

“Drastic Measures”

Mark 9:42-50

I. Introduction: Sin and Hell and Unquenchable Fire

Sin, hell, and unquenchable fire. Wow. What do we do with a passage of Scripture like this?

Isn't this exactly the type of passage that some would say we should just pass on by? Isn't this just the sort of thing that has and will drive people away from our church?

Come on Don, people coming into church are facing all kinds of difficulties in life. Their health may be failing, their marriages may be in jeopardy, their children may be giving them fits, they may be battling grave illness, they may have lost loved ones, they may be struggling to keep a job.¹

The last thing people want to hear about is sin and hell and unquenchable fire.

What was Jesus thinking? And if I teach what Jesus teaches, what am I thinking?

If Jesus going to have any hope of touring the country promoting a best-selling book, He needs to maximize His strengths... Follow my life-changing plan and I will promise you ... relationships marked by perfect harmony; good health; a stable career and financial prosperity.

But ... Jesus never promises any of these in this earthly life. There is a reason that the Christian faith is represented by a cross. Jesus knows better than anyone else how this sin-marred world is marked distinctly by pain and suffering; by disease and death; by conflict and uncertainty; by natural and man-made disasters.

In the midst of such evil and uncertainty and darkness, Jesus is the one true eternal light.

We do no favors to anyone by turning a blind eye to the blight of sin in this world that eats away at the fabric of life: that alienates individuals from God; that assails families and relationships; that precipitates war among the nations. We must look the reality of the world around us... square in the face if we are to offer genuine hope and purpose in life for today and tomorrow.

This past Wednesday I sat at the Hampton Inn near Grand Prairie Mall eating breakfast with Joe Weatherly and talked to him about the struggle I was having this week preparing to preach sin while at the same time preaching grace. I want the hallmark of each of my sermons to be the grace of God, His unmerited kindness in the lives of His people. So how do I preach sin when I want to preach grace? Joe has said he often finds himself in the same dilemma when he is teaching, though from the other direction, “How can I teach grace if I do not teach sin?” They go hand in hand. We must recognize and understand the wretchedness of sin – not only in the world around us, but in our very lives – if we are ever to appreciate and truly embrace the full reality of God's grace. Show me someone who has a casual attitude about sin, and I will show you someone who does not understand the magnitude of God's grace.

That is the truth at the heart of today's passage. On the one hand, this morning's passage is about the reality of ... Sin, death, and unquenchable fire; our sin is worse than we could ever imagine. On the other hand, this passage is about Jesus embracing little ones who believe in Him: offering life, the kingdom of God, peace with God and with one another. God's grace is greater still.

¹ Adapted from comments made by Joel Osteen in interview with Larry King, *Larry King Live*, CNN, aired June 20, 2005.

First, Jesus paints a stark picture of the danger of sin in the life of “these little ones” and the lives of all people. Second, Jesus speaks of the cleansing of sin ... “salted as with fire” as foundational to the purity and the peace of His church.

II. Battle lines: Slaying Sin Lest it Slay Us

A. These little ones (9:42)

As this passage opens, recall Jesus is in a home in Capernaum. In their travels back to Capernaum He witnessed an exchange between the disciples who are bantering about who is the greatest among them. Jesus takes the opportunity to instruct them concerning the vast difference between the way the world perceives greatness and greatness in the kingdom of God, which is marked by service to the least of these, the small and less significant of this world. Illustrating this He gathers a child in His arms and in verse 37 says:

"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

You see, at the heart of the disciples' dispute is not a mere misunderstanding but pride and the destructive nature of sin. In verse 42 Jesus interjects this stark warning:

42 "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to **sin**, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.

This is a large stone that is used to mill grains into flour. It has a hole in the middle so it can be held upright in the milling process. And it would be better for that person to be thrown into the sea with that great stone around his neck than “to cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin.” Well, that is quite a word picture. Let that truth sink in.

That says something about the gravity of sin on the one hand, and the incredible love God has for the “little ones” who believe. I would illustrate it this way: Think of someone you love, particularly if they are in worldly terms weak or vulnerable or in any way insignificant. Then think if they are threatened in some way. Someone places them in jeopardy, someone taunts them, or someone tries to hurt them. I think of my twin brother who some of you know is smaller in physical stature than me. When we were in high school if someone would have started picking on him in some way I would have headed headlong into that fight. And being the skinny kid I was we would have both would have taken a beating, but he wouldn't have gone down alone.

Principle: In the same way God is vigilant in protecting “these little ones.” So much so that if you cause one of these to stumble, to stray, to sin, it would be better for you to have a millstone placed around your neck and be tossed into the sea.

