

September 26, 2021
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Mark 9:38-50

ENTERING THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS WORTH ANY PRICE.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Mark, the 9th chapter which you heard read earlier.

Oftentimes, when there is repetition in a passage of Scripture, it intensifies the importance of what is being repeated. In our text this morning, Jesus uses repetitive hyperbole to teach that entering the Kingdom of Heaven is worth any price.

Hyperbole is defined as: “*deliberate exaggeration, not meant to be taken literally.*” (Concise Oxford English Dictionary). It’s like when you say to your child: “*If I told you once I told you a million times.*” No, you have not told them a million times, but you likely have told them often enough that they should remember. We know that Jesus words are hyperbole because the Old Testament Law forbids any type of self-harm or mutilation. (cf: Leviticus 19:28; Deuteronomy 14:1) So, He repeatedly exaggerates to warn you of how eternally deadly are the effects of sin.

Our text picks up where we left off last week. Jesus and His disciples are in a house in Capernaum. Along the way, the disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest among them. (cf: Mark 9:34) So, Jesus taught them what it means to be great in the Kingdom of God. He placed a little child in their midst, wrapped His arms around and said:

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” (Mark 9:37)

To be great, you must serve and receive others in the Name of Jesus... for the sake of Jesus’ Name. Serving and receiving others in Jesus’ Name is an act of faith in the Savior. Serving others for the sake of Jesus is serving God. To be first, you must be servant of all... even servant of a helpless child. This service is something that only believers can do. To serve and receive others for the sake of Jesus’ Name can only be accomplished by a child of God. All who were united to Christ’s death and resurrection in Baptism:

“... have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer [you] who live, but Christ who lives in [you]. And the life [you] now live in the flesh [you] live by faith in the Son of God, who loved [you] and gave himself for [you]. (Galatians 2:20)

And because you live by your God given faith, you cannot help but to perform good works and deeds for the sake of Jesus. And in our text, Jesus illustrates what this service looks like. As we go through the text, keep your ears open for the personal pronouns **you** and **your**. They’re

important because Jesus is speaking to His disciples of all ages and all times, including you, dear believer. In verse 41 He's looking right at **you** and says:

"⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward." (Mark 9:41)

Whoever gives **you** a cup of water to drink because **you** belong to Christ is serving **you** in the Name of Christ... for the sake of Jesus' Name. And because of this, they are serving Christ Himself — just as everyone **you** serve in the Name of Christ... **you**, too, are serving Christ Himself. You don't have to do miraculous things to do the will of God and receive His blessings. Simply serve your neighbor, loving him as yourself, and in doing so, you are serving God by serving others.

Each and every baptized believer in Christ is precious to our Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And because each believer is so precious to God, having the little child in their midst, Jesus uses hyperbole to describe the fate of the one who causes one of God's beloved children to stumble, leading them into sin, saying:

"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)

Jesus is not referring only to the child in their midst. No. He says: "***... one of these little ones who believe in me...***" Jesus is referring to children of all ages... even those below the ***supposed*** age of accountability. Every believer is precious to God. Woe to the one who causes a believer to sin. In the original language this ***cause to sin*** is pronounced ***scandalizo***, from which we get the word ***scandalize***. It means: "***To trap alive. To entice to sin. To stumble or fall.***" (BDAG, 926)

And anyone who causes a little one of faith, to stumble in their trust in Jesus, it would be better for them to have a millstone tied around their neck and be thrown into the sea. And not just any millstone... the original language says ***the millstone of a donkey***... a millstone so big that it must be turned by a donkey. Woe to the one who ***scandalizes***... who leads others into sin, for it would be better for them to suffer the worst of temporal deaths than bring upon themselves eternal death and damnation in hell.

Unfortunately, you and I wittingly and unwittingly teach innocent little children to sin. We'd prefer to blame a child, but many times they're merely mimicking and imitating those things they see and hear. And who are they watching and listening to? It's not only culture and television that leads little ones into sin. They're watching and learning from you and me.

