

4. 9-26-21

Sermon: More Essentials of Discipleship

Scripture: Mark 9:38-50, CTW Psalm 124

Hymns: 96, 103, 490

Theme: In this passage of scripture, we can see three things. First, we can see where caution hinders compassion. Secondly, we can see where compassion builds community. Finally, we can see where members of the community must be accountable to God and each other. All these are essentials of Discipleship.

This morning, we face a troubling reality: Many Americans are moving away from Christ and the church. Some are high-profile influencers, who might say they are “done” with church, or “deconstructing” their faith. Others are ordinary people—maybe people we know—who once had a connection to the church but are now pulling away.

I. WHY DO PEOPLE REJECT CHRIST OR THE CHURCH?

A. Some disconnect when they move away or move on to a new stage of life in college, work, or growing children. Some are too busy, tired, or they can’t find a church they love. Yet those reasons often hide deeper causes.

Some are fed up with narcissistic, manipulative leaders, who only seem to care about power, influence, and success. They feel like they are being used to pump up Sunday attendance numbers or make the church the biggest or coolest one in town.

Some have been hurt by people in the church who were insensitive or uncaring. Maybe they were shut out of the natural circles of families or friends. Maybe they were victims of idle gossip, judgmental attitudes, or humiliation.

Some had put their trust in people—maybe a pastor or close friend--and they became disillusioned when the ones they respected and trusted failed in some way.

Some feel that Christians are at war with each other, putting down other churches, or gloating over the problems of

other Christians. Sometimes political or social polarization spills over into the church, and people don't feel they can express what they really think without being attacked.

II. WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT THIS PROBLEM?

A. Our text for today is a collection of disconnected sayings of Jesus, which appear in different contexts in other gospels. Mark (and maybe Peter, in sermons Mark interpreted for Greek listeners) did not choose them at random, however, for they are gathered around concern for those who reject Christ or the church.

The central verse is **Mark 9:42**, "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."

Who are "these little ones"? We might think of them as children, because just a few verses before Jesus was holding a little child in his arms. We might think of teenagers or young adults, who are trying to find their way in the world. We might think of new believers, young in the faith.

The "little ones," however, could be any vulnerable seeker or believer who is struggling with trusting Jesus and living as a disciple.

Immediately before the verse about causing one of these little ones to stumble is a story about the disciples suppressing the efforts of an enthusiastic new believer.

B. Read Mark 9:38-41 NLT. Using the Name of Jesus

38 John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he wasn't in our group."

39 "Don't stop him!" Jesus said. "No one who performs a miracle in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me. **40** Anyone who is not against us is for us. **41** If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I tell you the truth, that person will surely be rewarded."

Jesus said something that is sometimes misinterpreted: "...no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us." Did he mean that everyone who passes out bottled water at a parade is on the side of Jesus, or that everyone who does a good deed is going to heaven?

Jesus clarified what he meant when he referred to "a miracle IN MY NAME" and "a cup of water IN MY NAME because you belong to THE MESSIAH." Jesus was not talking about members of other religions or humanitarian groups, but about people who acted in his name and accepted his claim to be the Messiah, the one who embodies the kingdom of God in the world.

C. Yet not every person or group that uses the name of Jesus is truly Christian. History is full people and movements that have used the name of Jesus for their own evil purposes: Cult leaders, con artists, and evil dictators have identified with Jesus to gain credibility.

In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

Yet Jesus did not doubt the sincerity of the man the 12 disciples shut down. The man is not identified, and he might have been one of the followers on Jesus' short list when he chose the 12 disciples—one who didn't make the cut.

He might have been Mark, the gospel writer, too young to be a disciple. (Pure speculation on my part!) He might have been one of many who heard and saw Jesus, with only the slightest understanding that Jesus was the Messiah. That would put him not too far behind Peter, who had first vocalized his recognition of Jesus as the Messiah in chapter 8.

The irony of the story is that the man seemed to be able to drive out demons, while earlier in the chapter, nine of the 12 disciples

had unsuccessfully tried to drive an evil spirit out of a boy brought to them by his father. Jesus had rebuked them for their incompetence, caused by lack of prayer.

