with God, on the basis of that, they would accuse him. And in a moment they wished to put him to death. That is a most curious state of mind into which men can get.

Now he says, which one of you having one sheep—will you notice that he says, “have” one sheep. It's almost as if he implies underneath this, having said above that he was Lord of the Sabbath, that he was not only Lord of the Sabbath, but he is the Lord of men, too, because this illustration is designed to reflect the status he has standing before them. So which of you, having one sheep; it seems that he is implicitly claiming to be the one who does possess men, just as a man possesses a sheep.

Now he says, one sheep. Now he doesn't say “a sheep.” He says, “one sheep.” He stresses the fact that it is just one sheep. This is so eloquent in expressing the love of God for one particular, one of his own people. If there is anything the Bible teaches, it is that the love of God is particular. And it is for the one. The one here, the one there—they make up a great company which no man can number. We're not saying that the number of the Redeemed are small. The number of the Redeemed are so great, in spite of the doctrine of election, that no one can possibly number them.

We often hear people who don't understand the biblical teaching. They'll say, “With the doctrine of election, you think that in heaven they're just going to be a small company of people that God has elected.” What an ignorance of the Word of God; not only an ignorance of the doctrine of election, but an ignorance of the teaching of the Word of God. God does not elect just a few out of the countless millions and millions who have been in this universe; he selects so many that when we get there, no man can number them. There are that many.

In fact, in Scripture we are told at the second coming of the Lord Jesus, there shall be a great worldwide conversion that shall take place. But even though that is true, the love of God extends directly and definitely and specially to one. Having one sheep—I am so glad to read something like that.

Now evidently, the Pharisees, if they followed their particular philosophy, they would take a sheep and not do anything about that sheep that was in the pit on the Sabbath Day. He expected that they would answer, why yes, he would lay hold on it and take it out. But if they followed their own philosophy, they would not do it. They would simply pass by the pit and throw a little food down there, and perhaps a little hay for the sheep to lie on, and then bring the sheep out of the pit on the Sunday rather than the Saturday, the Sabbath Day. But he knows and he expects them to say, yes, you would do something like that.

Now Luke also says, which of you would do this, and he said, is it right to save life on the Sabbath Day or to destroy it? Why of course, they would say to save life. But lying back of that question that he asks them, it seems to me, is a veiled reference to what they in their hearts are doing

right now in the synagogue. What are they doing? Why, it is the Sabbath day, but they have murder in their hearts. And they’re claiming to be right with God and that he’s not right with God, but at the same time that they claim that they are right with God in criticizing him for healing on the Sabbath day, they have murder—they’re plotting murder in their hearts—in order to do away with him.

So is it right to do well on the Sabbath day, or to destroy? He knows their thoughts, these wicked men. And he concludes in the 12th verse, “Wherefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath days.”

Now notice he doesn’t say it’s lawful to heal. He broadens it, not only to heal, but any other good act is included. It’s lawful to do good. In other words, ethical conduct is always more important than ceremonial obedience. Ceremonial obedience is required, and is good as long as the law demands it. When the law has passed away, the ceremonial types of activities pass away with it. And it is proper for an Israelite to observe the ceremonies that are observed in the New Testament, not the traditions laid upon them.

But even in the Old Testament days, it was better to obey than to sacrifice if one has to choose between the two. One should accomplish the sacrifices and also do that which is good. In other words, our doctrine should issue in life, and if there comes a question between the ceremonial aspects of the law and the doing of mercy, then the latter takes the precedence.

Well, having won the argument—I don’t think anyone would grant that he didn’t win the argument—in the meantime, the man with the withered hand is standing before him. I’m sure that the whole synagogue now—you know, have you ever been in a church where there was an obvious disagreement that had taken place in a meeting? Or, when a meeting has taken place in which there has been a whole lot of disagreement in the background, have you ever attended a church like that? There is a whole lot of tension in the atmosphere. It’s like electricity. If you’ve ever attended a meeting like that, you know exactly what I mean.

And here on this morning, there must have been an embarrassed and baleful silence. The Pharisees and the scribes were so angry that they could have murdered him on the spot, no doubt, if

they thought they could have gotten away with it. And those that were with him were embarrassed and disturbed. It must have been extremely tense. There must have been an undercurrent of bitterness there that you could almost slice.

Well in the midst of that atmosphere, the Lord Jesus turns to the man with the withered hand, and incidentally, he has not asked for healing. Nor has anyone else asked for him. But he says, rise up, stand forth. And then addressing the man with the withered hand he said, “Stretch forth thine hand.”

Now, let’s look for a moment at this man and the command. Now the person who is addressed is a man who has, as we say, inability. The one thing that he could not do was to stretch forth his paralyzed hand. He was hopelessly incapable of obeying a command like that in his own power. And yet, our Lord Jesus addressed him with a command that he could not, of himself, perform.

Now you can see why Augustine and Pelagius had their difficulties, because Pelagius contended that if God laid obligations upon us, we had the ability to perform them. And Augustine said oh no, God often lays obligations upon us which we cannot perform in order that we might turn to him and ask him to perform things that we cannot of ourselves perform.

