

*The Fierce Fight against Sin: Mark 9:42-50*  
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Sunday, November 7, 2010

This morning we come to some very intense and very vivid words from the mouth of our Lord. They are shocking words. They are words that should make us tremble. They are words intended to motivate us in the fierce fight against sin. That is the point that I hope will impact each one of this morning. The fight against sin is fierce. It's not a game. It's not pretend. It's not like you become a Christian and then you don't have to worry about sin anymore. It's not like you can coast through life, living at peace with sin. That is *not* the Christian life. That is not Christianity. Our sins are forgiven (Yes!) when we repent and believe, but the fight against sin doesn't stop there. The fight begins there. Before you became a Christian, you didn't fight against sin. You were friends with sin. But when God regenerated you and gave you new desires, holy desires, godly desires, that's when the fierce fight of faith began. And that fierce fight will continue until the day we go to be with Jesus.

If any of you are living under the illusion that you can be a Christian and still be friends with sin, I hope that illusion will be shattered today. If you think that you can be a Christian and live at peace with sin, I pray that this text will cause that assumption to crumble. For true believers, there is not peace with sin. There is war against sin! There must be. We're not friends with sin. How could we be, if God has given us a new heart that yearns for Him?

There is a violent streak to Christianity. There is a fierce fight that we are called to engage in. But here's the all-important clarification—it's not a fight that we wage against other people. It's not violence toward someone else. It's a fight that is directed at my own sin.<sup>1</sup> The war that I need to be waging each day is the war against my sin. And the war you need to be in each day is the war against your sin.

Let's listen to how Jesus talks about this, and pay careful attention to the intensity and the vivid descriptions He gives in order to communicate the gravity of what He's saying.

It's helpful to remember the context of what is happening here in the latter part of Mark 9. In verse 33 Jesus and the disciples entered the house in Capernaum, and Jesus rebuked them for their argument about which of them was the greatest. In verse 35 Jesus redefined greatness for them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Then He took a child in His arms and used that as a teachable moment to illustrate what

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<sup>1</sup> See John Piper's sermons on Romans 8.

true greatness is like. In verses 38-41 Jesus dealt with the related issue of jealousy.

### **Don't Be a Cause of Sin (verse 42)**

And then we come now to verse 42 where He refers to these little ones who believe in me. It's not the same word that was used for "child" back in verse 37, but in a parallel passage in Matthew 18 the same word is used for both. So it seems that Jesus is continuing to refer to the child on His lap as a way of teaching about discipleship. Although when He says "one of these little ones who believes in me," I don't think His point is to limit this to children. The issue is not merely about causing children to sin. It's about causing any disciple to sin, anyone who is believing in Jesus, maybe especially those who are young in the faith.

Now listen to the grave warning. What a horrific image this is that Jesus paints in our minds. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." The Greek word for "cause to sin" is *skandalizō* (scandalize). This is a warning to those who might act in such a way or teach in such a way that causes sincere followers of Christ to stumble. And it's a very frightening warning. In Jesus' day they would grind grain with a millstone. These were not small millstones. Jesus says, "a great millstone," which is more literally translated, "the millstone of a donkey," referring to the kind of millstone that was so large it had to be turned by a strong beast of burden. Jesus describes taking that large millstone, hanging it around the person's neck, and casting them into the sea with no hope of survival. They would quickly be pulled under the water and to the bottom of the sea to die the agonizing death of asphyxiation.

Jesus says that dying in that way "would be better for him." What does that mean? Better than what? The implication is that dying at the bottom of the sea, if that's all that happened to you, would be better than facing the eternal judgment of the Almighty God. Jesus describes a most horrific kind of death, and the point is that hell is far worse than that, and much more to be feared.

Why do you think Jesus uses such graphic illustrations? Why doesn't He just say, "It's really bad to cause someone to sin"? I think these vivid descriptions show us the intensity and the passion of Jesus' teaching. Life and death are at stake here! Heaven and hell are in the balance. This isn't about playing games. It's not about cute little stories. Jesus isn't trying to entertain or amuse. He's proclaiming the truth, and the truth is often scary.

