

Guard the Little Ones and Do Not Yield to Temptation

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Series: The Gospel According To Mark

Text: Mark 9:42-50

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Gospel of Mark together. We've been doing that now for several months. And so, verse by verse, passage by passage, we've been on Sunday mornings walking through these texts in the Gospel of Mark.

Today we are in Mark 9:42-50. Let us give careful attention to God's holy and inspired word, which abides forever, from Mark 9:42.

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.

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. 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.

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, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

For everyone will be salted with fire. 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.

⁴² "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. You may be seated.

As a reminder, we are still in the section in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus has shifted from the broad public ministry to a much more intimate, focused training of his disciples.

And in these sections that we've been on most recently, we have been discovering what it truly means to be a follower of Jesus.

And this lesson that we read here this morning is a stark, in-your-face kind of teaching. And it is essential that we face it squarely on, without diluting its message or trying to squirm away from what Jesus is saying right up front.

Let's acknowledge that what Jesus addresses here is one of the Bible's more difficult and often controversial teachings, that of there being a hell and a hell being a real, conscious, and eternal punishment. That is what Jesus is talking about as an overriding theme is hell.

And we know that there are many people, particularly in this day and age, who would say that this is what you just read is what's wrong with religion, particularly. It's the fundamental flaw in Christians and Christianity.

Some have argued that the issue isn't with Christianity itself, but with the way some Christians have portrayed God. That this kind of talk about hell, the sooner we can leave it behind, this distorted, unloving image of God, the more authentic and the more appealing Christianity will become, and the better off we'll all be.

I remember very early in my ministry, I worked alongside a pastor in a large church. This pastor that I was on staff with came out and said that he was a universalist. He had come to affirm and double down on being a universalist, the idea that in the end, all will be saved and no one will go to hell.

The church was not affiliated with any denomination. However, the church policed itself, and that pastor was soon after investigated, examining if that's what he truly believed.

He was relieved of his duties because he came to a place where he said, I don't believe that a loving God would send anyone to hell. And if it be Hitler, if it be a serial killer, if it be any adherent of any world religion, in the end all will be spared, whether repentant or coming to Christ or not.

The idea of God having wrath, of judging people, of eternally damning people, we need to move beyond, he would say, these immature views of God.

We have Jesus now, so we can do away with these archaic ideas of hell. And yet here we are seeing Jesus, the most loving man who ever lived, speaking about hell, indeed warning about hell, with stunning imagery.

And as we approach this text, we can ask, where does this idea of hell come from? Is it a concept popularized by the Puritans, who just didn't want anybody to have any fun? Is it something that's been derived from the medieval Catholics? Is it something that the fundamentalists have contrived to create and strike fear in people?

Well, as we look at this passage and the surrounding context of the passage, we see how it started, where the disciples were arguing, who's going to be great, who's the greatest?

And Jesus says, to be great, you have to be the servant of all. And even as he picks up a child, say, welcome a child, welcome the littlest, the most insignificant, to be great.

³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "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 9:34-37, ESV)

And then after that, John says that they saw someone casting out demons and they stopped him because he wasn't part of the group.

³⁸ John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." (Mark 9:38, ESV)

And they stopped somebody that was accomplishing something good for Jesus. And Jesus, we see, puts a high value on anyone belonging to him and doing good in the name of Christ and says, don't stop him.

Then he says, anyone who does anything good for my disciples, he will receive his reward. And now the lesson shifts from receiving from others to the seriousness of making others fall away from the faith.

And Mark 9:42 particularly stands out when he says, whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it is better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he was thrown into the sea.

⁴² "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)

So we will see, Jesus gives three things here, three points in this passage.

Number one, Jesus gave a strong condemnation upon anyone who causes his children to stumble.

Secondly, he instructed to remove anything that would cause you to sin from your life.

And then lastly, he spoke plainly on the reality of hell.

And it seems that as this section has started in verse 33, as he goes into this teaching, that not only was there a young boy in their midst that he had picked up and held and used as an object lesson, but there must have been a plurality of children around Jesus as he was teaching the disciples.

