

Jesus' Strong Words
Mark 9:38-50
ABC 10/22/23

On a spring day in 2003, Aron Ralston was exploring Blue John Canyon, a slot canyon in southern Utah. Following his map, he drove in, parked, & hiked 8 miles to the canyon. As he climbed into it, many boulders impeded his progress. They had fallen from above & become wedged in the narrow canyon.

As he descended toward the bottom, he hung from an 800-pound boulder that was pinched between the canyon walls. Unexpectedly, the rock slipped & came toward him. When it came to rest it had pinned his right arm against the canyon wall. He was stuck in agonizing pain & in total solitude. Miles of wilderness surrounded him.

He had set out with provisions for an afternoon. He had 32 oz of water, a few snacks, & had told no one of his plans. No one would be looking for him, & even if they were, they wouldn't know where. Pinned in this canyon, completely alone, isolated, he realized it would become his tomb. Did he have options? Yes, but great danger demands drastic action.

In Mk 9:38-50 we find spiritually that great danger demands drastic deeds. **38-41**

1. Kingdom Friends To understand vs 38 we need to remember what Jesus says in vs 37, **Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; & whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me.** From last week we know the **child** represents a Christian. Jesus is showing us that by welcoming this child to Himself His followers are to receive even the lowliest of Christians with open arms. Forget about rank, pre-eminence, & greatness. Welcome those who minister in Jesus' name who are of no rank or caliber. This instruction convicts John, who immediately describes an incident where the disciples didn't demonstrate this kind of love. **38**

The disciples recently had bungled an exorcism, yet they don't hesitate to stop someone who is successful but who isn't a member of their team. We don't know when this happened or who this was. We do know the disciples were very competitive, trying to be the greatest. They don't want anyone else succeeding outside their group. At some point they ran into someone who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. This man is a believer. He could be part of the 70 who were sent out with power to cast out demons (Lk 10:1, 17). Whatever the case, God was working through him & he was casting out demons in Jesus' name. Note the irony since 9 of the disciples were recently unable to cast out a demon (4-29). But they tell this guy to knock it off. Why? Because he wasn't a part of their group, **he was not following us**. In their pursuit of being the greatest in God's Kingdom, the disciples wanted to shut down everyone else. What's Jesus say about this? **39**

Don't misunderstand this. Jesus isn't saying that if this man were teaching something heretical and unorthodox that you should leave him alone. No. If someone teaches salvation by works we don't let that go. Jesus isn't saying it doesn't matter what this man believes or what this man is saying, just leave him alone. This man wasn't a part of their group & that's what Jesus is dealing with.¹ Jesus adds, **40**.

Jesus instructs the disciples not to oppose the man and offers 2 related reasons. 1st, those who perform miracles in Jesus' name won't soon speak evil of Him. The qualification **soon** or **quickly** indicates this is a general rather than absolute truth. In general, those who work in the name of Jesus are His true followers. Exceptions do occur, as when Jesus speaks of those who will prophesy, perform miracles, and cast out demons in His name & yet He'll say to them, **I never knew you** (Mt 7:21-23). Jesus' 2nd response is proverbial, **he who is not against us is for us**. Proverbs are general rather than absolute truths. Here Jesus is opposing partisanship and factions, those who're so focused on their own personal agendas and authority that they neglect God's greater kingdom purposes.² Jesus is saying to rejoice when His work is being done. If they're honoring Jesus & doing His work, let them be. Be like Paul in Phil 1. Paul was in prison & there were Christians who were preaching the gospel & saying terrible things about Paul. Did Paul defend himself & tell them to stop? No, he let it go. He says they **proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment**. He continues, **What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; & in this I rejoice. Yes, & I will rejoice** (Phil 1:17-18). What matters is that Jesus is proclaimed & the message of the gospel is being made known. Don't get this wrong: Doctrine does matter. We don't turn our brains off & accept everything done in the name of Jesus as good. But when Jesus & His gospel are taught, we should rejoice. There's diversity in God's work. Just because somebody doesn't dot every "i" & cross every "t" exactly the way you do is no reason to shut them down. They're either for Christ or against Him. If they're for Jesus, then we should be for them. Jesus is saying this life isn't a competition,

¹ Dr. Derek Thomas, <https://fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/for-or-against/print>

² Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, p 411

it's a mission. There are to be no competitors among believers. Don't be exclusive & stop competing with other Christians. This episode recalls Num 11:26–30, where Joshua complains to Moses that Eldad and Medad are prophesying outside the camp, even though they aren't among the 70 elders. Moses replies, **Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, & that the Lord would put His Spirit on them!** (29). It's the message not the messenger that's important. Similarly, here in Mk 9 it's the spiritual victory over demons that's important, not the identity of the exorcist.³ Jesus continues, **41**.

