

Sermon Title: Strong Words
Scripture Text: Mark 9:42-50

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 3-17-19

Our venue for this morning is Mark Chapter 9, where we're going to finish that chapter by studying Verses 42 through 50. This is a text quite different from most of the gospels. It contains very strong language; not language of profanity, but strong in the sense of, words that you might think are, as our vernacular says, "over the top." They are, arguably, the strongest words Jesus ever said to His followers, and they're all about the essence of discipleship. You know, Jesus, whenever He is portrayed in art or film or anything like that—I mean, He always looks like Jeff: handsome guy, long hair, nice beard, and smiling and friendly and kind and gentle. Well He is, I'm sure, all of those things. But sometimes He spoke *very* strongly, and this text is one of those.

These words are so strong that they have, over the centuries, provoked some unusual reactions, even affecting the copying of the manuscripts, and this has led to some manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark being slightly modified. And hence, probably, if we took a survey of translations in the room this morning, they might differ from one another more than just in a mild little translation of a word.

One of the reasons that we use the New American Standard Bible here from the pulpit is because, it was done from the very best available manuscripts of the New Testament, taking into account all of the differences that have shown up through the centuries of copying and translating the Bible. And we have manuscripts that go all the way back to the second century, possibly even the late first century, and we have thousands of them to compare and to look with each other. And you see the marvelous hand of God in how *clear* it is, what God wrote down; and we have, with tremendous certainty, knowledge [and] understanding of what He originally inspired.

But here we sit, looking at translations almost 2,000 years later. In the King James and in the New King James, and in some other translations, you will find in our text for this morning that Verses 44, 46, and 48 are identical; but if you look in other translations, you'll see something quite different: The New International Version, and the ever-growing-in-popularity English Standard Version—in those, you won't even see Verses 44 and 46 at all—even the *numbers* will go 43, 45, 47. The New International Version doesn't include those verses, but it includes a footnote that the words of verse 48 also appear in some manuscripts at what we call Verse 44 and what we call Verse 46. The English Standard Version—the ESV—that must be the "Mission Impossible" version, because it disavows all knowledge of the existence of those two verses, which were apparently killed or captured somewhere along the way; and if you didn't get that, that's okay—you can get to heaven [if you] know the Bible better than you know Mission Impossible references.

Now in the New American Standard Bible, you'll notice that Verse 44 and Verse 46 *are* there; they are identical to Verse 48, and they are included in brackets. That's the way that the translators—and these good translations tip you off to things like this—brackets show that these are things that, there *is* a tradition of them being in English Bibles, but they are not in the best manuscripts. If you encounter a person of the King-James-Only persuasion, he or she will tell you that, this is an example of modern translations omitting or removing part of the Word of God; and that's an absolutely inaccurate, unfair thing to say—that's not at all true.

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But what's all this about? I mean, can't we figure it out? Well, I think we *have* figured it out, and you have a product of it in your hands. When we get to Verse 48, I'll show you what the words mean. I'll show you where, in the Old Testament, they come from. They were clearly spoken by Jesus, and I'll show you why they are significant. But why do some manuscripts include them, and others don't? That's a legitimate question, so, sidebar to the meaning of the text for today, a little study in textual criticism: I think it's because of the unusually strong words here, which makes this passage kind of challenging to understand. If you don't take this passage in its historical context, it kind of sticks out like it doesn't fit; you've got to see how it connects in order to make sense of it.

Well, scribes who copied Scripture professionally—Old Testament scribes, and some of them were part of the problem, with the belief system that Jesus had to deal with—but, the profession of scribe was a very honorable profession, and until the advent of the printing press, the Bible was copied from generation to generation by hand. And so, those who copied it—and held a very high view of God Word—were very scrupulous to make sure that they would *never* drop anything out of the text of Scripture.

