

Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

Taking Sin Seriously

January 28th, 2018

Mark 9:42-50

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Mark 9:42; that’s on page 845 in your pew Bibles. I suppose we could have handled all of verses 32-50 in a single unit – we could have done that because it is a sort of contained unit in the story. You remember that back in verses 30-32 Jesus again predicted his suffering and his crucifixion – the disciples thought he was speaking metaphorically or allegorically. They had no frame of reference for what he was saying. “There goes Jesus talking in riddles again” – but he wasn’t talking in riddles, he was being DEADLY SERIOUS – but they didn’t get it. They totally missed it! In fact, as they were walking along behind Jesus they start arguing with each other over who will be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. Will it be Peter? He’s the oldest we think, and he was the spokesman for the group – the head boy you might say. But he was also still stinging from the strongest rebuke in the Gospel of Mark – maybe in the whole Bible. Just one chapter ago – from the same strategic retreat they are just coming back from Jesus pointed at Peter and said:

“Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” (Mark 8:33 ESV)

So maybe Peter was out of the running. Maybe he was in the dog house. Maybe the seat of honour at the King’s right hand was back up for grabs – that’s what they were talking about on the road after Jesus predicted that he would suffer and be betrayed and be crucified and rise

again.

They missed it. They totally missed it.

But Jesus was marvellously patient with them. When they arrived at Capernaum he brought them inside the house – Peter’s house – and he gathered them into a circle and he said:

“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” 36 And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 37 “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” (Mark 9:35–37 ESV)

It isn’t about climbing to the top – Jesus says! What are you doing up there on that ladder scrambling for positions? Jesus kicks that ladder out from underneath them and he gets down on his knees and he says – look at this kid. This is what its about. Its about loving this little one. Serving this little one and helping this little one come to know me, love me, serve me, follow me – that’s what its about.

And then the disciples ask a follow up question – and it wasn’t a good one. They say: “Jesus we saw a guy casting out demons in your name but he wasn’t following us! So we tried to stop him.”

And Jesus called down fire from heaven and he consumed those idiots and he started over again with 12 other boys who were much better listeners – no! That’s what I would have done, I think, but that’s not what Jesus did. He taught them again.

He said:

“Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 For the one who is not against us is for us. 41 For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. (Mark 9:39–41 ESV)

Listen, Jesus says, if he is helping people in my name, then it doesn’t really matter whether he is following you at this point does it? At this point NO ONE should be following you. What matters is that he is following me and he is helping other people to follow me – that’s what its about. If you help others because they belong to me there will be a reward for you – but now – right here in the story, things take a turn towards the serious, listen to what Jesus says next – and this is our

text for today. Starting in verse 42 he says:

“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.” (Mark 9:42–50 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

We took a turn towards the serious there – did you feel that? Jesus went from: “if you help a believer because he belongs to me you will be rewarded” to “if you hurt a believer who belongs to me you will be thrown into hell.”

That’s a turn toward the serious if ever I saw one.

Remember this entire sequence – from verse 32-50 – is about Jesus getting the disciples back on track. They thought it was about position and privilege and prestige – but its not about those things at all! Its about service and sacrifice and helping these little ones in the faith grow in their knowledge and love of Jesus – that’s what ministry is all about! And so the thing you should be thinking about, Jesus says, is sin. Your sin. Because your sin is a threat to your ministry. More than that it is a threat to your eternal soul.

That’s what this passage is saying. Jesus is saying that the disciples ought to be thinking less about status and more about sin because sin is serious business.

Sin Is Serious Business

He says 4 things about sin that I want you to notice. He says that sin is serious business first of all:

1. Because sin is contagious

The concern here is that rather than helping the little ones in the faith the disciples may actually cause them to sin. In verse 42 Jesus says:

“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. (Mark 9:42 ESV)

Some of you will have a text note in your Bible by that phrase “cause to sin” that tells you that the Greek word literally means “make to stumble”. Jesus is telling the disciples that if they don’t eradicate the sin in their own lives they will end up doing the opposite of what he wants them to do. He wants them to help these little ones grow in their faith – but if they don’t take their own sin seriously they will actually end up shipwrecking the faith of every little one around them.

