

**Mark 9:38-50** <sup>38</sup> "Teacher," said John, "we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."<sup>39</sup> "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me,"<sup>40</sup> for whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup> Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.<sup>42</sup> "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea."<sup>43</sup> If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. <sup>[44] [a]</sup> <sup>45</sup> And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. <sup>[46] [b]</sup> <sup>47</sup> And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, <sup>48</sup> where "the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched."<sup>49</sup> Everyone will be salted with fire.<sup>50</sup> "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

This passage of scripture takes place in the context of a series of short stories in the middle section of Mark where Mark shares Jesus' teachings about healing, about His coming death and resurrection, the story of the transfiguration, and he has just finished telling the story of the argument Jesus' disciples have had over who is the greatest in the kingdom.

So today we see Jesus attempt to refocus the teaching once again about discipleship.

There are actually three things in this lesson for this morning that I would like to suggest is critical for us to think about today because they have to do with our attempt to be faithful followers of our Lord.

Let us begin with Jesus' words about how we view those who are not a part of our group. Jesus tells his disciples that there may be others who do not seem to be a part of us who may also be doing the will of the Father. That is why I have often reminded us that Jesus more than once says, it is not all those who say, "Lord, Lord,"—those who worship and profess a certain doctrine—"but those who do the will of the Father, who enter the Kingdom."

In the text for this morning the disciples see someone casting out demons by the use of the name of Jesus and they tried to get him to stop because they were not one of them. They were not at that time included in the group of people that could be known as Christ followers, and certainly not a part of the twelve who have been sent out in the name of Jesus to work miracles.

We have often heard the word "demon" in New Testament writings. Most, in those days, believed that both mental and physical illness was caused by the influence of evil spirits. And it was also believed that a common way to remove their influence was to know the name of still more powerful spirit and command the evil spirit in the name of the more powerful one to come out and the demon was supposed to be powerless to resist.

This is what we have in our text for this morning. John had seen a man using the powerful name of Jesus to defeat the demons and he had tried to stop him because he was NOT one of the intimate band of

disciples. But Jesus said no one could do this kind of work in his name and still be his enemy. It was then that Jesus made the observation that *"He who is not against us is for us."*

This is a lesson in tolerance that we all need to learn.

Over the years I have observed in communities I have served as a pastor that various *"Christian groups,"* to say nothing of other religions, were not considered by all Christians to be doing the work of God among us. They were not using the right words when they fed the poor and clothed their neighbors and comforted those they knew who were mourning.

It was difficult for them to see at least two basic truths. One is that everyone comes to their understanding of who God is and how we can do His will even if we do not all use the same church name. We have to remember that any doctrine or belief must finally be judged by the kind of people it produces. We can verbally say we believe many things but if we do not give legs to those beliefs can we really say we believe them.

Biblical scholar Dr. Chalmers, a protestant pastor and theology professor in the mid 1880's, once put the matter in a nutshell. *"Who cares,"* he demanded, *"about any Church as but an instrument of Christian good?"*

The question must always ultimately be not how a Church is governed but what kind of people it produces.

There is an old eastern fable that helps to make the point. A man possessed a ring that was set with a beautiful opal. Whoever possessed the ring became so sweet and true in character that everyone loved him. The ring was passed on from one generation to the next. To a son. It so happened that there was one father who had three sons who he loved equally so he tried to decide which one would get the ring. (Since it was an OLD EASTERN fable there is no chance gals that it would have been passed on to you.)

After some thought the father decided to have two other rings made that looked exactly like that one so no one could tell the difference. On his death bed he called in his three sons separately, spoke words of love to them and gave them one of the rings without telling the others what he had done. When they discovered, as it was inevitable they would, that they all had what appeared to be the ring their father had worn over the years a dispute arose over which of them had the true ring. The case was taken to a wise judge. He examined the rings and honestly admitted that he could not tell the difference between the rings but that the boys themselves could prove which one it was.

They were astonished and wondered how they could do that. The judge replied that if the true ring gives sweetness and character to the man who wears it, than I and all other people in the city will know the man who possesses the true ring by the goodness of his life. So, he said, go on your way, and be kind, and truthful, be brave, be just in your dealings, and he who does these things will be the owner of the true ring.

The matter was to be proved by life. No man can entirely condemn beliefs which make a man good. If we remember that we may be more tolerant.

So, my second thing to call to your attention that Jesus goes on to say that any kindness shown, and help given by us, or other likeminded people, will not be without its reward. BUT LISTEN, he then says something else that is equally important. There is the teaching about the dangers of being a stumbling block to others who attempt to be kingdom people.

There are so many ways we can cause others to stumble.

Stark alternatives are put before us in today's Gospel. Jesus tells us to make a choice. Choose this day where you will be. It is better to mutilate yourself, to cut off your arm, to pluck out your eye, and throw these vital organs away, than to write yourself a ticket to hell. Why does Jesus speak in such a stark manner? Of course, the Bible scholars tell us that Jesus is speaking here in hyperbole – exaggerated overstatements designed to grab our attention. We are told that rabbinic teachers in that day often spoke in this fashion.

