

54 Mark 9:42-50

Sin & Salt

Text

“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. 43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 48 ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ 49 For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 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.”

Introduction

We have been working our way through the book of Mark, and we are now in the middle of a three message series on 9:42-50. Last week we examined this passage apologetically. We spent some time on the textual issues underlying this text. We examined the transmission of the texts, and the collating process of some of the different eclectic texts.

This week I want to exposit the text. This week is the aim of last weeks apologetics. With scripture now laid out bare before us, we must seek to know the mind of God. Why did he inspire this passage? What would he have us know? What is the meaning of this text.

Finally, next week I want to examine this passage doctrinally. I want to look a bit closer at the doctrine of hell. There is a a lot of confusion on that rather unpopular topic, and so it warrants spending some additional time to fill out that doctrine.

The Seriousness of Sin

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.

Regarding the sayings: This begins a series of sayings that can be found elsewhere in the gospels in different contexts. These sayings occur in Matthew 5 during the sermon on the mount. They also occur in Matthew 18, Luke 14 and Luke 17. It is likely that Jesus would repeat the same teaching to different audiences.

Sin's Objects & Nature

The "little ones" in verse 42 begs the connection with verse 37. "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." This is now that same basic teaching but in negative form. The focus last time was on the littleness, or the lowness of the one received. It was designed to promote humility. But in both cases, it seems that the reference is to believers. "Whoever receives one such child in my name." The little ones was to promote humility, but the "receiving" was the same kind of receiving that was done for an ambassador. And in our text this morning Jesus qualifies the little ones with "who believes in me." This is not to say that it is ok to cause others to sin, but the focus is on believers.

Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin. The original is **whoever skandalise**. It is where we get the term scandalous. It means, "to cause to sin, or to fall, or to stumble." It is sometimes used to describe those who have made shipwreck of their faith - those who apostatize. There is a much more rich meaning than is typically read into this verse. Jesus is not talking about enticing a 5 yr old take candy from his younger sister. Rather, those who are small in this world, those who are not well esteemed, to cause one of these to stumble in their faith merits a hard punishment.

Application: You can see, I hope, that this includes not only children, but believers in general. And it may involve, not simple sin, but anything that would cause them to stumble in the faith. The more explicit forms of tempting someone to sin are obvious. "Hey let's go get drunk and vandalize the school." Obviously don't do that. But it can be much more subtle than that. False teaching obviously falls into this category. Can you cause someone to fall through false teaching? Sure. Again, our minds go right toward the most crass and obvious forms of false teaching. But anything that will divert attention away from Christ and the cross is a dangerous teaching. If you remove the cross from the message, then you have removed the content of faith. If you have removed the content of faith in a message then you have removed the possibility of faith in the hearers. If you have done that, you are preaching a false gospel and are endangering their souls!

It can be explicit temptation to sin, and it can be a false teaching that will make them fall. But it can also be living a life of liberty when a weaker brother struggles with part of it. If somebody has a misplaced, but conscionable objection to something you are doing, don't encourage them to violate their conscience. Rather, through careful, grace-filled teaching, reform their conscience to align with the Word of God. Causing these to stumble can be many different things and we need to exercise great care not to be guilty.

Sin's Punishment

Now, observe **the severity of this warning:** "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." This is a horrible way to die. It brings to mind the kind of acts that the mafia would commit.

Then term for "great millstone" is literally "donkey-drawn millstone." This was a massive stone. Hendrickson informs us that:

there is a hole through which grain can be fed so as to be crushed between the two stones.

The presence of this hole explains the phrase "that a heavy millstone *be hung around his neck*." With this millstone around his neck he will surely drown.

There is no chance of escape. It is a certain death and it is a horrible death. What is it that warrants such a fearsome and certain death? Causing one of these little ones to sin! Notice that it says, "it would be better," indicating that this type of punishment should be viewed as merciful. It is the kind of punishment that would be preferable to what the actual punishment will be. Are you getting the sense that God views sin as more heinous than do you?

Sin's Immediate Cause

By immediate cause, I do not mean the root cause. By way of analogy, the immediate cause of the 8-ball going in the corner was that it was struck by the queue ball. The root cause was the player who set it all in motion.

43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 48 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'

Each of these illustrations show great concern for one's spiritual life. Sin is a thing that is not to be toyed with! Chop off the offending member! Gouge out the offending member! If it causes you to sin get rid of it. Jesus is speaking in hyperbole, and makes quite a point by it. We are not to take this portion literally. It is hyperbole, not because it is not better to enter life cripple than to be whole in hell. That is quite true. But if you struggle with stealing, cutting off your hand won't really solve the problem. It is a heart issue. The point still stands, and it powerfully illustrates our low view of sin.

