

*Not legalism but liberty and love are to govern  
God's servants in their witness to Christ.*

## PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN SERVICE

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The Miracle of the Healing of a Man with a Withered Hand  
(Matt. 12:10-13; Mark 3:1-5; Luke 6:6-11)

**T**HE SCRIPTURE record contains seven miracles which were performed by the Lord Jesus on the Sabbath day. This is not without significance, for the performance of one-fifth of the recorded miracles of Christ on the Sabbath seems to have been one of His primary ways of emphasizing the difference between rabbinic legalism and Christian liberty. For instance, on one Sabbath the disciples had been caught by the Pharisees rubbing and eating corn (cf. Mark 2:23 ff.). Although the picking of corn was perfectly in accord with the law (Deut. 23:25), the rubbing of it was one of the kinds of work which the Pharisaic tradition forbade on the Sabbath. Our Lord's answer was the declaration that the Sabbath was made for man; i.e., in man's best interests, and that the Son of man is the Lord of the Sabbath. On another Sabbath, the Lord performed a miracle of healing which was evidently intended as an illustration of the same principle concerning the Sabbath.

Although we clearly recognize the difference between the Sabbath and the Lord's day; nevertheless, in this miracle of healing the man with the withered hand there are certain

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principles illustrated which also concern Christian service and the Lord's day. Legalism is the principle to be avoided; liberty and love are the guiding principles of Christian service.

#### 1. Legalism

The principle which the Rabbis taught and from which the Christian has been freed is that of legalism. In applying the principle to those who were sick, they taught that such an one could be given relief on the Sabbath day only if his life were in danger. Obviously the case of the man with the withered hand was not urgent and treatment could easily be postponed. The Lord's reply to the thoughts which He knew were in the minds of these Jews points out to these and all legalists that, if legalistic principles forbid the practice of good, then the legalist must be prepared to justify evil; for, as our Lord put it, to refuse to do good is to do evil. Legalism, then, is condemned because its negative rigidity, which forbids actions under certain circumstances, often leads to the condoning of evil.

This is a lesson that present day evangelicals would do well to remember. How pathetically often today we see the spectacle of Christians refusing to do good because they are bound by some legalistic principle. For example, to refuse in the name of ecclesiastical separation and purity to render service for Christ is surely a contemporary illustration of this Pharisaic kind of legalistic interpretation of the proper principle of separation. Believers who do such things ought to face in their own hearts the fact that the Lord says such actions may be evil. Sometimes what we do not do is just as wrong as what we do.

Not only does legalism lead to doing evil, but legalism always breeds hypocrites. It was so in the first century and it is so in the twentieth. In those days, as our Lord pointed out, the Jews who would not come to the aid of an afflicted man would not hesitate to rescue their sheep (Matt. 12:11). In practice, then, the animal was of greater value than a man. Today it is too often the same, for some who name His name are only too ready to wreck the life of a man or woman in the name of saving a cause or defending a conviction. Our commission is to reach and nurture men—not to promote and

defend programs or causes at any cost. Let us be careful that even today we are not guilty of doing what these Pharisees did in relation to the man with the withered hand—sacrificing a man on the altar of legalism.

## 2. Liberty

Legalism binds; liberty frees. But liberty is not license. Liberty includes two ideas: the freedom to be regular, and the freedom to be irregular. Our Lord's actions on this occasion illustrate both aspects of true freedom. The principle of regularity in our liberty is illustrated in the simple fact that the Lord Jesus was present at the synagogue service. We are told elsewhere that this was His custom (Luke 4:16), and His presence on this occasion was not exceptional; rather, it was the result of lifelong habit. If our Lord had desired to use the reasons which are often given today by some persons, He could have found any number of excuses for not attending the meetings for the worship of God. Certainly He got very little out of the message; for, after all, He was the very fulfillment of every Scripture that was read or explained in the service. Surely He knew much more about God and spiritual things than anyone present, including the leaders in the service. Too, He knew that soon the organization which He was supporting by His attendance would be replaced by the Church. But still our Lord attended the synagogue services as a regular practice. Christian liberty in relation to the Lord's day exempts no Christian from his regular responsibility of attendance at public worship (Heb. 10:25). Even if the preacher is poor and our knowledge of spiritual things far exceeds his, and even if we are in a day of apostasy, on Sunday we should gather with God's people to worship Him.