Sometimes, scribes would add notes in the margin. Sometimes teachers, who would be studying from a certain papyrus or manuscript or scroll, might write notes in the margin of something, to help elucidate the meaning of the text. Sometimes in future iterations of copying, those things that *had* been written in the margins, and then had been taught orally so often, were known so well that they would actually, eventually, be incorporated into the text.

Something like that apparently happened in this passage. It appears that ancient scribes understood Verse 48—appropriately—to be a punchline. There's a *shocking* command in Verse 47, but there's also a shocking command in Verse 45, there's also a shocking command in Verse 43; and so apparently, that punchline—maybe in oral reading of the Gospel of Mark as it was first distributed—maybe sometimes they would read Verse 48 after Verse 43 and after Verse 45 and after Verse 47, just for the emphasis, because it really is a punchline. And so, maybe that's how it actually came to be written three times in the text, instead of one.

But in this case, it's very clear that the older manuscripts omit what we call Verses 44 and 46; because chapter numbers, verse references—those all came much later, centuries after the Bible was long-completed. And those two verses, like I say, they are words spoken by Jesus, and they *are* in Verse 48, but they apparently don't belong in Verses 44 and 46.

Now, something else that's very helpful about the New American Standard Bible—others do it another ways—is that, in the New American Standard, Old Testament verses that are quoted in the New Testament are put in all-caps; that's so that you can see the unity between Old and New Testament—you can see the connection between Old and New Testament. It doesn't mean you're supposed to raise your voice and shout when you get to the all-caps; it's not like you texting your friend. But, we need to put it together as it was, and it's a *really* powerful passage, and a unique passage, in the sense of how strong these words are.

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So I'd like to read it to you in its entirety before we look at the component parts, and I'm going to read it to you from what would appear to be in the best manuscripts, so I will save those words that might be in your Bible as Verse 44 and Verse 46 and Verse 48—we'll save it for Verse 48. So listen to how strong this is. Jesus says—and by the way, this is all the words of Jesus; there's no conversation here, there's no interaction here—Jesus says, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire. If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell. If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." (NASB, and throughout, unless otherwise noted)

Pretty strong words, right? Hey, they're the words of Jesus, but do you know what? I've never seen them on a bumper sticker! I've never heard anybody say, "In my time of trial, the Lord brought this into my mind!"—it's not that kind of a passage, is it? Well, as always, it's the historical context as well as the grammatical context that is essential for us to understand the text. I promise you, this is a prime example of a text that, apart from the setting, it would be extra hard to interpret.

So what *is* the setting? The setting is that Jesus is training the Twelve—and there's a small group of others traveling with them—He's training them to be ready to fulfill the plans that He has for them, after He is crucified and buried and resurrected and ascended to the Father. He's teaching them some very important lessons. He's already taught them a lesson on faith. He's taught them a lesson on prayer. And mingled with that, He's been giving them, in *very* straightforward language, the instruction to let them know that He must go to Jerusalem; He will be betrayed, arrested, and crucified, then He will rise from the dead after He's buried. Now, they aren't getting that part yet; they're very resistant to that—I don't think in a willful way; I think they truly couldn't understand how He could be both [going] to die, and to be the glorious King who will bring the kingdom. And Luke even mentions it was being kept from them (Lk. 9:45); it's like they were having to get this in bite-sized portions.

So, along the way there has also been a lesson on humility; that's what we saw in our last visit to Mark. So think back to that previous passage. Before it started, the Twelve were arguing among themselves "which of them was the greatest" in the kingdom of heaven (Mk. 9:35). They get to their destination, and Jesus said, "Hey, guys—what were you talking about along the way?" It got kind of quiet. He splattered their pride all over the windshield of His truth in the next conversation. They had no right to make the assumption that one of them would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven! Why, they had no right to assume that there's even *such thing* as "greatest in the kingdom of heaven"! In every mention that concept, Jesus *never* accepts the idea of that. Instead, He says—and we just saw this last time—"He who wishes to be the greatest among you shall be your servant. Guys, quit fighting for the top! Fight for the

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bottom of the pile, and lift everybody else up!" That's how kingdom-living is. Only the pride of sinful man would stoop to thinking about something like a spiritual All-Star team, and that's what these guys were assuming—"Yeah, we're obviously the All-Star team, but who's the *captain* of the All-Star team?"