Little boys watch and mimic dad. Little girls watch and imitate mom. It's how they learn how to be parents themselves one day. Have you ever had someone say: "***You remind me so much of your dad? You remind me so much of your mom.***" As the little one observes your words and deeds, you teach them to take the Name of the Lord in vain, to despise preaching and God's Word, to despise and tell lies about others, to desire the temporary and sinful pleasures of the world.

In our text, Jesus repeatedly intensifies the hyperbole. He has warned against leading others into sin – and now He has a three-fold warning against your own sin. Again, listen to the pronouns.

“... 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)

Likewise, if *your* foot or *your* eye causes *you* to sin. It is better for *you* to enter eternal life maimed and mutilated rather than to be thrown into hell, bodily intact. (cf: Mark 9:45–47)

In the original language, the word translated as *hell* in our text is *Gehenna*. Jesus’ hearers knew what Gehenna was. It was the city dump outside the walls of Jerusalem where all the trash, every bit of garbage, and the decaying carcasses of animals were thrown. Even the bodies of the dead homeless people were thrown into Gehenna. It was a place filled with flesh eating worms, and constantly kept burning all in attempt to purge it of rot and decay.

It’s a vivid picture of eternal damnation:

“... to be thrown into hell,⁴⁸ ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’” (Mark 9:47–48)

The worm is internal, and the fire is external. Hell is both internal and external pain and suffering. It’s pain and suffering that cannot be extinguished – eternally. This is why Jesus repeatedly exaggerates to warn you of how eternally deadly the effects of sin are.

But there’s a greater problem here. You and I are by nature sinful and unclean. Jesus knows that even if you cut off your hand, your foot, or gouge out your eye, your other hand, foot, or eye will cause you to sin. And, you would continue to scandalize others, causing them to sin. You and I suffer from sinful diseased flesh that must be cut off.

Doctors fight diseases of the flesh all the time. If a patient has a flesh-eating bacteria, or gangrene in their hand or foot, the doctor wouldn’t hesitate. He would amputate the limb. The diseased limb is a deadly threat to your life. So, it is with sin. It is a deadly threat to your life – a threat to your eternal life, and must be cut off. But Jesus not suggesting self-harm or mutilation. He knows that sin doesn’t reside in your extremities. It resides in your heart. (cf: Mark 7:20–23) It’s from the sinful heart that your lusts and passions pour out into your thoughts, words, and deeds. It’s from your hearts that you set a trap for yourselves and a trap for others, scandalizing little children and adults alike.

You and me and all mankind were doomed from the moment we were conceived, inheriting sin from our ancestor Adam, that wells up out of our hearts and bears fruit in our extremities. And rather than seeing you mutilated, Jesus took on human flesh and became your brother and substitute, taking on all your griefs and sorrows, suffering your trials, tribulations, and temptations in the flesh. He’s felt your suffering and your pain. But He did so without sinning.

Instead of becoming *sin-ful*, He became a *sin offering* for you. He was mutilated in your stead, not just giving up His hands or feet or eyes. No. He handed His entire being over into death and was cut off from the love of the Father as He was forsaken by God – so you might be reconciled with the Father and be forgiven your sins: your sins of not serving others the sake of Jesus’ Name, for the sin of causing others to stumble and be *scandalized*, your sins of thought, word,

and deed. He was mangled and maimed for you. He was beaten within an inch of His life, then His hands and feet were nailed to the cross when He would die the most horrible temporal death. The prophet Isaiah foretold:

"⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5)

Because of Jesus' perfect life, suffering hell and death in your stead, God accepted His substitutionary atonement and raised His mangled and mutilated body from the dead, making peace between you and God. By His wounds, you are healed from your sinfulness, spared from the torments of hell. And unless Jesus returns real soon, on the Last Day, your dusty and decomposed body will be raised from the grave. St Paul writes:

"What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body..." (1 Corinthians 15:42–49)

"... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality." (1 Corinthians 15:52–53)

Thanks be to God that His eternal Kingdom doesn't consist of mangled and mutilated bodies, but of healed and restored living people. Entering the Kingdom of God is worth any price. And Jesus paid your price with His holy precious blood, and His innocent suffering and death.

Amen

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.