Jesus says it is much better to go into the kingdom of God mangled, without an eye, without an arm, than to find one's whole body thrown into the fires of hell. A whole, healthy body is a great asset. But Jesus says that here is an asset worth sacrificing if the choice is between the kingdom of God and hell, and the choice of the matter of being a stumbling block to others that can lead to their destruction.

To sin is terrible but to lead another to sin is infinitely worse.

There was a little girl whose mother had died. When the girl would come home from school and her father would come home from work she would look for something to do. Her father would come in, get this newspaper, light his pipe, prop up his feet and settle in. There were no other kids in the neighborhood to play with and she was lonely. She asked her father repeatedly if he would play with her and she got the same answer. He asked her to leave him alone and go out and play in the streets.

The inevitable happened—she took to the streets. She had been told to go find others to do something with. Years passed by and she died an early death, influenced too much by the influence of the street. When we arrived in heaven St. Peter said, *“Master, here’s a girl who was a bad one. I suppose we send her straight to hell?”* But, Jesus said, *“No let her in. Let her in.”* BUT THEN his eyes grew stern and he said, *“But look for the man who refused to play with his little girl and sent her out to the streets instead and send him to hell.”*

The moral of the story is that God is not hard on the sinner, but he will be stern to the person who makes it easier for another to sin, and whose conduct, either thoughtless or deliberate puts a stumbling-block in the path of the weaker person.

We have to be careful about what our arms and eyes and other parts of us do that will be a hindrance to our walk of discipleship but especially be careful how we might be causing others to stumble by our lack of caution on their behalf.

How diligent are we in watching our path as Christians so we do not find our actions or words being a stumbling block to others.

Finally, let's take a brief look at the words about salt. I find it interesting that many commentators find it hard to see how verses 49 and 50 go together. A few have suggested that there are three statements about salt, which do not seem to go together well and were probably three things that were words that Jesus spoken but the writer could not remember how so he put them here without trying to tie them together.

My feeling is that they go well with the words that he has just shared in the comments about the first two things I wanted you to notice.

Salt is very important.

Jesus would have known about how salt helped to preserve things in a world without refrigerators and freezers. People would not only eat fresh roasted food or fish cooked soon after they were caught. But meat and fish were also dried, cured and they even smoked meat.

At the risk of leading you to think that I am older than I really am let me also say that when I grew up on the farm it was not uncommon for nearby farmers to have a smoke house, a way of curing and drying meat and preparing meat to be preserved for a longer period of time. Salt was an important ingredient in that process.

Salt has always been an important part of our lives. Not too much but not too little.

Speaking of salt. Last Sunday after church a few of us found ourselves eating lunch at Bandanas. We ordered our food and Dick had ordered a salad that went with his. And none of the rest of us had. So, as is normally the case Dick got his salad before he got his main dish and before we got ours. So, it gave us the opportunity to watch Dick.

Dick wanted some salt on his salad so he reached for the shaker to find what you often find in a restaurant. That is, you try to shake salt out but you can't because they had filled the shaker so full that nothing has room to shake. So, Dick did what many are tempted to do. He took the top off and raked some of the salt out of the shaker. Enough, or possibly a little more than enough, for the shaker to work. The people who cleaned up his dishes probably wondered if he knew the truth about salt, enough but not too much.

I thought of Dick as I read this passage. And, I thought, what if all that salt he had on the side of his plate had been to no good purpose because even if he had plenty of salt for his salad the salt had lost its ability to flavor anything.

As Christians we have been invited to be the agents of salt in the world providing the flavor the world needs—the example of mercy, kindness, and the example of walking humbly with our God. But, if we have failed in our mission we may have been the stumbling block that has led others astray.

However, we are not without hope. Jesus is saying that the world needs the flavor and purity offered by those who follow the Christ. And, if the Christian has lost its ability to offer those things the world will continue in its destructive ways. So, the Christian must accept the purification of those who have been made whole again by the offered cleansing to those who will accept it.

Have within yourselves the purifying influence of the Spirit of Christ. Be purified from selfishness and self-seeking, from bitterness and anger and grudge-bearing. Be cleansed from irritation, and moodiness and self-centeredness, and then, and only then, will we be able to have peace within ourselves and able to live in peace with our neighbor. In other words, Jesus is saying that it is only the life filled with the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,<sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control—that provide the salt of flavor and peace we have been called to provide.

How can we show that we have those gifts? Let's go back to the story of the father who had three sons. The judge replied that if the true ring gives sweetness and character to the man who wears it, than I and all other people in the city will know the man who possesses the true ring by the goodness of his life. So, he said, go on your way, and be kind and truthful, be brave, be just in your dealings and he who does these things will be the owner of the true ring. He will prove that he is the salty deacon.

The matter was to be proved by our lives. And those who live that way will be free from the fear of being the stumbling block that will condemn our souls.

***Are we in need of redemption today?***