

MARK 9:30-50 – THE PATHWAY TO GREATNESS

The Gospel of Mark focuses on Jesus's actions more than His teachings, but there ARE a lot of teachings of Jesus in Mark. We have been in this section (Mark Chapter 7 thru 9) and are continuing today and the next two weeks, this large section that is heavy on Jesus's teachings. Some of these teachings are very difficult to understand, very deep. When I get to His teachings I like to slow down and absorb what Jesus says. They are the words of God Himself to His disciples and then, by extension, to us who are also His disciples, His followers.

Jesus's earthly ministry lasted just over three years. Two of those years were spent in and around Galilee. You will hear it referred to as "the Galilean Ministry." While Jesus did travel outside of Galilee on several occasions during that time, the first two years were primarily focused on ministering in Galilee. Toward the end of His Galilean ministry (we have seen this the last few lessons), Jesus took His disciples and they made their way along the Mediterranean coast up to Tyre and Sidon (which is Gentile territory). He then headed back south into the region of Decapolis (which was also Gentile territory). From there Jesus traveled north to Caesarea Philippi. This six- to eight-month period has been the focus of our study the last few weeks.

Well, Jesus and His disciples, as we are going to see today at the end of Chapter 9, return home to Galilee. With less than a year remaining until He goes to the cross, Luke tells us that "[Jesus's] face was set toward Jerusalem" (Luke 9:53). Jesus knows what awaits Him there in Jerusalem. This next phase of His ministry will be down in Jerusalem and Judea.

He knows His mission and He has recently revealed that mission to His disciples. Back in Mark Chapter 8 Jesus told the disciples, "The Son of Man [speaking of Himself] must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He said this plainly" (Mark 8:31-32). The disciples were less than enthusiastic at hearing this. In fact, Peter rebuked Jesus

and said, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (Matthew 16:22). Well, Jesus lets Peter and His disciples know that His death and His resurrection ARE God's plan and that they WILL happen. Jesus did not put it up to a vote. He did not say, "Hey, what do you guys think about this?" No, Jesus told the disciples what was going to happen.

Jesus will soon enough fulfill His mission, which will be a mission of redemption – "Thank you, Jesus for the blood!" We sang about that today. That is going to be His mission, right? It will require His sacrificial death on the cross. The disciples may not yet understand what all of this means, but in time they will. The next several lessons (today and the next two lessons) Jesus spends time teaching His disciples some intense, life-changing truths in preparation for the rough road that lies ahead for them. So, let's pick up the narrative where we left off. We will be in Mark Chapter 9 and v 30...

READ Mark 9:30

Jesus and the disciples had been in Caesarea Philippi. They now return home to the region of Galilee. They have been gone for a while. Notice this time in the text there are no large crowds mentioned. Jesus's public preaching and healing ministry, at least in Galilee, have ended. Q1 asks, why did Jesus not want anyone to know where He was? The very next verse tells us that "He was teaching His disciples." Jesus is focusing on teaching His twelve disciples.

READ Mark 9:31

So, for the second time (that is recorded in the Gospels) Jesus reveals to His disciples what is going to happen to Him in Jerusalem. He reiterates His mission. But He gets a different reaction this time than He did last time.

READ Mark 9:32

The last time when He had said this, the disciples had been completely shocked and pushed back against what Jesus said. They did not like what He said. They had difficulty grasping this thought that Jesus, the Messiah (at this point they recognized Him as the Messiah), their Friend, Jesus,

would be killed. The concept of a suffering and dying Messiah (yes, it is spoken about in Isaiah) is more than they can wrap their minds around. It really made no sense to them.

So, Q2, true or false? The disciples were shocked when Jesus told them that He would be killed and rise after three days. False. Not this time. Last time they were, but not this time. It says that this time they did not understand and they were afraid to ask. Luke 9:45, which is a parallel passage to this one, says that "[the disciples] did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it." In other words, this is not a case of the disciples just being hard-headed. This is the sovereign work of God. God is keeping this a mystery to them for now. We don't know why God does this. Perhaps it is because God knows that the details are too much for them to handle. So, God is protecting them. We don't know.

Mark says that the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus about what He had said. We can understand why. They remember how Jesus had rebuked Peter the last time the subject came up about His death. And besides, they do not really want to talk about Jesus dying. They don't like the idea one bit. So, instead, they just keep quiet and they don't ask any questions.

READ Mark 9:33-34

Most scholars believe that "the house" mentioned here is Peter's house and was where they stayed when they were in Capernaum.