That should make us think about how we care for the children/ youth in our church. Parents in particular have a great responsibility here. As we raise our children we are given an opportunity and a responsibility that is not one to be squandered or carelessly neglected. It is important enough that we at this church pour a lot of time and effort: Sunday school for all ages, Vacation Bible School, Youth group for those in high school, Jr. High and Youth Retreats. Those times of formal instruction offer parents a foundation to build upon.

Whenever possible, get your kids to Sunday school and to church and such opportunities. But don't leave it there. You are their teacher. Talk to them about what they learned in class. Go over the lesson with them later in the day. Prayerfully/ consistently seek after the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

Don't carelessly cause them to fall away, to stumble from the faith. You cannot ultimately make that decision for them, but you can lovingly and consistently and purposefully communicate to them the importance of valuing God's kingdom before all others, and the truth that they have a loving Father in heaven who listens and cares for them all along the way.

So, verse 42 stands as a warning to all of the drastic consequences for those who would cause "these little ones who believe in Jesus to sin" or stumble in the faith. As we move to verses 43-48 Jesus drives home the critical importance of assertively battling – waging war – against sin, of "slaying sin" at every opportunity.

B. The enemy within (9:43-48)

If your hand or foot or eye causes you to sin, to fall away from the faith, cut it off, pluck it out.

Why? Because it is better to enter life, to enter the kingdom of God absent a hand, foot, or eye, than be thrown into hell where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. The stakes couldn't be higher and protecting that which is most important in this life, that which has REAL consequences into all eternity, calls for drastic measures.

What Jesus is talking about here is "Mortification of Sin." That is, slaying sin, putting sin to death. John Owen, great English Puritan of 17th Century, wrote about mortification of sin. Looking at the Scriptures, John Owen first talks about what mortification is not and then what it is:

It *is not* the final elimination of sin, pretending sin is removed, a quiet controlled temperament, sin diverted to other sins or occasional conquests of sin. It *is* rather the habitual weakening of sin, a constant fight and contention against sin and finally is evidenced by frequent success against it (154-158).

Is your life marked by such a commitment? Is the battle you wage against sin in your life marked by vigilance and determination? By a sober and serious assessment of the importance of the battle you wage? To be desensitized to sin is to be conquered by it. If you do not slay sin, sin will slay you – it is that serious.

John Owen goes on to say that preparation for living a life marked by the mortification of sin should include – listen to this – letting guilt truly burden our conscience. Guilt, in this sense, is a good thing. That is, as we have a true assessment of sin, of its dire consequences, we can have true remorse for our sin and in turn we can fully appreciate the grace of God in our lives and thereby we can gratefully and joyfully participate with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as we "put sin to death in our mortal bodies."

My own circumstance is a good example of how practicing the mortification of sin impacts the life of a believer. I used to view sin more as a past failure. While I took sin seriously and I knew that the "power within" me (Holy Spirit) enabled me to oppose sin (Eph 3), in practice I was more passive in my participation in such a conflict. It was more of a little arm wrestling than a battle. I certainly still have failures, but my mindset has shifted to a more proactive present battle against sin rather than a hopeful avoidance of sin solely by God's grace.

Cut off the hand, the foot, pluck out the eye. Jesus is saying that we must assertively battle sin at every turn.

This battle is never apart from God's grace. He empowers us to wage this war or we would never succeed, but we do battle (put to death) sin.

Why, then, is so little heard of Mortification in the preaching and teaching of the Evangelical church? Strange as it may seem, I am convinced that H. Richard Niebuhr's classic statement on liberalism sheds light on the question of why the subject of mortification is rarely addressed in modern evangelicalism:

According to Niebuhr,

Liberalism taught that "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

This is not to say that modern evangelicalism can simply be cast aside as "liberal." It is, however, to say that evangelicalism is susceptible to errors of the liberal church even if it does not fully embrace liberalism. To the extent that Christians focus solely on the resurrection of Jesus, without a proper contemplation of the crucifixion of Christ as the costly payment for our sin, we will not have a full understanding of the vile nature of sin, the certainty of its judgment, nor the need to mortify sin in this earthly existence – "Christ without a cross." In one sense, sin has been defeated, and this seems to be where much of the evangelical church stops. Yet, in another sense, by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us, we battle sin to our dying breath.

Now, as we now turn to the final two verses of today's passage Jesus concludes His teaching on the ravages of sin with a brief word on the purity and peace of the church.

III. The Purity and Peace of the Church

A. Salted for Purity (9:49)

Recall again, Jesus is speaking with the twelve and says ...

