



Speaker:
Paul Forrest

The Peril of Sin

Series: The Gospel of Mark • 32 of 32

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And John answered him saying, "Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us. And we forbid him, because he followeth not us." But Jesus said, "Forbid him not, for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part. For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward. And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea. And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off. It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched; where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off. It is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched; where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out. It is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire; where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt is good. But if the salt have lost his saltness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves and have peace one with another.

Last week, we said true greatness was to be achieved by becoming everyone else's servant. You remember Jesus brought in a child to represent those who are the least among the brethren, and the disciples were to understand they must embrace lowly believers as much as anyone else. They were reminded that to embrace a fellow Christian is to welcome Christ, and to welcome Christ is to accept God himself.

Today, we're still in the same house and the same conversation. After listening to Jesus's message, John speaks up. It's difficult to see what prompted him to say what he did. But let's not forget John was by nature a rash individual.

At first blush, the actions of the disciples, as John reports them here, are legitimate. There was an individual claiming to be doing his Christian duty, but they didn't know him. If he were genuine, they thought, he'd be part of their group.

Why I have some sympathy with the disciples' actions is because I'd likely think the same way. So I need to bring to mind Jesus's teaching here as much as the disciples needed to. If I were walking through town and started chatting with an open-air preacher, and found he

wasn't attached to a local church and had no intention of joining one, I'd be suspicious. I'd conclude he had a fault in his Christian walk—if he were a Christian at all.

So what's Jesus's response here? He says something surprising. He informs them, not only is this individual a believer, but it would be wrong of the disciples to hinder him in any way.

Jesus's argument goes as follows:

1. There was a genuine miracle carried out
2. The miracle was done with the authority of Jesus himself
3. People who do such things will not be found to later curse Jesus

You should be careful reading Jesus's arguments here. If you misunderstand, you might lose confidence in Jesus's arguments. He says people who don't oppose him are with him. Now you might inwardly object that you know individuals who are not actively opposed to Jesus. They might say he was a good man. They might tell you how much they respect your beliefs. Is this person, and all like him, to be regarded as a Christian? Of course not. Jesus means for us to understand that **to take a neutral position on the gospel is to oppose God**. They cannot sit on the fence and expect to be treated favourably by God. Listen to what Jesus says in another place:

He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.
Matthew 12:30

He goes on to emphasize his point. Never mind life-changing miracles; **if someone does the smallest service to a believer in the name of Jesus Christ, this is evidence of true faith**. Someone brings a cup of water to a fellow disciple of Jesus and says, *You must be parched in all this heat. Here; drink this*. If he does this for Jesus's sake, he is a genuine believer, and his reward of eternal life is secure.

Echoing Jesus's teaching, Paul says:

Wherefore I give you to understand that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus "accursed": and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.
1 Cor. 12:3

When the disciples encountered this exorcist, they weren't in the best place to be making judgements. Most of them were part of the spectacular failure of exorcising a demon themselves, and here they were lording it over one who had successfully done so! And we've seen they were prone to thinking about status, and no doubt thought it was impossible to have any ranking if you weren't part of the organisation to begin with.

It might help to compare an OT example where people became indignant that others were claiming to do God's will but not in the prescribed way:

But there remained two of the men in the camp. The name of the one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them. And they were of them that were written, but went not out unto the tabernacle, and they prophesied in the camp. And

there ran a young man, and told Moses, and said, “Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp.” And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of Moses, one of his young men, answered and said, “My lord Moses, forbid them.” And Moses said unto him, “Enviest thou for my sake? Would God that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!”

Numbers 11:26–30

They got a polite slap in the face just like the disciples did from Jesus. We believe in a God of order, and we force our understanding of that on to every situation, sometimes wrongly. We’re to learn today that those we think of as mavericks are likely Jesus’s disciples, albeit working in an immature way. We’re to help them, not hinder them.

I want to spend some time looking at Jesus’s warnings about sinning against others and sinning yourself. But I’d like to make a brief comment about the end of our passage. It contains some remarks which are difficult to interpret. Fortunately, we don’t need to understand them for the purposes of our message today, so I want to mention them then put them out of the way.

If you cast your eyes over verses 49 and 50, you’ll see it talks about salt and fire. The difficulty here is not coming up with reasonable suggestions about what it means. There are lots. I’ve encountered more than a dozen different interpretations—and come up with one or two of my own! Deciding which of these was originally intended is our problem.

