

Jason Upchurch - Mark 9:42-50 - The Good News Forsakes Sin

We come to a very weighty passage of Scripture this morning as we look at the very last night of Jesus in the northern area of Israel. If you remember he's in Capernaum, his base of ministry operations throughout most of his ministry. Capernaum is at 12 o'clock on the Lake of Galilee in the northern region of Israel called Galilee. Remember Israel in Jesus's times was divided into Galilee in the north, Samaria in the middle, and Judea in the south.

And Jesus traveled to Capernaum on the north shore of the Lake of Galilee after his transfiguration for one last brief time of teaching. After he finishes teaching in this section in Chapter 9, he will set out south to Jerusalem. He will never again return to the northern area of Galilee in Israel.

So although there are still 6 chapters to go in Mark, this is only a short time before Jesus is crucified and raised.

We saw last week that although the disciples have been with Jesus for so long, they still don't really understand a lot about Jesus. The truths Jesus is teaching them have been hidden from them. Yet Jesus is patient and kind toward his disciples who fail to grasp some of these truths.

But as Jesus's teaching goes on, and we look to our section this morning, we see that although Jesus is patient and kind, he is serious about the danger of sin. Sin is deadly dangerous. Dangerous to us in this temporal life. Sin often comes with a high price tag just in the here and now of this life. Whether it injures us, damages us, injures others, has consequences for others.

But it also eternally dangerous as Jesus makes clear here as well. So the big picture here this morning is that Jesus threatens great punishment for those who persist in sin.

Now, before we address our outline, I think it's going to be helpful to pause for a few minutes and talk about hell. My goal here is not a hellfire and damnation sermon. But I think we need to be aware of what the Bible says about hell and this passage has a lot to say about it.

And as many people have pointed out: no one talks more about hell than the Lord Jesus Christ. When someone is saved, we often say they are saved from hell. That's true. They are also saved from sin and guilt and the wrath of God. But they are saved from the horrors of hell. Hell is the instrument of eternal punishment on those who do not believe in Jesus.

And I would be remiss for not saying, if you don't believe in Jesus hell is what awaits you. This is not a joke or a game. This is eternal damnation for all those who do not believe in Jesus.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not what? Perish - in hell. But have eternal life.

And by the way, this doctrine offends those who are not believers. Our family found that out this week. Unbelievers don't like the doctrine of hell - wonder of wonders. It offends their sensibilities and their consciences. But it is

But since this section in particular tells us a lot about hell and I think it's worth pausing and working through this.

First of all we see that hell is mentioned explicitly in **Vs. 43. Read**

The word that is used here is Gehenna. Gehenna was actually a valley just south of Jerusalem. If you walk from Jerusalem down to Gehenna - or the Valley of Hinnom - you'd walk down to this place just outside the walls of Jerusalem. **Picture**

It had been known in the OT as a place where the people would offer their sacrifices, even child sacrifices. King Ahab, and King Manasseh along with many others burned their children as offerings to the Baals and

Ashteroths. It was filled with necromancers and fortunetellers and sorcery and mediums. The Valley was a cursed place.

Later on during the time between the OT and the NT it became basically the trash dump of Jerusalem. It's beautiful and lush now. But back in Jesus's day this would have been a stinking dump. And what ancient people did was burn their trash and refuse. It was a non stop fire pit for trash and refuse. The fire never went out - it perpetually burned and the people of God in Jerusalem would be able to look south during the day and see and smell the smoke or look out at night and see the glow of the fire.

Now, what you need to understand is that what the Bible says about hell is slowly developed as time went on. It seems that in the OT, people just understood that the physical body went into the ground and the soul went to a place called Sheol. Sheol was kind of a vague place that basically meant "the place of the dead." The biblical authors use it both as a good place and a bad place. You wanted to die peacefully as you went down to Sheol, but at the same time you wanted your enemies to perish and go to Sheol.

There seems to be a sense that the righteous would be in the presence of God in Sheol, but that the wicked would be punished. It was somewhat vague.

And what happened during the time between the OT and the NT was that the Jews began to use Hinnom - "Gehenna" - as a metaphor for eternal judgement of the wicked. And instead of speaking vaguely about "Sheol" the wicked went to a place like Gehenna: constant burning and punishment. And Jesus picked up on that. He didn't refute it or deny it, instead he adopted it into his teaching and even expanded on it.