Like today, isn't it a good thing? We hear some Amens from the choir of the children. Even through the sermon, children were around Jesus, and Jesus is teaching the disciples.

And note what he says, whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin.

⁴² "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)

Now, the context indicates that Jesus is identifying those who belong to him and those who believe in him as little children.

Little children represent Christian believers. Jesus is not exclusively talking about babies or little children. He is identifying his people as little children, including babies and kids, but also those of age.

And the term little ones then would be an endearing term of anyone of age that belongs to Christ, that like a child, they are weak, but he loves them.

And we see the apostle John uses this throughout his Epistle, doesn't he? Constantly calling the people of God little children, little children, abide in him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Little children, let us love not the world. Little children, keep yourself from idols.

So the first thing Jesus does as he addresses the disciples is he gives a strong condemnation upon anyone who would cause his children to stumble, anyone who would lead any of Christ's little ones astray, meaning would cause them or persuade them to abandon the faith. What does he say?

It would be better for him if a slab of stone was hung around his neck and he was thrown into the sea.

Better than what? What's the comparison that Jesus is making? Better than the judgment that is coming for that offender.

So we get our answer right away. We could approach this topic philosophically, we could approach it in many different ways. But we really need to start with what did Jesus say about hell and judgment?

And what we see right away is Jesus believed in hell, and he believed that wrath was coming for certain individuals, and the consequences will be so dire. He uses this grotesque imagery to say it would be better to die like this than to endure what is coming.

Now, before we get into why such dire consequences, let's reiterate that this is exactly why we need to learn who Jesus is from the Bible. We learn who God is from the Bible. My children often will go back and forth with me.

I tell them, you don't have to watch the Chosen to know who Jesus is. And then they'll be smart, Alex, and say, would you rather us play video games? I said, no, I'd just rather you read John like you're doing in youth group and know who Jesus is, Mark and Luke.

Because none of those shows and those movies are really going to give us the full picture of who Jesus is. We have to go to the Scripture and consider who Jesus is as depicted in the Gospel of Mark.

Here is a savior who embodies both the gentleness and the intensity. He embraces the brokenhearted and outcast, while showing little tolerance for arrogance and self-righteousness. He delights in those who place their trust in him and is pained by those who turn away.

He stands firmly for everything that is true and beautiful and good, while he actively confronts all that is false and ugly and evil. He is a God of mercy and justice, holiness and love. A savior who dined with sinners and tax collectors. And yet he also warned about the reality of heaven.

And you get a full picture of who Jesus is. And Jesus says, whoever causes one of these little ones.

Now, the Greek word there is scandalize, which, of course, is where we get our word scandal from. It literally means whoever puts a stumbling block before or trips someone up.

In this context, it refers to causing someone to abandon the faith. Jesus says, to lead just one of his little ones astray, death of the most gruesome kind would be preferable to what is coming. The image is the millstone.

A great millstone is the image of one's head being thrust through the hole of a large slab of rock, turned by a donkey, so that it became an enormous and deadly collar, and then thrown into the sea.

And Jesus says this fate is better than to cause a little one to fall away from the faith.

Now, as we read this, we have to ask, does Mark have in mind the persecution of the vulnerable believers in Rome, where this gospel was intended for? And certainly, that would seem to be true.

Nero would be persecuting believers, threatening them with bodily harm, threatening their families, threatening their livelihoods. So why? So that they would turn away from Christ.

And Mark's words here would resonate with the congregation like that of the warning and the vivid reminder of the harsh realities imposed by powerful, oppressive regimes that are attacking believers.

But might Mark also be speaking more personally, referring to the everyday struggles where not only authoritarian rulers but also ordinary individuals inflict pressure and temptation, challenging a Christian's faith on a daily basis?

Would this warning also apply to the deliberate and systematic rejection of all things Christian in our culture?

We notice that Jesus has been placing a high value on his people, hasn't he? If there's one thing you can extract from this section of Mark, you get that picture that he is placing a very high value on his children.

Don't hinder anyone who's working in my name, John. God will reward those who do service and hospitality to the disciples, to my people.