The disciples have reward on their brain. They want the payoff & prestige. They want glory & greatness. Jesus is trying to get them to realize that pride isn't the right path. Humility is the path to reward. Jesus shows what humility looks like here: someone giving you a cup of water because you belong to Jesus. That's humility. True humility looks like simple kindness. Humility is shown when there's sacrifice given towards those who bear the name of Christ. Whoever goes to another & gives them a cup of water for the sake of Jesus will be rewarded. Why does He say that? Because there's the fear that if we humble ourselves, we're going to lose. But Jesus says, *No, you're not going to lose. You're going to gain.* The simple act of sacrificial kindness given to one who belongs to Jesus will result in what you can never achieve by promoting yourself. You won't lose your reward but will be rewarded. Stop looking at other believers, other ministries, & other true churches as competitors & rivals. If they know Jesus & proclaim the gospel, if they're not proclaiming false doctrine & they show spiritual fruit, then cheer them on.

2. Kingdom Foes (42-48) 42

We can be our own worst enemies. In context, this warning is against causing others to sin because of our elitist, proud attitude, an attitude that projects a superior toleration for the bumbling enthusiasm of a new believer; that condemns his spiritual efforts with faint praise; that belittles his accomplishments and douses them with cold skepticism. Jesus hates this in His church!⁴ This is one of the severest challenges Jesus gives because there's great danger here. Jesus doesn't say

³ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, p 411

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark*, p 38

specifically what being drowned would be better than but divine judgment is clearly in view. Simply stated, you'd be better off dying a horrible death than to lead another believer into sin. This is actually a call to love God's people. This is a reminder of your responsibility to others in this church. These **little ones who believe** are fellow Christians. Don't lead a fellow-Christian into sin. It's better to drown in the sea with no chance of escape than to face the judgment of God against those who lead others into sin. This is drastic. You see the seriousness of a crime by the severity of the punishment. If you're given a talking to or a slap on the wrist, the crime wasn't too bad. But if you're skinned alive, rubbed with salt, torn to pieces, burned, & your ashes are thrown in the gutter, you'd assume it must have been a serious crime. Some Christians think causing another Christian to sin isn't that big of deal. Jesus says differently. This is scary severe. We should shrink in horror over the idea of leading another Christian into sin. Why? Because it'd be better to have a *mule stone* tied around your neck. This millstone would be as much as 5 ft in diameter & up to 2 ft thick & could weigh 2,000 lbs. Jesus says leading a believer into sin is worse than tying this millstone around your neck & throwing you into the sea. In Jewish poetry, the sea was a place of terror and chaos. To say the least, this was a strong metaphor that conveyed Jesus' point with great force.⁵ This is how serious causing another Christian to sin is. Are you hearing this? Our loving Savior, gentle Jesus says, *You'd be better off to have a 2,000 pound rock tied around your neck & thrown into the sea than to cause one of My children to stumble into sin.* How do we lead others into sin?

1) Through direct temptation⁶ You invite someone to sin with you or encourage them to sin against the laws of God. You encourage people to lie, gossip, cheat, steal, curse, or hate. You draw them into ungodly or a sinful activity. Jesus says you should die a horrible death rather than do that.

2) Through indirect temptation This would be prompting someone to jealousy by flaunting what you have or provoking your child to anger by your indifference, unkindness, or inattention.

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, p 236

⁶ John MacArthur, *Mark 9–16*, p 44

3) Through a sinful example No one sins in isolation. When others see your choices to sin, sometimes they're encouraged to follow. We can do this by flaunting our liberty, being unforgiving, or expressing anger or pride, which affects everyone who sees it. We must be careful what example we set.

