

Mark 9:38-50

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.'* 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."

Have you ever been reading your Bible, or reading a good book, or listening to a sermon and all of a sudden it hits you- **I am that person**. I am the person who has done this horrible thing. But I either **did not know** it was horrible, or I was **successfully dodging the blame for it**. And then the Holy Spirit brings it fully to your attention. The Holy Spirit does **to us** what Nathan **was used to do to David**. He puts our sin in a way that we see it for what it really is. And we are pierced to the soul with our awful behavior or thoughts.

That is what we see this morning in the disciple John. John has just listened to Jesus talking about what is **really great** and **valuable** and **congruent** with kingdom living. And it is humility and service. The two are logically hooked together. If you regard yourself as the least of a group, you will see that everyone else is worthy of your service.

As John listens to what Jesus says, he begins thinking about his interaction with someone who was not part of their group. He was not part of their club. He was not of their denomination. He was not of their theological inclination. I think you get what I mean. He wasn't one of them, so he must not be important. And what John does is awful. It made perfect sense at the time. He would think he was

being perfectly reasonable and appropriate. He probably thought he was guarding Christ's interests. He was certainly protecting **his own** interests. He certainly didn't want **one more person** to compete with for the top seat. From a "climbing the corporate ladder" kind of perspective, this competitor would be at the lowest rung. With that kind of mindset, you can treat a person awful and it is appropriate.

But Christ has just turned that perspective on its head. He was just talking about **choosing to be** the least esteemed participant and the lowest servant. And without a doubt the Holy Spirit pierced John's soul. He showed John great clarity into the wrong that he had committed. But just to make sure that John's perception is accurate, John brings it to Christ's attention. He clearly wanted to know what Christ would say about this.

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."** There are two things, right off the bat, that we would do well to follow John's example. First he listened to Christ in such a way that Christ's words held authority over John's life. He listened deeply and thoughtfully. He allowed Christ's words to direct his thoughts. He allowed them to evaluate his life. He didn't shut them off when they started to meddle in his preferred affairs, when they started to offend his pride. John was actually listening humbly. What a wonderful example for us. We would do well to live in this same mentality all the time. We should live in a way that we welcome the word of God to do its job, to separate bone and marrow.

Hebrews 4:12-13

¹² **For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.** ¹³ **And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give account*.**

The second thing he did is **he did not** trust his perception. He brought his perception to the master. He confessed his actions, in this case publicly, and sought Christ's reaction. How wise we are when we do the same. Do you feel guilty about something? Are you uncertain of something you are doing? But you keep it hid because you might not want to know what God thinks of it. Because if you know, you know you will have to change?

Well today is the day to do business with that doubtful thing. Bring it to Christ's attention. Get help from someone you trust if you must. But don't allow it to fester in the background. John, in our text, does it perfectly. He brings his life into the open in front of Christ and does business with what he has done.

Now the text says that John, and whoever was with him, forbade the man from casting out demons.

Let's think about that for a minute.

First, who gave John the authority to do such a thing? We don't see that anywhere in the pages of scripture.

How much damage is done by people who assume they have authority to speak for God that they really don't have? How much damage is done by people who seek to rule churches with authority that scripture does not give them? We all know of leaders, or people who pretend to be leaders, who take on all kinds of things in the name of Christ, as if the rest of the church is supposed to get in line and support their self-created programs. And pretty soon those leaders are spewing hatred toward the body because the body is not following his or her marching orders.

John isn't the only one who was guilty of this kind of sin, this presumption of authority. And it is always destructive to the true body of Christ.

Then look what John tells the man. Stop casting out demons in Jesus name. Now think about this. They see this man walk up to a demon possessed man and he invokes Jesus' name in casting out that demon. And we have nothing here to show us that the demon did not come out. He was probably doing this ministry successfully.