Now, I can’t help but hear that through the lens of my experience as a parent. Shauna Lee and I had this conversation just the other day. We both said that we wish we could start over again as parents because when we had our first child we were so young, so stupid, so selfish and so immature in our faith. I lamented that our oldest daughter – who is now 20 years old – got the worst of us – the least sanctified of us – and I worried to my wife that my immaturity during her childhood might make it more difficult for her to love and follow Jesus over the course of her life.

Do you think about that?

You should!

Jesus is saying here that if we aren’t **SERIOUS** about our sin – if we aren’t eye plucking, hand amputating, foot sawing off serious about sin we will end up passing that on to our kids. We will end up putting barriers in their path that they will struggle to get over on their way to Jesus.

Are you hearing that?

I am hearing that.

I am fall down on the ground in sackcloth and ashes hearing that.

I wonder sometimes about the different answers you would get if you interviewed my oldest daughter and my youngest daughter about their dad when they both turned 80. If you asked the oldest: Did your daddy have a bad temper? Was your daddy selfish? Was he godly? Was he a good husband? What would she say? What would she remember? If you asked the younger one the same question what would she say? Something very different I think – I hope.

I think the point here is that if we really love the little ones in our life – our kids, the new believers God entrusts to us – the new believers here at the church – if we really love those people then we are going to get serious about sin – NOW. Right now. Eye gouging, hand amputating, leg cutting off **SERIOUS ABOUT SIN RIGHT NOW.**

If you love them.

Because sin is contagious. And the sins of the fathers and the mothers and the big brothers and big sisters are passed on to the little ones. So if you care about that – if you care about them – you are going to get serious about sin.

The second thing Jesus says here is that sin is serious business:

2. Because hell is forever

Now I know that we don't like sermons about hell anymore; I know that they are out of fashion, but Jesus talked about hell more than any other person in the Bible. R.T. France says here:

“Christians who disparage ‘hell-fire preaching’ must face the awkward fact that Mark’s Jesus (and still more Matthew’s and Luke’s) envisaged an ultimate separation between life and gehenna (*hell*) which demanded the most drastic renunciation in order to avoid the unquenchable fire, and that he did not regard even his disciples as immune from the need to examine themselves and take appropriate action.”¹

In this little sermon that Jesus is preaching to HIS DISCIPLES in Peter’s house – just note that; there are no “unbelievers” in this setting. This is Jesus, 12 disciples, probably Peter’s wife, his mother in law and one little kid – maybe Peter’s nephew, maybe Peter’s son, we don’t know. But

¹ R.T. France, , *The Gospel Of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 383.

all believers. All believers and the bulk of this paragraph is about how if the people in that circle don't take drastic measures to kill the sin in their life it will DRAG THEM DOWN TO THE PIT OF HELL.

What are you going to do with that?

Listen to what he says:

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.' (Mark 9:43–48 ESV)

He said that to BELIEVERS! He said that to the Apostles!

What are you going to do with that?

He told a house full of PUBLIC, PROFESSED followers of Christ that if they didn't get serious about sin their sin would spread through them like gangrene and it would drag them down to the depths of hell where their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched – what are you going to do with that?

Are you going to say that hell doesn't exist? Some Christians are doing that.

Are you going to say that God would never do that to people? Some Christians are saying that.

Are you going to say that this is just a warning – a threat – like when you tell your kids that if they don't stop messing around in the back seat you will stop the car right there on the side of the highway and spank the living sin out of them – is that what this is? A threat? A threat Jesus would never actually follow up on?

Or is it serious?

I think it is serious and I believe that partly because I am studying and translating my way right

now through the First Epistle Of John. John was there in that circle and he heard what Jesus said and then he wrote this.