Q3, what did the disciples argue about on the way home? Who was the greatest, v 34. Here Mark reveals to us a problem that we do not normally associate with the Twelve Disciples. It is the age-old problem of pride. The disciples apparently have an excessive self-love and an inflated view of their own importance (that is what pride is, by definition). So, Q4, when Jesus asks them what they had been discussing on the way, how do they respond? They kept quiet. They responded with an embarrassed silence. Do you really think that Jesus was unaware of what the disciples had been discussing on the way? Do you think that is why Jesus asked

them – because He didn't know what they were discussing? NO. He knew. Luke 9:47 tells us that Jesus "knew the reasoning of their hearts." He knows their thoughts! He knows exactly what they had argued about! But, rather than rebuke them, Jesus uses this as a teaching opportunity.

READ Mark 9:35

Here Jesus reveals the pathway to greatness. Greatness, as defined by the world, is often tied to things like personal achievement, fame, or to power, or skill, or wealth. But greatness as Jesus sees it is much different than that, isn't it? His view of greatness is associated with humility, and caring, and self-sacrifice, and service.

Q5 asks what does Jesus choose as an object lesson? A child. "He took a child," right? v 36.

READ Mark 9:36-37

Now, you need to understand that children back in that day were on the lower rung of the social ladder. If Jesus were to teach this same lesson today to a group of American Christians, He probably would use a poor, homeless person to make His point. What is His point? THIS little child, who has achieved nothing, attained no social status, has no power or wealth or fame, seemingly insignificant to most people – this child matters to Jesus!

The statement that Jesus makes in v 37, "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me" is important. To help you better understand what Jesus is actually saying here, I want to read a very similar teaching from Matthew Chapter 25...

"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world.'" [This is judgment, a scene of judgment]. "For I was hungry, and you fed Me. I was thirsty, and you gave Me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited Me into your home. I was naked, and you gave

Me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for Me. I was in prison, and you visited Me.”

“Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see You hungry and feed You? Or thirsty and give You something to drink? Or a stranger and show You hospitality? Or naked and give You clothing? When did we ever see You sick or in prison and visit You?’ And the King will say, “I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these My brothers and sisters, you were doing it to Me!” (Matthew 25:34-40 Living Letters).

Whenever we do acts of service for other people, in reality we are not just serving them. I don’t know if you ever thought about of this before, but we are, in effect, serving the Lord Jesus Himself. This is powerful. In our passage here in Mark Chapter 9 Jesus actually adds another layer to this. Not only are we serving Jesus, but we are also serving God the Father, the One who sent Jesus. That is His point.

So, here is the lesson that Jesus is trying to teach His disciples (and us): Do you really want to be great in the Kingdom of God? Do you want to be rewarded for what you did? Be a servant. Help those around you. Meet the needs of others. Show mercy and kindness. THAT is the pathway to greatness in God’s economy.

Jesus’s teaching here about receiving others in His name prompts John, one of His disciples, to recall an earlier incident. So, he is listening to Jesus and he is apparently convicted by what he has heard.

READ Mark 9:38

John thinks that maybe he and the disciples might have been wrong in how they handled the person who had been casting out demons. So, John asks Jesus about it. Q6, why had the disciples stopped the man casting out demons? Because why? He was not one of them, right? “He was not following US. He was not one of US,” John says. In other words, he was not one of the Twelve. Once again, Jesus does not rebuke them, but uses it as a teaching moment.

READ Mark 9:39-41

Q7, how did Jesus respond to the disciples for stopping the man? He said what? V 40, "For the one who is not against us is for us."

Now, what you need to notice is that there are other legitimate followers of Jesus outside of the original Twelve. Later on, Jesus is going to send out 72 of His followers to do ministry work (Luke 10:1-24). So, the point is that, at least in that case, in Judea, there were 60 other followers besides the Twelve. In First Corinthians Paul says that, after Jesus's resurrection, Jesus appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time (1 Corinthians 15:6). So, there are many other disciples, other followers of Jesus that are around at this time. We don't normally think about that. We think about there being these twelve and that is it. But there are others.

Jesus recognizes that the individual the disciples had encountered was, in fact, a true believer, a legitimate follower of Jesus. That person had used the authority of Jesus's name (he used the right name). And that person had successfully cast out the demons. We just read a story earlier in Mark where the disciples had been unsuccessful in casting out demons (Mark 9:18). That is interesting. So, there is this contrast in these two stories back-to-back. Just because this person is not one of the Twelve did not mean they were not aligned with Jesus. They were doing the ministry work that Jesus had sanctioned. Jesus is basically saying, "That man is one of My servants," Jesus is saying. "Don't stop him. He is on our side." The basis of Christian fellowship is the name of Jesus. A true believer is one who has made Jesus Christ their Lord and Savior. As long as they get that part right, about making Jesus their Lord and Savior, we can work on the rest of their theology.