After discussing the responsibility to not cause others to stumble, Jesus moves on to the responsibility to keep our own lives free from sin. Jesus is reminding us that sin is serious, so serious that Jesus had to suffer & die on a cross to remove sin's penalty from His children. Since it's that serious, we better not treat sin as no big deal. Yes, we're under God's grace, but sin is still a serious concern to Jesus in the life of His children. Confess your sin, repent of your sin, fight it, flee it, & never ignore it.

In vss 42-48 there are 2 vss (44 & 46), that don't belong because they were added later. I know you trust your Bible & you should. When it comes to ancient documents, nothing compares with the Bible. No other ancient text can compare with the NT when it comes to the sheer volume of manuscripts, nor when we consider how close the earliest manuscripts are to the originals.⁷ But sometimes those who made copies of the NT would occasionally add things for emphasis or clarification. There are many manuscripts of Mark's gospel & the older ones don't include vss 44 & 46. Those 2 vss were added by someone who was trying to emphasize Jesus' message here. They took what was written in vs 48 & repeated it in vss 44 & 46. Your Bible probably has either brackets around these vss, indicating they don't belong in the original, or leave them out completely.

The danger of leading others into sin is eliminated when you deal with sin in your own heart, so Jesus says these dramatic words in **vss 43, 45, 47-48**.

I value my hands, feet, & eyes as I'm sure you do. But Jesus says it's better to get rid of any one of them than to end up in hell forever. You're thinking, *He doesn't want me to literally cut off my hand or foot or gouge out my eye?* No, but He's definitely telling us to get serious about our sins. Jesus talks about hands, feet, & eyes, symbolically picturing all of life. Hands are for everything

⁷ <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2019/02/15/the-earliest-new-testament-manuscripts/>

you do, feet are for everywhere you go, & eyes are for everything you see. Jesus wants you to take severe action against anything that stands in the way of the pursuit of holiness, righteousness, & purity. Dillydallying with sin is deadly. We must kill sin or it will kill us. Stop feeling guilty & bad about your sins & do something to kill them. This is something we must do. Notice the 2nd word in vss 43, 45, & 47: **YOUR hand, YOUR foot, & YOUR eye**. No one can do this for you. Of course, you can't do it on your own. You must depend on the Spirit. We aren't passive, but neither do we succeed by sheer will power or determination. Matthew Henry says, *We cannot do it without the Spirit working it in us, & the Spirit will not do it without our doing our endeavor.*⁸ We know Jesus isn't calling for physical mutilation. A person with one eye, hand, or leg doesn't automatically conquer sin in this life. The problem isn't a body part, it's the heart. You are the problem. You're seriously sick & decaying with sin. Remember what Jesus said in Mk 7:15, 21-22?

There is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.... For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting & wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride & foolishness.

The problem is the heart & Jesus wants us to get serious about the sins we battle in our hearts. Maybe you're thinking, *Hey, sin is no big deal. I'm under grace.* You're not listening to Jesus. To not get serious about sin doesn't make you a carnal Christian it means you end up in hell. Did you hear that? That's why hell is mentioned 3x (43, 45, 47). Hell is the alternative to not seriously attacking sin in your life. The phrase **kingdom of God** (47) describes salvation, heaven, God's eternal rule, which you want to enter. In vss 43 & 45 it's called **life** describing eternal life since it's in contrast to eternal hell. The point is gaining salvation on the positive side & escaping hell on the negative side. Just like faith continues after you're saved, repentance continues in the life of a believer. Fighting sin is one of the evidences you're truly delivered from eternal hell. Jesus says to take sin seriously or end up in hell. Choose holiness or hell. No real salvation comes unless there's a heart that seeks after righteousness. Blessed are those who hunger & thirst for what? For **righteousness** (Mt 5:6). The pursuit of holiness starts at salvation & continues as we grow. All

