

“The Living Worm and the Unquenchable Fire”
The Gospel According to Mark 9:38-50

July 1st, 2018

An old mountaineer lived a full, but not exactly saintly life and he was now on his deathbed. He summoned his weeping wife. “Sara, go to the fireplace and take out the third stone from the top. Reach in there,” he said, “and bring out what you find.” She went to the fireplace and pulled out a large Mason jar. It was full of cash.

“Sara,” said the old man, “when I die, I’m going to take all that money with me. I want you to put that jar up in the attic by the window. I’ll get it as I go by on my way to heaven.” His wife, again, followed his instructions. And, later that night, the old man died.

A couple of days later, after the funeral, Sara remembered the Mason jar and she climbed up to the attic. There she found the jar, still by the window, and still full of money.

“Oh,” she sighed. “I knew I should have put that jar in the basement instead!”

Nobody likes to think about hell. Yet, when we do think about hell, we must think *rightly* about it. According to the Bible, hell is a real place; it’s one of two eternal destinations where souls go after this earthly life comes to an end. Hell is no figment of the imagination; it isn’t simply the tough life you’ve lived this side of eternity. Hell is a far worse reality than anything we could ever think or imagine. No one in their right mind should desire to go there, but many end up in eternal hell.

Jesus spoke about hell often in his earthly ministry. Unless He has saved you from your sins, when this present life comes to an end for you, you’ll spend your eternity in hell. You see, there’s only one way of escaping the sentence of eternal hell in the next life; and that is to trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord in this present life. Seek His forgiveness for your sinfulness, and turn it over to Him. Do that, and you will live, both now and forever.

In the verses of sacred Scripture before us this morning, **Mark 9:38-50**, we have one of those times where Jesus teaches on hell. This picks up on our study last Sunday of verses 30-37 of Mark’s 9th chapter. There, Jesus taught His disciples that they had to approach each other as little children. Now, with today’s passage, we see how we are supposed to approach Him.

The Gospel According to Mark 9:38-50:

Now John answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.”

³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰ For he who is not against us is on our side. ⁴¹ For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.

⁴² “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched— ⁴⁴ where

‘Their worm does not die
And the fire is not quenched.’

⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched— ⁴⁶ where

‘Their worm does not die
And the fire is not quenched.’

⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire— ⁴⁸ where

‘Their worm does not die
And the fire is not quenched.’

⁴⁹ “For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. Salt *is* good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another.”

MP 1 – No Neutrality (v. 38-41);

MP 2 – No Negotiation (v. 42-48);

MP 3 – No Nominalism (v. 49-50).

Verses 38-41 contain our first point – **no neutrality**. In the only time he speaks in Mark, the Apostle John describes to Jesus a man the disciples had come across who was working the kind of miracles they had worked. Yet, the disciples didn’t know the man because he wasn’t with them. So, they challenged him requiring that he no longer conduct miracles in Jesus’ name.

Perhaps thinking Jesus would encourage them for the good work they’d done, the disciples instead receive an explanation. Jesus told them that those who complete works done in His name are actually on His side, whether or not they are with John and the disciples. Further, Jesus’ rationale is that if people are not working against Him, it is because they are on His side.

Those words strike me down. You see, from the very first time I sat under the biblical preaching of my pastor in Alabama, Henry Lewis Smith, along with other preachers like James Boice, RC Sproul, and Sinclair Ferguson, the Bible came alive to me! I wholeheartedly embraced Reformed theology! I don’t often listen to preachers who interpret the Scriptures differently, and I don’t read their books. Sometimes, I don’t think of their denominations as co-laborers in the gospel ministry. Because we are different, I have to be careful not to form a prejudice which views them as competition or even an opponent.

That becomes difficult for me when those Christian denominations treat our spiritual practices with contempt and a lack of collegiality. To disregard our baptism of infant and young children, which is both biblical and Trinitarian, because we didn’t use enough water or it was accomplished before the child exercised saving faith is demeaning and divisive. We accept *their* baptisms when their people join our fellowship! *Where’s the love for us?*

This deep seated ‘us and them’ mentality, of our own making and others’, is what Jesus addresses here. We have more in common with other Christian denominations than we don’t. Our challenge is find more room in our hearts and our theology with those with whom we differ,

but live on the same side of the fence! “It is more important that the servants of God are devoted to Christ than that they are ‘one of us.’ (Ferguson, 152) Ryle asks, “Is our neighbor warring against Satan? Is he really trying to labor for Christ? Better a thousand times that the work should be done by other hands than not done at all. Happy is he who knows something of the spirit of Paul, when he says, ‘If Christ is preached, I will rejoice!’” (**Philippians 1:18**) (Ryle, 191)

So, there’s **no neutral** position when it comes to Jesus; you’re either for Him or against Him. As we come to our second point in verses 42-48, we also have **no** need to **negotiate** with sin. Earlier in **Mark Chapter 9** – verses 36 and 37 – Jesus taught His disciples that they were to receive little children. He picks up that topic again with today’s text, warning His disciples not only are they not to cause other Christians to stumble, but to watch out for stumbling themselves. This is verse 42, “...whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea.”