I do believe in what theologians called *the perspicuity of scripture*, that all things required for godliness are very clear in the scriptures. However, it’s clear God didn’t intend everything in the scriptures to be as clear as everything else. Peter says some of Paul’s theology is baffling. So we need to be open to the possibility that God will leave us with difficulties, expecting us to patiently consider and discuss them without the guarantee we’ll have the answer before Jesus comes.

Salt and fire are used throughout scripture. They represent a variety of things, and this is one of the reasons it’s difficult to interpret these verses. Salt is used to represent preservation but is also associated with punishment. Fire can represent spiritual cleansing, but it’s also used to picture God’s judgement of the wicked.

Considering those two elements of Bible imagery is more suited to an in-depth study. If you’re interested, I think you’d find it profitable to spend some time looking into this yourself.

Here’s my first heading:

SINNING AGAINST THE BRETHREN

Jesus warns people not to sin against his children. Let’s do away with the idea Jesus is talking about actual children. We must dismiss the opinions of our brethren who insist Jesus is talking about how he loves the little children. That he loves mankind, but he loves children most of all. That heaven is full of little babies and children with wings and so on.

Children are sinners. They lie, cheat, steal, and commit many other sins. Jesus doesn't hold them up as virtuous. Jesus has had children wiped off the face of the Earth. They're simply full-blown opponents of God in training.

I said to you last time: Jesus is using a child to represent lowly believers. Those who are, wrongly, esteemed least in the church. They may be new Christians, who are still quite mixed up. They may be Christians of many years who've had such poor teaching they haven't grown much. They may be thought little of because of their social status. They may be homeless. They might have some physical disfigurement that makes it difficult for most people to look upon them.

But all those who believe on Jesus Christ are cherished by him, regardless of their looks, social status, or Christian wisdom. They are the most fragile and are therefore to be most attended to. And again, in as much as you do attend to these poor ones in the church you attend to Christ himself.

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.
Matthew 25:40

In our passage today, the particular warning is about causing one of these lowly brethren to stumble in their Christian walk. Others can cause them to sin, and the penalty God imposes on such people is severe.

A good example of how we can cause a weaker brother to sin is found in 1st Corinthians. The apostle gives an example of two brethren. One encourages a weaker brother to act against his conscience by eating food previously dedicated to false gods. The food's fine. It's to be taken and eaten with thanksgiving to God. But if your brother's uncomfortable with that, you shouldn't eat it in front of him. Take him to the KFC instead. Here's an extract from that section:

But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.
1 Corinthians 8:12

We can also sin against our weaker brothers or sisters in Christ if we hinder them in their efforts and even cast doubt on their very profession. If, because of some erratic or unspiritual behaviour in them, we dismiss them as false converts, we risk causing damage. The truth is it's usually impossible to determine if someone is a believer or not.

We need to be more thoughtful before dismissing someone profession.

But I say unto you that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whosoever shall say to his brother, "Raca", shall be in danger of the council. But whosoever shall say, "Thou fool!" shall be in danger of hell fire.
Matthew 5:22

“Fool” means “unbeliever”. And this is another way Jesus strongly discourages people from carelessly writing off people’s professions. If there was ever a message of Jesus that applied more to the preacher than to the hearers, this must be it. I've written off far too many people. It was never without cause, but if I'd been more familiar with my Bible I'd have been far, far more careful.

Protestants are at risk at least as much as anyone else. We have a heritage of defending the truth, and there’s more often than not been an imbalance in our mission. Protestants, not just Catholics and pagans, have persecuted the church. Their attitude has been, *If you're not going to work for God in our way you're not going to work for him at all!* The underdeveloped faith of the exorcist we read of today, and all like him who lack knowledge in the Church of God, need to be encouraged rather than ruined by harsh criticism or sectarian biases.

Let us not therefore judge one another anymore, but judge this rather: that no man put a stumbling-block, or an occasion to fall, in his brother’s way.

Romans 14:13

YOUR OWN SIN

This word “offend” needs explaining. If the average person read this, they’d think it was about people who were disgusted with their feet or something. *That foot! I’ve always hated it! It offends me, so I’m gonna cut it right off.* “Offence” in the scriptures refers to sin or, as here, *causing* someone to sin.