He calls it Gehenna, and describes it further as unquenchable fire. **Read 43**

Throughout the Bible when God judges people it is often described as burning. Fire in the ancient world was an uncontrollable danger. Even now - having just made it through a terrible fire season - there's a sense in which fire is an absolute danger. But even as little as 100 years ago there was no fire suppression. There was no public water system to suppress fires, no helicopters spreading flame retardant. It was an uncontrollable force of death and destruction.

This is what hell is described as: unquenchable fire. It won't go out and more than that: it can't go out. It is unquenchable. Not **able** to be put out. Interestingly, the Greek word for "unquenchable" is asbestos. Most of us know asbestos as the dangerous material that was considered revolutionary because fire couldn't consume it. Well, here this is an asbestos fire - unquenchable, unstoppable fire.

That's hell. And notice the way in which hell is described: bodily. **Read 43**

The threat here and in the other verses is that someone who continues on in sin will go bodily into hell. Hell isn't just a place of mental torment or theoretical suffering. What Jesus describes is a fiery judgement that affects the physical body.

Even at the return of Jesus, all the dead of all of humanity are raised bodily. The saints have their body reunited to them and are glorified forever. Unbelievers are reunited to their bodies and cast into the lake of what? Fire. Somehow those in hell suffer physically now - there seems to be some kind of bodily suffering even now. But even after the resurrection there is bodily suffering. You remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus? The rich man says he is in torment and desires Lazarus to give him just one drop of water to cool his tongue because he is in anguish in the flame (**Luke 16:19-31**). It's not a parable, parables don't use peoples' names. So this is a glimpse into the eternal situation of those who have died and somehow he is suffering in flame prior to his resurrection.

Another aspect of hell is that people are **thrown** into hell. **Read 46-47**

Maybe this seems like a minor point but I think it's important. Hell is not some sort of automatic punishment place people go to and God is powerless to help them. It's not some sort of inevitable trap door that people fall

into at the judgement. Here, the visual that Jesus gives us is of people being thrown into hell - ballo in the Greek. Thrown by someone. Who are they thrown by? Satan? Angels? Who?

I think it's God himself.

Luke 12:5 But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell.

Who is that? God. Now, whether he does that directly or commands some angel to do it, is a little beside the point. What we need to understand is that hell is personal punishment from God to the sinner. And it's not like the cartoons where Satan is in control of hell and sort of runs the place. No, in the Bible Satan ends up in hell along with the beast and the false prophet and all the unholy angels and all the unbelievers.

They have all violated God personally and so God personally sees to their eternal judgement.

Look at **Vs. 47-48. Read**

The fire is an eternal fire. There are some who wrongly believe that hell is a temporary thing. In fact, a hallmark of liberal theologians is that they deny that hell is an eternal reality. Their reasoning goes something like this: How could a loving God punish someone in hell eternally for the sins of this life? That doesn't seem just.

So what they'll often do is say that when an unbeliever dies they simply blink out of existence. Or maybe they suffer for a short time and then they blink out of existence. This is called annihilationism. The soul that God created is annihilated. This is wrong and taught nowhere in Scripture.

What we see in Scripture is eternal, conscious punishment in hell for all who do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And Jesus gets to that idea here in 2 ways.

First, the worm never dies. This is a graphic picture of decomposing. That worms would eat up bodies. Well they never die in hell. They continually consume forever and ever. And as we've seen, the flame does not die. If people eventually blink out of existence, why would God need the flame to go on forever and ever? He wouldn't.

You know the reason the punishment for sin is eternal? Because the sin is committed against the eternal, infinite God. God is infinitely holy, infinitely powerful, infinitely more excellent than we could ever imagine and sin is treason against him. We don't get to decide the punishment for sin, God does. And it's eternal.

By the way, this is a reference to Isaiah **66:24** - the very last verse in Isaiah - where God promises to judge all the ungodly and bless all the righteous in the New Heavens and New Earth. Isaiah says that the righteous "shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against [the Lord]. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

So much more we could say about hell, but I want to warn any this morning that if you haven't turned from your sin and followed after Jesus as the risen Lord of all the earth this is where you are headed. And yet Jesus calls you to come to him and be saved from it.