We also have to realize, though, that Jesus' goal is not merely to frighten us. But He has to frighten us with warnings as well as motivate us with wonderful promises, both of these being means of grace to us. This warning is meant to put the fear of the Lord in us, and that is a very good thing.

Who does this warning apply to? "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin . . ." Who is that? It could be any of us. I certainly feel the weight of this warning as one who stands up here and preaches each week. If I or any of the elders were to lead people astray through false teaching or immoral living, we would find ourselves in the crosshairs of this rebuke. The same would be true for those who teach and lead young people. It would certainly apply to all parents. And it applies generally to anyone who bears the Name of Christ.

We must all bear the Name of Christ with fear and trembling. If we are lax in our fight against sin, then we will cause others to sin. We can rejoice that there is grace and forgiveness for those times when we have stumbled and even been a cause for others stumbling, but we should never presume upon that grace. Let this be a warning to all of us to be fierce in our fight against sin—first of all because we must strive never to cause others to sin.

### **Don't Be Caught in Sin (verses 43-49)**

In verses 43 and following, Jesus broadens the application to the fight against sin in general. Not merely with a view to how it affects others, but focusing on the eternal things that are at stake in whether or not we fight this fierce battle. Again the illustrations are vivid and gruesome, and the intensity and passion of Jesus' teaching continues. Verse 43, 45, and 47 are all parallel statements. In the first statement, the instrument of sin is the hand. Then it's the foot. And finally, the eye.

There are a couple other places where these different parts of the body are mentioned as instruments of sin. Proverbs 6:16-19 says this: "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers." Job also says, "I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin? . . . If I have walked with falsehood and my foot has hastened to deceit; (Let me be weighed in a just balance, and let God know my integrity!) if my step has turned aside from the way and my heart has gone after my eyes, and if any spot has stuck to my hands, then let me sow, and another eat, and let what grows for me be rooted out." (Job 31:1, 5-8)

In these passages the eyes and tongue and hands and feet are linked with certain sins that are carried out through that particular part of the body. But another important passage, which also parallels our verses in Mark 9, is Matthew 5. Here we see that it's not the eye or the hand or the foot that is the root problem. It's the heart.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:27-30, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her *in his heart*. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."

The fight against sin is a heart matter. Lust isn't about the eyes, even though it's associated with the eyes. And lying isn't about the tongue, even though it's associated with the tongue. It's about the heart. It's a battle that goes on inside of you. This, by the way, should make it abundantly clear to us that Jesus is speaking with hyperbole and in no way expects anyone to literally cut off a hand or a foot or gouge out an eye. Let's make sure we all understand that. What would happen if you gouged out an eye? The other eye could still be a means of lusting. And even if you gouged out both eyes there would still be images in your mind and a sinful imagination that could be a means of lust.

So we have to understand the way Jesus is speaking here. It's hyperbolic language intended to convey the severity of the warning. He says it with such force and vividness because He wants us to know that it's serious. The fight against sin is fierce, and it's not optional. This is a necessary part of the Christian life. This is what Christians do, which means that if you're not fighting like this you should question whether you're really a believer. If this fierce fight against sin doesn't characterize your life, if you think that Jesus is just an add-on to your comfortable worldly life, then you haven't been truly changed by the Gospel. You don't get it.

It's at this point that the objection might arise, "I thought Christianity taught that salvation is by faith alone, and not by works. It sounds like you're saying you have to work hard in this fight against sin in order to be saved." Let's try to address that question. Jesus is saying in this passage that the fierce fight against sin is a necessary part of the Christian life. The Bible also teaches that we're saved by faith alone and not by works. And the question is, Do those two affirmations contradict each other? I think another way to pose the same question is to ask, Should we

continue in sin that grace may abound? That represents the same sentiment: I'm saved by faith because of God's grace, therefore it doesn't matter how I live; it's not of eternal importance whether I fight sin or not. That unbiblical thinking is taught explicitly by some and is simply assumed by many.

