

"Extreme Obedience" - Mark 9:42-50

Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:14)

That's certainly sobering!

We Christians have found the narrow gate, but we still have trouble keeping all four tires on the difficult road. The ditch on one side of the road is legalism. Even though we are saved by grace alone, we foolishly think we can add something to our salvation by performance and then we stumble into spiritual pride.

But the ditch on the other side is antinomianism. That's the idea that since we are saved by grace, it really doesn't matter how we live our lives. That is just as wrong, just as foolish. If your salvation is authentic, you have not only been saved from the penalty of sin, but you have also been saved from the power of sin and your life should reflect it.

We serve a merciful God. He is willing to forgive even our most heinous cosmic treason. But we must receive His forgiveness on His terms.

We serve a gracious God. He is willing to grant us an inheritance we by no means deserve, an eternity in glory as members of His own household. But if we are to receive this grace, we must do so on His terms.

We serve a jealous God. He will not share His glory with another. If you are to enter His kingdom, He will not share you with another. Not even your own carnal agenda.

The Bible tells us that if we confess Jesus as our Lord and believe God has raised Him from the dead, we will be saved. (Romans 10:9) By faith we are moved from the realm of death to the realm of eternal life, but confessing Jesus as Lord is much more than just saying the words. It requires submitting yourself to His authority. You become His *dulos*; He becomes your *kurios*. You are the bondservant; He is the master.

Jesus said:

*"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but **he who does the will of My Father in heaven.** (Matthew 7:21)*

Salvation requires a commitment to obedience, extreme obedience, setting aside your agenda and submitting to His perfect will. You will not be perfect, but as a Christian, you need to strive for this extreme obedience.

This is a lesson that was hard for His closest disciples to grasp. They had their preconceived vision of what His kingdom was going to look like and they had trouble handling the truth. Instead of submitting to His will, they were clinging to their own agendas. As Jesus drew closer and closer to the cross, He needed to correct them. He needed to teach them about the true nature of His kingdom.

As they traveled South through the province of Galilee, the twelve had been disputing among themselves. They had been arguing about which one of them would be greatest in the kingdom. They were engaged in self-promotion, trying to position themselves for greater power and authority. When they got to Capernaum, Jesus said, in essence, "You guys need to get over yourselves. It's not about you, and if you want to be great in the kingdom, you need to become the servant of all."

Our text this morning continues with the same lesson. It is a lesson on obedience, what Jesus requires of His disciples and many would consider these requirements extreme. But it is exactly what our Lord expects of us: extreme obedience.

Before I get into actually expounding on our text this morning, I need to address the reason for some variation in how your Bibles read. If you happen to have an English Standard Version (ESV) or a New International Version (NIV), you will notice that verses 44 and 46 are missing. If you have a New American Standard Bible (NASB), verses 44 and 46 are present, but enclosed in brackets. And of course, if you have a King James or a New King James translation, those verses are included. So, what's going on?

First of all, we believe and affirm that the Bible in its original autographs is the inspired, inerrant word of God. We agree with Paul when he writes:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The Bible is perfect as it was originally written, but we do not have the original autographs. We do have over 5,800 complete or partial Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Scholars call these Greek manuscripts "witnesses" and until the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, all these manuscripts were hand-copied. Remarkably, they completely agree with one another over 92% of the time and most of the disagreements involve word order or spelling variations. None of these disagreements causes a conflict or confusion with regard to any Biblical doctrine.

That is miraculous! That tells us that the Holy Spirit has been just as involved with preserving the word as He was with inspiring the original authors. You can trust your Bible.

Now, the King James and the New King James were translated primarily from what is called the *Textus Receptus*, or the "received text". It has proven to be a very reliable Greek text. But in the late 1800s and early 1900s, archaeology has discovered a number of older manuscripts. One theory is that the older the manuscript, the closer it is to the original autograph, because there would be less of an opportunity for copying errors to occur. Now in many cases, where there are variations, the oldest manuscripts don't agree with one another, which sort-of torpedoes this theory. But in the case of verses 44 and 46, and the last phrase in verse 45, the oldest manuscripts agree with one another and those verses are not present. So, newer translations either omit them, or put them in brackets.

Here is what I think might have happened. At some point in the line of the *Textus Receptus*, a scribe thought it would be a good idea to add emphasis to the original text. And so, he duplicated verse 48 two times previously. It is never a good idea to add anything to the word of God, and if that is what happened, this guy will have to stand before the Lord and give an answer for what he did, but it certainly doesn't change the meaning of the text at all.

All that is to say, if your Bible doesn't have verses 44 and 46, it really is no big deal. In fact, I think that is closer to what the original autograph had. And while I'm a big supporter of the *Textus Receptus* and the Luther, Wycliff, Geneva, King James family of Bibles, I think this is a place where it probably got it wrong.

So, let's now dive into our text.

"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. (Mark 9:42)

Remember, Jesus is addressing his closest disciples privately, disciples who had recently been engaged in a dispute with one another over their relative importance. Such a dispute exalts self over others. That is backwards.

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.
(Philippians 2:3-4)

Jesus is zealous for the righteousness of His family, His Church and if any member of His family entices another member of His family to sin, it is a very serious thing. A millstone in those days was incredibly massive. It would weigh tons. You're not going to swim away with one of those puppies hanging on your neck!