So, Jesus has been talking to them and that child that has been in the room is still there. He is still there with Jesus and Jesus is continuing to teach the disciples...

READ Mark 9:42

That is quite a picture there, isn't it? Very vivid. Very extreme. The term "little ones" could refer to children, like this child that is sitting there. It could also refer to someone who is a brand-new believer. We call them "a baby in Christ." Or it could even refer to an immature believer. It has a very broad meaning. So, I asked you in Q8 to give one example, one way, that you, as a believer, could cause one of these little ones (the broad definition I just gave you) to sin or to stumble. What did you come up with?

When I taught this class, several good examples were given: One way to cause a child to stumble is by not disciplining them when they exhibit bad behavior. If we don't do that, then they may grow up thinking it is OK to act that way. Another way is by engaging in immoral activities, not taking our sin seriously. This could include the use of harsh language or profanity. As Christian parents and grandparents we need to set the right example. Another way is by teaching them that the Bible is just a general guideline rather than truth that God expects us to live by. Another way is by falling away from our faith and commitment to Christ. This could be detrimental especially to a young believer who looks up to us.

This verse here, v 42, is one that as a Bible teacher, I have always had in the back of my mind and taken very seriously. I have always thought of this verse and it reminded me of the utmost importance of teaching sound doctrine. As a teacher, what I say to you or to any class that I will have could potentially cause someone in that class that is listening to me to sin (or to stumble). I could do that by teaching something that is not true. Truth, sound doctrine – they matter. Paul says that we are to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

As I was preparing this lesson, I was trying to come up with a good example of this rather than just some general statement. Let's suppose that I was teaching on the doctrine of eternal security. That is something that we Baptists fundamentally believe is true. Suppose that I was to teach that doctrine and I said, "Because our salvation is secure in Christ, then our behavior doesn't really matter." Well, if I were to teach that, it would

be wrong. The result could be that a person listening to me goes out and continues in their sin thinking it is OK – “As long as I am saved, that is all that matters. I don’t have to worry about [this particular sin] that is plaguing my life, that is hurting me spiritually. I don’t have to worry about that because I am saved.” Well, the truth is that the Bible teaches that our behavior as Christians DOES matter. While our works do not save us, we are still called to do good works and we are commanded to live godly lives. This is what pleases God. That should be our aim as Christians is to please God.

READ Mark 9:43-48

You will notice that v 44 and 46 are in brackets because they are not in the earliest manuscripts. They were added later, probably for emphasis by some scribe.

Q9 asks, how does Jesus describe hell in these verses? He is clearly talking about hell, right? How does He describe hell? FIRE that does not go out, right? The other three choices I gave you (in Q9) certainly do describe hell in other places in the Bible, but not necessarily in this passage.

There are all kinds of thoughts as to what “where their worm does not die,” what that means. That is a quote from Isaiah, the very last verse in the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 66:24). Jesus is quoting scripture. Now, if you look up what that means in Isaiah and how Jesus is referring to it here (in various commentaries), it could refer to the nature of the eternal punishment found in hell and to the never-ending pain there.

I didn’t ask this question, but how does Jesus refer to heaven in these verses? A couple of ways. As “the kingdom of God” and as “life.” So, Jesus is talking about this contrast between heaven and hell.

Q10, true or false? The choices we make in this life could have eternal consequences. Absolutely! What is the most important choice a person can make in this life? Whether to make Jesus one’s Lord and Savior or not, right? Is that more important than who you marry? And what career you have? And what you wear? That is a very important decision. That has

eternal ramifications. That is what determines your eternal destination. Which leads to the next question...

Q11, Jesus uses extreme language, dramatic hyperbole here, to drive home an important point. What truth is Jesus emphasizing in these verses? If something you hold near and dear is preventing you from going to heaven, get rid of it. Get rid of it! When Jesus says, "cut off your hand" He is saying, "Get rid of that thing!" Now, He is using extreme language because obviously he doesn't mean literally go cut your hand off, right? But that is the picture here. This is something that is going to send you to hell. That is the strong implication He is talking about, right? Get rid of it. It is better for you to enter heaven with one hand than to go to hell with two. Eternal life with Christ is so much more valuable than any temporal pleasure we may get from anything else in this sinful world.

