

Mark 2:23 – 3:6 (NIV)

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

²⁵ He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

²⁷ Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

¹ Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. ² Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

⁴ 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.

⁵ He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

We're in Mark chapter 2 this morning – if you'd care to turn there and follow along.

We have been looking at the different responses or reactions Jesus provoked in those around Him, and so far in our study, Jesus' provocations have all been very **positive**:

He drew from His mother Mary's heart **utter trust**.

In the centurion, Jesus was the provocateur of **deep and unusual humility**.

From Peter and Andrew and James and John, Jesus prompted a **confidence** that caused them to **leave everything** they had ever known in order to follow Him.

So, it's all good so far. But we all know, of course, and today's text reminds us, that the provocateur of **trust** and **love** and **confidence** and **humility** in **some** was also the provocateur of such a **hardness** and **stubbornness** in **others** that those **others** would eventually seek His **death**.

Why are some people so drawn to Jesus, while others are repulsed by Him?

It was true back in His day; He was much loved, and yet crucified.

It's still true today. People still take great offense at Jesus, or at least at some of the things He says and claims. I actually think the reason **more** people **aren't** offended by Jesus today is simply because they're not aware of some of the things He said. A lot of people have a picture of Jesus that isn't really accurate.

So, again, what is it about Jesus that provokes **attraction** in **some** and **revulsion** in **others**?

Of course, it's not that **Jesus** is in any way **different** as He interacts from person to person. Jesus is always the

same. He doesn't change His message depending on to whom He's speaking.

Jesus is no politician.

Jesus **does** take into consideration the person to whom He's speaking and what they are able to handle or understand. He does consider His audience, which is just good communication.

And frankly, His doing that is really **compassion**. Jesus very graciously gives us only what we're able to take.

But Jesus doesn't change the essence of His message to suit His audience.

So, whatever it is that causes Jesus to provoke different things in different people **is in the other person** – and not in Jesus.

And so, if that's true, what would make someone, after interacting with Jesus as we see there in verse 6, decide to plot to kill Him?

I mean, that's a pretty extreme reaction!

Who are these people who reacted that way?

Verse 6 tells us it was the Pharisees (who were the very spiritual, very serious, what we might think of as the "holier-than-thou" Jews of the day) and it was the Herodians, who were Jewish supporters of the Roman puppet king, Herod.

But why did they want to kill Jesus? What had He done that was so offensive?

Well, up to this point, Jesus had offended each group in different ways.

The Herodians took issue with Jesus in terms of his politics. They didn't like the sort of things He was saying about **rule** and **kingdom** and **authority** and all that. To them, that sounded like sedition; as if Jesus was speaking in "hostile takeover" language, and they heard Him that way **because** their minds were all on the **present**. They saw everything that happened in the world through the lens of the **temporal** and **earthly**.

Lots of people are like that. Lots of people are doing that today, and they miss the eternal perspective and the greater spiritual lessons of all that's happening in life in these days.

To the Herodians, Jesus was a threat to their plans for earthly power. That's why they wanted to kill Him.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were upset with Jesus for different reasons – theological reasons.

They were highly offended at Jesus' claim that He had the power to forgive sins.

They did not like His association with known "sinners" while claiming to be a representative of God.

They did not like the fact that He **could actually heal** people, since He didn't fit into any of their categories of "divine presence." They didn't know what to make of that, so they despised it.

Which is also so typical of fallen people, isn't it? If we can't explain something, we declare ourselves against it. That's such a closed, senseless response, but it makes us

feel better because it appears to keep our world ordered, and it leaves us in control. So, we respond that way probably more often than we know.

The Pharisees knew Jesus could heal, but they couldn't explain how, so they hated Him for that.

The Pharisees also took great issue with Jesus teaching His disciples not to keep all the little rules for holy living that they had set up, and especially the rules about Sabbath observance.

You see, by this time the law had become very detailed and definite about Sabbath – and even about healing on the Sabbath.

The law said that on the Sabbath medical attention could only be given if life was in danger. You could treat someone's inability to breathe, but you could not treat a broken bone or a sprain. You could bandage a cut to stop it from bleeding, but you couldn't put any sort of ointment on it to help it heal.

