

RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP

Mark 9:38-50

Mark's Gospel has been giving us excellent glimpses into the character of a true disciple of Jesus Christ. We have turned a corner in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has begun in earnest to prepare His disciples for what is coming in the next few months. After Peter's great confession of Jesus as the Christ in chapter 8, Jesus began to teach His disciples that He was going to be rejected, to suffer, to die, and to rise again. Each time Jesus tells His disciples this plain truth about what it means for Him to be the Christ, He then teaches them about what it means to be His disciple, His follower. Here in chapter 9 after Jesus again teaches them about His death and resurrection in verse 31, He then teaches them about true discipleship, that true followers of Jesus will be humble servants.

In response John brings up what seems to be a totally unrelated subject, how the disciples tried to prevent someone who was not one of them (Mk 9:38). Jesus answers this by relating it to principles of discipleship in verses 39-50. This is a very unique portion of Scripture. It is full of graphic language, dramatic acts, and severe warnings. It really is a passage about radical discipleship.

Jesus is calling for radical discipleship. I think this is a message that is highly necessary for the day in which we live when under the name of Christianity often there is so much superficiality.

Someone told me last week that these last few messages from Mark's Gospel were "moving us out of our comfort zone." That's right! The Word of God will comfort the afflicted, but it will also afflict the comfortable. Like the disciples, the modern church has become far too comfortable in this world. Jesus knew that His men needed to be shocked into becoming the men He had saved them to be. He knows the same thing about us.

Left to ourselves, we will amount to nothing. Therefore, the Lord has to come along every now and then and shake us up to get our attention. That is what these verses are designed to do. I find here that there are calls for four aspects of radical discipleship: radical acceptance, radical purity, and radical sacrifice.

38 Now John answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us."

39 But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me."

40 "For he who is not against us is on our side."

41 For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."

42 "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea."

43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched--

44 where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.'

- 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched--
- 46 where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' and all of Mark 9:46.
- 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire--
- 48 where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.'
- 49 "For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt.
- 50 Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another."

I. Radical Acceptance vs. 38-41.

Jesus had just spoken to the disciples about acting in His name. In verse 37 He said, **"Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me."** Jesus was talking about serving people, especially a child, with no thought of what we are going to get out of it. Serving others in Jesus' name, that is true greatness. John is still thinking exclusively. He assumes that only the twelve disciples are authorized to act in Jesus' name. So in verse 38 he says to Jesus, **"Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us."** If Jesus says it doesn't matter which of the twelve disciples is the greatest, John at the least thinks it must matter who is part of Jesus' inner circle and who's not. I think John expects Jesus to endorse the exclusive actions of the disciples.

Jesus, though, has no problem with those outside His inner circle casting out demons or doing other works of power in His name. Verse 39, **"But Jesus said, 'Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me'."** Someone who is able to do a work of power in Jesus' name quite clearly is not an enemy of Jesus.

The Lord says it plainly in verse 40, **"For he who is not against us is on our side."** And even the smallest service done in Jesus' name is important. In verse 41 Jesus said, **"For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."**

Jesus' disciples had just been arguing about who was the greatest, about who would receive the greatest reward. Jesus says that doing something "great," like casting out demons, is not something to measure your group by. If you really want to talk about greatness, then realize that something small, like the simplest gesture of hospitality, qualifies as greatness. If you really insist on talking about greatness, then know this: anyone can be great. You can't be greater than the one who does the smallest thing.

II. Radical Purity vs. 42-48

Remember that Jesus speaks these words with his arms still around the little child. Jesus said a child illustrated the kind of people we are to serve in this world, v. 36-37. In this verse, Jesus uses that same child to teach us another

important lesson. Not only are we to serve the least among us willingly; we are also commanded to protect the least among us from sin.

Jesus teaches in verse 42, **"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea."**

The phrase "cause to stumble" means "to scandalize". It has the idea "of leading someone else into sin." Jesus says that it is a very serious matter when we cause one of God's children to fall into sin.