The disciples probably felt insecure about their abilities, and their reason for stopping him is telling: "We told him to stop BECAUSE HE WAS NOT ONE OF US."

The disciples had a tendency to make the kingdom of God all about themselves. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus had poured out his heart to tell them he was going to die and rise again, and they did not understand, because they had been arguing about who was the greatest.

Now they come across this man, who is driving out demons in the name of Jesus. Hallelujah! Well, no, they were NOT praising God; they were worried that their power and influence would be diluted if someone outside of their little circle could claim the authority of Jesus.

What did they care about most? Themselves. Their importance, their influence, their acceptance and power in God's kingdom.

Unfortunately, they are not the only ones in the history of the church who have made the kingdom of God and Christ all about themselves. It happens today, and it causes some to stumble.

The disciples cared most about their status and influence.

III. WHAT DID JESUS CARE ABOUT MOST?

A. The focus here seems to be on Vulnerable People.

People who need salvation and fellowship and might stumble over Christians who fail to represent Christ as they should.

READ Mark 9:42-48. ⁴² "But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone hung around your neck. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better to enter eternal life with only one hand than to go into the unquenchable fires of hell^[a] with two hands. ⁴⁵ If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better to enter eternal life with only one foot than to be thrown into hell with two feet. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. It's better to enter the Kingdom

of God with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ 'where the maggots never die and the fire never goes out.'

This is troubling! Yes, Jesus was using a figure of speech—hyperbole' (obvious exaggeration)—when he described a large millstone drowning a Christian who caused a vulnerable believer to stumble. **But we can't miss his point: He is very serious about how we handle vulnerable believers.** In fact, he refers to hell as an alternative to the kingdom of God and quotes a graphic description of the condition of the lost from **Isaiah 66:24.**

I don't think Jesus was focusing on the fact that Christians who mess up are headed for hell. No, his concern was that the "little ones" might end up in hell, apart from God, because of Christians messing up! **That is a sobering thought!**

Jesus' words about cutting off hands and feet or plucking out an eye are hyperbole too, of course, for how would that help anybody? **But we get the point; Jesus is serious about this.**

B. So what would you do to keep "little ones" from tripping over you and missing out on God's kingdom? You don't need to cut off body parts, but what would you cut off or root out for others who are vulnerable?

Would you root out pride and personal ambition that makes you blind to other people and God's love for them? Would you shed the self-centeredness that insists on getting your own way, without concern for others?

Would you give up some of your privileges for the sake of others? The Apostle Paul, in **1 Corinthians 9:23** for example, did not insist on his rights as an apostle in Corinth, saying, "I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

Would you root out any bitterness, hurts, or unresolved anger, to be gracious to others? Would you let go of the past and drop the grudge you carry? Would you drop your judgmental attitude toward the mistakes and failures of others?

Would you cut off the sins that offend others, dealing with the root causes within you? Would you do that so that others would not stumble over you?

Would you lovingly and bravely confront sin in other believers, who are causing distress in the church and soiling the reputation of Christ?

Jesus tells us to root out anything that would cause a vulnerable believer to stumble. Then the metaphor shifts to describe a healthy environment for the "little ones" God loves:

C. Look At Mark 9:49-50. ⁴⁹ "For everyone will be tested with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? You must have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live in peace with each other."

Salt not only makes food taste better, but it also preserves and purifies. Jesus says, "Have salt among yourselves." Do the things that make people healthy and strong:

Jesus says, "...be at peace with each other." Do what you can to bring peace among believers. Admit mistakes, confess sin, and grant forgiveness. Be gracious and give people a break.

Vulnerable people need to build relationships, so open up your circle of relationships to include others. Support people who struggle, by listening and caring for them.

Pray for power to heal and overcome evil, so that people with problems can be made whole

Serve gladly, providing for the needs of others, while demonstrating the heart of Christ.

Our relationships with vulnerable people are not a game; they have eternal significance.

I think that is what Jesus meant in the puzzling statement of verse 49, **"Everyone will be salted (tested) with fire."**

When we understand the impact we have on people whose eternal destiny (even the fires of hell!) is at stake, we will be careful to live "salty" lives that do not cause people to stumble, but to follow Christ to glory.

Amen? Let Us Pray...