49 Everyone will be salted with fire.

That is, each of the disciples will face times of trial. In contrast to the fiery judgment spoken of in verse 48, here the salt and fire likely allude to the salt accompanying sacrifices in the OT temple (ref. Exodus 30:35; Lev 2:13). The disciples, who were quibbling in a very worldly manner over who was the greatest, interestingly even as Jesus was telling that he would suffer and die and rise again, clearly needed to shift their thinking, the way they viewed the world around them. Following Jesus did not come to bring a person worldly acclaim; Indeed just the opposite. For Jesus and His disciples it would mean rejection and suffering and death. And while this is troubling news to the disciples, there is comfort in knowing that such trials come under the sovereign design of God. There is nothing that happens in the life of His people that will not be used ultimately to refine His people after godliness and through which He will not provide the strength and grace to sustain.

Are you His disciple? Then you will be salted as with fire.

It is one thing to read these words on a Sunday morning and a very different thing to live these words, by God's grace and power, each and every day. In the face of difficulty, challenge, circumstances you cannot endure, do you pray for God to remove the obstacle as Jesus did in the garden? But will you also join Jesus in praying, not my will but your will?

Praying, "If this trial endures, God, use it in such a way to refine me, to purify my life, in order that my life might truly be a living sacrifice that brings honor and praise to Your holy name." Those are hard prayers. Only God can enable such prayer and, in turn, He sustains us. Finally, in the last verse Jesus speaks of the effect of salt in the midst of His church: it brings peace.

B. Salted for Peace (9:50)

50 "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?
Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

Remember again the context. Jesus has just exhorted the disciples on the importance of slaying sin at every turn. Here in verse 50 the clear implication is that faithfulness to the truth of the Gospel will have a preserving effect in their lives and in their relationship with one another and with the world.

Jesus came to Redeem the world. This has ramifications first in our estrangement from God as He graciously reconciles those who were at war with God to their loving Father. If that is true of you and of me, it cannot help but have a significant bearing on our relationships with one another.

In Ephesians Paul writes powerfully concerning the dividing wall that separated Gentile and Jew in the ancient world. There was REAL bitterness culturally between these two groups. But Paul proclaims that God has now made the two one in the Lord Jesus Christ. In a similar way, here Jesus exhorts the disciples not to be bickering about who is the greatest, but to turn their eyes from themselves and be at peace with one another and in doing so shine as a light to a dark and troubled age. There is no room for divisiveness and backbiting and bitterness in His church. Rather, His church should be a model in the community and in our world for forgiveness and reconciliation.

He who has been forgiven much, loves much – loves Christ and loves His church.

IV. Conclusion: Life and Peace and the Kingdom of God

Lessons I would offer from this passage:

A word about Paradox; a word about little ones; a word about sin.

(1) Paradox.

Some, perhaps even well-intended Christians, seek to modify the message of the Christian faith in order to appeal to those outside the church. One of the primary responsibilities of the church is to reach out to those outside the church. Yet the paradox is this, the more like the world we are – as a church or individually – the less we have to offer. The Gospel is not: you can be better in this life; God wishes to prosper you. That is so trite:

In the face of the sin-marred world in which we live. A world that dies a little more with each passing day.

In the face of the beauty and magnificence of the eternity God has in store for his people.

The Gospel offers redemption, freedom from the darkness of sin and new life. Real life, rooted in all that is beautiful and good and true in this world. If we corrupt that message, we come to our friends and our neighbors and our loved ones with empty hands.

(2) Little Ones.

They are important to Jesus. Are they important to you? Husbands and wives, will you commit to discussing this with one another in light of the clear teaching of God's Word and submission to His purposes for you and for your family? Ask yourselves if your commitment to your children parallels the commitment Jesus demonstrates in this passage? Are you pointing them to Christ as their Savior and as their Lord? Teaching them to seek His righteousness and His will before their own? Those are difficult lessons at any age, but if not

learned in the early years it is all the more difficult to instill this truth in the years to come. Pray that God would give you the wisdom and discernment to press this *vital* truth home as you lovingly raise your children. Parents, will you talk with one another about this over lunch, today?

(3) Sin

Sin is not something to be tolerated or even passively resisted. We must wage war against sin in our lives at every turn. Is that your posture today? You can measure your resistance to sin quite easily: Are you in the Word? Does that Word shape your life? Are you praying that your life will be salted as with fire? Shaping your life and your character more and more after the image of Christ? Whatever the cost? He will sustain you.

50	"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."
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Amen.