Listen to what Paul writes in Romans 6:1-4: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." After the glorious proclamation of justification by faith alone in the previous chapters, Paul knows that this question must be addressed. Does salvation by faith alone mean that we can continue in sin? What's the answer?—by no means! Why? Because we died with Christ. Christ died for sin, and we died with Him. The old self was crucified with Him (v. 6), and then we've also been raised with Him, to walk in newness of life. Here is the glory of Jesus' death and resurrection. The only reason we can make any progress in the fight against sin is because Jesus died for sin and rose again.

So the answer is, Yes, we're saved by faith alone. But we also have to realize that when we are saved we are also radically changed. We are united to Christ and our union with Him means that we have died to the old self and walk in newness of life. And this new life is characterized by fighting fiercely against sin.

Here's another way to look at it. Fighting sin does not earn salvation. That's not the sequence. Fighting sin doesn't come before salvation. In fact, nobody genuinely fights sin until they are saved. The sequence, rather, is salvation and then the fight against sin. Salvation involves a new heart, new desires, walking in newness of life, and therefore the sins we used to be so comfortable with we now despise. And that link between salvation and fighting sin is so tight that if you're not fighting sin you have to wonder if your so-called salvation is for real. One other way to say it, which has been helpful to me, is that "We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone"—meaning it always produces a fight against sin and a hunger for holiness.

A couple chapters later in Romans we find the verse that John Owen wrote a whole book on. It's Romans 8:13, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Is that salvation by works? No. It's just reality. Those who live according to the flesh are not saved, and if they don't repent and believe they will face eternal death. But those who, by the Spirit, put to death the deeds

of the body are those who are truly saved, and they will live. Based on this verse John Owen wrote, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*. Mortify means “to kill, to put to death.” And that’s what we are to do. We need to mortify sin in our lives. We need to identify it and wage war against it. Here’s what Owen says, “Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it while you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.”<sup>2</sup>

Romans 8:13 and Owen’s comments on it help us to see the utter importance of this fight. Life and death are at stake. It’s not just about who’s going to have more crowns in heaven. It’s not about who can be the super-Christian. No, it’s about who is a true Christian. Who is really going to heaven? If you sit back and find assurance in your church attendance or your childhood profession of faith, and yet you are not waging war against sin, then you should have no assurance. But if you are engaged in the fierce fight against sin, by the Spirit, fighting with the kind of vigilance that cuts off limbs and gouges out eyes in order to mortify the deeds of the body, then you will live.

Let’s look at how Jesus describes the threat and the promise in our passage in Mark 9. I already mentioned that verses 43, 45 and 47 are parallel to one another. Each verse discusses sin and commands a violent response to one’s own sin—“cut it off” (v. 43), “cut it off” (v. 45), “tear it out” (v. 47). Each verse also contrasts heaven and hell. “It is better for you to enter *life* crippled than with two hands to go to *hell*, to the unquenchable fire” (v. 43). “It is better for you to enter *life* lame than with two feet to be thrown into *hell*” (v. 45). “It is better for you to enter the *kingdom of God* with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into *hell*, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’” (vv. 47-48).

First we should take note of what Jesus says about hell. It’s not an imaginary place. It’s not just a bad word that people use when they get angry and tell someone where to go. Hell is a real place. It’s a place where there is unquenchable fire. It’s a place where there will be everlasting torment. Some theologians contend that unbelievers are simply annihilated after death, and they cease to exist. But we read in verse 48 that hell is a place “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” It’s eternal. It’s never-ending. Hell is not a place where God sends people simply to be annihilated. It is everlasting conscious torment.

This quotation in verse 48 comes from the last verse of Isaiah (66:24), which describes the judgment of God upon those who rebel against Him. It’s the image of Jerusalem’s city dump.

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<sup>2</sup> John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, edited by Kelly Kapic and Justin Taylor, page 50.

Just on the southwestern slopes of the city of Jerusalem is the Hinnom Valley, which was a giant refuse dump where the waste of the city was continually burned. That place became the symbol of God's judgment and wrath. To fall under God's condemnation was to receive the punishment of going to a place like the Hinnom Valley. The word "Gehenna" is what we translate as "hell," and it simply comes from the Hebrew meaning Valley of Hinnom—Gehenna. That's the gruesome imagery of God's everlasting condemnation upon those who persist in rebellion against Him. It will be a place of burning waste, a place of worms and fire. It is an awful place, a truly God-forsaken place.