I think one of the worst ideas that's ever been proffered among Christians—when I heard it, the first time it happened, I actually thought that it was satire; I didn't think anybody would actually do this—but there is that day when Christians, in *full* carnality, copy the world, get together, dress up like the world, and act like the proud world that they're supposedly saved from, and then they get together and they give each other awards... *Dove Awards!* Oh, my goodness! I don't want to just pick on musicians; we have our problems elsewhere. But I have a feeling, if Jesus showed up for that night of self-sanctified pride, after it was over, people would be talking about how He'd cleared the temple. How dare we think like that! I mean, if we're going to do that, why don't we have *Brimstone Awards* for sermons, and for *great preachers*? How about the *Casserole Award* for the superstars of potlucks?

We laugh because that's so absurd; and then, with a straight face, our world *does* it! A true child of God—you might be flattered by such things. You might also realize, though, that they don't matter at all. Like one of the songs that never won a Dove Award says: "God is not impressed with the loftiness of man" (Willard, Kelly, "Humble Yourself," Maranatha Music, 1999). I love that phrase! And that's why our text for today is in the next paragraph after Jesus' teaching: "Quit fighting about who's the greatest! If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."

So the passage before us this morning is a passage about discipleship. What does it *mean* to call Jesus "Lord"? What does He ask of you when you come to Him for salvation? And this is Jesus's own answer. If you will, I would say that our text this morning is Jesus's commentary on His own words from the previous chapter—Mark Chapter 8, Verse 34—He says, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." So here's how we're going to break down our passage; not equal parts to the points, but three evidences of discipleship: Number 1—Verse 42, Strong care. Number 2—Strong repentance, Verses 43 through 48. And Number 3—Strong sacrifice, Verses 49 and 50.

First: Strong care. If you are a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ, you will have—*not* a desire to argue about whether *you're* greatest or the other guy's the greatest—you will have a tenacious, profound care for all of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Look at Mark 9:42—"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble"—now, remember: Where are they? They're at Capernaum; they're probably in the home of Peter and Andrew. He probably had taken one of Peter's or Andrew's kids and brought them and put him in their midst, and He's using the child as a vivid illustration. Now, He's not just talking about being nice to little kids. I'm *all for* being nice to little kids, alright? And we should *never* attack the faith of a little child who has come to Christ. But, Matthew makes it very clear that He's using the child to *illustrate* those who "believe in" Him (Matt. 18:6)—that we *all* must come like a child; we must all come with childlike faith: total trust in the parents on the part of the child, total trust in God on the part of the believer.

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So, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea." Not only do we need to be "converted and become like" a little child (Matt. 18:3), we must also serve God by serving His children and being involved in each other's lives so that, as we fight for the bottom of the heap, everybody else gets lifted up to be encouraged and to be more like the Lord (see Heb. 10:24). In other words, we want to watch out for the well-being of the other children of God.

Now, would you notice, there's another one of those all-inclusive words here: "whoever." He's done that on several occasions in this flow of events. This could apply to anybody, anytime, anyplace, any circumstance. And the child He's referring to—remember, it's both a literal child *and* that child represents one who trusts in Christ with childlike faith.

Now, what does He say not to do? "Do not cause one of these to *stumble*." That's the key phrase that tells you what this is about. I'm going to say a Greek word to you, because you'll know an English word that comes from it. The Greek word *skandalizō*; it's transliterated into English as "scandalize." It literally means, "to put a snare in the way." It was used for hunting by way of setting traps; you know, set the trap: there was a stick that would hold the trap open—that was called the *skandalon*, the tripwire, if you will. You put the bait inside, the animal comes, you tug the wire, the trap falls and captures the animal. Very picturesque. So it means, "to put a snare in the way," and hence: to cause someone to stumble; to set a trap; to entice somebody to do wrong; to beguile someone; to tempt someone; to distract someone with some kind of a lure to take them in the wrong direction, rather than pursuing Christlikeness. Something that entices you is something for you to trip over in your walk for the Lord. And we must *never* have *anything* to do with helping trip up a brother or sister.

