

Mark 9:38-50
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 3, 2021

Playing hooky from church has long been a concern. Already in Bible times was the plea made, "Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing." Yet I remember vividly a professor telling us, "Don't be surprised when people don't come. Be surprised that they do come and that some keep coming. After all, look who they have to listen to." He was making a point that fit with what we heard last week about humility. Never get the idea that they're coming because they want to hear you, that you are such a great or clever speaker.

Jesus didn't have that problem. He was the Master Teacher, adept at using illustrations from everyday life to convey understanding of spiritual truths. He could read hearts and knew exactly what people needed to hear. He challenged his hearers and their presuppositions. His words called for deep reflection. Some were like what we hear from him today: downright puzzling, causing us to ask
HE SAID WHAT?

John interrupted the Savior's teaching about greatness coming through serving with a question. He wanted to clarify a recent action. "We saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." Was that right? Jesus gave the Twelve the ability to do that when he sent them out on a preaching mission, but that man wasn't part of their group. He was out of line, wasn't he? Yet he was helping people. The men were accustomed to a restrictive priesthood for the chosen nation in the Old Testament. It was easy to think they should also be exclusive.

The Savior's response disagreed. The man was operating in connection with the name of Jesus. He gave him honor. It was a positive action. "Whoever is not against us is for us." Another time he made a similar statement in the reverse: "Whoever is not for us is against us." There is no neutral. You are either one or the other. This man is on our side. He is doing OK. In today's First Lesson there were two men who were on the approved list of elders but missed the meeting. Were they wrong to prophesy? Moses had said, "I wish all the Lord's people would prophesy."

Both cases were different than opposing a false message. God regularly and forcefully condemns changing his teaching. In our Sunday Bible class we are studying Paul's letter to the Galatians. Some had come in teaching a different gospel, one based on works. Paul bluntly stated, "Let him be eternally

condemned!" A strong statement, but God's truth was at stake. We must stand apart from false teaching and not join in spiritual activities that express a oneness that does not exist. Yet we do not torch or destroy the buildings of other denominations in town. We recognize that wherever God's Word is at work, believers will be present. It's not just members of our church body that will be in heaven.

So we will show care and concern for others. Jesus referred to giving a cup of water "in my name," that is, because you are a believer, and receiving a reward. The reward is not salvation—that's a free gift you already have from him—but some other recognition. It's still an undeserved gift, beyond what to expect from such a simple act. We are to treat everyone with kindness. Each individual is someone for whom Jesus died.

We have a special concern for little believers. Jesus warned against causing one of them to sin. The word, which we have heard a number of times this summer, is to scandalize, to trip the trigger of a trap. It is a fatal action, causing the loss of faith. The millstone to be used was the large stone turned by an ox or a mule to grind grain. Hang it around the guilty person's neck and throw him in the sea. He said what? That's certain death! That's better than the penalty for the action, which is hell. He hits between the eyes parents, teachers, pastors, coaches and other mentors. They have an important responsibility and exert a lifelong, even eternal, impact.

"These little ones" can also indicate little in faith such as a new Christian or a struggling believer. We all may influence them by our words and examples. Take to heart the warning Jesus sounded.

II.

It doesn't get easier as Jesus continued and addressed our personal spiritual condition. "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." He repeated the instruction regarding your foot and eye. How gruesome, even gory! What is he telling us? Should we register for surgery? Amputation is at times necessary if a limb is turning gangrene, in order to save a person's life. Here Jesus calls for doing it if the body part causes you to sin. He used the same word, to trip the fatal trap. Think about the situation in taking the action literally. Is stealing prevented if you cut off the offending hand? No—you could still use the other one. Would coveting or greed end if you had no hands left? Or would lust and adultery stop if removing both eyes left you blind? No again.