All that is to frame that in the context of our passage. Because hell is what Jesus is threatening for those who refuse to stop sinning.

1) Jesus threatens punishment for causing others to sin. Read 42

Remember that Jesus is talking with the disciples in the house. And he has a little child in his arms. The little child is the example of what disciples of Jesus should strive to be like and who they should esteem. We should consider ourselves the lowest in society and we should accept and treasure the lowest in society.

Well, he continues on with this child in his arms and his point is that as followers of Jesus we would never want to be the cause of another believer to sin. He says one of these little ones to sin.

Who's he talking about? Just children? Just the lowly? I think he's talking about every believer everywhere. We are not to cause any believer anywhere to stumble.

He's just said that we are to all be like this little child - we are to be last of all and servant of all. So the Kingdom is filled with children. And just as it would be unthinkable for us to cause a little child to sin, it should be unthinkable for us to cause other believers to sin.

And then he makes the comparison: it would be better for the person causing other believers to sin to hang a great millstone around their neck and be cast into the sea than cause another believer to sin.

When we were in Israel we visited a village in Nazareth that was made to look like villages in Jesus's time. It was really fascinating. And in the village there was a small house where people would press olives to make olive oil. And the first step in making olive oil is to pick the olives, and smash them down with a millstone. The millstone is huge, as you can tell from the picture. It's weighs several hundred pounds. And although it's very heavy, it's leveraged so you can actually push it around in circles with some effort.

Usually what they would do would be to hook up a donkey to the press and the donkey would just walk circles over and over and the millstone would crush the olives. This is the exact type of millstone Jesus had in mind. How do we know?

Most of us have "great millstone" or "large millstone" but literally it's a millstone of a donkey. A millstone that a donkey would turn. This millstone.

Jesus says it would be better to hook this thing around your neck and jump into the sea than cause someone else to sin. Whatever else we can say about that I think he's pretty serious. Drowning ourselves is better than causing others to sin.

Now, I think we need to be really clear that when we sin we are entirely responsible for it. We can't pawn our sin off on other people. When you sin, it's on you. When I sin, it's on me. But we can tempt people to sin. We can invite them or entice them to sin.

If you know I'm on a diet and put a huge apple pie right in front of me, you are enticing me. You're not picking up the fork and putting the pie into my mouth, but you're putting a stumbling block in my way.

That's how it is with tempting others to sin. And there are only about 5,000 ways we can do this.

Fathers can entice their children to sin:

Eph. 6:4: Fathers do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Parents in general, but fathers in particular, can entice our children to anger. We can oppress them and frustrate them rather than encourage them and train them in grace.

Husbands and wives can entice each other to sin. Husbands failing to love our wives and provide clear direction and leadership; wives by not submitting to husbands and seeking to encourage their leadership.

Gossip is a way we can entice others to sin. When we invite others to speak about people and in ways we shouldn't.

Constant complaining and discouragement. There's a reason there are so many verses against complaining in the Bible. It has such a negative affect on everyone around. It kills morale and more than that it denies that God is actually the good and gracious and generous provider of all things.

Immodesty is a way we can entice people to sin. Tight clothes, short clothes, revealing clothes - both men and women - can cause others to stumble.

Greed can entice others to sin. Whether by lack of contentment or using sinful means to obtain riches. The love of money is the root of all evil. Often times we operate out of greed without even knowing it.

We could go on, but we never, ever want to cause someone else to sin. We never, ever want to be the reason that someone else stumbles. And I think sometimes it's hard for us to know if we're doing this. It takes some reflection. I'd encourage you this week to sit down and honestly consider ways in which you might be causing other people to sin.

We've all done this. I think all of us have at one point or another enticed someone else to sin. There's grace and forgiveness through Jesus for this. But Jesus nevertheless calls us to ensure that we are not causing anyone to stumble.

2) Jesus threatens punishment if we persist in sin. 43-48

So what Jesus is doing here is using hyperbole to make a very serious point. Jesus doesn't actually want us to cut off our hand or foot or gouge out our eye. And for the record he doesn't want us to drown ourselves with a millstone either. This is all hyperbole, which is exaggeration for effect. Nowhere in the NT do we see this action and all through church history no one who is sane takes this literally.