Now he says, God, persuade my people to abandon the faith. And we can extract very pointed principles here. Celebrate other Christians, seek to be hospitable to fellow believers and take seriously those who would scandalize God's children.

On a personal level, we should heed this warning and not do anything that would cause a disciple of Jesus to fall away from the faith.

You get the sense that as John is listening to this teaching of Jesus, a lump may be forming in his throat when he was even in the previous section wanting to stop someone that was ministering in Jesus' Name, and Jesus says don't stop him.

Don't ever do anything that would discourage someone from following me. Don't trip up my little ones.

But we do find these corrupting influences tripping up God's people all around us, don't we? As an example, we see high school students who may be raised in Christian homes.

They graduate, perhaps from an evangelical background, and they go off to a supposed Christian university, and the professor seeks to undermine their faith. This is often disguised by asking questions. We're just asking questions.

Well, it's one thing to ask questions and seek to grow in the faith, address doubts, but it's another thing altogether to deconstruct the faith with no desire to build it back up.

And these young people go off to college with some semblance of evangelical faith. But they are persuaded, their faith is attacked until they abandon the faith.

And this is a strong warning to such teachers that it would be better for a 2-ton millstone to be put around your neck and thrown into the sea.

Or we see people in power, leaders who abuse their authority and bring damage and scandal to the gospel, use their privilege to abuse God's little ones, and people fall away on the account of hypocrisy. Those who name the name of Christ.

And if one doesn't repent, Jesus is saying it would be better for that person to be drowned in the sea than to be subject to what is coming.

And there are immediate applications we can take from this one verse, aren't there? That we must take seriously heresies. James says we who are teachers will receive the stricter judgment that we teach heresy that would cause people to fall away from Christ, to fall away from the authentic true gospel.

And so we must seek to be precise theologically and biblically. We must seek to be serious in our attitudes and actions that would harm God's little ones. For we can say the wrong things and lead people astray. We can also say the right things in a wrong way and lead astray.

Let us be careful not to trip up Jesus' little ones. When Luke's rendition of this passage, the ending is, pay attention to yourselves is the lesson Jesus gave the disciples. Pay attention to yourselves.

That as professing Christians, we could be harsh, we could be inapproachable, we could be gossipers, we could be people who don't keep our promises. By our actions inconsistent with our faith, we trip people up.

Well, sure, we could talk about our culture and about the professors of colleges and so forth, but often how we condone our own sins and we turn a blind eye to our own vices. Certainly, this is a strong warning that if we do not live consistently with our faith, we are at risk of causing God's little ones to stumble.

And then there are those who scandalize our fellow brothers and sisters in the faith, and these are not our friends. Jesus could not have been more serious and more graphic. If you lead these humble disciples away from their love for Christ, look at the metaphor he uses.

Oh, let us watch what we say and how we live. Thus we follow or cause people to follow us on the way, the path to hell. Jesus gave a strong condemnation and then secondly combined these two points into one.

Jesus said, don't tolerate sin in your life and take seriously the reality of hell. Now look at verse 43. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire, in Mark 9:43.

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. (Mark 9:43, ESV)

The Greek term for hell is gehenna. Now, we often are accustomed to the word Hades, which in the Old Testament is the general abode of the dead. But gehenna comes from the Hebrew words that mean The Valley of Hinnom.

That was a steep ravine southwest of Jerusalem, a notorious site in the Old Testament where the Israelites sacrificed their children to the Ammonite god Molech. you'll find that in

Jeremiah 7:31, they say things got that bad in Israel, that they were sacrificing their children to a false god. It did.

And it wasn't until King Josiah's reform that that valley was destroyed. But it became a literal garbage dump, a place where refuse was piled high, trash was burned, and there was infestation with worms and maggots in the valley.

And when Jesus speaks of an undying worm and an unquenchable fire, he's drawing upon the imagery of that place. A picture that all the people of Jerusalem would have immediately recognized as representing utter decay and destruction.

It was an image that was used centuries earlier by Isaiah. Isaiah 66, the last book of that glorious book of Isaiah. At the very end of that chapter, you see Isaiah gives a picture of salvation for God's people. But in the final verses of that book, he.