Sin's Punishment - Round 2

Verse 48 is a quotation from Isa 66:24:

"And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

Isaiah 56-66 provides much material for eschatology. There is an interesting mix of blessings for God's people, and judgment for his enemies. This section from Isa 66, which is quoted by Christ, is one of the sections of curses that the enemies of God will have to endure.

The imagery in that passage is the carnage leftover after a battle. Some of the corpses are burnt, others are left to decay. Perhaps both happen, one an internal destruction and the other an external destruction. Isaiah takes it one step further by describing the worm as undying and the

fire as never quenched. He has in mind an eternal destruction.

Application: There is a sense, however, that Christ probably does intend for us to destroy our members. But the main part of us that needs to be killed is not our hand, but our flesh, our old nature. This we must kill. John Owen rightly observes, "Mortification from a self-strength, carried on by ways of self-invention, unto the end of a self-righteousness, is the soul and substance of all false religion in the world." (Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*)

At the start it is important to recognize that these exhortations must be done firmly planted in the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ through sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Owen goes on to say, "*The vigour, and power, and comfort of our spiritual life depends on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh.*"

Whatever the cause of sin, it must be destroyed! Do not delay! Whatever the cause of sin, get rid of it post haste! Children, If a certain toy has become an idol for you and you sin on account of it, get rid of that toy. Better to have no toy than to enter hell entertained. Adults, if certain TV shows tempt you to sin, whether through greed, or lust, or envy, don't watch those shows. Indeed, if it is too much of a temptation or if you watch inordinate amounts and so are wasting your life, get rid of it! The heart must be dealt with, but if any of these currently provides too much temptation, it is stupid to keep setting that temptation before yourself.

Deal with the sin in your heart. This is an enemy that must be destroyed and destroyed quickly. This is too dangerous to play games with.

Salt

49 For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 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."

These three salt passages are somewhat tricky. "Salt" is not being used in the same way each time. Each of these sayings seems to be independent. Therefore, I present this exposition in humility, recognizing the difficulty of certainty here.

Allow me to simply state my understanding and I will then provide some support for it. I take this entire complex of salt sayings something like this:

The Christian should come to expect suffering and difficulty. These fiery trials purify us (or make us salty) developing in us a Christ-likeness. This Christ-likeness is the basis for the peace that we maintain with one another. These fiery trials culminate in the judgment day where our deeds will be tested by fire.

For the first statement, "[The Christian should come to expect suffering and difficulty.](#)" I gather that from the context. Since Peter gave his good confession, Jesus has been constantly talking about suffering, about the cross, about death, about the need for his followers to take up their cross, about how anyone who wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for the sake of Christ will save it. 1 Peter 1:7 and 4:12 say:

so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

These confirm not only the fact of suffering for a Christian, but also the imagery of fire for suffering.

Now the second statement, "[These fiery trials purify us \(or make us salty\) developing in us a Christ-likeness.](#)" When verse 49 says, "*For everyone will be salted with fire.*" It is possible that this could mean that the fire is the way through which we become salty. Everyone will be salted, or made salty, with fire. 1 Cor 11:32 says, "But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world." Also consider Hebrews 12:3-11:

3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.

6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.

11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

This leads well into my third statement, "[This Christ-likeness is the basis for the peace that we maintain with one another.](#)" This is along the same line of Colossians 4:6 "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." It has reference to an inward quality. Contextually this also fits with the discipleship theme. As Jesus has been discipline them, they are arguing with one another over greatness. They show more concern for how they will be received than over how they receive little ones. They are contending with others who are casting out demons. None of this is a great display of maintaining the peace with one another. They need to be more salty.

Most commentators and scholars recognize a link between being salted with fire and the OT sacrifices that were to be salted (such as Lev 2:13). Christians are to be living sacrifices to the Lord (Rom 12:1). When we endure these trials with the salty character of Christ, it is a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

Finally, my fourth statement, "[These fiery trials culminate in the judgment day where our deeds will be tested by fire.](#)"

"*For everyone will be salted with fire.*" The "for" connects it with what was just said. If your foot, hand, or eye causes you to sin, cut it off for it is better to enter heaven lame than enter hell whole." There will be a judgment whereby people either enter heaven or enter hell.

1 Cor 3:10-15 states:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. **11** For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. **12** Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— **13** each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. **14** If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. **15** If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Again, your work will be tried. But even if it burns up, the Christian will be saved as though by fire. Works are important. Works will come up in the judgment. But works are not the basis of our salvation. They are the evidence, and not the basis of our salvation.