So the work of demons was being thwarted and Christ was getting the credit. The bad was being stopped and the good was getting the credit. What is not good about that? Why in the world would you stop such a thing? Just the least bit of thought would tell you that these demons were not coming out of these people because of **the man doing it**. They were coming out because of the overwhelming authority of Christ. This wasn't a magic trick. It was a spiritual transaction. What would make the disciples think that they should stop it? Because he does not follow us. He is not one of us. He is not one of the cabinet members in Christ's inner circle. So somehow he is not important enough to be doing this ministry. But the disciples think themselves important enough to make him stop.

When we look at it in this way, it is much easier to understand what Christ says next. What he is saying is a death blow to the kind of mindset that John and the disciples are displaying. It is also a deathblow to how our flesh responds in most situations.

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.**

Christ is about to open the disciples eyes to just how wide the kingdom of God really is. Remember, they are looking at it as a movement. In a movement there are those in the know, the leaders, and then there are those who join up and follow along. But what Christ is describing is a kingdom. There are people in this kingdom and there are people who are outside. Being in the kingdom is everything. Every member is vitally important to God. Being outside of this kingdom is devastating. It is eternally dismal.

So what Christ is doing is not about getting the crowd's approval into such a frenzy that he can manipulate them for some good end. No. What He is doing is filling the kingdom of God with people who are being prepared to live with God forever.

So Christ starts by saying, "**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.**

These people who are doing these miracles are choosing to place themselves on Christ's side. They would look foolish in saying, oh no, I don't think Christ has any spiritual authority after they had just watched demons flee by the simple mention of Christ's name. If nothing else, people like this end up siding for Christ, whether they are of his kingdom or not. And the work they are doing has value.

Do you remember when Paul met up with something similar?

Philippians 1:15-18

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from good will: ¹⁶ The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; ¹⁷ but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁸ What then? Only *that* in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

Paul recognized that not everyone doing a good spiritual activity is actually a member of the kingdom. But if the gospel goes forward, that is what he ultimately cares about. So whether they are friends or foes, there is a good outcome.

So Christ is saying, let them go. Don't stop them. Don't interfere. They are not doing any harm, and they are not likely soon to turn against us. Pragmatically, if nothing else, they will endorse us rather than attack us.

But what Christ says next opens up his conversation. He is expanding on how the kingdom really works. He says:

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.

Now Christ is telling them what is going on behind the scenes. There are those who are **in the kingdom**. And **they are the ones** who are going to be rewarded.

And what will they be rewarded for? Do they need to be one of the 12 disciples? Do they need to be going town to town preaching the gospel?

No. There will be people who are as much in this kingdom as you are. And this is how they will display their love for Christ. They will see you ministering for me. They will see that you have a simple need for water. And they will bring it to you. And they will not be bringing it to you just because **they are wonderful people** who love the satisfaction of giving water away. They will bring it to you, because **they are one of you!** They are sharing your kingdom with you. They will do it because of **your affiliation with me**, Christ is telling these guys.

He is telling them, they are **one of you**. And you are **one of them**. There isn't this **us/them** perspective that you have been thinking about this from. There is an us/them. But the **us** is those who are headed to an eternal reward. And the **them** is those who are headed to eternal punishment.

And any one of the "**us**" is just as important as **any other**. They are just as important **as you**. That is the effect that these words would have had on these guys. Those who are serving me are **one of you**. **We are one**. And the work **they do** will be rewarded in the same way as the **work you are doing**.

They share the same motivation and they share the same reward. The sameness is what is being emphasized here.

Then Jesus goes on to issue a warning. Now again, we have to keep this in context. John has just confessed to excluding someone from the fellowship of Christ and His ministry. He has taken this upon himself to do. It dawns on John that it is a bad thing he did. But Christ is about to show him just HOW BAD it was. It is the kind of thing that is very awful.

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.**

First Christ was talking about children. He is now no longer talking about children. Now Christ is talking about **His children**, about followers of His.

The word stumble means to trip someone to fall, or in this example to fall into sin. Evidently what John did was close to this kind of sin. It was **of the same kind**. It probably did not go to the degree that Christ is talking about, but it would have if left unchecked.

