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Mark 9:38-50
30 Sept 2018

“The Serious Savior”

God’s grace and peace...

We are continuing in Mark 9 and to my surprise, I find myself preaching a series on Mark by accident for the next several weeks. But I was drawn to this very challenging part of Scripture. It has a high degree of difficulty and I like tough teachings. If you’re here today and are new to the faith, do not start in Mark 9. But if you’ve been a follower of Jesus for a while, if you’re up for a challenge, then you might want to consider what Jesus has to say in Mark 9 about how we relate to one another.

Last week, we heard how Jesus set the disciples straight after they argued with themselves about who was the greatest. You might recall how Jesus put a child before them and said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” Jesus is essentially saying, “Don’t be so obsessed with making yourself great; but make great those who are last and least.” A child—in that culture—represented the last and least. Well, as sermon endings go, it felt a little weird to me because while it was the end of the reading, I knew Jesus wasn’t done talking.

But he’s interrupted by his disciple, John, who has a concern. “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he

was not following us.” We tried to stop him! In this very same chapter, the disciples were stumped because they couldn’t drive out a demon. So now they’re tactic is, if *they* can’t drive out demons, they sure aren’t going to allow *other* people to do it! The disciples want to be in charge! They want to have the user rights exclusively. The disciples are trying to contain the power of God. No unauthorized use of Jesus’ name! So, the disciples are really failing here. I think it comes down to this: If they can’t argue amongst themselves who is the greatest, can they at least feel better than other people who aren’t one of them? Ever feel that way? We’re not perfect, but at least we’re better than others. Can’t we be better than? Can’t we tell others what they can or cannot do in Jesus’ name? Jesus’ answer is, “No. That’s not how it works.” “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us.” With that statement, Jesus just put a lot of people—all believers of Jesus, despite their differences—He put them on the same team. Belonging to Christ is the baseline. That’s the criteria. So we don’t have to worry about stopping others, but rather can cheer them on as part of Team Jesus.

It is a special privilege to be on this team. That’s why Jesus says in verse 41, “For truly I say to you, **whoever** gives you a cup of water because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.” Just that simple act merits reward.

Why? Because the disciples belong to Christ. When people acknowledge that belonging, and do something kind, they're rewarded! These people aren't apostles, can still serve or help in some way and be rewarded for act of kindness.

Jesus is saying to the disciples, "Look, whether you think it's a big deal like driving out demons in my name or small and insignificant gesture like a cup of cold water...you're not in charge of what other people do. Let them do what they are doing. If I didn't want it to happen, I wouldn't give the power for it! I empower. I reward. You just obey." Being a disciple of Jesus is not about trying to control other people. Being a disciple of Jesus is about controlling yourself.

Which, by the way, how's that going? You may notice that there are people in life who are out of control. But there way of managing their life is to not control themselves, but to control others. When we misplace the control, it's a problem.

There was a woman in the checkout line at the store. The clerk rang up the sale and asked, "Cash, check or charge?" The woman dug into in her purse for her wallet. The employee noticed there was a TV remote control in her purse! She said, "Uh, ma'am, do you always carry your TV remote in your purse?" "No," she replied, "But my husband refused to come shopping with me and this was the most evil thing I could do to him legally." You are meant to control you. Others are not meant to control you. You are not meant to control others. You can have influence. But you control you.

I'm glad we could get a laugh in because things are about to get really serious. "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" (v. 42). That's how serious Jesus is about sin. But what does Jesus mean by little ones? Does He mean children? They are little. And He just had a child in His arms as an object lesson last week. But I don't think that's what Jesus means. In many places in Scripture, "little ones" refers to believers of Jesus. V. 42, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin..." They are believers. And they are little because in some aspect, they are new or weak in their faith or somehow undeveloped. They aren't strong. They are vulnerable. This could certainly include actual children, but I think Jesus is referring to a phase of spiritual maturity—these "little ones" may be the folks that just aren't that strong in their faith yet. In our discipleship process, we have stages of spiritual maturity and we talk about spiritual infants, spiritual children. Could this be the understanding? It could. But grammatically, if I were looking for the closest referent, it would have to go back to v. 41. The little ones refers to "whoever" gives a cup of water to the drink to the Twelve. Who would do that in this situation? Maybe the child's mom? Whoever the "whoever" is, this person is little because he or she only gives support and assistance—he or she does not belong to the Twelve! But Jesus says there's reward for "little ones" even in the little things,

just as greatness is found in the last and the least. So don't overlook them, don't discount them, and whatever you do, don't cause a believer who is weak in his faith to stumble or sin. Don't be the cause of their downfall. It says in Leviticus 19:14, "You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind." Either act would be cruel and punishable. So treat that person with respect. Be concerned with their welfare. That's what the Lord says in the Torah. But Jesus takes that same concept and applies it spiritually. Don't cause someone to stumble that they give up following Jesus.

I've heard so many stories about people who left the church because of how they were treated or because of what someone said. Fortunately, most people recognize unchristian behavior in Christian people—but sometimes people can't distinguish and they say, "If this is what Christianity is about, count me out." And they walk away. It's a terribly sad outcome not only for the person who stumbled, but more so for the person who caused them to stumble. A millstone around the neck is a lousy life preserver! The millstone were two stones that ground against each other. By the way, there are two kinds of millstones used in that day—one smaller, one larger. The smaller was the handheld, cordless version I suppose. But the larger one was several thousand pounds and required a donkey or beast to turn it. Jesus is talking about the larger millstone being tied around a person's neck, lest we have any doubt about the imagery. And suffering this fate, Jesus says,

would be *better than* causing a little one to stumble! That's how serious Jesus is about sin.

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. What is Jesus saying here? He is not advocating self-mutilation. But He is making a point that it's better to be maimed or crippled and have life than to have full faculties and be thrown into hell "where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (v. 48). That's a quote from the very last verse of Isaiah (66:24). The very last verse! It's a description of Gehenna or hell.

Look at Mark 9:49, very challenging verse with a variety of interpretations. "For everyone will be salted with fire." Some commentaries think this is a good thing, that it's referring to purification or an act of sacrifice. I don't! I think Jesus is continuing with the imagery for destruction because Jesus is talking about hell here. Everyone *who enters into hell* (that part is assumed by the context) will be salted with fire.

And hell would be our unavoidable destination because here's the problem. I can cut off a hand, a foot or pluck out my eye, but I know me! I'd still find a way to sin. Because it's not my hand, my foot or my eye that causes me to sin. It's my heart. And I can't cut that out and still live. We see the impossibility of our situation. We're the problem. Our own sinful flesh is the problem. We are our

own stumbling blocks. We stumble over ourselves. And what can we do? What can we give? Following Jesus costs more than an arm and a leg. It requires the heart itself.

Fortunately, God's specialty is the heart. The heart is where transformation happens! He takes our heart that is dirty and selfish. He gives us new hearts, clean hearts—hearts that receive and delight in God's love and show forth love for Him and for others. He will take the heart that knew only how to love oneself and transform it into a heart that is inclined toward God by creating faith! He'll give a heart that has genuine love for the other person! Love is the essence of God. It's who He is and we are called to have that same essence in ourselves, in our hearts. After coming through really hard verses, Jesus tells us not to lose our essence that He gives us. "Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Be confident in who you are because you belong to Me, says Jesus. That's salt. It's distinctive. It's different. Just as we are called to be different and live differently. How we live has eternal implications—not only for us, but for those around us.

This Jesus is a serious Savior! What we believe matters! How we relate to one another matters! We have different parts to play, but we're on the same team because we belong to Christ. He's in control of our lives by the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' name, Amen.