

The last two verses in our passage attract little attention, often because although people know what salt does, they are unfamiliar with what it meant in Bible times. Of course, salt is something which preserves or seasons food. However, salt was also used in ancient times as a means of rendering land infertile. When the Romans sacked cities, they ploughed salt in to the surrounding countryside; an act that would prevent the growth of crops and stop anyone from trying to settle in the region again. It was basic, cruel, and well known. Salt had both very good and very bad uses, and therefore became a symbol of discernment and judgement. With this in mind, we can now interpret the use of the word 'salt' in the Bible with more accuracy.

'Everyone will be salted with fire' (9:49) is a classic description of the judgement of God, who 'tests' His people with fire (Malachi 3:2, Matthew 3:10, 7:19 etc). Salt that has lost its saltiness (literally, its 'potency') as in verse 50, describes a potential loss of discernment amongst God's people, especially where they fail to recognise those sins which eat away at a person's relationship with God. The final encouragement, 'have salt in yourselves ...' (9:50) begs us to be discerning and aware of God's judgement on our own sin. When explained like this, these verses follow on directly and logically from what has gone before!

Application

The teaching in this passage presents us with significant challenges. On the one hand it asks us not to be closed, and on the other, we are to see our relationship with God as an exclusive privilege. Our Lord's mercy is for all, and the call of humility and service demands that we have an open attitude towards others who are not, or not yet, Christians. If we present ourselves to others with anything less than normal human openness and decency, then the Gospel we proclaim will receive a frosty reception!

The central section of this passage contains two quite specific messages of condemnation from the Lord; firstly, of those who seek to destroy faith in Jesus Christ. We may find some people in our world who make it their mission in life to attack Christians through writing, the media, and the arts. Whilst this can present Christians with difficulties, there are no problems so deep as the ones we give ourselves, however; especially when Christians of a particular theological persuasion seek to dominate theological education, forcing those who claim a more traditional faith to change their beliefs. It does not take too much journeying through the corridors of theological training institutions today to observe this awful phenomenon at work. It then becomes more heinous as Christian leaders, priests and ministers are sent out into churches and parishes with little confidence in their own faith. Such consequences are not inevitable, but they are a significant factor in theological education today, and it needs to be assessed.

The main part of this passage challenges us as individual disciples to be discerning of the way in which sin works in our own lives, trying to separate us from our Saviour. We do not always know the truth about what we do, and we need to do two things to correct this. Firstly, we need to get to know God's Word well enough to recognise what is said about sin in the Bible, and secondly, we need the Holy Spirit to convict us of our sins (John 16:8). Seasoned with this salt, we will then be at peace with our God (9:50)!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Are you aware of people who cast out demons in Jesus' name? What would you think of any who might do this but who are not part of the church?
2. What are the gravest sins we face today as a 'people of God'? How do they affect the church?
3. What are the gravest sins we face today as individuals?

Discipleship

Have a look at the 'application' section of the study today, and decide which of the challenges presented by the text affects you most. Make a determined effort to pray about this matter over the coming few days and ask the Lord whether you should do anything about this. The more time you spend praying about this, the more confident you will probably feel about trying to do something about it.

Final Prayer

Great and Mighty Lord; fix my heart on You with such intensity that no evil temptations can shake me. Keep my feet firmly on Your pathway, guide me securely through my troubles, and bring me safely into Your complete salvation and my journey's end. Through Jesus Christ, AMEN

Prayer

Almighty God, You lift me up when I have fallen down. You receive my confessions when I have sinned and offer me forgiveness to cleanse my soul; You strengthen me when I fear I cannot do what is right, and You comfort me when my soul is distressed. I praise You, Almighty God of my salvation; maintain my soul and spirit for ever, I pray: AMEN!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Elections

Thank God for the benefits of democracy and for those who have fought for the rights of all people to vote. Great and famous people have advocated and established the laws which have embedded democracy and the systems of government which we now take for granted. Pray about the democratic privileges and liberties you have, and where possible, give thanks.

Meditation

(a reflection based on Psalm 101)

My song will be one of loyalty and justice;
A tune that is pure in your ears, O Lord.

My path will be one of integrity of heart;
A walk which attains this through You, O Lord.

My tasks will be done with continual effort;
A work which is pure in Your sight, O Lord.

My heart will be far from perversity of thought;
A soul which knows nothing of evil, O Lord.