How many people do you know who have suffered greatly because the church did not treat them the way they should have? I have a friend who knew that his father was abusing children but the leadership would not listen to him. They suspected that it was true, but they did not want to do business with it. We have known people who have been excluded from fellowship for any number of things that Christ would not have required of them. I am sure that we can expand on the application of the principle presented this morning. But I want to make

something very clear. In the context, the most clear expression of the sin Christ is talking about is in the incident that John had described. That is the context. We can't miss this point.

Jesus is going to go on talking about the seriousness of sin. But the context is not just garden variety sins, or sins in general, or even the sin we might, most knowingly, wrestle with. He is talking about sins against one another. He is talking about sins that harm brothers and sisters.

I was brought up in church. I seem to have spent a lot of that time getting spanked in the basement for behavior I am told fully warranted such treatment. But somehow over the years I picked up that Christianity is primarily between Jesus and me. So when I took communion, I searched my soul for ways that I had sinned directly against Christ. And when I read this passage, sins that I struggled with privately between me and God were the ones that came to mind. It took me a long time to see that I was missing the bigger picture. I was missing much of what is in God's heart.

The sin in the communion passage that should be most soul searched is the sin of failing to treat the body of Christ well. Our passage this morning is the same thing. It is a huge deal to God when we do harm to one of His children. Those terrorists who persecute believers have no idea what wrath of God they will face. It will be awful for them. But this passage is not addressing them. This passage is addressing us when we start getting uppity. This passage is talking about **us** when we don't care how what we do affects our brothers and sisters. It is talking about excluding brothers or sisters or treating them in such a way that invites them to fail or fall. It may be just as thoughtless as John's sin in our text. We might even think we are doing some noble thing. But we aren't.

Christ has appointed us, every one of us, to look after His people. If you are a believer, this is your job. You don't need to be in leadership. Christ told every follower of his to love one another. Every epistle tells us the same thing.

We are responsible to look out for our brother and sister's good, even when it is at our expense.

I want to say something this morning that is a bit out of the norm. As I was thinking about an application of this text, I immediately thought of dating as it is commonly practiced in our culture. It is one of the greatest violations of this passage that I can think of. Young men and young women get together and try out relationships. And even when there is no **physical** intimacy, there is often an **emotional** intimacy and expectation created that is devastating when it fails to end in marriage. There are divisions created in the body of Christ and they are commonly treated like they are something that is **unavoidable**. I cannot think of a more common violation of the words of Christ here than this practice that happens in most any youth group.

What is **unusual** is that I want to **commend** our young people for breaking that mold. Oh, I am sure that they have not done it perfectly. But from what I have seen they have, for the most part, taken something that our generation failed at dramatically and continually, and they learned from our mistakes. The young men have protected the young women from others and from themselves. And the young women have not walked blindly into relationships. I cannot express how deeply thankful I am to see this in action.

We see from our text just what a huge thing it is to do harm to God's people. We see what a huge thing it is to sin in such a way as to cause one of them to fall into sin.

Our first reaction to that is probably, boy I would never do such a thing. And we would probably be wrong.

How about our hypocrisy? How about when we talk the party line but live a powerless life? How about when we tell people to live a certain way and they see evidence every day that we have no intentions to live like we preach? Is that not the best way to undo the faith of our children? Will they not have obstacle after obstacle to overcome due to our example?

How about our expression of our freedoms? Do we consider what effect we will have on weaker brothers or sisters? Or do we not care because we want what we want. And since an argument cannot be made to prove that what we are doing is forbidden, we take no consideration on how it affects brothers or sisters.

How about our failure to intentionally include outsiders? Do we not have opportunities to include people into the world we minister to, but we don't due to apathy or laziness or discomfort?

I am not trying to say that the sins that we commit that are **between ourselves and God** are not big deals. They most assuredly are. And we must deal with them. But from what I can see, the sins that Christ is most vehemently against are **those who do harm to our fellow believers**, whether by commission or omission.

.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.'**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.'**

Like I said, I always applied this to personal sins. But that is not the context. The context is sins against brothers and sisters. It is that big of a deal. But I think it is safe to extend the application to anything that would cause us or someone else to fall.