These verses could serve as a warning. It is possible that a person could call themselves a Christian (69 percent of Americans say they are Christians) and yet continue in a life of sin, engaging in ungodly, worldly behavior, unchecked and without repentance. And it is possible that such a person may NOT really be saved. Our behavior does matter to God.

V 49, "For everyone will be salted with fire" (Mark 9:49).

What in the world is "salted with fire" all about? In John Walvoord's Bible Knowledge Commentary he says, "This [mysterious] statement, unique to Mark (none of the other Gospels have it), is difficult to interpret. About 15 possible explanations have been suggested." That is what he says. I am not going to take the time to give you all 15 explanations. I am just going to give you the best two that I read by reputable Bible teachers. Let me lay them out for you.

#1 – The only mention of salt and fire together in scripture is in the Old Testament grain offerings (Leviticus 2). The grain offering was seasoned with salt and then sacrificed with fire. This offering represented a worshipper's commitment to God. Then in Romans 12:1 Paul says this: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your

bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Then Paul goes on to say in the subsequent verses, basically, "Don't copy the behavior and ways of this world (don't be like the world). Instead, (we just talked about behavior) let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think." And therefore, the way you behave, right?

There is another possibility that I read that I thought was good.

#2 – "Salted with fire" is linked with verse 50 and talks about the trials and temptations of our lives and how God disciplines our life through all of that, as a believer. God begins to mold you through trials, through "fire." In the long term this (the trials) helps one to grow and become mature, more useful believers.

So, both of those explanations are possible or feasible. I am just throwing them both out there (for consideration).

Now, assuming that v 49 and v 50 are connected, because in both verses Jesus is talking about salt; so, are they necessarily referring to the same thing? You could use the same metaphor without necessarily teaching the same truth, but some commentaries believe that Jesus is talking about the same thing here. So, let me follow up with v 50 continuing with the same metaphor of salt. Jesus says...

"Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again?" Well, that is a good question. How do you get the salt flavor back into it? You don't, right? "Have salt in yourselves," (and then He says something very interesting) – "and be at peace with one another." (Mark 9:50). OK, there is a lot there.

So, Jesus says that salt, which is something that we use in our everyday life, is a good thing. It is useful. What does salt do? It preserves food. It also flavors, it gives flavor to food. And salt in the life of a believer, "in yourselves," refers to what? That is Q12. We know what salt is. It is both a preservative and it adds flavoring. But what about in the life of a believer, what is salt? And that is where you have to dig a little deeper.

Several thoughts here... Salt is a good thing. That is the beginning of the verse. But it is connected at the end of the verse to being at peace with one another. In Matthew 5:13 Jesus says to His followers, "You are the salt of the earth." Jerry Vines in his commentary on this verse says, "When [we as believers] come in contact with a lost world, there is a flavor in [our lives] that is attractive to those who do not know Jesus." So, putting all of this together, one possibility is that we Christians can be a positive INFLUENCE.

But there is something else I want you to consider. When you link v 50 back to v 49, which is our commitment to God (to lead holy lives) and you read Hebrews 12:11 which says that discipline "yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness," salt here in the life of a believer could refer to our holiness, our godly behavior, our RIGHTEOUSNESS.

So, both of those are possible. There are all kinds of possible interpretations. I have just given you what I think are the best.

From Mark Chapter 9, v 50 to Mark 10:1 (the very next verse as we get to Chapter 10) there is a 6-month gap. Mark records nothing in his gospel about what Jesus does during these six months. But a lot happens. You can read about it all in Luke Chapters 10 thru 17 and then John Chapters 7 thru 11. There is a lot there including the raising of Lazarus. There is a lot that takes place during that time.

During this 6-month period, Jesus and His disciples depart Galilee and make their way down through Samaria, down to Jerusalem and Judea. His first two years of ministry have been mostly around Galilee. His last year will be Jerusalem, Judea and Perea. During this six-month period, if you read those chapters in Luke and John (mentioned earlier), Jesus and His disciples are mostly in Jerusalem. They are staying with Mary, Martha and Lazarus in their house in Bethany, which is right outside of Jerusalem. They go down to Jerusalem on a regular basis. Jesus teaches in the temple almost daily. And then there are some threats made by the Jewish religious leaders that drive Jesus to leave Jerusalem and travel around the regions

of Judea and Perea. Of course, He will eventually make His way back to Jerusalem. But that is all happening during this time. That is where we will pick it up next time in Mark Chapter 10 with Him in Perea.