Jesus says that you would be better off having a "millstone" tied around your neck and being cast into the sea. The word translated "millstone" literally means "a donkey stone". It referred to a stone used to grind grain that was so heavy a donkey was tied to it to turn it.

If such a stone were tied around your neck and you were thrown into the sea, you would be pulled to the bottom and would surely drown. The image is very graphic! Jesus is describing a death as horrible as any that can be imagined. Yet, He says it would be preferable for a person to die this way than for them to cause one of His little one to fall into sin.

O. Henry wrote a short story in which he told of a little girl whose mother had died. When the father would come home from work, he would fix their meal, then he would sit down with his paper and pipe, put his feet up on the mantle, and read. The little girl would come and say, "Father, would you play with me?" And he would say, "No, I'm too tired, I'm too busy. Go out in the street and play."

This went on for so long that finally the little girl grew up on the streets, and became what we would call a "streetwalker," a prostitute. Eventually she died, and when, in the story, her soul appeared at the gates of heaven, Peter said to Jesus, "Here's this prostitute. Shall we send her to hell?" Jesus said, "No, no; let her in. But go find the man who refused to play with his little girl, and send him to hell."

How do believers cause others to stumble? There are many way! Let me share a few with you today.

Ø By directly tempting others to sin - This kind of behavior is seen throughout the Bible – Eve, Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Pharisees. Ill. Matt. 5:32; The church at Pergamum, Rev. 2:14; the church at Thyatira, Rev. 2:20. (Ill. One spouse leading the other to cheat on taxes; a Christian man seducing a Christian woman or vice-versa)

Ø People can be led into sin indirectly – When we treat others in insensitive; unloving and unkind ways we can cause them to sin through rebellion. We can spark an angry reaction in people, or we can cause them to throw up their hands in frustration.

Ø People can be led into sin by a wicked example – If a believer who is weak in the faith sees a respected believer commit a sin, that younger believer could fall into sin by following that evil example. (Ill. 1 Thes. 5:22; 1 Tim. 4:12)

Ø People can be led into sin because other believers fail to lead them into righteousness – In other words, we fail to disciple them, and as a result, they remain weak and never grow up in the Lord. We fail to give them the spiritual food they need and they starve in the midst of plenty!

Ø People can be led away through false doctrine – Teachers of false religion lead people astray. When they do, they are committing a two-fold sin. First, they sin because they follow false religion. Second, they sin because they lead those that follow them away into Hell.

I am a man, but I am also a parent. I can forgive a slight against me pretty easily, but you touch one of my children and I have a hard time with that. But, I am in good company! God says that the person who offends one of His little ones is in big trouble! Whether we see it or not, this is a very serious warning!

This leads Jesus to teach about personal purity. These next few verses are very graphic in nature and they offer a stern warning to both believers and unbelievers.

Jesus refers to the “hand” the “foot” and the “eye”. These are our three problem areas when it comes to dealing with sin. The “hand” refers to “the things we do.” The “foot” refers to “the places we go.” The “eye” refers to “the things we see or desire to have.” These three words describe all the areas where we humans are tempted to sin, 1 John 2:16; Gen. 3:6.

Jesus says that if the hand, the foot or the eye causes us to sin, we are to take drastic action and amputate that body part, so that we will not give in to its desires.

Let me just say that Jesus is speaking figuratively here. He is using hyperbole. Jesus is using exaggeration to emphasize the horrible nature of sin. He is not commanding us to mutilate our bodies.

In the early days of the church some men took these words literally. One of the more notable examples was Origen of Alexandria. He had such a problem with sexual lust that he had himself emasculated to get rid of that temptation.

What Origen discovered is what you and I need to know today. No amount of surgery on the outside will cure the problem on the inside! Man does not need a change on the outside; man needs a change of heart! Man needs to be born again. All our sins proceed from the heart, Mark 7:18-23.

