

## Mark 9:38-50

38 John said to him (Jesus), “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he does not follow us.” 39 And Jesus said, “Do not stop him. For no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able to speak evil of me; 40 for whoever is not against us, is for us. 41 Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will by no means lose his reward.<sup>1</sup>

42 “Whoever cause one of these little ones who believe (in me) to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around the neck and he were thrown into the sea.<sup>2</sup> 43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter into the Kingdom of God than to have two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, 48 where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’<sup>3</sup> 49 For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good, but if

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly odd and clunky section within Mark’s Gospel. John and some of the other disciples have witnessed another person casting out demons in the name of Jesus. They inform Jesus of this occurrence and tell him that they tried to stop this person. Yet, Jesus turns things around on the disciples by basically saying, “Don’t you worry about what they’re doing in my name. That’s not really your concern. If someone gives you a glass of water because you belong to me, take it.” What Jesus highlights within these brief verses is that we shouldn’t be surprised if the circle of followers is larger than we assume. Just because the person casting out the demon isn’t one of the twelve, doesn’t necessarily mean that he or she is not a follower of Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> The discussion now shifts from receiving hospitality from someone to the seriousness of discipleship. Since Jesus’ question on the road in Caesarea Philippi he has been instructing his disciples on what it means to follow him; what it means to pick up your cross, deny yourself, and follow him. In this part of his discussion, he first references the child, present in their midst, telling his disciples to be wary of leading others astray. He says that causing one of the “little ones” who believe in him to sin is not something to be cherished and warns that it would be better for that person to place their head through the hole of a giant millstone, be thrown into the sea, and drown to death than to do that. That’s a much better fate than causing a believer to sin. But if we thought this image was brutal to our imaginations, Jesus is just warming up.

<sup>3</sup> On the surface, Jesus essentially tells his disciples that if their hand, foot, or eye causes them to sin, they should remove it rather than be cast into the fires of Gehenna (which will be explained below). Is Jesus really advocating self-mutilation or is there something else going on here? What would cause Jesus to speak in such a harsh and seemingly brash tone?

## salt loses its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves and

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As we dig into this passage, we should be aware of our context. In the previous section, Jesus was in a home, more than likely the home of Peter, when he sat down and called the Twelve to himself. In sitting, Jesus takes the position of a rabbi. And even within this passage, John calls Jesus, “Teacher (v. 38).” So we shouldn’t be surprised that Jesus uses a rabbinical style of teaching when talking about discipleship; one that involves hyperbole and symbolic interpretation.

If we were to take Jesus’ words literally, we would have to wonder why there weren’t more Christians walking around with no hands, feet, or eyes. The fact of the matter is that this isn’t Jesus’ intention at all. Rather, Jesus uses this tripartite reference (hand, foot, eye) to highlight the ways in which we often sin so that we are more aware of them. “As in many biblical contexts, rather, the hand is the instrument for the commission of sin, the foot is the means of transport to the place of its commission, and the eye is the means by which the temptation to commit it enters in. If this is true, ‘cut it off’ and ‘pluck it out’ are not to be taken literally but as injunctions of increasing inwardness against sin in general (Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16* (Yale University: New Haven, 2009), 697).” Thus this hyperbolic way of speaking calls his disciples to be attentive to the things they do in their lives; to pay attention to ways they are living out their call as disciples. And to highlight the seriousness of this discussion, Jesus bears witness that it’s better to be maimed than thrown into Gehenna. So, you might be thinking, what is the deal with all of this Gehenna business?

Most English translations translate the Greek word Gehenna as hell. Yet this can be a dubious translation. Before anyone conceived of a place of fiery torment where the wicked went to burn, it is important to point out that Gehenna was a literal place located outside of the southwest corner of the old city of Jerusalem (N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (Harper Collins: San Francisco, 2008), 175). What type of place was it? It was the burning garbage heap within the Valley of Hinnom; a place where people would throw waste, refuse, and anything else that should be burned in the event that it could cause a disease. Moreover, this particular location figured prominently within the Old Testament.

We find a description of the Valley of Hinnom in 2 Kings 23:10. King Josiah had just discovered again the book of the covenant, which seemingly had been lost or forgotten for a number of years. Josiah began to institute a number of changes throughout Israel that involved the removal of pagan images from within the temple, the tearing down of pagan high places as well as the removal of those idolatrous priests who participated in the worship of Baal and Asherah (the Canaanite gods). In verse ten we learn that Josiah issued a call to defile Topheth, which was an installation or place of worship for the pagan god Molech located in the Valley of Hinnom.

The worship of Molech was one particular pagan ritual which had existed for hundreds of years within Canaan and eventually Israel. It involved child sacrifice to Molech by casting the children into fire. It appears also that there was a rite of passage involving the passage of children through the flames (this practice is described in 2 Kings 16:3 in regards to King Ahab). “The Jews so abhorred the place after these horrible sacrifices were abolished by King Josiah, that they cast into it not only all manner of refuse, but even the dead bodies of animals and of unburied criminals who had been executed. And since the fires were always needed to consume the dead bodies, that the air might not become tainted by their putrefaction, it came to pass that the place was called ‘Gehenna of fire (J. H. Thayer, *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Hendrickson: Peabody, 1979), 11).” This “Gehenna of fire” existed well into the time of Jesus and continued to be used as the town dump. Imagine a place where the fires burn constantly to ensure that all refuse is burned up. It’s one thing to imagine being cast into hell after you die. There’s distance to that idea. But when Jesus says it’s better to be maimed in life than be cast into Gehenna, he hyperbolically gives his disciples usable imagery of the burning valley to understand how serious he is about being attentive to ways they act.

be at peace with one another.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The obvious question is: What is Jesus talking about? How can salt lose flavor, I mean it's salt. One possible reason for Jesus' words lies in the ordinary experience of Galilean peasants. "Probably in the ordinary experience of Galilean life, salt was rarely found in a pure state; in practice it was mixed with other substances, various forms of earth. So long as the proportion of salt in the mixture was sufficiently high, the mixture would serve the purpose of true salt. But if, through exposure to damp or some other reason, all the salt in the mixture was leached out, what we left was good for nothing (F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, 37)." This helpful image might pertain to what Jesus is talking about. The rabbi's would often speak of Israel and their role in the world as salt, as a purifying agent. This is drawn from the fact that salt is a purifying agent in food and in other things. So it might be a reference to the disciples work in the world. On the other hand, when Jesus says "have salt in yourselves and be at peace" it is not entirely clear what he is referring to. One possible way of reading this entire passage is to think backwards from Jesus' call to be at peace.

In Hebrew, to be at peace is to be at shalom or wholeness. In this midst of selfish passions and self-seeking desires that can tear apart the fabric of a community, Jesus offers some harsh words that call us to consider what it means to be joined together as the church. What does it mean to share a common calling, to look out for one another, to not cause one another to sin, to be there and protect one another from their own sins so that in the end, as the body of Christ in the world we are able to live in peace? Knowing that the eyes of many are upon Jesus and his disciples, is he calling them and us to be attentive to how we act in the world, that we might bear witness to the glory of God through our actions as the people of God?