

Counting the Cost

- Mark 9:42-50
- Finish these statements for me. “If you dance to the music, you have to...” “A stitch in time...” “An ounce of prevention...” “Actions speak...” These are common idioms and proverbs that most of us know because they have been used for so long. It is believed that the statements Jesus makes in this passage were familiar to most of his listeners because he used them at different times and in different places. For example, Jesus spoke about plucking out an eye if it causes you to sin in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, after his teaching on adultery. Even the way Jesus phrased these proverbs about the hand, the foot and the eye are mnemonic devices, intended to help the listeners remember them as the strong warnings that they are. But the context of this passage in Mark’s gospel is important. Jesus has been talking to his followers about counting the cost of discipleship. Now he gives them a strong word on how we as followers must take great care in two ways, hurting others and hurting ourselves, and a final word on being salted with fire.
- **Hurting others (verse 42)**
- “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him that a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.” Remember, Jesus has just said that anyone who gives a cup of water to a follower of Christ gives it to Christ. Whatever we do to one who follows Christ, whether good or bad, we do to Christ. The phrase “little one” does not mean children, but anyone who follows Christ. All of us who believe are his children, and all of us as children are subject to stumbling if someone we love or respect leads us astray. The Greek word for “causes to sin” is *skandalizein*, and it means to cause to stumble or to offend. In this case, it means to cause someone who believes to turn away from God. That is a serious matter, and Jesus pulls no punches in describing the punishment. A millstone was huge and heavy and could only be powered by beasts of burden in order to grind grain as it rolled across it, and it would be a lot of trouble to tie one around someone’s neck. Jesus uses hyperbole here, as he will do in the next section, to make a point. A person thrown into the sea with a 3000-lb stone around his neck has no chance. James Edwards writes that this depiction of a watery grave “was a graphic way for Jesus to convey the finality of God’s wrath against spiritual pride.”
- In Revelation 18:21 we read, “Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, ‘So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more.’” This is the judgment that comes upon the world, represented by Babylon. But Jesus’ warning is to his disciples, to avoid at all costs leading other disciples away from the Lord. In the first century, Clement quoted this verse, Mark 9:42, as a warning against schisms in the church.
- Now listen, we have all done or said things to offend other believers, causing some to stumble. When we do, let’s be quick to repent and quick to ask the one we harmed for forgiveness. But this word has to do with leading others intentionally away from Christ. Maybe someone listening today is that little one who has been led astray. I plead with

you to draw near to Christ who will never let you stumble. I plead with you not to walk away from the truth, from the Word, or from the church.

- **Hurting ourselves (verses 43-48)**

- Now Jesus turns to the seriousness of discipleship and the deadliness of sin that can lead to destruction. He uses hyperbole here again to make a point. He is not advocating literally cutting off a hand or a foot or gouging out an eye. He is speaking in violent terms about a matter that cannot be trivialized. The matters of hands, feet and eyes are metaphors of what we do, where we go, and what we see. But these body parts are also precious to us. None of us wants to lose a hand or a foot. Or an eye! But as important as they are, they pale in comparison to the kingdom of God. Your right hand is not life. The kingdom of God is life. You can lose a foot, a hand, or an eye, or both of all three, and still enter the kingdom and have life everlasting.
- Now, what Jesus is really talking about here is counting the cost of discipleship and removing anything from our lives that is hindering our faith, drawing our hearts away from God, and leading us to destruction. William Hendricksen writes, "The surgery must be radical. Right at this very moment and without hesitation the scandalous picture should be destroyed, the soul-destroying film condemned, the sinister yet very intimate social tie broken, and the baneful habit discarded." He went on to say, "In the struggle against sin the believer must fight hard." That's what Paul meant when he wrote, "I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified." Saints, we must look at ourselves with clear eyes and examine our lives to see if there is anything that has become so important to us that we are willing to sin to get it, or sin to keep it. It will destroy us.
- I was intrigued by the news story several years ago of a man who raised and kept a four hundred-pound tiger in his New York City apartment. He brought home the tiger as a tiny cub and hand-fed it with a bottle. It soon took over the apartment. The man's mother, fearing for her safety, had to move out of the apartment, taking the rest of her children with her. As the tiger grew more powerful and harder to control, its owner was eventually forced to move out of the apartment as well. He would return daily and open the door just wide enough to throw in a raw chicken.
- Then there's the story of the man whose "pet" mamba snake bit him a half-dozen times on the forearm and wrist. It was discovered that this man possessed 26 poisonous snakes and 4 small crocodiles in his mobile home, along with his 4 small children.
- We shake our heads at those stories, but Jesus calls us to examine our own relationship with sin, which can be much more deadly.
- Verse 48 is a quote from Isaiah, and Jesus uses it here to give the strongest possible warning about ignoring or misjudging the call to discipleship. James Edwards writes, "(This verse) is a warning against rebellion against God and a summons to faith in the present, and especially to the ridding of whatever hindrances and impediments would prevent one from entering true life in the kingdom."