He says that there are worms that never die, uses the imagery of worms that never die and fire that is never quenched. And it's a picture of judgment upon those who oppose God, who love their sin, and who reject the Lord's offer for mercy.

And so what is Jesus teaching us about Hell? These images, the smoldering garbage heap, the outer darkness, the lake of fire, they are all metaphors meant to convey the reality of a dreadful and irreversible judgment upon those who reject God and cling to their sin.

Hell is a place where the glory of God's presence is absent and the full weight of his wrath is present. There are those in recent years who have said that the wicked will cease to exist.

In contrast to universalism, there's the idea that the wicked will be annihilated in the end and so that there just will be no more. But Jesus makes a point in this passage to emphasize the unending nature of hell's affliction, doesn't he? He says it's an unquenchable fire. Later, in Luke 16:24, we see the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

And you remember the Scripture says Lazarus went to hell, and he called out, father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.

²⁴ And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' (Luke 16:24, ESV)

Revelation 14:11 says, the smoke of the torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest day or night. Those who are in hell.

¹¹ And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." (Revelation 14:11, ESV)

Now, friends, I know that these things and what Scripture says elsewhere about hell offends our sensibilities. It stuns our mind. We shudder to think about its reality.

But what we have to keep in front of us is that these words come from the lips of Jesus. He believed in hell. And the word gehenna is used 12 times in the New Testament, and Jesus uses it 11 of those 12 times. It comes from the lips of our Savior.

Now, there are others who say that the horrors of our world are hell. Pastor Bob mentioned the beginning of this service of what has happened in D.C. and most recently in Philadelphia. There are those who would say that is hell.

Hell is the barbarity we see in our world, the abuse, the murder, the oppression. Some will look at what has been happening in the past few years in Ukraine and Palestine and say that is hell. But we must be clear. Those things are not hell, but they are the hellish symptoms of the fallen human condition.

Jesus said there's a place where there's an unquenchable fire. We also need to notice that the doctrine of hell is never presented as an isolated fact. In other words, Jesus and the apostles never say about hell.

We want you to believe in hell because it's a really hard doctrine to swallow and it will make it unpopular if you believe in it. So believe in it. Believe in hell so that you stand out and you are countercultural and thought of as mean and weird and crazy. No. Notice that this sober teaching always comes with a purpose to motivate us to live and to think and to act in a certain way.

In fact, from this text, one of the reasons Jesus mentions hell is as a motivation to flee the pleasures of sin and resist temptation because there's a hell. Do you notice it? He uses these metaphors of cutting off your hand, your foot, plucking out your eye.

One of the reasons we can shun the fleeting pleasures of sin and resist temptation is because we believe in hell. Now, we need to be very clear. Jesus, of course, is not speaking literally. There are people who feel the urge to self-mutilate, self-punish.

That's forbidden in the law of God. It was forbidden in Israel to mutilate yourself in any way. He's not saying to literally cut off your hand and your foot or pluck out your eye. But he's giving us these images because he wants our fight against sin to be just as drastic and radical.

To give up anything that gets in the way of following him, to lop off whatever sin it is that is hindering us. To not play with it, not entertain it, not say, I'll start tomorrow or next week or next. Next month to cut it off. That's the sense of urgency.

So if a man comes and says, my wife disrespects me, she doesn't respond to me as I think she should. And he uses that as justification for flirtation with other women and ultimately to an adulterous relationship. This text is saying a disrespectful wife is better than to go to hell.

Someone who's struggling with poverty or is poor and they get involved in an elaborate scheme to steal. This text is saying hell is worse than being poor.

The young person who says, for me to stand out and not involve myself in what my peers are doing in school and not engaging in what is popular. And so I look strange, and I look weird living a life of celibacy among a people who are just giving themselves to hedonism.

This text is saying hell is worse than being unpopular. I see what it is saying: hell is worse than anything we would interpret as a temporary hardship. Jesus spoke in this graphic way so that people would run to him, run away from their sins.

As Daniel 12:2 says, multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will one day awake, some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.

