

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 30, 2018

Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Mark 9:38-50 (NIV)

"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." 39) "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, 40) for whoever is not against us is for us. 41) 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. 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. 43) 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. 44) 45) 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. 46) 47) 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, 48) where " 'the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.' 49) Everyone will be salted with fire. 50) "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."

Friends in Christ Jesus,

Jesus' words about our hand, foot, or eye causing us to stumble certainly get our attention, don't they? Sadly, a common reaction to those words is to conclude that Jesus really wasn't being serious when he spoke them. "Surely," People think, "Jesus doesn't want us to physically harm ourselves, right?" Because of this, there is the temptation to simply move beyond these words without giving them much serious consideration. Let's not take this section of God's word lightly. Let's take a few moments to think about what is happening and to analyze the relationship between these events.

As this text begins, we notice that the disciples displayed a misguided zeal when they encountered someone who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. They stopped him because he wasn't part of their group. He wasn't "acting as an official" representative in Jesus. Behind their zeal lurked sinful pride and jealousy. They regarded doing things in Jesus' name as their exclusive right and privilege. Interestingly enough, earlier in this chapter we were told that the disciples were unable to drive out a demon from a child whose father had brought him to them. (cf. Mark 9:18)

It seems as if the disciples were acting disrespectfully to do the "outsider" who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. They may have even regarded him as someone who was "weak" or "little" Christian. Jesus warns his disciples to be careful not to do anything which would cause a weak or little Christian to sin with some strong words.

Jesus has identified and corrected some sinful tendencies in his disciples. His comments to them are a powerful reminder not to take sin lightly. As this text continues, Jesus will remind us of the consequences of sin, the source of sin, and the solution to sin.

Theme: Don't Take Sin Lightly

1. Recognize the consequences of sin
2. Recognize the source of sin
3. Recognize the solution to sin

Earlier I mentioned Jesus' words about our hand, foot, or eye causing us to stumble. I mentioned that many people might tend to think that Jesus couldn't have been serious when he spoke those words. But Jesus was very serious when he said: **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. 44) 45) 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. 46) 47) 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, 48) where " 'the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.'**

Let's look a little closer at Jesus' words. Jesus used words from the Old Testament book of Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 66:24) to describe the consequence of sin. The consequence of sin is eternal suffering in place where the "fire never goes out" and a place where worms or maggots continuously feast on rotting flesh. These graphic images are a reminder of how important it is for us not to take sin lightly but to resist it in our lives.

There is another reminder of the serious nature sin in Jesus' words about being careful not to cause the little ones who believe in him to fall into sin. Jesus says that it would be better for the one who causes one of them to sin if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. The Lord will hold a person accountable if they lead someone else to fall away from faith. For that reason Jesus says that it would be better for that person to be removed from the scene before the offence would occur. The millstone that Jesus mentioned was a large stone turned by a donkey as part of the processing of grain. By placing such a stone around a person's neck and tossing that person into the sea – there would be no chance for that person to cause someone else to sin and lose their faith.

Jesus word's make it clear that falling away from the faith through sin has deadly consequences. That's why Jesus urges us to avoid sin at any cost.

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These verses remind us of actions that a surgeon might take to save a person's life when a part of the body is severely infected. Perhaps you have known of someone who had to have their toe or leg amputee to prevent an infection from spreading throughout their body. That's what Jesus is suggesting with his words. If something leads us to sin – get rid of it. Avoid the TV, the computer, the friends or associates if they lead you down the path of sin. Those are practical suggestions to follow in our fight against temptation and sin.

But how are we to take Jesus' words about cutting off our hand or foot or plucking out our eye if it causes us to sin and endangers our faith and salvation? Jesus words invite us to pause to consider the source of sin. Is it the hand that causes a person to sin by hurting or harming someone or stealing something? Is it the eye that lead us to have sinful thoughts? Is it the foot that leads us to go places where sin abounds?

If we think about it for a moment; we realize that the hand, the eye, and the foot are "the instruments" we use to sin. The cause or source of sin goes much deeper. Removal of our hand, eye, or foot won't stop the sin and the evil because the problem is our heart. Jesus explained quite clearly on another occasion when he said, **For out of the heart come evil thoughts--murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.** (Matthew 15:19 NIV)

The Scriptures speak of every inclination of man's heart as being evil from childhood (cf. Genesis 8:21) The Psalmist reminds us that we were conceived and born in sin. (cf. Psalm 51:5) All of this lead the Apostle Paul to remind the Christians in Rome that it was the sin living in him that lead him to do things he did not want to do. (cf. Romans 7:17 & 20)

This all helps us to understand that it is impossible for us to solve the problem of sin on our own. The Apostle Paul lamented his sorry state: **"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!** (Romans 7:24-25 NIV)

Jesus also speaks of the solution to sin in our text. Once again, he uses a picture – one that is a bit challenging for us to understand. **Everyone will be salted with fire. 50) "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."**

One of the ways we can begin to understand what Jesus is saying is to think of how salt is used. Salt is used as a preservative to cure or prevent food from spoiling. It is also used to make food taste good. Interestingly Jesus once told his disciples that they were the salt of the earth. (cf. Matthew 5:13) As such they were to flavor or influence the world for good – combating the sin and the evil which is in the world.

What is it that separates Christians from the sin in the world and allows them to be a positive influence in the world? The Word sanctifies or sets Christians apart. (cf. John 17:17) When we are salty, we will not lead others to sin and we will not become entrapped in it ourselves. Another way of saying this is to say that we are to filled with the Word – that word which calls us to faith in Jesus who defeated sin for us with his death and who rose from the dead that we might live with him and for him.

What does Jesus mean when he tells his disciples that everyone will be salted with fire? Salt can have a burning property when we use it as cleansing agent. Jesus is talking about the burning property of salt to destroy the germs of corruption. The Word of Christ has the power to burn out of our hearts the evil desire to entrap others (vs. 42) and the evil desires that would allow our own bodily members to entrap us ourselves (vs. 43-48) (Lenski, pg. 411)

Even when the salt of the Word does it's purifying work and burns like a fire eradicating the evil in our heart, it is good. Jesus warns us not to reject the Word but to hang on to the purifying nature of his Word and to continue to apply it our lives, saying, **Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.**

Shortly before Jesus spoke these words his disciples had been quarreling amongst themselves as to which one of them was the greatest demonstrating the sinful pride which was in their hearts. Then they told someone to stop casting out demons in Jesus' name because they were jealous. It would be the salt of the word which would cleanse and purify them from these sinful actions so that they could be at peace with one another.

As the Word dwells in us purifying our hearts it guides our hands, our feet and our eyes to resist sin and to live in ways which will bring honor and glory to the name of Christ. May we never become unsalty by taking the saving power of the word for granted or by taking sin lightly. May we constantly make use of the Word to remain salty and free from evil and spiritually clean and pure. Amen.