You know, some of the attacks are frontal, like Potiphar's wife—she wasn't too subtle when she said to Joseph, "Lie with me" (Gen. 39:7). Most aren't that blatant. Most of them are more subtle, like how the Serpent started the whole thing when he said to Eve in the garden, "Has God really said, 'You shall not eat of all the trees'?..."—just planting doubt.

There's also stumbling blocks in the form of bad examples. Every time a pastor falls into immorality, that emboldens the critics of Christ (see Rom. 2:24; cf. 2 Sam. 12:14; Prov. 25:26); it disillusiones people who are young in the faith or maybe haven't come to faith yet; it weakens the resolve of those who want to follow Christ and are thinking, "If he can't make it, I can't make it." Or, the father who cheats in business is teaching his children to do the same thing. The person who gossips, or listens to gossip, is showing the way to the next generation. We don't want anything to do with that! We must *never* do that!

Now, don't read in something that isn't here. This isn't saying that if someone does something that leads you to stumble, they're responsible for your sin. It's not saying that. *You* are responsible for your own sin; you can't blame anybody else for your transgressions. But the passage doesn't contradict that, it *adds* to that. It says, "Just like you know you're responsible for your sin, make sure you're not contributing to anyone else's!" To entice somebody else to sin is a very wicked thing, indeed (e.g. Gal. 2:11-13; 2 Tim. 2:16-18; Rev. 2:14-15, 20).

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Jesus is saying here that, part of learning the lesson of childlike faith, part of learning the lesson of prayer, part of learning the lesson of humility that He has taught, includes watching out for the wellbeing of other believers. The catchy little phrase "Live and let live"—I know what that means, but it's certainly not Christian! That's not how we deal with each other! "I got my thing, you got yours...eh, you know, see you in heaven!" No, we *care* about each other (see Phil. 2:3-4).

So, when we let down our guard—we become reckless, we just dabble in a little rebellion—and especially when we influence somebody else in the wrong way, that's *very* serious. And so, Jesus put it in terms of very vivid words: "It would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea." Ooh! That's not very "Jesus-ee"! I thought He was supposed to always be meek and mild and uplifting! The word "millstone"—boy, it's not even polite, either! It's literally "a donkey stone." What it means is, "the stone that's so big that it's pulled by a donkey" to roll the stone around, to grind the meal in the mill, in that area. And He's saying, it would be better to die such a horrible death as to have one of those stones around your neck and be thrown into the depths of the sea, than to lead another Christian into sin. Do you care like that about other Christians? (see Ps. 69:6)

Now, by the way—we do not have a set of millstones in the closet that we're going to pull out, and start throwing people into the river or Lucky Peak Reservoir, or something like that. He's not speaking literally, He's speaking *hyperbolically*—this is hyperbole; that's where you say things to an extreme, an absurd extreme, to make a point. He's saying, "Look, you ought to care about each other *so much* that it would be *so appalling* to you, that you would rather *die* than lead somebody else astray! That's part of what it means to be a disciple. That's the kind of strong care you ought to have.

Now, that's caring for everybody else. How about you and your own sin, you and your own temptation? Another characteristic of discipleship is strong repentance. Now, if you think *that* was strong, this one's even more vivid. Jesus is saying, if you don't hate your sin enough to want to run away from it, you don't understand what it means to belong to Him. And again, He's going to use hyperbole; to make a point, He's going to use exaggerated statements, and He did not mean to make these literal. We also have not ordered in a batch of hatchets to obey this next section. Verse 43—"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire. If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell. If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."