My mind will be upright, avoiding all slander;
A life trained for love, not war, O Lord.

*I have set my soul to achieve right not wrong;
And walk as I have been taught, O Lord.*

*I have given You glory for saving my soul;
And will only succeed by Your Spirit, O Lord.*

Bible Study - Mark 9:38-50

³⁸ John said to Him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow us.' ³⁹ But Jesus said, 'Do not prevent him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able to speak evil of me at the same time! ⁴⁰ Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, I tell you the truth, he will definitely not lose his reward.

⁴² 'If anyone causes one of these 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 Now, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than go with two hands into the unquenchable fire of hell. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than to be thrown into hell with two feet. 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 to be thrown into hell with two eyes, 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 can it be restored? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

Review

Whatever you think of the sayings in today's reading, this whole passage is a powerful collection of teaching. Several words and phrases are repeated, indicating important topics such as the 'name' of Christ (9:38,41), 'sin' (9:42,43,45,47) and salt (9:49,50) and they help us to group the teaching themes together. However, the most important thing to remember when reading it is that Jesus had previously highlighted the first principle of Christian discipleship, that of humility and service; 'whoever wants to be first must be last of all and the servant of all' (9:35). This is only one of few places in Mark's Gospel where we are given a glimpse into Jesus' teaching, so we must be careful to get the right perspective.

If you were to read more about this passage in Mark, you would find that few authors agree on the meaning of this teaching. This is very unhelpful, and I suggest that it is only when we approach the passage with the attitude of humble service required of His followers by Jesus that His teaching makes sense. For example, Jesus responded strongly against the disciples' attempts to prevent someone from casting out demons using His (Jesus') name (9:38). We might think that the Gospel was to be kept exclusively within the fellowship of Jesus and His disciples, but surprisingly, Jesus demonstrated a far more open attitude, saying 'whoever is not against us is for us.' (9:40). This is certainly something we will need to explore later in the study, because other Scriptural texts appear to say something quite different (see Acts 19:14f.).

The real enemy, Jesus said, was not people who cast out demons, but those who caused 'the least of these who believe in me' (9:42) to sin. The words 'the least of these' sound as if they ought to refer to children, but because Jesus added 'who believe in me', then the phrase meant more than that. Putting together all Jesus has said about discipleship, the phrase in verse 42 now means; 'followers of mine who are like children and have no status, but have an attitude of humility towards others'. These are the servants of the Kingdom truly valued by Jesus.

The following verses (43-48) are very contentious, and you will see that no verses 44 and 46 exist (this is fully explained below, but where they do exist, they are identical to verse 48; it is an ancient picture of hell "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched!" - 9:48). Here, Mark hands on to us Jesus' teaching that it is better to lose an eye or a hand or a foot than be thrown into hell because one of these has been a 'cause of sin' (9:43,45,47). These sayings are like parables which drive home the message that although we are to be humble servants, we cannot tolerate any personal sin which might cause a break between us and our Lord. Jesus did not require us to maim our bodies because of Him, He graphically illustrated the importance of keeping an exclusive relationship with Him when we 'take up our cross' (8:34) as a disciple.

A pattern now emerges in Jesus' teaching. His followers must have a humble and open attitude towards others who are not His followers, and have a closed and exclusive attitude towards their relationship with Jesus. Moreover, Jesus appears to say that what comes between us and Him is more often than not something to do with us, rather than others; and we should deal with ourselves accordingly, instead of pointing fingers at others! These are strong words, and it is no wonder that the passage concludes with a collection of Jesus' sayings about 'salt'. Salt is an ancient symbol of judgement which Jesus used to encourage His disciples to be discerning, and therefore 'be at peace' (9:50) with one another.

Going Deeper

There are a number of things which will need to be explained now, in order to justify the remarks I have made above. The passage is not at all straightforward, especially when there are disputed verses in the middle of it which appear in some translations and not in others! However, it is the explanation of the last two verses about salt which is potentially the most helpful, because it helps put the whole of this section of Jesus' teaching into perspective.