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. 8 Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. 9 No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. 10 By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:4–10 ESV)

That sounds for all the world to me like an Apostolic commentary on this paragraph in Mark 9. It sounds like the Apostle John wrestled with this teaching of Jesus and then with the help of the Holy Spirit he explained it to his people and what he said was that if a person is at peace with their sin – if they WALK IN IT – if they PERSIST IN IT – if they ABIDE IN IT – then they show that they never knew Jesus in the first place. They show that they were never SAVED in the first place. Because if they really did know Jesus, if they were truly saved, if they were filled with the Holy Spirit then the power of sin would have been broken in them and they would walk increasingly FREE OF IT.

The work of Jesus destroys the POWER of the devil in us. So if the power of the devil is undiminished in us, John reasons, then we are not saved and as unsaved people we will go back to our father who is the devil.

That's how John worked this out.

Now hear that – wrestle with that with me for a minute. Remember that John was in the room – remember also that Judas was in the room – and so John heard Jesus say to a room full of public, professed believers that if they didn't wage war on sin – if they didn't destroy sin in their lives – they would go to hell. From that John understood that SAYING you were a Christian didn't make you a Christian – or didn't prove you were a Christian. Being in the room, listening to the teaching didn't prove you were a Christian – what PROVED you were a Christian was that you fought sin and through the power of the Holy Spirit – increasingly and progressively overcame sin in your life and conduct – that's what ultimately proved that you were a believer. And that you loved your brothers and sisters in Christ – he says that too:

By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:10 ESV)

So Jesus is telling the disciples not to be focused on status – who is at the top and who is next from the top – he is telling them to be concerned about who is going to the bottom – who is going to hell. Be focused on that, Jesus says. Think about that, he says. Fight sin in your life through the power of the Holy Spirit because ultimately, if you don't fight sin, you will pass it on to other people around you and it will grow and consume you and drag you down to hell.

That's what he's saying.

The third thing he says is that sin is serious business:

3. Because holiness is compelling

This gets us into the very confusing saying that Jesus speaks at the end of the passage. He says:

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.” (Mark 9:49–50 ESV)

What in the world does that mean? Most scholars believe that Jesus is referring to the sacrifices in the temple – as a figure of speech. In the temple offerings were burned and they were usually offered with salt. We think that the burning was intended to symbolize totality – it was consumed – no portion of a burnt offering went to the priests it was **TOTALLY** given to God. We think the salt symbolized purity and “set apart-ness”. Salt was a preservative and it arrested decay so it came to symbolize a zealous, active, purity and differentness. So those **THEMES** lie behind this expression which makes no sense in contemporary English. William Lane offers the best and simplest explanation I have been able to find. He says that the expression means that:

“The disciples must be seasoned with salt, like the sacrifice. This will take place through fiery trials (cf I Peter 1:7; 4:12), through which God will purge away everything contrary to his will....salt typifies that quality which is the distinctive mark of the disciple, the loss of which will make him worthless.”²

² William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 349-350.

Alright, so the saying means that God will use trials to purify us and to burn the sin out of us – that’s the fire – so that we maintain our distinctiveness without which we are useless to him in this world – that’s the salt.

That’s what Jesus meant by that saying. Let me put this all together. Jesus is telling the disciples not to be focused on status but rather to be focused on sin. Sin is serious business because it spreads and it can shipwreck the faith and growth of the little ones. Sin is serious business because left unchecked it can grow and consume the whole person and drag them down to hell and then here he is saying that sin is serious business because left unchecked it destroys our witness to the world. It obscures the character of God that is supposed to shine through us and commend the person of Christ to a dying culture.

And then lastly, Jesus says that sin is serious business:

4. Because peace is persuasive

This comes from the same saying. Jesus says:

Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. (Mark 9:50 ESV)

So “have salt in yourselves” means “be distinctive, be holy, holiness is part of your witness to the world” and “be at peace with one another” which suggests that peace is also part of our witness to the world. Sin is serious business, Jesus is saying because it obscures our witness, it blemishes our testimony to the perfection and beauty of God and it destroys our community which is the ultimate proof that we belong to God!

Jesus said that; he said:

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35 ESV)

The lynchpin of our witness to the world is the quality of our love for one another – and sin threatens that – sin ruins that.

So take it seriously.