So here is a man who is hopelessly incapable of doing the things that Jesus Christ asked him to do. I think if I had been there, I would have said, “Well, that’s the one thing I cannot do, Lord.” I might not have gotten healed [laughter].

Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield was one of the great theologians of the 20th century. He stated, “We point out that the doctrine of inability does not affirm that we cannot believe, but only that we cannot believe in our own strength.” We do not say, when a man is unable to do the will of God, when we say that he is guilty of inability or that when he is afflicted with inability, we do not say thereby, that he cannot believe. We say that he cannot believe in his own strength.

It is obvious that men who are unable to please God do please God, but he does not do it of his own strength. Now, Augustine said, *Da quod ubeis et ubey quod wies*. That’s very illuminating, isn’t it?

[Laughter] That’s the way in which the Word of God affects people who have not been illumined by the Holy Spirit, incidentally. It’s Latin to them. But Augustine said, “Give that which you command, and command what you will.” Now let’s turn it around. “Command what you will, Lord, and then give what you command.” Command anything you wish, anything you will, and then give what you command.

Now Pelagius, the British monk, was so upset by this statement by Augustine that this was one of the things that precipitated the famous conflict between Pelagius and Augustine that led to the condemnation of Pelagianism in the professing Christian church. Pelagianism was condemned, and though it did arise in a new form later on, Augustine won the battle, because Pelagius essentially believed that men could be saved by their own efforts. And Augustine pointed out that men could only be saved by the grace of God.

Now later on, Pelagius won the battle, but he won the battle by the help of Satanic enablement, for there came into the Christian church the doctrine of free will. And when the doctrine of free will came into the Christian church, it is in the form of that, called, historically, semi-Pelagianism, that the Pelagians finally won. And whenever we believe—if we do believe—that a man is saved by an act of his own free will, we have fallen into that which is contrary to the doctrine of the grace of God.

Now I have stressed this over and over and over again because it is so important. We cannot preach the doctrine of a free grace of God and believe that men have a free will at the same time and be consistent. Now mind you, there are lots of people who stand and teach the Word of God, who stand in a pulpit such as this and preach the Word of God and say, “We are saved by the grace of God, and we have free will.” They do not realize the contradiction of those two statements. I do not question that they are preaching the grace of God, but it is confusion.

Let me illustrate. Let’s suppose that we have a man standing by the pulpit here, and he has a free will. And suppose that we have a man standing over here, and he has free will. And let’s suppose that we preach the gospel to them, and having preached the gospel of the Lord Jesus, we call upon

them to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ that you might be saved. And this man believes, and this man does not.

Now, assuming that we have free will, then it's evident—and of course we must assume that the decision is a decision of the man, otherwise it is not “free” will. That decision has come from this man, which has brought him life according to that doctrine, whereas over here, the man has not responded. Now it is evident, I think, on any thought at all that there must have been something in this man that enabled him to make that decision that, according to that doctrine, is pleasing to God. He had some power that this other man did not have. In other words, the word of salvation is not due only to what Christ did, but due to the fact that he had some power of his own, which enabled him to make that decision.

Can you not see that that is contradictory to the grace of God? That you cannot really say salvation is of the Lord if you believe in free will. Do you not see that? Some of you are looking at me like this [unknown look]? [Laughter] Do you not see that this man, out of his own inner being, has called forth some kind of power that has enabled him to respond to the gospel message? He has some power that this man does not have. In other words, his salvation is dependent upon what Christ did plus that which was lying in him which enabled him to respond.

Now you cannot believe in total depravity under such a doctrine of total depravity, because evidently this man was not totally lost in sin that he could not respond. He was able to respond of himself, as free will asserts—of himself. So, he doesn't really believe in total depravity. He cannot, consistently. He cannot believe in salvation of the Lord consistently. He cannot really believe in effectual grace consistently, because it is not necessary for the Holy Spirit if he has free will and is able to respond. And of course, if he has free will, he cannot logically believe that if once saved, he will never be lost, because what he was able to attain of himself he might be able to lose of himself.

So you see why I get excited over the doctrine of free will? [Laughter] I'm not giving you something that's new. I am saying something that has been lost in our evangelical churches, sadly—sadly lost. Not only was Augustine a believer in the bondage of the will, but Luther wrote his greatest

theological treatise entitling it, *The Bondage of the Will*. Calvin believed in the bondage of the will. This is the historical position of the Reformed and evangelical church. This is not new doctrine. It has been lost in our 20th century in so many of our evangelical churches. Man’s inability.

Now, I know someone will say, “Don’t we have a will at all?” Why of course we have a will. God has given us a will, and we make decisions of our will. Now if you had walked up to the man whose hand was healed, and you had asked him, “Did you stretch out your hand?” He’ll probably say, “Are you crazy? Of course I stretched out my hand! I’m the one that was healed, was I not? Of course I stretched out my hand.”

And then you want to know if he really does believe in grace, you see. So you say, “Did you stretch out your hand of yourself?” “Oh no, not of myself! For twenty years I tried to stretch out my hand, and I was unable to do it, but I did today.” Well how did you do it? Well, evidently, the Lord Jesus gave me some power that enabled me to stretch forth my hand, and I did, and it was healed.