The warnings here given by Jesus are some of the most extreme in scripture. He talks about hacking off body parts. It’s true that the three body parts mentioned are employed elsewhere in scripture as metaphors. I can’t be confident Jesus intended us to read any more into this other than the need for extreme measures to prevent sin. But in any case, I’ll remind you of examples of how they’re used.

- The hands represent our actions; the things we do. And throughout our lives the things we do are mostly sinful.
- The feet are used sometimes to describe our walk through this life, whether it be on the narrow or the broad path. What we want to avoid is allowing our feet to take us on a path of sinfulness, this broad path being the one that leads only to destruction.
- And so much of what we think and how we act are determined by things we see. By merely looking at something we shouldn't, we are often led into sin.

I made a covenant with mine eyes. Why then should I think upon a maid?

Job 31:1

Drastic surgery is urged on us. It’s needful that I point out Jesus never expected anyone to do these things literally. That may be obvious to you, but Christians in history have taken these things exactly in that way. One of the Church Fathers for example, Origen, believed Jesus meant this to be understood literally.

It would make no sense anyway. If you did pluck out one of your own eyes because you were looking at things you shouldn't, you still have one eye left! It wouldn't stop you. Having said that, if there was a sin that could only be prevented by such self-mutilation, there may be an argument for it. But as I say, I'm sure this wasn't Jesus's intended teaching.

But he is talking about real and sometimes severe sacrifices in our war on personal sin.

Whatever it is in your life that tempts you to be unfaithful to God must be discarded promptly and decisively, in the same way an army medic might have to amputate a hand or a leg in order to save a life.

Be savage with your sin. Hate it. Go to war with it. Kill it. Show no mercy. Bring your whole self under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle advises his fellow believers thus:

But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.

1 Corinthians 9:27

GLORY OR GEHENNA?

Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners. They've sinned; he hasn't. God's rule is simple: if you sin against him, you will die a never-ending death at his hand. The punishment in the place we call "hell" was laid on Jesus Christ on the cross. There, he owned the transgressions of all of those ordained to eternal life. God the Father was then able, in all justice, to look down and see the sins of the elect congealed in the person of his very own son, and this allowed him to punish Jesus instead of them.

It's way beyond us to understand how a person can endure an eternal hell in time. But Jesus did. And for all its horror, we are thankful he so suffered.

The use of this English word "hell" is not very helpful. It's used to describe both the common grave of man and the place of eternal torment for the wicked among them. And its use in this passage describes the same thing. The Greek word behind hell is *Gehenna*. The name comes from a place outside Jerusalem where human sacrifice took place. It came to be used to represent a dark, miserable and horrific place. All kinds of rubbish, as well as human corpses, were piled up there, and it was frequently on fire.

Some other imagery the Bible uses to describe the suffering of those in that place can be found in the OT. It talks about worms, or maggots, that torment from inside. And it speaks of a raging fire that torments *externally*. That is, it describes suffering of the entire man. I've never believed this imagery was to be understood literally, but I've always believed the reality will be worse.

Jesus sometimes uses unpleasant physical deaths to shadow the eternal death he's prepared for Satan, his angels, and all those who are not on the Lord's side. In our passage today, in a warning to those who would harm one of his beloved children, he talks of someone being drowned. It would be better, he said, if such a transgressor had a millstone tied around his neck and was thrown in the sea.

It may interest you to know the millstone used in Jesus's example was one of the larger ones used in their mills. If you were attached to one and dropped in the ocean, that's the end of you! There are reports of some Jewish insurrectionists being killed in this fashion by Rome before Jesus came. If so, his hearers may have been aware of these accounts of some of their countrymen being killed in this exact way. It would make the warning all that more stark.

And brethren, let this also impress itself on your minds and hearts this morning. These warnings were addressed to believers. Now on the one hand, we believe God will never cast away his children from him. But those who commit sin, and cause others to commit sin, should consider their situation as precarious.

Our acceptance is entirely because of the merits of Jesus Christ. It is not made more secure or made less secure by our variable behaviour. But we must not let a narrow understanding of our cherished doctrines cause us to dismiss these teachings today as not applicable to us. When you sin, or when you cause others to sin, you should tremble, and go immediately to God for forgiveness.

If you are a genuine believer today, you will hate your sin. You should be angry at yourself every time you sin, but then you should straight away go to God and get that peace of conscience that is a gift promised to all those belong to Jesus Christ.

Amen.