I say to couples all the time in marriage counselling: “Your sanctification is the best gift you can give to your marriage.”

Can I tell you something? 99% of conflict in a marriage is caused by sin and the other 1% is caused by stupid, which is also sin.

Sin destroys community – in a marriage and in a church – so the best gift you can give to our church – the best thing you can do to help our witness as a church – is to get serious about your sin.

That’s the point of this passage.

Application:

And so, the application of this passage is painfully obvious – Jesus gives it to us:

if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. (Mark 9:43 ESV)

if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. (Mark 9:45 ESV)

if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. (Mark 9:47 ESV)

What’s he saying there? He’s saying sin is serious business, therefore, you need to get serious about getting rid of the remaining sin in your life!

That’s the application – that’s the take away.

Now, I need to be sure that you understand that Jesus is speaking in hyperbole here – he is not actually telling us to engage in self mutilation – the Bible forbids self mutilation in Deuteronomy 14:1 – so Jesus is using a figure of speech. He is saying: “You’ve got to get serious. You’ve got be willing to give up things you love and crave and desire and cherish in order to get on top of this.”

William Lane is helpful again here, he says:

“Jesus did not hesitate to call for the renunciation of possessions (10:21), family (10:28f.) and of life itself (8:34f.) if these things stood in the way of following him; here he demands the complete sacrifice of the sinful activity of the member.”³

Does everyone have to give up all their money to be a Christian? No. But you do if you are tempted to sin with your money. Does everyone have to break up with their boyfriend or girlfriend to follow Jesus? No. But you do if that relationship is causing you to sin and interfering with your relationship with Jesus – are you seeing that? That’s what Jesus is saying.

You have to be willing to take a SCALPEL to your life – you have to be willing to carve out and cast off any remaining sin – because if you don’t, it will get passed on to your little ones, it will drag you down to hell, it will tarnish and obscure our witness and it will destroy the peace of our community. Those are the stakes!

So what are you going to do?

I’m going to suggest 3 things – and by the way – this sermon hit me like a ton of bricks on Tuesday. It brought up a ton of regrets in my life – I was so late to take sin seriously. You’ve heard me say that before. I didn’t hate sin until my late 20’s. I didn’t make war on sin until it threatened my marriage and my ministry. I didn’t see this! I wish someone had preached this sermon to me when I was 21 years old! This sermon makes me sad for my past but resolved for my future – so if you are feeling that, I think you’re in the right place and I know you are in good company.

So here are the 3 things I’m going to suggest:

1. Identify the remaining sin in your life

Where is sin hiding out in your life? Where is it lurking? What are you playing with? Is it sex

³ William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 348.

stuff? Money stuff? Language stuff? Power stuff? Rebellion stuff? Independence stuff? Where is your stuff? What little monster have you got closeted away from the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit.

NAME IT. Right now, in the quietness of your heart NAME IT.

2. Starve it

Find whatever is feeding that sin and cut it off. If it is a sex thing then cut off whatever is feeding it. Is there a show you are watching that you shouldn't be? Are you looking at porn on your phone? Then get rid of it!

I'm going to say something right now.

Men, if you have looked at pornography on your phone in the last 30 days GET RID OF IT. You don't need that phone – don't tell me that you do! We survived for thousands of years without smart phones! If your smart phone causes you to sin CUT IT OFF! Better to enter life with a clam shell flip phone without data or apps than to be cast into the pit of hell.

STARVE IT! CUT IT OFF!

And then lastly,

3. Look around

Jesus put a little kid in the middle of the disciples to remind them of the stakes. He put a human face on it. That's what I'm saying. Look around. Do you see the face of your daughter my friend? She will pay the price for your sexual addiction. Do you see the face of your son? He will pay the price for your pride, your arrogance and your stubborn rebellion. Do you want to make them stumble? Do you not know that greatness in the kingdom of God is about loving them, serving them, SACRIFICING FOR THEM so that they can know, love and follow Jesus – will you do that for them? Because doing it for them is doing it for Jesus. Jesus said:

'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:40 ESV)

Thanks be to God, let's pray together.