The man casting out demons (9:38-40)

John was something of a firebrand in his youthful days. There is a report in Luke's Gospel of his request to Jesus to call down fire on some Samaritans because they had not 'received' Jesus (Luke 9:54 – perhaps with Elijah in mind – see 2 Kings 1:15f.!) Here, John was clearly not happy to see others using Jesus' 'name' to cast out demons. Documents of the first century AD tell of instances where people would use the name of a successful 'exorcist' in order to bolster their own success in dealing with people who were possessed. Indeed, there are two occasions recorded in the Acts of the Apostles in which Jesus' name was used like this (8:9-13 and 19:11-20). Both these stories; of Simon the Magician and the seven Jewish sons of Sceva, are usually taken to infer that trying to use the name of Jesus without knowing what you are

doing is dangerous and wrong. For this reason, some think that Jesus' teaching (our passage - 9:38,39) is therefore at odds with the experience of the early church (Acts 8 and 19).

This is not quite so. In our instance, we know nothing about what happened to raise John's concern, apart from the fact that someone was using Jesus' name to deliver people from evil spirits. Jesus does not focus on what was reported to Him but calls on His own disciples to have an open attitude towards this. Elsewhere, Jesus says that the best way to judge the value to the Kingdom of what other people do is to apply the principle 'you will know them by their fruits' (Matt 7:16,20). Now if you read the stories in Acts, you will see that in each case, the disciples acted carefully and with discernment, and they did not dismiss Simon because of his magic or the sons of Sceva when they got into difficulty with their deliverance ministry! They kept in contact with the individuals concerned and the public situations which developed around them, and in each case the result was great glory for God! By showing discernment and a servant heart instead of dismissing what happened, great good came from potentially difficult situations, and that is why they are recorded in Acts. This interpretation is not fundamentally different, of course, from what Jesus taught in our reading (see above), and Jesus' stark summary 'whoever is not against us is for us' tells us that the real opposition we face is Satan and his works of evil. For Jesus has come to save people, not condemn them!

Verse 41 is appended to this teaching to remind John of the basic humanity of what Jesus said. God was prepared to 'reward' anyone who gave a 'cup of water' (a precious commodity in that region in those days) to John, as a disciple who 'bore Jesus' name'. He should therefore have been more generous in attitude to others, reflecting the love of his Lord for all people.

The causes of sin

If the disciples were to have an open attitude towards others, then Jesus went on to teach that by contrast, they should have the most exclusive of relationships with Him. By definition, sin is whatever places a division between God and people, and between Jesus and His disciples; so if we want to know how to find the real enemy within the human soul, then we should be looking at sin. Jesus began His assault on sin by warning against those who encouraged His disciples to sin ('the least of these who believe in me' - 9:42), before going on to look at the sins which people harbour in themselves which are primarily their own responsibility (9:43-48).

It is tempting to wonder whether Jesus had any particular sin in mind, given John's recent brash performance and the general problems the disciples had experienced in doing their Master's will (e.g. 9:14-29). From our perspective today, however, in which we tend to think of sins as 'doing something wrong', it is always worth reminding ourselves that the word 'sin' in the Bible means not just 'acts of wickedness', but the general state of rebellion against God which can be created by constantly rejecting the revealed truths of God. The word used in our passage is rather like this more general idea, being the Greek word 'skandalon' from which we get the word 'scandal'; and it refers to 'being turned away from God' in a general sense. This means that the sins condemned from verse 42 to 48 are not merely specific acts of sin, but the state of falling away from faith in God and His son Jesus.

In the light of this, Jesus' teaching firstly condemns those who actively seek to break down people's faith (9:42), and then in verses 43 to 48, we are personally warned that we need to be rid of anything in our life which draws us away from God. It is simply wrong to read these verses and think that if we do some 'sin' with our hands or watch something awful with our eyes, then we should remove a hand or eye in order to prevent the same thing happening again. This is a parable about the whole of life, and if we interpret it aright, it begs us to examine ourselves very carefully for attitudes, habits and deeds which are a 'scandal' to God. The most radical of interpretations of this text will require us to remove our physical connection with these 'scandals' (books, attendance at events, music, or anything which may have become 'sin' for us); but I do not believe that Jesus meant we have to maim ourselves.

It is only late fifth and sixth century copies of Mark's Gospel which include verses 44 and 46, both of them being the same as the verse 48 we have in the standard text, and you will find these verses in the King James version, but not in all other more recent translations. Verse 48 is a strange verse itself, but is in fact a standard Jewish description of the Valley of Hinnom, to the south of the Old city of Jerusalem, and a place where there is evidence of very ancient child sacrifice to the Moabite god Molech (see 2 Kings 23:10, Jer 7:31 etc). It was a very real symbol of the underworld to ancient Jewish people.

The salt that lost its flavour