The point he's making here is that we need to take radical steps to get sin out of our lives. If there's something causing you to sin, cut it off. If it's your hand with what you're touching or being involved in, cut it off. If what you're looking at is causing you to sin, gouge out your eye. If your feet are taking you to a place you shouldn't go, chop them off too.

If working at that place is causing you to sin, leave. If being on Facebook is causing you to sin, turn it off. If you can't stop looking at porn on your phone, get rid of the phone. If you keep going to the casino, going to the bar, going to be with people you shouldn't be around, chop it off.

We need to do radical things to get sin out of our lives.

Let me paint a little picture for you. Let's say you die today. And there's 2 lines for eternity. One line is the line to the Kingdom, the other line is the line to hell. And you're standing in line to get into the Kingdom. And there's all these people standing around. What do you imagine them looking like? All nice and beautiful, white robes, golden crown?

Or do you imagine them looking like a leper colony? Everyone is missing legs and hands. Half of them have no eyes, the other half have body parts missing. That's the picture Jesus is painting. The line going into the Kingdom looks like something out of a horror movie. But what line were they in? They're in the Kingdom line. They're getting in. They've made the hard and radical decisions to get stuff out of their lives they knew shouldn't be there.

The line to hell is filled with gorgeous people. People with 2 legs, 2 eyes. They said they loved Jesus but they never really wanted to get rid of sin. They never took any radical steps to sever sin out of their lives. They never did anything that looked foolish to the world, but looked wise to God.

Jesus says it's better to enter the Kingdom missing some limbs than enter hell whole.

And while we know our justification is all through faith in Jesus - not a work of our own - we also know we are called as followers of Jesus to rid ourselves of sin. That has to be our priority.

3) Jesus threatens that we'll be useless if we compromise. Read 49-50

These last two passages are the most unusual of the section, and maybe the most unusual in all of Mark's gospel. They are both tied together with the theme of salt. Beyond that we stretch to understand them.

They join the ranks of verses like **1 Cor. 11:10** talking about women wearing head coverings because of the angels. What does that mean?

Or **1 Cor. 15:29**: where Paul talks about people who had been baptized for the dead. What was that? We don't know.

The same thing is true here, except that we have one tiny clue that doesn't even make it into our Bibles. Some of you have a footnote at the bottom that says "Some manuscripts add 'and every sacrifice will be salted with salt.'" Well that just clears it up, doesn't it?

What is that talking about? Well, that seems to be a scribal addition from way back - not in the Bible - but added for clarification. In **Lev. 2:13** God tells the people how to offer grain offerings to the Lord.

And what you would do was bring your grain offering to God, add salt to the offering and burn it up on the altar. The salt had to be there or the sacrifice wasn't accepted.

And the best most scholars can put together is that Jesus is using this kind of imagery. We're all going to go through the proverbial fire. Everyone is going to have hard stuff, trials, difficulties and ultimately death in their life. We're like the grain and we're going to be burned up. The question is: are we going to go through those fiery trials with salt and be pleasing to God because we suffer well? Or are we going to go through those trials kicking and screaming in an ungodly way?

And it seems like what the scribe was trying to help explain was that every true sacrifice would be a salty one. True believers are to suffer well to the glory of God.

We don't know for 100% if that's what Jesus is getting at, but that's the best we have. And that lesson is repeated throughout Mark where Jesus tells his disciples they will suffer and they should do so for the glory of God.

The second phrase here about salt is also tough. **Read 50**

Both of these sayings seem to have been understood by their original audience, but some of the impact is lost on us. The only connection here is the reference to salt. So what is Jesus saying?

Well, salt is a stable compound. The only way it "loses its saltiness" is to be mixed with other things. And it's almost impossible to repurify salt once it's mixed with other things.

So to put this together I think what Jesus is saying is that we are salt and we need to stay salty. We need to stay unmixed. Do not mix with sin or the world or the devil. Don't compromise morally. Don't compromise doctrinally. Purity is good and it's hard to reclaim once it's gone.

Be pure Jesus says. And be at peace with one another. Why be at peace? Well what did Jesus call them out on just a few minutes earlier? They were arguing about who the greatest was.

Guys, don't fight - especially about dumb things. Be pure and be at peace.

When there is this much on the line - heaven and hell and the Kingdom we are called to put sin to death. To never tempt others to sin and undergo every trial with purity and godliness and peace. To the glory of God.

Pray