Now, look at the contrast here. Jesus isn't talking about the next little level for you to take—He's talking about the very nature of discipleship, *because* the two choices here are "the kingdom" and "hell." That's what He's saying. He said, "If you don't feel like this about your own temptation and your own sin, I fear that you haven't even gotten the message yet! You're not even going to be in the kingdom."

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Now, He used more strong words. The word translated "hell"—it's in Verse 43, 45, and 47—it's a word you've probably heard: it's the word *Gehenna*. It literally refers to the Valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem; the south end of the little promontory that is the ancient city of Jerusalem. It was the garbage dump where fires were constantly either burning brightly or smoldering. It was, in older days, the place where child sacrifices were made to the Canaanite God "Molech" (Jer. 32:35); it's also spelled "Moloch." And remember when we read about Stephen's testimony, he mentioned that, and that Israel had played the harlot with false gods, including child sacrifices to "Moloch" (Acts 7:43), so it also came to be called the Valley of Death. In the time of Jesus, it was the trash dump for the city of Jerusalem. It was the place of burning sewage, burning flesh from the scraps and the blood from the temple, burning garbage. Maggots and worms literally crawled through the waste, and the smoke smelled strong and sickening. It was utterly filthy, disgusting, repulsive to the nose and to the eyes. It presented such a vivid image—*Gehenna* did—that Jesus used it to describe hell, as a symbolic description of hell—a place where there is eternal torment (see Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 25:41, 46; Lk. 16:23-24; Rev. 14:10-11; 20:10, 14-15), constant uncleanness (see Dan. 12:2; cf. Mk. 3:29; Jn. 8:24; Rev. 22:11), where the fires *never* cease burning and the worms never stop crawling (see Ps. 81:15; cf. 2 Thess. 1:7-9). Can you think of anything more disgusting? So, do you want to be there?

Now, Verse 48—"where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched"—that is from Isaiah; as a matter of fact, it's a quote from the very last verse of Isaiah. Isaiah does not finish on a high point. You know, a lot of books of the Bible finish with, "Grace to you, and peace," you know, "grow in the grace and knowledge," "the Lord bless you and keep you"—great benedictions. Isaiah finishes with, "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." And Jesus is talking about hell, that Isaiah was referring to in *his* terminology; hell or, more precisely, "the lake of fire" (Rev. 19:20), or, "eternal fire" (Matt. 18:8; cf. Jude 7). These words are arguably the strongest call to discipleship that the Lord ever made. He is saying, "Guys, *this is serious!* This is life and death, heaven and hell—are you with Me or are you against Me? Are you in or are you out?" This is a *very* strong call to discipleship.

So, this is why we say that, because of how strongly Jesus commands us to deal radically with our own sin, or risk being cast into the eternal garbage pit of hell—this is why we say, "You need to love the Lord Jesus Christ more than you love your sin!" (see 1 Cor. 16:22; cf. Jn. 14:15). Now, we're all temptable, right? We all battle the flesh. None of us have perfect obedience yet (Phil. 3:12-13). But how do you feel—we say this all the time—how do you feel about Jesus Christ, and how do you feel about the sin (see Rom. 7:21-22; Gal. 5:17)? Because in any moment, every person is moving in the direction of one or the other. You need to love your Lord and hate your sin (see Ps. 97:10; Prov. 8:13; cf. Ezek. 6:9). Are you a disciple or are you a pseudo-disciple? Do you want the glory of God, or do you want your own comfort? If you believed a gospel that leads to comfort, you believed a *false* gospel (see Jn. 16:33; cf. Ps. 34:19; Acts 14:22; Phil. 1:29). It's not *about* your comfort—it's about the glory of God, and your eternal redemption, to be "glorified with Him" (Rom. 8:17)! And in the meantime, you're living on enemy territory (Jn. 12:31; 1 Jn. 5:19; cf. Eph. 2:2), and the enemy *hates* the Lord you love; therefore the enemy hates you—therefore, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12; cf. Rev. 12:17). How do you feel about your sin?

