

First Baptist Church Merritt Island
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Sin, Hell, And Our Hope in Jesus
Mark 9:42-50

My favorite teacher in high school was Mrs. Masters. She was my math teacher. I wasn't great at math, but Mrs. Masters went out of her way to help me earn an A in trigonometry my senior year. A week or so after I graduated, I had to drop off some papers to her classroom so that she could finalize my grade. I'll never forget that conversation. We talked for a few minutes. Mostly small talk. Then, I turned to go. But, before I could get out of the room, Mrs. Masters stopped me. She had one more thing she needed to say.

I don't remember the exact words that she used, but it was something like this, "Titus, there's something I need to tell you that you might not want to hear, but I've got to say it: You can't straddle the fence with God. It seems like you think you can. I'm pretty sure you have one foot in the world and one foot in with God. And you need to know, it doesn't work like that. You have to choose. I hope you know I care about you, and I believe you'll be successful, but I'm afraid you are going to throw your life away by straddling the fence with God."

Needless to say, it wasn't fun to hear someone I respected say they were worried I was going to waste my life. It was hard to hear. It felt offensive and judgmental. But I knew she loved me, and I was thankful she cared enough to tell me how she felt, even if I thought she was way off base.

I left the school that day and basically disregarded most of what Mrs. Masters had to say. However, for the next 6 months or so, God began to make something abundantly clear to me: Mrs. Master was right. God used that conversation with Mrs. Masters to change the trajectory of my eternity. I will forever be grateful for a message that wasn't easy to hear. And I will forever be grateful that Jesus worked in my heart so that I would believe the truth before it was too late.

Here's why I tell that story, some of the most important messages are the hardest ones to hear. And our text this morning is one of those kinds of messages. The message of Jesus is serious and sober. It's not easy to hear. Most of our world would consider it to be offensive and judgmental. But some of the most important messages are the hardest ones to hear...

So, let's pick up where we left off last week in our study of the Gospel of Mark.

Mark 9:42–50 (ESV)

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."

I think you can see why this message could be hard to hear. Four times, Jesus talks about sin. Three times, He talks about hell. He suggests that people cut off a hand or foot. He says there is a

fate worse than being cast into the bottom of the sea. He ends with a series of cryptic statements about salt.

This is a hard passage. Some things are hard to hear. Some things are hard to understand. But there are several things that are completely clear in this passage. And I want those clear truths to guide our study and form our big idea.

Big Idea: Hell is real. Sin is serious. Jesus is our only hope.

Now, let's look at the clear teaching of our text through the lens of that big idea.

1. Hell Is Real

This passage is filled with warnings about hell. It starts with the implicit warning in verse 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.***

First-century Jews fished on lakes, but they didn't travel across the sea. The sea represented fear and chaos for them. So, none of Jesus' listeners would have wanted to be thrown into the sea, no matter what. But Jesus adds to the displeasure by saying a millstone would be hung around their neck. This type of millstone was so large it required a mule or donkey to move it. So, the picture is that someone would be thrown into the sea and immediately sink to the bottom, never to be seen again. That would be a “worst nightmare” scenario for the Jews of Jesus' day.

So, what does that have to do with hell? The connection is that Jesus says there is something far worse than their worst nightmare of being thrown into the sea. What is it? Hell. Three times in this text, in verses 43, 45, and 47, Jesus refers to hell.

In the original language of the New Testament, the word for hell is the word Gehenna. Gehenna was a valley just south of Jerusalem. During the time of the wicked kings of the Old Testament, Jews who had rebelled against God offered sacrifices to false gods in that valley, including human sacrifices. Two wicked kings, Ahaz and Mannaseh, sacrificed their children there. It was an awful place of rot and decay. When a good king named Josiah brought reform to the Jews, he turned that valley into a place where garbage and refuse was burned.

So, the Jews of Jesus' time were familiar with that place where the fires constantly burned everything that the inhabitants of that area threw away. It was crawling with worms and burning with fire.

That's why verse 48 uses a quote from *Isaiah 66:24*: *‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’* That's a perfect description of Gehenna – perpetually crawling with worms and unquenchable fire.

As a side note, some of you may have noticed that verses 44 and 46 are omitted from the English Standard Version. Most modern translations do not include those verses because the most reliable manuscripts indicate those verses were added over time, possibly as a scribal note. They are repeated phrases from verse 48. It doesn't change the meaning of our text.