If you love your brother, if you love your sister in Christ, you will want the absolute best for them. You would certainly not want them to stumble into sin.

“How in the world would I do that?” you might ask.

There are actually many ways. Maybe you encourage someone to gossip by engaging in gossip yourself. Maybe you provoke them to anger by being an insensitive jerk. Maybe you encourage them to undermine the spiritual leadership of the church by questioning the authority of an elder. Maybe you incite jealousy by flaunting your own wealth or possessions. Maybe you cause them to sin against their consciences by asking them to do something they believe is sinful. Those sorts of activities are contrary to the love Jesus demands. You engage in that sort of behavior, Jesus will not hold you blameless and you will be disciplined.

Jesus demands love for one another. Extreme love. Because how you treat your brother or sister in Christ is how you treat Jesus Himself.

Not only does Jesus demand extreme love for the brethren, He also demands extreme holiness. We see that in the next several verses and I'm going to read these from the English Standard Version, because as I explained before, I really believe this is closer to the original text.

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. 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. 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, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' (Mark 9:43-48)

Well, that's pretty graphic! I hope you understand that our Lord was speaking metaphorically. He does not actually expect you to lop off your hand, your foot, and gouge out your eye because your hand, your foot, and your eye will never cause you to sin. Remember what Jesus said back in Chapter 7?

And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man." (Mark 7:20-23)

We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners. That is the nature of our flesh. It is the filth that originates with our depraved nature. But when we accept Jesus Christ, He sets us free from our sin nature. We still have our sin nature, but we no longer have to obey it. By the grace of Jesus, we have the opportunity to strive for holiness. And so, Paul argues as follows:

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? (Romans 6:1-2)

Jesus wants us to pursue extreme holiness in every facet of our lives. When He talks about the hand that causes you to sin, He is talking about the things that you do. When He talks about the foot that causes you to sin, He is talking about how you walk in this world. When He talks about the eye that causes you to sin, He is talking about how you view the world.

Jesus must be the most important thing in your life. Obedience to Him must be the overarching ambition and motivation for all that you do.

For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:16-17)

Don't just say the words, "Jesus, you are my Lord and my God." and believe that your ticket to heaven has been punched. Jesus says:

"But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say? (Luke 6:46)

Strive to do what Jesus tells you to do. Jesus is calling you to strive for extreme holiness.

John reminds us:

He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. (1 John 2:4-5)

Do you want to make sure your salvation is authentic? Then strive for extreme holiness.

And now we come to verse 49, which I have to say is pretty challenging. I spent a great deal of time this past week trying to get my mind around the meaning of this one verse, but the Bible itself gives us direction. Back in Leviticus, chapter 2, instructions are given for making the grain offering.

And every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt. (Leviticus 2:13)

So, salt had something to do with this grain offering, with sacrifice. And from the verse I just read, it was designed to represent the covenant of God. Salt is a preservative. It represents the fact that God will be faithful in preserving His covenant. As Christians, we are to consider ourselves to be living sacrifices (Romans 12:1) and as such, we need to be seasoned.

"For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. (Mark 9:49)

Once again, the second phrase of this verse is in dispute and many recent translations omit it, so that it reads as the ESV:

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

As a Christian, you are being refined. The Holy Spirit is at work to perfect your sanctification, but He is not done yet. You are a work in progress and one of the primary means He uses to refine your faith is to subject it to the fire of trial and temptation. Sometimes, unfortunately, you are going to fail, but Jesus has that covered too.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)

God can and will use even our failures to further our sanctification. He's heating us up and scraping off the dross. Our job is to own up to our failures, to confess them, to repent of them, to pray for forgiveness, and to trust that the Lord will cleanse us.

Jesus demands extreme obedience. But when you fall short, and you will, He uses your failure to further refine you, to salt you with fire. And why is that?

Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another." (Mark 9:50)

Now in itself, salt is completely stable. It doesn't lose its flavor over time. In the Ed. Building, we have shakers in the back of the cabinet that have salt that is probably years old, and guess what? It's still salty! But if something else happens to get mixed with it ... well, that can get nasty! In the land of Israel in the First Century, quite often the salt that was mined or obtained would be contaminated with gypsum and that salt was useless.

Jesus is saying that your salt must be completely unmixed. It must be pure because we Christians are called to be the salt of the earth. We are called to be the light of the world. Jesus said:

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

As Christians, we are called to have extreme influence. We are Christ's ambassadors to this dark and desperate world. We possess the only solution to the depravity of man. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ and we must adorn the gospel with our behavior. We must demonstrate the grace and peace that is available through Jesus Christ and we can't do that if we're not at peace with one another.

Jesus concludes His lesson with this exhortation:

... have peace with one another." (Mark 9:50b)

The disciples had not been at peace with one another. They had been disputing with one another and that was the immediate reason for the lesson. But we need the lesson too. We need to remember who the Boss is. We need to remember what He expects of us. Jesus expects extreme love. Jesus expects extreme holiness. And Jesus expects us to have extreme influence in the world.

So, we need to follow Him with extreme obedience.