Few things disturb Jesus more than seasoned Christians causing new, weak, or uninformed believers to sin. Insisting upon Christian liberty before those weaker in the faith is to court disaster for them, and ultimately for us, as well. Jesus used graphic language to impress upon His people the absolute necessity of overcoming sin in our lives – and not causing others to sin.

In his commentary on Mark, Kent Hughes shares a story by former pastor Donald Hubbard, who tells of seeing a high school girl excluded while he was leading a week long camp. The girl was severely handicapped and literally had to drag herself from cabin to chapel. When she ate, she had to have a spoon strapped onto her wrist to eat. In the process some of the food would fall on the table and on her lap.

No one had time for her, so she went around by herself and she ate alone. Dr. Hubbard said that this particular group of high schoolers, though they were from good churches, were an unusually sophisticated and hardened bunch. They could quote the Scriptures, but little spiritual reality was evident in their lives.

On the final night, in keeping with camp tradition, a great bonfire was struck, and all gathered around to give a testimony and cast a stick in the fire. But no one responded...except this handicapped girl. As Dr. Hubbard tells it, she picked up a stick and then stumbled around the fire, looking each camper in the face. And when she was finished she said to all in her slurred speech, “I don’t know why God made me like this, but he can have all of me there is!” And she wrenched her body around and threw her stick into the fire. She refused to be a casualty of their sinful, superficial hearts!

“Sin is to be opposed at all costs.” (English, 171) We must be about killing sin in our lives, or it will be killing us. There is an extreme cost to sin – eradicate it, don’t negotiate it!

What Jesus is calling for in verses 43-48 is not physical mutilation, but spiritual mortification – the cutting off of harmful practices from one’s life. The hand, foot, and eye encompass the totality of life. Think about it - the hand symbolizes what we *do*, the foot where we *go*, and the eye what we *see*.

Three times, we see a refrain in these verses from the last verse in Isaiah (**Isaiah 66:24**). It speaks of hell as a place where ‘Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ In saying “the fire is not quenched,” Jesus meant that the punishment for those who enter hell is never-ending. The word Jesus uses of hell in these verses is ‘Gehenna,’ the root of which comes from the Valley of Hinnom. That valley lay south of Jerusalem; it was the place where Kings Ahaz and

Manasseh offered human sacrifices to the false god Molech. You can read more in **2 Kings, Chapters 16 and 21**, and **2 Chronicles, Chapters 28 and 33**.

In using the concepts of worm and fire to describe the torment of hell here, the Scripture differentiates between external and internal torment. The external torment is the fire, and the internal torment is the worm.

Hell is not a place you want to go; it will not be a party with your drinking buddies. It will be endless torture, pain, and horror, internally and externally, with no relief...ever! And, those who experience those pangs are those who do not serve Jesus Christ as Lord and Master; one's unbelief in the Person and work of Jesus is his ticket to hell.

Application – Let's answer some questions:

** What have you downloaded from the Internet? Are there pictures on your phone or computer you want no one else to see? Don't coddle sin!*

** How many people have you murdered on video games, or how many murders have you witnessed in games or videos? Have you considered what that does to your sensitivities?*

** In contrast, how many chapters of the Bible did you read this past week?*

We've seen there is **no neutral** position with Jesus, and there is **no negotiating** with sin. Thirdly, there should also be **no nominalism** (so-called; in name only). That's in the last two verses – “For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. Salt *is* good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it?”

The thought here is that both fire and salt purify. Fire purifies by burning away the garbage in our lives, the impurities. Salt purifies in what it preserves. Every believer in Jesus Christ will “be seasoned with fire” – that means that we will endure suffering because of our faith. And, said suffering is intended by God to purify us.

Though your doctor may think otherwise, Your Savior says that “Salt is good.” Yet, salt sometimes loses its flavor. Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount are helpful here when He speaks of salt losing its flavor. **Matthew 5:13** - “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.” We can become complacent in our faith, focusing only upon ourselves or our family. We can become legalistic instead of grace-filled; critical instead of compassionate; hardened instead of helpful; mean instead of merciful.

This is where nominal Christianity comes into play. Jesus expects more than a name-only Christianity from His disciples. The last words of this chapter reveal God's plan for His people, and this addresses the argument the disciples had on the road, when they were debating who was the greatest among their number. “Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another.”

Salt is made up of two substances – sodium and chloride – which are poisonous in themselves. But, together, they create a helpful substance we must have to live.