Jesus is intentionally associating hell with the most awful place these people would have known. He wants them to have a visual from this world that most closely parallels what hell is like. A place of unquenchable fire.

And look what He says in verse 47: ***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,***

Jesus is saying there are only two options for every person. Either they will enter into the eternal kingdom of God and live forever with Him or they will be thrown into hell.

Listen to Revelation 14:10–11 (ESV). This is a description of what will happen to those who reject Jesus.

10 he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 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."

This is the eternal destiny of those who turn from Jesus in their sin. They are tormented forever and ever. Romans 3:23 says that the wage, or the payment, of sin is death. That's not just physical death on this earth. It's eternal death in the fires of hell.

I cannot imagine the reality of hell. As I've studied for this morning, I've trembled over and over at this thought. Everyone who has rejected Jesus is destined to spend eternity in hell. Just because we have chosen not to talk about hell doesn't mean it no longer exists. It's real. Jesus says it's real. Jesus says it's the eternal destination for everyone who dies in their sin apart from Christ.

And that brings us to the second clear point in our text...

2. Sin Is Serious

If the payment for sin is hell, then sin is deadly serious. That's the point Jesus is making and He uses shocking images to make that point.

Look at verse 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,***

Jesus is calling us to get serious in dealing with our sin. It has eternal consequences. And I believe Jesus absolutely means exactly what He is saying. If your hand or your foot is the cause of your sin, then cut it off rather than continue in sin. Value God's kingdom more than you value the dearest things you have, like your hand or foot or eyes. Be so serious about dealing with the cause of your sin that you don't play games with it. Do not play games with sin. The fires of hell burn hot with the wrath of God because God takes sin that seriously. Do not take your sin lightly. God doesn't take your sin lightly.

But don't forget what Jesus said earlier in Mark. He told us the cause of our sin and it isn't our hands or feet or eyes. What is the root cause of sin?

Mark 7:20–23 (ESV)

20 And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. 21 For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

What's the cause of our sin? Our hearts. That's why true followers of Jesus don't lop off their hands and feet. The real cause of our sin is our hearts. It's something within us, not outside us. We sin because we desire sin. It's who we are. We sin because we are sinners. It's who we are. My dogs bark and roll around in my yard and scratch their chins with their back feet because they are dogs. You can bark and roll around in your yard and scratch your chin with your feet if you're flexible enough, but that doesn't mean you're a dog. It just means you're weird. Our behavior doesn't determine our identity. Our identity determines our behavior. We don't need new hands or feet. We need new hearts.

But how can we get new hearts? What hope do we have that we can get new hearts so that we can begin to successfully attach our sin?

That brings me to the third clear truth of our text...

3. Jesus Is Our Only Hope

We can't change our hearts. That's why we need Jesus. And we don't just need Jesus, we have Him. He came to make us new.

2 Corinthians 5:21 - For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus came to deal with our sin. At the cross of Christ, God placed our sin on Jesus. He became sin on our behalf and the wrath of God fell on Jesus at the cross. He endured hell so that we would never have to endure it ourselves. And when we place our faith and trust in Jesus, He makes us new from the inside out. In Christ, we are no longer sinners who are enslaved to the sinful desires of our flesh. We become the righteousness of God in Him.

That's why 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."* In Christ, we become new men and women with new hearts. He changes our identity from the inside out. It's a work He graciously does in us not a work we do for Him.

So, when Jesus says to get serious about dealing with our sin, I take Him to mean get serious about trusting in Jesus. That's exactly the paradigm Hebrews 12:1-2 describes for us.

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

There is no doubt that we are called to stop sinning – to cut it off and lay it aside. But we don't conquer sin by focusing on sin or cowering in fear of hell. We conquer sin by fixing our eyes on Jesus as our only hope. Only Jesus can deliver us from sin. And that fits perfectly into what Jesus is saying in our text. Look at the first verse of our text.

Mark 9:42- "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,

Remember what Jesus is doing here. A few verses ago, He picked up a little child and held him in His arms. Then, John brought up a man who wasn't part of their group who had been casting out demons in Jesus' name. He likely didn't know all that the disciples had learned in their time with

Jesus. But he was evidently trusting Jesus. And Jesus is equating a person who trusts in Him with a little child who is resting in the arms, the strength, of Jesus. That's who believers are. They are people who, in childlike faith are depending on the power of Jesus and not themselves.