According to the law, you could keep an injury from getting worse on the Sabbath, but you couldn't help make the person better.

That's how rigid things had become.

And these guys, the religious leaders, knew that and actually enjoyed enforcing it, and I say that because we see there in verse 2 that they were in the synagogue watching for people who broke the rules.

Barclay says that in the synagogues of Jesus' day there was always a group of religious leaders who sat in the front seats – the seats of honor, of course – not to worship, but to watch what was going on, and if they found anyone or anything out of place, they called them on it.

They were religious police, you see?

Everyone else was there to worship, but they were not. Oh, they said they were, but really, they were there to *evaluate* – to *catch* people in the act of doing something *not* necessarily offensive to *God*, but offensive to *them* – and to catch anyone who might not be following all the little standards of Sabbath and worship *that they set*.

God didn't set them. *They* and their *forebears* set them.

Professional-grade nitpickers, that's what they were, and they loved it. They loved picking nits, finding things wrong in what other people were doing and saying.

Do you know people like that – people who just love to catch someone doing something they feel is wrong? And when they do, they turn on their lights and siren and pull people over and write them a citation – all done in love, of course.

No wonder Jesus' harshest words were given to people like that – people who took it upon themselves to set standards and then pridefully and joyfully enforce them, with no compassion and no benefit of doubt.

And these guys found plenty wrong in what Jesus was doing, and especially with this healing in the synagogue on the Sabbath. To them, this was the capstone of His violations – the last straw that would put them in cahoots with the Herodians.

The funny thing is, normally those two groups of people would have hated each other. Practically speaking, the Pharisees would have seen the Herodians as unclean.

But as Shakespeare wrote in *The Tempest*, certain causes do make strange bedfellows.

They hated each other, but they joined together because they hated Jesus more.

That's why it's so divinely ironic that Jesus asks them the question that He does there in verse 4, "*Which is lawful on the Sabbath... to save life or to kill?*"

They don't answer, so Jesus goes on to heal in order to save life, and in response, the Pharisees, in defending the Law, violate that Law by plotting to kill.

That's certainly why Jesus asked the question as He did. It's also probably why He brought the fellow who needed healing up front so everyone could not only *see* the miracle but also *hear* the *rationale* – because *it is that rationale* that is really the issue here between Jesus and the religious professionals.

What did Jesus provoke in these guys that would cause them to plot His murder?

Hardness of heart.

Mark tells us in verse 5: "*Jesus looked at them angrily and was deeply distressed at their hard hearts.*" (Tr. from GNT)

Jesus knew the Sabbath laws. He also knew that to heal this man was not, necessarily, an act of saving his life. He could have just as easily said, "Come see me tomorrow."

But He didn't. Jesus made this a test case by asking, really, two questions of the religious leaders there. *Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?*

In asking this, Jesus was stating explicitly what everyone assumed: saving life is good, killing is not.

But in this moment that was a problem for these religious leaders, because while they had to say it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath, they knew the good that Jesus was planning to do broke their restrictions.

And, even beyond that, the timing of this question was terrible for them, because there on the Sabbath, at the very time Jesus was thinking about preserving life, those guys were thinking about killing Him!

That's why they couldn't respond.

And that's what made Jesus both angry and sad: even when their error was pointed out to them so clearly and logically and sensibly, they still *could* not and *would* not admit they were wrong.

And *that right there, that is hardness of heart*: the refusal to take counsel, the refusal to admit error, to see logic and sensibility, to prayerfully and thoughtfully consider another perspective – and *God's* perspective at that!

That is hardness of heart.

Most of the religious and political leaders of Jesus' day suffered from it already: they were proud, presumptuous, obstinate, and utterly convinced they were right.

And Jesus' challenge to them here, given in hope of *breaking up* that *rigidity* and *hardness*, only made it *worse*.

Here's a great example of the frustration of that phrase from the 12th century, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

Every parent knows this intimately.

How frustrating it is to explain to a child why they must not do this or that, and then to have that stubborn child totally ignore the soundest of logic or good sense.

And that doesn't just apply to children, does it?

There is a hardness of heart in some people that even God either *cannot* or *does not* or *will not* overthrow.

Consider Pharaoh, for example: the more proof He was given of God's power, the harder his heart became.