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Now, Jesus mentions body parts here, and they are very significant. They are illustrative. "Hands" in the Bible very often represent what you touch and what you do; your deeds—"the deeds of your hands," those are the things you actually do in the world (e.g. Ps. 28:4). Your "feet" represent how you walk and where you go (Prov. 1:16). Your "eyes" represent what you choose to look at, what you choose to focus upon (Heb. 12:2; 2 Pet. 2:14). Now, I say they're very strong words, but on at least one other occasion, Jesus used these words; it's in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew Chapter 5, Verses 29 and 30, He said almost exactly the same thing. And obviously, it's hyperbole—it is overstatement for effect. The point is: how strongly we need to learn to hate sin and everything that might cause us to move in the direction of sin.

Now, clearly He didn't mean it literally, or He would have been having to drag the disciples around who couldn't walk, and couldn't see to walk. You could remove both of your eyes, and you could picture just as many temptations as you can with perfect vision—maybe even better, if you lived full-time in the realm of your imagination. You could cut off every appendage you have, and you'd still be full of sin. But the imagery is very powerful. How much better to be maimed and enter the kingdom of heaven, than to be whole and healthy and comfortable—and end up in hell. The ultimate contrast: enter the kingdom, be cast into hell.

Jesus is telling you to remove yourself from corrupting influence as much as you can. That's why I called this "strong repentance." "Repentance" means to change your mind, and therefore change your direction (see Ps. 119:59; Prov. 28:13; Is. 55:7; Acts 26:20). You've got to learn to hate the things that are your enemy. If something tends to take you down, *go without it!* If a certain person is an influence that drags you down, *stay away from that person* (see Prov. 13:20; 14:7; 22:24-25; 1 Cor. 15:33)! If a certain activity tends to lure you into sin, fill your time with other things (see Ps. 119:37; Prov. 6:25; cf. Jos. 1:8)! If a certain place is especially tempting to you, *stay away from it* (see Prov. 4:14-15; 5:8). The question is not, how close you can get to the edge without falling over; the question is, how much you *hate* what's over the edge, so you're *not* going to be over there peeking over all the time.

I could do a little science experiment to illustrate; being a not-very-good science teacher, I didn't bring any equipment, but I think you can do this one in your imagination. Picture this with me: Suppose I have a clear plastic bottle of water. I break the seal, open it; I drink half, and then, I pour an ounce of red paint into the bottle. What happens? That ounce of red paint says, "This isn't my territory; I'm just going to hide over here in the corner." No, it doesn't! It permeates the whole bottle and all of its contents, and it colors the entire bottle. Now, suppose I have another bottle here that I've already opened and drunk half; I have another half-full bottle. If I pour some of the first bottle—that's now tainted red—into the second, what happens? Now, I have *two* poisoned bottles of water! What if I filled up the remainder of that first bottle, then, with really clean, pure, crystal spring water? I'd still have pink, poisonous water—right? That illustrates the spiritual principle: What is dirty—what is filthy—corrupts what is clean and pure, when the two come in contact (see 1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9; cf. Eph. 4:22). The clean does not clean up what's dirty, merely by contact. Now, there *is* an exception: Jesus could touch a leper and heal him (see Heb. 7:26); He could touch the unclean and make it clean—but you're not Jesus!

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What's the application Jesus meant here? First: Guard each other from corrupting influences. Look out for each other (Gal. 6:1)! Pray for each other! Help each other stay away from stumbling blocks (Rom. 14:13; Heb. 10:24). And in your own life: *Hate* your sin, and run away from what tempts you (1 Cor. 6:18; 10:14; 1 Tim. 6:10-11; 2 Tim. 2:22). There are *plenty* of temptations in the world; and Matthew recorded more of the words of Jesus than Mark did, and Matthew includes Jesus's words that, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!" (Matt. 18:7). Don't you be that one!