- **Salted with fire (verses 49-50)**

- Much has been written about these verses, and I do not claim to know the absolute way to interpret them. But I offer what I have learned from scholars I respect. Jesus now talks not about the fires of hell but the fires of purification. Most believe that the best way to understand these two verses is against the backdrop of temple sacrifices. Burnt offerings, a bull, a ram, a dove, were required to be wholly consumed by fire in order to be accepted. Salt, also, was a sign of the covenant. "It is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord for you and for your offspring with you," God spoke to Israel (Numbers 18:19). And salt was also required in sacrifices. "With all your offerings you shall offer salt." (Leviticus 2:13).
- What does that have to do with us? Paul wrote, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers (and sisters), by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." That's what Jesus is calling us to. Give our bodies to him day by day as living sacrifices. As James Edwards writes, "Discipleship to Jesus lays a total claim on one's life; in the language of sacrifice, it must be totally consuming or it is worthless." We are salted by fire, and that fire comes through trials and persecutions that are not pointless but are a painful necessity of discipleship. The follower of Jesus who takes up his cross daily and nurtures the faith of other believers, who willingly "lays aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely," (Hebrews 12) is a living sacrifice to God.
- Jesus says in verse 50 that salt is good. How valuable is salt? 57 million tons are required each year to fill our needs. Homer called it divine. Shakespeare mentioned salt 17 times in his plays. Leonard da Vinci wanted to send a subtle message perhaps about purity lost when he painted "The Last Supper." In that painting an overturned salt container is conspicuously placed before Judas. Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt. The word was "salarium," from which we get salary. And we know a person who doesn't work hard is sometimes said to be "not worth his salt."
- The followers of Jesus have already heard Jesus say at the Sermon on the Mount that they are the salt of the earth. But here and in that sermon, to be salt comes with a warning: "but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet." (Matthew 5:13)
- We are the salt of the earth. Salt gives flavor so we must make sure we stay salty! Hendricksen writes, "Ever so many people who never read the Bible are constantly reading us." When they read us, let them read truth. When they taste us, let them taste Christ and his love.
- Salt also preserves. It is for the sake of the future disciples of Jesus, that God tarries. We, the members of his church, are the preservative without which the earth would be rotten. So, as Paul said, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." (Colossians 4:6)
- Jesus closes with this: "Have salt in yourselves." Being a preservative means maintaining the purity of our lives. Have salt in yourselves. Then he says, "and be at peace with one another." Is this an afterthought? No! Christians loving one another while all of us are being tested by fiery trials of various kinds is a powerful testimony to the back-stabbing society in which we live. Jesus takes them back to where this discussion started. "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

(verse 35) A salty servant, that's what we are to be. Because when every one of us sees himself and herself as the servant of all, there will be peace.

- Prayer