The word "sin" in our text means "to stumble or fall away." And Jesus is warning us not do anything that would cause another person to stumble or fall away from trusting in Jesus. And He is warning us to not allow anything in our lives to cause us to stumble or fall away from trusting in Jesus. All sin is really just an expression of not trusting Jesus. Romans 14:23 says that whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

So, I take Jesus to mean that in our battle with sin, we must radically be devoted to trusting in Jesus as our only hope. We must cut out anything that would keep us from trusting in Him, anything that would cause us to see ourselves as something other than a child held in the powerful arms of Jesus. We must cut out anything from our lives that would cause anyone else to believe they have any hope other than Jesus. Only Jesus can save us from the grip of sin and hell.

And that's where I believe the cryptic last verses of our text come in.

49 For everyone will be salted with fire.

Commentators have countless views on what Jesus could be talking about here. But Leviticus 2:13 gives us a clue as to what Jesus may mean. It's in a section that talks about the sacrificial fires at the Temple and there's a peculiar reference to salt.

Leviticus 2:13 You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.

When the people of God brought their offering to the Lord as a sacrifice, they were called to season it with salt. Salt has an antiseptic quality to it, it purifies. I believe Jesus is saying that when we offer our lives as an offering to Him, He will do a work to purify and refine our lives.

He will use the fire of trials in this life to purify us and our faith. Ultimately, 1 Corinthians 3 says that all our the works of our lives will be tried by fire to see what sort they are. If they are work of our flesh, they will be consumed. If they are works empowered by Christ, they will endure like gold, silver, and precious stones. In other words, Jesus will purify our lives as we trust in Him. He will give us His power to overcome our sin.

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."

Salt is good. Next time I go to the doctor, I'm going to tell her that my sodium intake is just fine according to my religious convictions.

But, seriously, how does this connect? Just think about what Jesus is saying. Salt that isn't salty isn't salt. And you can't make it salty if it isn't salt. The salt that the Jews of Jesus' day would use was taken from sources that were easily contaminated with other elements, like gypsum. In the process, there would be times when people would think they were getting salt, but they were really getting something that was contaminated and was not actually salt. And, since it wasn't pure salt, it didn't work effectively the way salt works. It wouldn't purify. It wouldn't flavor food. It didn't have the power of salt because it was mingled with too many things that weren't salt.

Now, bring that back to what we've seen so far. If Jesus our only hope to be saved from sin and hell, Jesus is warning us not to mingle anything in with our faith in Jesus. In other words, don't try to fight sin or save your soul with anything other than the salt of the gospel. Don't try to fight sin with your flesh, that's not the salt of the gospel and it won't do the trick and you can't have it both ways. You can't have the effectiveness of Jesus' power if you are trusting in anything other than Jesus. Jesus, and only Jesus, will purify our lives.

That's why we need to be careful about how we consider our text. Jesus is absolutely calling us to get serious in dealing with our sin. He absolutely means that we should be radically fighting against our greed, our lust, our gossip, our bitterness, our anger, our immorality, and any other expression of sin. But the only power we have to fight our sin and be saved from hell is the power of Christ in us. Internet filters won't save you from lust. Self-improvement books won't save you from anger. Taking a vow of poverty won't save you from greed. Those measures of accountability or practical help may have a good and healthy place in your life, but they won't do you a bit of good if you aren't depending completely on the power of Jesus. Jesus is our only hope. And because we have Jesus as we trust in Him, we have hope.

Hell is real. Sin is serious. And Jesus is our only hope. So, look to Jesus. Trust in Jesus. Be like a child safe in the arms of Christ by depending on His power and not your own.

And, as we close, I want to just ask you a few questions in reflection over this morning's truth.

1. Are you trusting in Jesus to save you from eternity in hell?
2. Are you trusting in Jesus to deliver you from the power and patterns of sin? Where is He stirring you to fight for purity.
3. Are you living toward others in a way that is encouraging them, not hindering them, from trusting in Jesus?

Hell is real. Sin is serious. And Jesus is our only hope and the hope of everyone we know.