Finally: Three evidence of discipleship: Strong care, Strong repentance, and then: Strong sacrifice. If Verses 42 through 48 are very strong language, we would have to say that 49 and 50—maybe not quite as strong, but more enigmatic, in that, if you haven't just happened to be reading the right parts of the Bible to know what Jesus was alluding to, this isn't going to be really obvious to you at first glance. Here's what it says: "For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Now, as you come and go around church this morning, you might see your friend; you might say, "How are you doing?" I bet no one has ever answered you, "Salted with fire, thank you!" What's *that*? What in the world did He mean?

Well, for centuries, salt was the most widely used preservative for food. If you don't have a refrigerator or a freezer, salting preserved things. Salt is very stable; it does not easily degrade. But Jesus talked about "unsalty" salt. Well, sometimes salt—especially salt that might have been mined near the Dead Sea—could be contaminated with gypsum. Gypsum and salt *look* alike—hard to tell the difference—but, if it's contaminated gypsum, it would quickly lose its effectiveness as a preservative and become "unsalty" and tasteless. And Luke 14 mentions "useless either for the soil or for the manure pile," so it would be "thrown out" (vs. 35). And how can you make salt salty again? Well, you could say, you'd add salt—but wouldn't you just be wasting your good salt by dumping it into your bad salt, which would make your good salt bad—like your pink bottle of water would make the other bottle pink?

So, what's He talking about here? "Everyone will be salted with fire...Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." The connection of salt and fire is perhaps obscure to you,, but it's really cool. It likely refers to Ezra 6:9 or Ezekiel 43:23 and 24; those are two places where salt and fire are both involved in Old Testament sacrifices, and here's the significance: Adding salt to a sacrifice symbolize that, as you brought the sacrifice, you were relying on God's enduring covenant. The salt is the preservation; it symbolizes God's faithfulness.

It's stated in Leviticus 2:13 in conjunction with the grain offering—which is not a sacrifice for sin, but the principle is there. Leviticus 2:13 says, "Every grain offering of yours, moreover, you shall season with salt, so that the salt of the covenant of your God shall not be lacking from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt" (cf. Num. 18:19; 2 Chr. 13:5). As the salt preserve meat, and it flavors food, the covenant of God is what preserves Israel because His promises are certain. You can offer your sacrifice in faith because of God's faithfulness to His unchanging promises.

Sermon Title: Strong Words
Scripture Text: Mark 9:42-50

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 3-17-19

So if you're a believer, what is He saying here? "Everyone will be salted with fire"—you ought to be bringing your sacrifice, and it ought to be salted. Well, wait a minute—there's a "once for all" sacrifice—it's Jesus (Heb. 7:27; Heb. 9:12; 10:10; 1 Pet. 3:18). Well, I know. That's why you don't bring animal sacrifices; but you know Romans 12:1—"Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." You are now a *living* sacrifice because the once-for-all sacrifice died and rose again.

So, "Have salt in yourselves" is saying, "Stand on the eternal promises of God." It's a very strong call to *obedience*; it's a call to live a holy life, and hate your sin; it's a call to watch out for each other, because you are all in this together (1 Pet. 5:9); it's a call to present yourself as a sacrifice, to have God at the center of everything (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17), and to lift up everybody else around you (Rom. 12:13; Gal. 6:2; Eph. 4:2-3; Col. 3:14; 1 Thess. 1:6-7). And notice how Jesus ended that with these words: "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." You know what? I think there's a good reason He said that. You're not at peace with people that you're at war with for who's greatest. He's saying, "Come on, guys! Are you going to be My disciples, or not? Are you still going to be bickering about which one of you is better than the other one of you, or are you going to walk with Me? Are you going to have salt in yourself?"

Strong words. May the Holy Spirit apply them to our lives.

Let's pray to that end:

Father, how we thank You for Your wonderful goodness to us in Christ, and thank You for these words of Your Son. We take them for what they are. Oh, Father, teach us to be wise. Teach us to hate that which You hate, to love that which You love, and those whom You love. And most of all, teach us to keep our eyes forever on Jesus Christ, the author and the perfecter of faith—in whose name we pray. Amen.