Or, Nebuchadnezzar: Daniel says that, "his heart became arrogant and his spirit was hardened with pride, and so he was deposed from his throne, and his glory taken from him." (Daniel 5:20, paraphrase)

Proverbs warns of this in 29:1 where we're told, "*Those who are often rebuked, yet harden their neck, will suddenly be destroyed – without remedy.*" (paraphrase)

This is exactly what's happening here – hard hearts getting harder – which is, sadly, what Jesus provokes in some people.

Why?

The Greek word here in Mark 3:5 for "stubborn" or "hard" is *porosis*, and it carries the idea of *callousness*.

We know what a callous is. People who work hard with their hands wind up with callouses there. Guitar players develop callouses on the ends of their fingers – where they're constantly pushing down on the strings. People who have no shoes develop callouses on the bottoms of their feet.

Callouses develop from repeated use, and the effect they have is to *make you unable to feel as you once were able to feel*.

And there is the core of the issue: hard-hearted people have, if you will, callouses on their hearts, which prevent them from feeling – prevent words and pleas and sensibilities from moving them as they should.

In this case, the callouses prevented them from feeling the presence and voice and truth of God.

Jesus provoked *hardness of heart* in these guys precisely because He Himself was *soft-hearted* toward God's purposes and presence. His soft-heartedness revealed how incredibly *hard* toward God those who thought they were soft, actually were.

And there were only two ways out of that circumstance: the religious leaders there could either, 1) acknowledge – admit – and then repent of their stubbornness; or 2) they could harden their hearts even more.

Those are the only options they had. Those are the only options *anyone* has, really, when confronted with their own hardness of heart toward God. We can either *give in* and follow God's way, or we can *dig in* and fortify our own position.

If we'll *give in*, we'll begin *working* with – *cooperating* with – God's Spirit toward our own sanctification, you see? When we give in, we're saying, "Yes, Lord, you're right and I'm wrong, so change me here – make me soft toward you in this."

When we give in to Him, a bit more of that callousness – that resistance to God that we were born with – falls away and our heart gets softer toward Him.

But, if we *dig in*, we add another layer to the callous that is already there – we make it thicker and tougher and harder to penetrate. And that adds to our inability to feel, so the next time God speaks He'll be even harder to hear, and we'll be even more likely to ignore what He says.

That's what happens every time we dig in when God speaks – the callous on our heart grows.

Would you hear the voice of the Spirit today saying to us through this account, "*Please*, don't let the callous on your heart grow – not another day!"

God doesn't want anyone to have a calloused heart. He wants us to learn from these hard-hearted ones who resisted Him all those years ago.

Jesus was angry with them because they had let their own traditions and values overwhelm real human needs. Years of that had distorted their perspectives.

The injustice of that made Him *angry*, but what made Him *sad* was that pointing it out to them did no good.

Friends, Jesus is pointing it out to us here today.

Are we hard-hearted in some way?

Has God tried to speak to us about some values we hold, some opinion we stand by, maybe some rule that we've made up, but that has no basis in Christ and is actually hurting others?

Are we standing for things that make Jesus angry?

And are we making Him sad because we will no longer hear His voice?

Does the pain and need of others no longer affect us?

Does the good that God gives no longer call up praise in our hearts?

Do we keep on a sinful course even when we know it grieves Jesus?

That's all hard-heartedness, and if it's left to have its way in us it provokes God to leave us to our own errors and passions – which will, eventually, lead people to ruin.

That is the very course of our nation in these days, and the only thing that can save both us, individually, and us, corporately, is to stop *digging in* to our own ways, and to start *giving in* to God's.

Please, if God's Spirit is speaking to you today about some calloused place on *your* heart, give in to Him! Admit to yourself and to Him that it's there and invite Him to soften that place, for your own good.

The fact is, there's no telling what He wants to do – what He wants to accomplish in that very part of your life, if He can turn that hard place soft to His purposes.

Closing Song: *Spirit of the Living God*

Benediction: This day and this week, may we hear the voice of God's Spirit pointing out the calloused places on our hearts, and may we quickly give in to His will, so that our hearts would grow ever softer to His voice – so that our hearts and lives would be ever more like Jesus'.