What Jesus is talking about in these verses is how we are to deal with our sins. When temptation to sin comes into our lives, we must deal with it immediately, harshly, ruthlessly, consistently and decisively! Sin should receive no quarter in your life or mine!

If a relationship is leading you into temptation and sin, you need to sever that relationship! If some activity is leading you into temptation and sin, you need to cut that out of your life immediately.

The right eye, the right foot and the right hand represented a person’s best. The right eye spoke of one’s best vision. The right foot spoke of one’s best walk. The right hand spoke of one’s best skills. Jesus is simply saying that we must be willing to give up the most precious, the most valuable things we have in our effort to avoid sin.

Jesus warns His disciples that nothing in this world is so valuable that it is worth going to Hell over. Yes, Jesus believed in Hell! His references to Hell are very graphic. Let’s examine what Jesus said.

The word “**hell**” comes from the word “Gehenna”. Gehenna was a place in the Valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem. In ancient times it had been a site devoted to

pagan worship. It was here that the people of Israel had sacrificed their children to the false gods of the Canaanites. King Josiah tore down the pagan altars and desecrated the site, turning it into a garbage dump.

By Jesus' day Gehenna was a horrible place! Fires burned there continually. Wild dogs roamed the dump, feeding on the carcasses of animals and criminals. The insane and other outcasts lived there as well. It was a fitting description of what Hell will be like.

Jesus is trying to teach His men that even if radical surgery is required for a person to be saved, that surgery is necessary and warranted. The Lord wants people to know that there is a horrible place called Hell and that lost people will spend eternity there.

Jesus says that Hell will be characterized by two terrible realities. Jesus quotes Isa. 66:24 and tells us that people in Hell will suffer in two terrible ways.

First, in verse 48, "**Their worm does not die...**" This phrase has been interpreted many ways over the years. Some think it refers to actual worms that will gnaw on the body in Hell. I do not think that is what He is talking about! Others think Jesus is talking about the soul. They feel that He is saying those who go to Hell will live forever. They do, but I do not think that is what He is talking about here. When Jesus says, "**Their worm does not die...**" I think He is speaking about the internal torments man will suffer in Hell. When the rich man died and went to Hell in Luke 16, we are told that he had an active and accurate memory, Luke 16:25. Those in Hell will remember every opportunity they had to be saved. They will remember the love and grace of God. They will remember the cross and the empty tomb. They will be reminded for all eternity that they did not have to be in that horrible place.

Second, Jesus says, "**And the fire is not quenched.**" This phrase refers to the physical agonies of Hell. The torments of Hell are real and they are horrible. They are unceasing and they are unimaginable. Jesus spoke about hell as:

Ø A Place Of Punishment - Matt. 25:41

Ø A Place Of Fire - Luke 16:24; Mark 9:43-44

Ø A Place Of Thirst – Luke 16:24-25

Ø A Place Of Pain - Luke 16:24,25,28; Rev.14:10-11

Ø A Place Of Divine Wrath – 2 Thes. 1:8-9

Ø A Place Of Frustration And Anger - Matt.13:42; Matt. 24:51

Hell is real! If you do not know Jesus as your Savior, you will spend eternity there. It does not have to be that way! Above all, Hell is avoidable! You do not have to go there! You can be saved, if you will come to Jesus!

The point Jesus is making is that sin is not something to be toyed with! You may think you are its master, in reality you are its servant. When it has ruined and taken all you have, it will cast you into Hell and torment you there for eternity. Whatever your particular poison is, it is not worth going to Hell over! You would be far better off to live this life denying yourself the "pleasures of sin for a season" so that you might go to Heaven and avoid Hell.

III. Radical Sacrifice v. 49-50

The next two verses are among the most difficult in the New Testament to interpret. But, I think we can understand what they are saying to us, if we take them in their natural context. In all of these verses Jesus is talking to His disciples. In verse 42, Jesus warns His people against offending weaker believers. In verses 43-48, Jesus warns His people to avoid the terrible and tragic consequences of sin. He is not saying that a believer can lose his or her salvation; He is saying that sin is a destroyer and that it must be handled ruthlessly. In these verses, Jesus warns His people that serving Him will require sacrifice and purity. Let me explain.