Sometimes our Christian liberty involves irregularity. To heal on the Sabbath was irregular, and the method which the Lord used in healing was also irregular. The scene in the synagogue that Sabbath must have been a very dramatic one, for all the people would have been sitting on the floor when the Lord called to the man with the withered hand to stand forth in the midst; i.e., in plain view. Yet for all its dramatic features, the scene was completely dignified. Even our Lord's rebuke of the Pharisees was full of dignity (and

strikingly different from the practice of some today). Irregularity does not mean disorderliness. It is sometimes proper to do the irregular thing in an irregular way just as long as the guiding principle of such liberty is doing good (Luke 6:9); i.e., doing those things which are morally excellent. Under such circumstances liberty will never become license.

Proper conduct on Sunday is often a problem with Christians. What is right and what is wrong to do on Sunday is frequently debated. The only workable answer is found in applying this principle of liberty. Use liberty and be regular—regular in attending the services of the day (Heb. 10:25), and regular in keeping your financial accounts up-to-date (I Cor. 16:2, "lay by himself"). Make a regular accounting to yourself is the teaching—not necessarily a regular distribution, though God may lead that the distribution of some of the Lord's money shall be done on a regular schedule or pledge; nevertheless, this verse speaks of the accounting to yourself, not the regular bringing of an offering to church.

Use liberty also to be irregular; for apart from the regular gathering and accounting that should take place on Sunday, the Scriptures are silent as to other Sunday activities. This makes it incumbent on every believer to be led by the Spirit of God into Christ-honoring Sunday activities. He may be led in seemingly irregular ways, but everything will be for good; for "the servant is not greater than his lord" (John 15:20), and our Lord "went about doing good" (Acts 10:38).

### 3. Love

The second positive principle of Christian service is love. All of our service must be carried on in love. And yet sometimes love will involve anger, for love is not a sentimental emotion which overlooks truth. Love is the earnest desire to see the glory of God revealed in the one loved, and sometimes such desire will have to include anger. So it was that day in the synagogue. The Lord looked on those legalistic Pharisees with anger and compassion (Mark 3:5). This is a perfect illustration of the Pauline exhortation, "Be ye angry and sin not" (Eph. 4:26); for as we serve Christ we will have to be angry at the world and at legalistic religion, but we must always love those who are in the world. We must

condemn wordliness on every hand, but we must also be careful, in the condemning, not to lack love.

But love is also positive, and the completed miracle on this man with the withered hand proves that. Our Lord did not just *say* that He loved the man; He proved it by healing him.

A number of things are noteworthy about this miracle. It was an undeserved thing; for there was no special reason why this particular man should have been picked out of the crowd and healed. There is no evidence that there was any faith in his heart which the Lord perceived and which was the reason why he was the one to be healed. Neither is there any reason why we who know Him should have been chosen out of the masses of people in the world. There was certainly no faith in our hearts until He opened them to Himself. Too, this miracle was unrequested; and although some of Christ's miracles were performed at the behest of those in need, this one seemed to come as a complete surprise to the one healed.

Further, it was a sovereign act on the part of Christ. He did not even touch the man but simply healed him by an almighty act of sovereign will. It was a supreme act, for the shriveled hand was restored as new. All the "faith healers" in the world cannot do that, but our Lord did.

Finally, it was a public act. All in the synagogue saw that the man was whole. That is the way it ought always to be—all with whom we come in contact should know that we have been made whole by the saving, sovereign, sufficient grace of Christ. Our salvation will be a public thing throughout all eternity (Eph. 2:7); why will we not make it public now?

This is the miracle of the man with a withered hand, with its illustration of principles of Christian service. Legalism is to be shunned, for it can only stab at the very heart of the grace of Christianity. Liberty and love alone provide adequate and dependable guides for our service for Him.

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God never would send you the darkness  
If He felt you could bear the light;  
But you would not cling to His guiding hand,  
If the way were always bright;  
And you would not care to walk by faith  
Could you always walk by sight.