The terrifying description of hell should motivate us away from it. It's a threat that should spur us on to fight sin. If we live according to the flesh we will die. If the hand or foot or eye causes us to sin, and we don't cut it off, we will end up in the eternal fire. Jesus says so powerfully, It's better to make sacrifices now, as painful as they may be, than to spend forever in the agonizing pain of hell.

Matthew Henry expounds on this so well. He writes, "Suppose we cannot keep that which is dear to us, but it will be a snare and a stumbling-block; suppose we must part with it, or part with Christ and a good conscience. The duty prescribed in that case; *Pluck out the eye, cut off the hand and foot*, mortify the darling lust, kill it, crucify it, starve it, make no provision for it. Let the idols that have been *delectable* things, be cast away as *detestable* things; keep at a distance from that which is a temptation, though ever so pleasing. It is necessary that the part which is gangrened, should be taken off for the preservation of the whole. We must put ourselves to pain, that we may not bring ourselves to ruin; self must be denied, that it may not be destroyed."

That puts it in perspective! Do you want to fool around with sin for the short duration of time that you'll spend on this earth and then go to hell forever? Or do you want to wage war against sin for the short duration of time that you'll spend on this earth and then go to heaven forever? Jesus describes heaven as "life." Don't you want life—real life, everlasting life? He also calls it the kingdom of God, which has an already / not yet aspect to it. The kingdom is both present and future. But in this context, being contrasted with hell, it's just another way of referring to heaven. It's the ultimate fulfillment and consummation of the Kingdom of God. That's what we have to look forward to at the finish line. As we run the race of the Christian life, fiercely fighting against sin day after day, fighting for joy, the fight of faith, we will eventually go to be with our Lord in heaven. We will enter life.

Jesus motivates us in this passage with these two very powerful realities. The threat of hell for those who make peace with sin, and the promise of heaven for those who wage war against sin. Remember these things. Remind yourself of these weighty realities. Read this passage over and over again. Read Romans 8 over and over again. Meditate on the threats and the promises, and let these things spur you on. We're not playing games here. Heaven and hell are on the line.

The day of judgment is coming, which I think is what verse 49 is referring to. "Everyone will be salted with fire." We will all pass under the microscope of the final judgment. Those whose life gives evidence of saving faith, those who were fighting sin, will enter life. Those who give no evidence of saving faith, those who lived at peace with sin, will be cast into the unquenchable fire.

Verse 50 concludes with a word about discipleship and the need to be salty. We are to be the salt of the earth, like Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:13). We are to have that kind of pervasive influence on the world around us. Then in the very last statement of verse 50 we're reminded of the situation that prompted this whole discussion. "Be at peace with one another" hearkens back to verse 34 where the disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest. In response to that Jesus has been teaching them about what it means to be truly great, what it means to be a disciple. Be a servant, He told them in verse 35. Then in the verses we studied this morning, don't be a cause of sin. And don't be caught in sin.

I want to close with an application about lust. This passage should certainly be applied to any and every sin that is still present in our lives, but in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus, Himself, applies this specifically to lust. "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell." (Matthew 5:28-29, ESV)

My question for us this morning is, Are we going to fight like this? Some of you are in bondage to pornography, in bondage to lust, and you're only resisting it half-heartedly, if at all. Where's the fight? Where's the fierceness and intensity that Jesus commands? Come on, let's wage war against the deeds of the body. Let's make sacrifices that may hurt very badly in the moment, but will be for our eternal good. Get rid of the internet if you have to. Get rid of your TV if you have to. Confess this struggle to your wife and to Christian friends. Ask for accountability. Some of these measures may seem as painful as cutting off a hand or gouging out an eye, but it's worth it. "It is



better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.” Meditate on these grave warnings and these glorious promises, and fight for life. Fight, by the power of the Spirit, to kill the momentary pleasures of sin and pursue the never-ending pleasure of following Jesus.