⁸ *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6:418

Christians want to kill sin in their life. Why? The motive for us to get serious about sin in this text is the fear of spending eternity in the horrible torments of hell. The word for **hell** is *Gehenna* & is the term that refers to the *Lake of Fire*. Vs 43 describes hell as the place of **unquenchable fire**. Vs 48 describes it as **where their worm does not die & the fire is not quenched**. Jesus wants us to realize the reality of hell. The concept of *Gehenna* comes from the Valley of Hinnom on the SE side of Jerusalem. This valley has a sordid & sick history. In the OT, King Ahaz & King Manasseh offered child sacrifices to the pagan god Molech in this valley. King Josiah stopped this evil practice & turned the valley into the city dump. This was the place of rotten food, sewage, dead animals, dead criminals, maggots, & with a fire always burning. As a result, the place was a constant source of rancid smells, flies, worms, decay, & death. This is why the word came to be used as a picture of eternal hell. The word *Gehenna* is used 12x in the NT & Jesus uses it 11 of those. Hell is a reality about which we are warned. In hell, Jesus warns, the **worm does not die, & the fire is not quenched**. This is a quote from the last vs in the book of Isaiah, a vs of judgment. Is 66:24 says, **Then they will go forth & look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm will not die & their fire will not be quenched; & they will be an abhorrence to all mankind**. In hell, the worm does not die because the host is never consumed. In hell, the fire is never quenched meaning the torment is constant. Hell is a place of searing, unceasing pain.⁹ What makes hell so terrible for the condemned is that God *is* there. He is there in His wrath & it's a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:31).

In order to be saved, you must repent of your sin. After you're saved you still hate your sin & continually repent of it. Jesus says don't grow comfortable with it. Don't presume on God's grace. Don't stop pursuing holiness. Take sin seriously. It's better to clean up your life now than to bear your sins in an eternal, smoking rubbish heap where the worms eternally gorge themselves on the refuse of your life.¹⁰ Yes, as a believer you're forgiven, cleansed, washed, & ready for heaven. But take your sin seriously. Crush sin or sin will crush you. Kill sin or sin will kill you. Don't merely feel

⁹ R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, p 240

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, p 40

bad about your sin. Hate it & turn from it. Are you willing to endure pain to deal with your sin? It hurts to cut off your foot or gouge out your eye. It also hurts to give up sin in our lives. But better that than the agony endured in hell for eternity. If God is speaking to you, act on it today. Are your feet taking you places you shouldn't go? Are your hands doing things you shouldn't do? Are your eyes looking at things you shouldn't see? Repent! Sin is trying to destroy you. Don't take sin for granted.

We are responsible to make sure we don't cause others to stumble & we are responsible to eradicate sin in our lives.

3. Kingdom Sayings Vs 49 is cryptic & baffles interpreters. **49**

What's that mean? Where in Scripture do fire & salt come together? Ezra 6:9 says salt was to be stored up to be used in sacrifices. & Ezekiel 43:23-24 says salt is used with sacrifices & sacrifices were burned with fire. One sacrifice fits the Mk 9:49 image best. It's found in Lev 2 which gives the description of the grain offering. Lev 2:13 says, **Every grain offering of yours, moreover, you shall season with salt, so that the salt of the covenant of your God shall not be lacking from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.** Salt seems to symbolize God's promise, a picture of God's faithfulness. What's the grain offering? It's not a sin offering but an offering of devotion & dedication to God. You gather up your best grain & you offer that grain on the altar. It's then covered with salt, which speaks of the faithfulness & permanence of God. Our faithfulness is to be the same. **For everyone will be salted with fire** seems to mean our lives are an offering to God & we're to be faithful to Him. Every day we're making an enduring, permanent offering of our lives. We're all in, a living sacrifice to Christ.

Jesus is calling you to commit your life to Him as a sacrifice. Paul states it this way in Rom 12:1, **I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living & holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.** That's what we see in the grain offering. This is denying yourself, taking up your cross, & following Jesus. This is giving yourself completely to Him. You're saying, *I no longer live for me, but for Jesus. I'm His servant & am at His call, to be used in*

any way He wants. Don't get distracted by anything other than being a living sacrifice for Jesus. Are you His no matter what?

Jesus now challenges us with **vs 50**.