In verse 49, Jesus says, "**For everyone will be seasoned with fire.**" Literally it is "for everyone shall be **salted** with fire." As you know, fire is a purifier. Fire is a cleansing agent. Jesus is telling that those who would be His servants can expect to be cleansed through fire. God sometimes allows us to go through fiery trials in an effort to make us more like Jesus. (2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Thes. 3:3-4; Acts 14:22; 1 Pet. 4:12-13).

Then Jesus says, "**and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt.**" Again it is literally, "and every sacrifice shall be **salted** with salt". I believe this is a reference back to the sacrifices of the Old Testament. When a sacrifice was offered, it was to be offered with salt, Lev. 2:13; Eze. 43:25. Salt, like fire, was a purifying agent and it made the sacrifice acceptable to the Lord. Jesus is telling His followers that we are to be a willing sacrifice, giving up all of our rights to serve Him and others in this life, Rom. 12:1-2.

In verse 50, Jesus says, "**Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another**"

Salt was a valuable commodity in that day. The ancient Jews had a saying that went, "The world cannot survive without salt." The word "salary" comes from the Latin word "salarium". It referred to the fact that often Roman soldiers were paid their wages in salt, which could be traded ounce for ounce for gold. Salt was also necessary for life in the days before refrigeration. Meat would quickly spoil, but if meat was pickled in a salt brine solution, it would keep for long periods of time. Salt was also good because it made the unpalatable tasty. Some foods just need a little salt to make them edible. Salt was often placed into wounds to help them heal and stop the spread of corruption. Salt was a preservative, a flavoring, an antiseptic, and a currency.

Salt is good, but if the salt loses its saltiness what good is it? Salt in our day is pure and it does not lose its flavor. In that day, it was often contaminated with other minerals and after a short time salt would develop a terrible flavor. Salt in that condition was good for nothing, but it was to be thrown away.

Jesus then says, "**Have salt in yourselves...**" In this context to have salt means to be genuine. Jesus is telling us that if we are truly the children of God, then we should act like and live like children of God. How do we do that?

1. We do not cause others to stumble and fall into sin.
2. We avoid sin at all costs in our own lives.
3. We willingly embrace the salt of a sacrificial life and the persecution that comes with it.

When we do this, we will demonstrate another quality of salt. Salt creates thirst. When believers are salty and walking as Jesus would have them walk, they

create a thirst for the things of God in the lives of the lost around them. The best witness for Jesus Christ is a salty Christian who lives like Jesus, 1 John 2:6.

Like salt, we are to make this world thirsty for Jesus. Like salt, we are to make this world a better, more appetizing place to live. Like salt, we are to help stop the spread of corruption in the world.

Jesus closes this chapter by saying “and have peace one with another.” You will remember that the disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest among them, v. 34. And, they had rebuked a man who was working in Jesus’ name, just because he was not one of their number, v. 38.

I think the Lord is saying that His people should not be worried about who is the greatest, and His people should not be rebuking others. God’s people should be in the business of examining their own hearts. We should “salt” ourselves and judge our own faults!

It is easy for us to lose our saltiness and become useless to the Lord. We need to remember that it glorifies God when His people live lives of commitment and character day by day. It also glorifies Him when we forget about who might be the greatest among us and prove that we are His by loving one another and by being at peace one with another!

Where does this message find you today?

Are you lost in sin and headed to Hell? Would you like to be saved? You can be if you will come to Jesus. The Lord can help you, get to Him!

Are you struggling to live the right kind of life and having trouble? The Lord can help you, get to Him!

Do you need to be more salty? The Lord can help you, get to Him!

Is the Lord purifying you through trials? The Lord can help you, get to Him!

Are you leading people to the Lord, or away from Him? The Lord can help you, get to Him!

Let’s obey His voice as He speaks to hearts today.