You see, that’s what we affirm. We affirm man has a will, but he does not respond until God gives him power to respond. He does make the decision, but it’s a decision initiated by God—that’s the important thing. There is no such thing as human volition of itself, able to make a decision for God. Nobody’s will ever makes a decision for Jesus Christ, until God, as Dr. Barnhouse used to say, “jiggles the willer.” [Laughter]

The way the Lord Jesus works, the way God works, is very simply found in the Word of God. For example, he says, “Make your heart clean.” You cannot do that. And so what do you do? You pray, “O God, create in me a clean heart.” And you read the Scriptures and it says, “I will make your heart new.” And then relying upon the grace of God, the promise of God, God works to cleanse and make new the heart.

He calls upon us to do something that we cannot do. Recognizing our inadequacy, we plead to him. He gives us the great promise of the Word of God, and leaning upon it, by God’s power, that which we cannot do transpires in our lives.

Someone says, well why preach to the dead? They are dead in sin, they are totally unable— why preach to them at all? If someone ever asked me that, I would say, well, don’t do it. It’s obvious if you believe that way, God has not called you to preach. God does not say because men are dead in their sins, and because they are unable, we should not preach the gospel to them. He says because men are dead in sins, and because they are unable, we must preach the gospel to them. And he works as the Word is preached.

And he does the miraculous. Look at all these dead people in this auditorium who are now alive. You’re enjoying the ministry of the Word, because you know that is the way that you have been brought to faith in Christ. It didn’t come of yourselves. It came from God.

I want you to notice the healing. It was complete. He stretched forth his hand and it was restored, well, just like the other. It was complete. It was not the kind of healing that we find in healing meetings today. People throw away their crutches in the meetings and then hobble off the platform [laughter] with the help of someone who manages to get them over and enables them to sit down. Not that kind of healing. It was immediate and it was final.

Have you noticed that all of the healings of the Lord Jesus were permanent? Mr. Spurgeon, in one of his accounts of this incident tells the story of a dentist, I think, or at least a druggist who advertised a momentary cure for a toothache. And he said he had no real response. And he realized that perhaps people were not interested in momentary cures, and so he went out and changed “momentary” to “instantaneous,” and business became a lot better. [Laughter]

The kind of healing that the Lord Jesus performs is permanent. You never read of people who were paralyzed going back to their paralysis, or you don’t read of people being healed of their disease going back after a few months or years back to the same old disease. His healings are immediate and final, permanent. Of course, he did not even touch the man. Even the most rabid Pharisee could not have accused him of working. All he did was simply give the word, stretch forth thine hand.

Now as a result of this we read that they sought the death of the Lord Jesus. You see the result of unbelief is that it leads to a kind of callous ceremonialism. Incidentally, the reason that frigidity leads to formalism is that the cooler we become to the things of the Lord, the more we like to cover it up. And so, if we can cover up the fact that we do not have a vital relationship to the Lord Jesus by ceremony and ritual, by the repetition of prayers or other means by which we make our service appealing to the eye, if we do that, then we cover up the fact that we don't really have that right relationship with the Lord. That is usually—I do not say always—but usually the origin of ceremonialism and ritualism, and particularly in our churches today. And this incident reveals the fact that this frigidity, which leads to formalism, provokes the fury of Jesus Christ.

Well, we're inclined in the Christian church to say, well, that does not concern us, but it does. In those days that frigidity and that formalism was outside the company of the true believers, but today it's inside the company of those who profess the name of the Lord Jesus.

Vance Havener, the Baptist Bible teacher, used to say, “There are fundamental fellowships that are right in their dispensations and wrong in their dispositions. They rest at ease in Zion, snug and smug in their orthodoxy, but just as powerless in their holier-than-thou Phariseeism as the groups they censure.” There is some of that, and it can exist even in such a church as Believers Chapel in which there has been a conscious effort made to avoid a lot of the pitfalls of ceremonialism.

If you are here today, and you have never believed in the Lord Jesus, you are unable of yourself to believe. You cannot believe. That is why your condition is so desperate. You are not able to believe at any moment. You are able to believe only by divine power. And if I were in your state, as I was, and that came home to me that I could not of myself please God, the first petition I would make, immediately, is, “O God give me the grace to do that which I cannot do!” And you can be sure that he will do it, for he has promised to do just that very thing.

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved. May God speak to your heart. May you come to him. Let's stand for the benediction.

“The Man with the Withered Hand” by S. Lewis Johnson
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[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these incidents which reveal such deep spiritual truth. We rejoice in the enlightenment that Thou dost give us as we ponder the Word of God. And Father, it leads us, more and more, to understand and appreciate the marvelous grace that Thou hast shown to us: poor, wicked, lost men and women such as we are. We worship Thee. We praise Thee.

O God, help us to appreciate all that Thou hast done. And may all that Thou hast done for us be a motivating power to us, that we may be useful to Thee in pleasing Thee in teaching the Word of God.

Lord, we ask that Thou would especially be with this audience and stir them and move them through Thy goodness and mercy to them. May grace, mercy and peace go with us.

For Christ's sake. Amen.