

Mark 9:38-50

There was a noticeable, new intensity in Jesus' manner and teaching as he and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem this time.

In Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had very plainly told them that he was the Christ. He also told them for the first time that as the Christ, he must suffer many things, be rejected by the Sanhedrin and be killed and rise from the dead (Mk 8:27-33). So, this time as they travelled to Jerusalem, Jesus very deliberately avoided the crowds so he could concentrate on further teaching his disciples about God's Christ. His teaching was so contrary to popular expectation. He wanted them to understand that as the Christ he must die and rise. (Mk.9:30-32). This time as they travelled to Jerusalem he was "walking ahead of them" with strong purpose and his followers were "amazed" and "afraid" and again he took the twelve to teach them he must suffer and die and after three days rise (Mk. 10:32-34).

It was essential that the disciples understand the otherworldly nature of his Kingdom and of his calling to be the Christ. Especially was this to be the case with them for it had implications for them as followers of God's Christ. He was calling upon them also to take up their cross and follow him. He was saying they must lose their lives for his sake and for his gospel's sake. He was wanting them to understand, what is very difficult to understand. He was impressing upon them that to gain life eternal requires losing life now in this world. It is this passionate desire of Jesus that underlies the sayings Mark has recorded for today's reading.

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Firstly disciples are to honour other disciples outside their group v38-40

There were other followers of Jesus outside the twelve and the seventy. The disciple, John, had come across a man casting out demons in Jesus' name. This was a mighty work and a kingdom work. Jesus had cast out demons. The disciples had cast out demons in Jesus' name. There was also a time when the disciples could not cast out demons (Mk 9:14-29). It was pretty obvious that the exorcist was on Jesus' side. He ought to have been encouraged not discouraged in this ministry – UNLESS of course John was concerned for the honour of himself and his fellow disciples in this world! Such self-serving is not acceptable in God's Kingdom.

Secondly disciples are to honour all who serve in the name of Christ v41

I guess most people would not view giving a cup of water to a thirsty disciple at the same level of mighty works as casting out demons. However Jesus says emphatically that such an act will not go unrewarded by God in the Kingdom. He introduces his humble example of kindness by the strongest of formulas, "for truly I say unto you". Jesus deliberately is trying to get his disciples to view life differently from the way the world views life. It is not the spectacular or grandness of the deed but the motivation that ultimately is the important factor in the eyes of God's Christ. One may cast out a demon in Christ's Name and another provides a cup of cold water in Christ's Name. In both cases Truth and Love are involved. In both cases God will honour and be honoured. Both the "grand" and "humble" deeds are to be honoured whether the do-ers are members of our group or others who claim the Name of Christ.

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Thirdly disciples are not to cause little ones to stumble v42

The disciple of Jesus who seeks his own honour is a disaster. Seeking our own honour will cause us to think, speak and act as hypocrites. We pretend to honour Christ but want our own recognition as well. Inevitably this will cause the “just believers”, the “little ones”, the “strugglers in the faith,” to stumble and fall perhaps even from their salvation. Disciples struggling to believe are not helped by so called disciples acting like the rest of the world in their attitudes and actions. Jesus warns that the punishment that awaits them is horrible. It would be worse than having the great millstone hung around your neck and being cast into the Sea of Galilee. This graphic reference to death would not have been lost on Galilean disciples who undoubtedly would have heard that the Romans had inflicted this cruel death on some of the leaders of the insurrection under the Zealot leader, Judas the Galilean, not too long before.

Fourthly disciples are to take drastic action to stop sinning v43-48

In our current generation it has been fashionable to mock the “old hell, fire and brimstone” preacher. Jesus did not. He spoke of hell and damnation as a reality. It was the place of unquenchable fire and where the gnawing worm does not die. Moreover it was to be avoided at all cost. If necessary, the most drastic action must be taken to avoid such an eternity from the presence of God. The hand or foot that offends should be cut off for it would be better to enter life maimed or lame. The eye that offends must be plucked out rather than the person be thrown into hell with two eyes.

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Now Jesus is not asking his disciples to take his words literally but he is asking them to take following him seriously and standing for the gospel seriously. We understand this better when we realise Mark wrote his gospel in Rome. There under the mad Emperor, Nero, Christians were clothed in animal skins and had dogs set upon them in the arena, and there Christians were doused with oil and set alight at Nero's garden parties to entertain his guests. Drastic action is to be taken to avoid all sin! Hell must be avoided. Life must be gained in Christ.

Fifthly, disciples are not to lose their zeal v49-50

Salt was essential in sacrifices and in food. Without salt the Temple sacrifice was not acceptable. Without salt food would rot. Without losing our lives for Christ and his gospel the world will not be affected by disciples of Christ and peace will not reign in the church. Jesus is calling for disciples not to think like the world thinks. They are not to be ashamed of Christ or live as the rest of the world. They are to stand for righteousness and truth and love. They are to own Christ.