Jesus applied this to the hand the foot and the eye. It isn't hard to see that if we eliminated all sins that do not include one of these three, we would be doing pretty well. Where we go, what we touch, and what we see includes a large portion of the sins where we could harm others or ourselves. Speech and hearing would be difficult to remedy with an amputation, so that might be why it was left out. But we get the idea.

No sin is worth missing out on heaven. No sin is worth going to hell for.

Sin offers us pleasure now and suffering later.

God offers us suffering now and pleasure later.

And God's deal is a wonderful deal. The devil's deal is a fool's deal.

Now, should we all run out and cut off a body part if we struggle with a sin? No and yes.

First we should apply everything scripture has to say about how to overcome sin.

We are given the word of God, we are given prayer, and we are given fellow believers who can help us. So we should exhaust those avenues first. Most of the time, if the tools we have been given don't work, nothing is going to. Because we are displaying just how much we love sin. But I believe that Jesus really did mean this literally, **if** such an act would truly accomplish such an end. It truly is better to lose any body part than to miss out on heaven. That is not to belittle the body parts, but it is to display just how much more important making it to heaven is. The problem is, most of our sins would not be stopped by amputating a limb. In fact, to stop most of them we would need to cut out our heart. Because that is where scripture says our problem is. So there are very few sins that would be stopped by an amputation. We must look deeper than that, to the things we believe.

One of our biggest problems here in America is that we are used to having both. We are used to having the best of this life and the best of the next. It won't be too long before that changes. It won't be too long before we will be forced to pay a price to follow Christ. And it isn't likely that they will amputate limbs, but we will have to sacrifice some things we have grown accustomed to. And it is going to be very hard. We will be making choices like the one posed in this text. Except that in this text, the price is something we choose for ourselves because we are trying to please Christ. In the future the world will exact a price from us for being **who we are**.

But in this text, we must get the point that sin is a huge deal. A hand or foot or eye is a small price to pay to stop sinning, especially when that sinner is harming a fellow believer.

Now, look at what Jesus says about hell.

The word he uses is *Gehenna*

The word comes from the Old Testament valley of Hinnom, just south of Jerusalem. It was there that Jewish people sacrificed infants to Molech by burning them to death. The place became known as Topheth which comes from the Hebrew word drum. Evidently drums were used to drown out the babies screams. Josiah ended those sacrifices, but eventually the land became a garbage dump. Animal carcasses were frequently thrown there.

Like any dump there was a continual fire and there were continual worms. Hence what Christ said-

hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched--⁴⁴ where *'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.*

This is a quote from Isaiah 66 where it says:

Isaiah 66:24

²⁴ **"And they shall go forth and look Upon the corpses of the men Who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, And their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."**

Jesus clearly taught that some will enter into eternal life and others will enter into eternal punishment. It is important that we don't **forget that** as we are going into our world. This is more than people having a right to whatever opinion they may want. There is a penalty that **we must make them aware of**, as well as a way to escape that penalty. Scripture provides us with both a proper **view of reward** and a **proper view of the penalty**. It gives us that perspective because we need it. We need to understand that if we love people, we will try to dissuade them from this punishment, even when they seem bound and determined to suffer it. **We** cannot ultimately **change their destination**, but we should be about the ministry to present them with the truth in such a way that they understand that we fully believe it.

The people in Jesus day were fully aware of this dump. To be cast into that dump would have been absolutely hideous. They would have dreaded it with great veracity and sought to avoid it. Jesus is making the point that it was worth doing anything to avoid being sent to eternal judgment. He put it in terms that everyone would understand.

So we are left with plenty of application this morning.

First-

Will we do business with our sin like John did?

Second-

Will we consider how we might be doing harm to fellow brothers and sisters, by our examples of faithlessness, by our expressions of freedom, or by harms we actually intend toward them?

And third-

We need to consider where our lives are headed. Are they headed toward God's eternal reward by receiving for ourselves what Christ did for us on the cross, or are we headed to hell for refusing to do business with what Christ did?