Salt here has a different meaning than in vs 49. Here it seems to have a more common & domestic meaning. Salt was used for flavoring, preservation, and even cleansing.¹¹ Jesus says, **salt is good**. It's useful & beneficial. In a world with no refrigeration & no ice, salt was required for preserving food. Salt also flavors food. God intends for His people to be salt. Like salt preserves & brings taste, we're to be salt & bring a desire for Jesus. Whatever or wherever we are Jesus calls on us to have preserving influence. **Salt is good** unless it **becomes unsalty**. How can **you make it salty again?** Salt is good unless it loses its saltiness. Our salt is stable & doesn't go bad. So the question is, *What does it mean for salt to lose its saltiness?* Two possible interpretations: One is that Jesus is speaking hypothetically: *If salt were to lose its saltiness, what good would it be?* The other is that Jesus is referring to the kind of salt found near the Dead Sea, which included various impurities. What remains is salt that has lost its saltiness.¹² Jesus is encouraging His followers not to lose the characteristics that bring preservation and life to the world.

We're to serve & obey Jesus & give this world a desire for Him, which explains the next statement which is a command: **Have salt in or among yourselves**. To have **salt among yourselves** means to share salt, a reference to having meals together in the context of fellowship and peace (Ezra 4:14; Acts 1:4). When people share meals together, they're at peace with one another. This whole episode began with the disciples arguing about who was the greatest (9:33–37) and then objecting to a stranger's right to use Jesus' name. It continued with Jesus' warning about causing other believers to stumble. These concluding sayings present peaceful fellowship as the model for disciples' relations with each other.¹³ Be salt, but don't be salt mixed with anything else. Be undiluted, unmixed, & uncorrupted. He then gives a direct application, & **be at peace with one another**. Why does He say that? Because that's what they needed to hear. They were proud, self-

¹¹ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, pp 414–415

¹² RT France, *Mark*, p 385

¹³ David E. Garland, *Mark*, pp 370–371

serving, & competitive. They were guilty of leading each other into sin. They had made each other angry. They weren't at peace with each other. Jesus' command was a fitting challenge to those proud, self-serving, competitive men. Jesus says, *You need to be unmixed in your obedience, & here's your command for today. Stop fighting. Stop elevating yourselves. Stop competing. Be at peace.*

Are you ready to live radically so Jesus is seen through you? Is He worthy enough for you to pay any price to make Him known? Are you attacking sin as a living sacrifice?

We left Aron Ralston hanging earlier. You know the story. He was willing to do the radical to survive. He worked for days to chip away at the rock to free his arm, but nothing worked. He needed another plan. On the 5th day, he was severely dehydrated & preparing for the worst. He'd carved his name in the rock, took a couple of selfies & filmed a final goodbye video. He'd considered cutting his arm off earlier, but realized he wouldn't be able to cut through the bone. Then it dawned on him, he could break the bones in his arm & then cut it off.

To break both bones, he pried & pushed until both his radius & ulna cracked one at a time. After days of stabbing at the rock, his knife was very dull but the skin, muscle, tendons, & nerves all gave way through unimaginable pain. It took him an hour but finally was free. *It was the happiest moment in my life. It was absolutely the greatest feeling to know that I was getting out of here. I did what I needed to do.*

He couldn't climb back up, so he had to hike out of the canyon, forcing him at one point to rappel down a 65-foot cliff. Then he faced an 8-mile hike, which ended with an 800-foot vertical climb. He finally ran into some hikers who gave him aid. He was emaciated, starving, dehydrated, & exhausted. He lost 40 lbs & 25% of his blood supply but was still alive.

Great danger demands drastic deeds. Are you willing to fight & kill sin? Will you take the spiritual steps to respond to the danger? Not amputation, but mortifying sin, turning away from anything that distracts you from Jesus. Of course, your standing with God isn't based on how well you keep this passage because Jesus has perfectly kept the requirement of this passage for you. He was serious about sin in every way; every thought, every deed, & every interaction was done in complete obedience to the will of God. He was serious about sin and so He was willing to suffer and die so that sin would be conquered. Because of the sacrifice of Jesus, we don't have to be afraid. We don't have to hide from our heavenly Father. We can run into His presence and say,

Father, I have moments of humility but not always. There are times when I'm serious about sin but not always. There are moments when I want to be part of what You're doing in the lives of others, but not always. There are instants when I want to live a holy life but not always. So I come to You again by Your grace and I thank you that I've been accepted on the basis of the obedience of Another, and I can ask once again, Empower me by Your Spirit. Fill me with a hatred of my sin. Make me salt in a dying world. Help me be at peace with others so that You might be glorified.