² And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2, ESV)

There's always a purpose for this doctrine, multiple purposes in fact. And one of the reasons we can make sense of the worst injustices and leave the retribution of those injustices to God is because we believe in hell.

Romans 12:19 says, beloved, don't avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (Romans 12:19, ESV)

We can forgive the deepest hurts we've encountered or been done to us, because either the perpetrator's sin is paid for on the cross in their repentance, or there is cosmic retribution in eternity.

We don't take personal vengeance because judgment is in God's hands. That's the understanding and application of the doctrine of hell. And one of the reasons we share the Gospel with such urgency.

Why are we doing what we do here today? Why plant another church in Lebanon County? Because we're a church culture. We like churches. We need somewhere to go on Sunday morning. No.

One of the reasons we do what we do and share the Gospel and seek to follow the Lord's commission with such urgency is because of the belief in hell. The reality of hell is reading an excerpt of the sermon from Jonathan Edwards.

One of the more infamous sermons ever preached on US soil, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. And here's an excerpt from that sermon. He says, o sinner, consider the fearful danger you are in.

'Tis a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit full of the fire of wrath that you are held over in the hand of God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed, and as much against you as against many of the damned in hell.

You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about and ready every moment to singe it and burn it asunder.

And you have no interest in any mediator, nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you have ever done, nothing that you can do to induce God to spare you one moment.

History books tell us the people lifted their feet off the ground literally, for fear of what the words of that preacher were saying. My friends, one of the reasons we share the Gospel with such urgency is the doctrine of hell.

2 Corinthians 5:20. Paul said, we implore people on the behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. Be reconciled to God.

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20, ESV)

We plead with people, echoing the words of Jesus, come unto him, all who are weary and heavy laden, heavy laden with sin, heavy laden with the brokenness of sin. Come. He's the one who will give rest.

We do that with urgency, with passion. People say that all roads lead to God, and there is truth in that statement, isn't there? But many will come before the living God in judgment on that day.

You say, I can't fathom this kind of teaching. There's so much in the world we can't fathom, isn't there? I can't fathom that. People were 15 minutes away from landing in Washington, D.C. and they didn't make it. Can't fathom that. I can't fathom that.

People were going about their day in Philadelphia and a jet like a missile upended that section of the city. It's hard to fathom. We lament, we grieve. We settle upon a God who's in control even in the midst of this broken world.

But from those things, we also say how life is so fragile. We push along and run along as if tomorrow will be here for us, and it may not be.

And so we plead with people, come to Christ. We warn of hell, and we warn our own hearts of hell so that we may enter into life.

Don't miss that in the passage. It is better for you to enter life crippled. It's better for you to enter life feeling lonely. It's better for you to enter life not having the materialism and the riches of this world.

It's better for you to enter life. That's what Jesus provides. Life. Eternal life that we sang about today. Oh, the beauty of it all, the glory of it. The reality of it. The reality of heaven, the reality of hell.

It's only when we fully confront what some would say is a harsh doctrine that we grasp the immense significance of what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

But there is one who spoke these words, who guards his little ones and has never let down his guard and never had a wolf come in and get one of his own.

And there is one who heals. And there is one who is tempted in every way and, unlike us, is without sin. One who on the cross was separated from the Father so much. So he said, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? What hell.

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? (Psalms 22:1, ESV)

If an acquaintance rejects you, that hurts. If a friend rejects you, that hurts deeper. But if a spouse walks out on you and rejects you, oh, the great pain of that.

Jesus took the pain of that, the intense abyss of that reality, the fiercest furnace of suffering imaginable. And he did so willingly for our sakes. He has a furious love for his little ones, a love for you and for me. May we turn to him today.

Let's pray, Father. These are sobering words from our Lord. They confront and trouble us. But may they confront and trouble us enough to convict us and to turn to Jesus as Savior.

Have mercy on anyone here who is on the path of destruction. Have mercy on those we love, and we pray for, and we work among. We ask for their salvation.

Grant us strength to battle our sins and not to give up in the fight. And lead us always to the cross. We pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.