Drastic action is called for because of the drastic results. Sin brings a penalty, going to hell, as Jesus noted. That is the place of eternal punishment. It brings

separation from God and his goodness. Instead there is the fullness of his fury against sin. "The fire is not quenched," he quoted from the Old Testament. A momentary touch of a hot burner on the stove brings pain. Serious burns require painful grafts and time for healing. What if the burning were constant? Like much dealing with eternity, it is beyond our experience. People in Jesus' day had an idea from the word he used for hell. "Gehenna" was a site outside Jerusalem where the idol Moloch was once worshiped with child sacrifices. Because it had such a horrid connection it was not fit for other use; it became a garbage dump. Fires burned continuously, like the outside torment of hell. The Isaiah quote also pictured the inside: "Their worm does not die." Maggots were eating away at the rotting refuse. We realize hell is awful, something to be avoided at all costs.

So action is needed. The heart is the key. It would be worth it to maim your body if that would keep you out of hell, but it wouldn't stop your sinning. We need a transplant, a new heart. It happens by the action of the Holy Spirit. He works through God's Word. Its message of law exposes and condemns our sin. We need to bring it under control. But all the law in the world won't stop sin. Oh, it may scare us into right actions for a while, but it doesn't change the heart.

The effective tool is the gospel. It tells us of Jesus Christ and what he did for us. It reveals how a loving God couldn't see his creatures die in misery so he satisfied his justice by sending his own Son. Jesus left heaven and came to earth as one of us. He faced temptation and conquered it. He shouldered our sins and went to the cross, where he paid for them all as he endured those horrible pains of hell. He has brought us peace with God. We do not need to fear the unquenchable fire or gnawing maggots. We have heaven instead with all its joys, security and beauty. That's an even more awesome, "He said what?" as we hear, "Come, you who are blessed by my father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." What's more, we have assurance for this life that we will have his provision of our needs and his protective, loving care and guidance.

It is then well worth it to cut off not hands or feet but earthly indulgences in sinful pleasures. Do what it takes not to lose faith. If you can't avoid pornography, stop searching online, looking at provocative magazines, watching those movies or shows that incite improper desires. If you have difficulty with gossiping, get off the phone or social media. If your weakness is gambling, don't go to the casino; cut ties with your bookie or betting site. It's worth it.

III.

Of course, we need something else to replace those activities. Jesus tells us to use lots of salt. He said what? Aren't we supposed to limit the intake of salt in our diet? It does have good purposes. In the old times lacking the refrigeration we

have, salt was a preservative for food. It also enhances the flavor. Ever forget to add the salt in a recipe? You know its value.

Salt can cause a burning sensation on a wound. We have a saying about rubbing salt in a wound. That's painful. Too much salt also isn't pleasurable. Years ago at a spaghetti supper I saw a shaker that I thought was Parmesan cheese and dumped a large amount on my son's serving. One bite soon revealed it was salt and halted intake.

We put salt on sidewalks and roads in the winter to melt ice, but must also be careful with it so we don't damage vegetation.

The salt Jesus is talking about is God's Word. It burns out the evil desires in our hearts that entrap us and others in sin. It prevents moral rotting as we admonish sin. God's salt provides wholesome flavor as it impacts life in society. Our Lord Jesus told us that Christians are the salt of the earth. Our use of salt affects relationships. We have "peace with each other." That comes as we share the gospel, which changes hearts, bringing God's love that overwhelms people more with God's goodness and produces the desire to follow his ways.

There's another, "He said what?" statement in this text. Jesus spoke of salt losing its saltiness. How can that happen? It would require a change in its chemical composition and then it would no longer be salt. That can't happen with God's Word, which is unchangeable like he is. However, our attitudes and use of it can change, which brings problems. If we neglect God's Word it is soon forgotten, does not influence our lives and we lose faith. If we ignore what it says or contradict it, it cannot serve its purpose. When we look to our own ideas or popular opinion for standards of right and wrong, we also miss out on the solution for sin that God has provided as we don't see the need for a Savior. If we look to ourselves or any other way of salvation than Jesus, we are lost. Instead, stay faithful. Hear gladly the good news of Jesus and his forgiveness. Turn to the Word for guidance on how to thank him for all he has done. Follow his path. Use lots of the salt of the Word.

Jesus certainly grabs our attention with the statements we heard today. Ponder them; take them to heart. Enjoy the blessings personally and share them gladly. That is our draw for coming to his house. Hear the Word of Jesus and receive its blessings.