

Radical Obedience

Mark 9:42-50

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Did you hear about what happened in California this past week when the spillway around the nation's tallest dam started eroding so severely that officials warned a 30-foot wall of water could be unleashed on towns below? Around 200,000 people were ordered to evacuate. This mandatory order triggered a chaotic exodus, filling highways with evacuees.

Some chose to ignore the warnings, putting their lives at severe risk. Apparently people have been allowed to return now as water levels have receded.

Our passage today contains some of the strongest words ever spoken by Jesus about the severity of sin and the harsh reality of Hell. If we ignore them, we do so at our own peril.

One of the reasons I like preaching verse-by-verse through books of the Bible is because we're forced to deal with warnings we'd rather avoid. Most pastors would not put a sermon series together called, "*The Severity of Sin and the Harshness of Hell.*" One of the many things I like about Edgewood is the high view of Scripture and hunger for biblical preaching. In fact, one of the guys in the Growth Group Beth and I lead on Wednesday nights has been asking me to do a 12-part series on Hell. When I told him what the topic was this weekend he said, "*Bring it on!*"

We're not going to skip this section or water it down because Jesus cautions us to be careful about how we live. Turn to Mark 9:41-50 where we'll encounter a series of stern warnings. Last weekend we were challenged to not exhibit a drive for *personal status* or to have an attitude of *group superiority*. We're going to see today that we must avoid causing a follower of Christ to sin, we must cut off anything that causes us to sin and finally, we must live out the cause of Christ.

1. Avoid causing a follower of Christ to sin. Listen to the front half of verse 42: "*Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin...*" Jesus put a young child in the midst of the disciples and then picked him up to make the point that we must become least and last if we are serious about following Christ. We're called to receive the forgotten and the marginalized – the preborn, children,

orphans, widows, the poor, the disabled, the mentally challenged, those who are deaf or blind, those in prison, immigrants, the persecuted, refugees, and minorities.

Picking up on that scene, Jesus now refers to little ones ***“who believe”*** in Him. He’s talking about our brothers and sisters in Christ. We see this because He uses a different word for “little ones” here. 1 John 2:28 refers to Christians as little children, ***“And now, little children, abide in him.”***

We’re cautioned against causing even ***“one of these little ones”*** to sin. The word for sin here is the word *skandilizo*, from which we get scandalize. It means *“to offend, to entice, to entrap, or to put a stumbling block”* in front of someone. Most of us don’t consider how our attitudes and actions can be the cause of a fellow Christ-follower falling into sin but 1 Corinthians 10:32 says: ***“Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or to the church of God.”***

I’m grieved when I hear a Christian say something like this: *“I have liberty in Christ to do whatever I want.”* What I say to that is this: *“You might have liberty in some areas but love dictates that you and I must watch how we live because others are watching us.”* In 1 Corinthians 6:12 Paul wrote: ***“‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be enslaved by anything.”***

Jesus wants us to know how serious it is to cause a Christian to cave into sin. Look at the second half of verse 42: ***“...it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”*** The word translated ***“millstone”*** is literally, *“a donkey stone”* that was so heavy (several tons) that a donkey was tied to it in order to turn it. As the stone moved it crushed the grain. The image of wearing a millstone necklace and being thrown into the sea would be absolutely horrifying, especially to a people who didn’t like water.

Right before I graduated from high school, one of my friends drowned in the Rock River. To this day I’m afraid of water. The Israelites were an agrarian people and they avoided the sea whenever possible. In addition, they were aware that the Romans sometimes carried out executions by tying heavy stones around the necks of people and throwing them into rivers and lakes. I can’t imagine a more horrible death. And yet, Jesus said this is preferable to causing a fellow follower of Christ to fall into sin.

I wrote down 9 ways that we can cause a Christ-follower to slide into sin...

- By not practicing what we preach. Matthew 23:25: ***“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.”***
- By gossiping about someone. Proverbs 26:20: ***“For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.”***
- By directly tempting someone to sin. Asking someone to lie for you would be an example. Jesus said this in Matthew 18:7: ***“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”***
- By involvement in sexual immorality. This causes you to sin and leads someone else to sin as well. If you’re a Christian, you’re called to treat your boyfriend or girlfriend with purity. Men, according to 1 Timothy 5:2, we’re to consider ***“older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.”*** If you’re a Christian and living with your boyfriend or girlfriend, you could also be causing those who know you to sin.
- By using substances like alcohol or drugs you could be sending the message that it’s OK for others to do the same. Romans 14:21 says, ***“It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.”***
- By treating others unkindly and wrongly we can cause rebellion or outbursts of anger. Ephesians 6:4: ***“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger...”***
- By teaching false doctrine we can lead people astray. 1 Timothy 1:3-4: ***“Charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith.”***
- By not encouraging and equipping believers. I’ve always been challenged by Hebrews 3:13: ***“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”***
- By not gathering with God’s people according to Hebrews 10:24-25: ***“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”***

I truly *am* my brother’s (and sister’s) keeper. Because my attitudes and actions do affect other followers of Christ I must avoid causing them to sin.

2. Cut off anything that causes you to sin. I must not ensnare others in sin and I must also be careful to not become entrapped in it myself. Jesus uses the strongest of all language to communicate that its better to lose limbs and have an eye excised than it is to spend eternity in hell.

Listen to verses 43-48: ***“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.’”***

The **“hand, foot and eye”** represent the three big ways we sin. The *hand* refers to our actions; the *foot* speaks of where we hang out and the *eye* stands for what we look at, or our desires.

Jesus wants us to deal severely with sin in our lives. He’s obviously using figurative language when He says, **“cut it off”** and **“tear it out.”** We know that’s the case because in Mark 7:18-23 Jesus says the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. You could whack off your hand and gouge out your eye and still think of ways to sin. Jesus is not after physical amputation but rather spiritual mortification because sin doesn’t start in our hands; it starts in our hearts.

We’re to deal with disobedience severely, radically, harshly and immediately! Too many of us have become way too cozy with sin. If there’s a relationship that is causing you to sin, lop it off! If your feet are taking you to a place that leads you to sin, cut this activity off right now. If you’re a serious disciple of Christ, don’t dabble in sin. Jesus is telling us that there is nothing so valuable that it is worth going to hell over. The word **“better”** is used three times to help us see that whatever we have to do now to sever us from sin is much to be preferred to spending eternity in hell.

In 2003, Aron Ralston was hiking in eastern Utah. While he was descending a canyon, an 800-pound boulder became dislodged, crushing his right hand and pinning his right arm. Ralston had not told anyone of his hiking plans, so he knew no one would be searching for him and if he didn’t get free, he would die. After being trapped for five days, he used a dull pocketknife and cut off his forearm. He then repelled nearly 70 feet and hiked three hours before he was rescued.

So here's a question. If you were faced with the same dilemma, would you be able to do what he did? He had no other alternative. Either lose a limb, or keep it and die.

What do you need to cut off? What do you need to cut out? What do you need to radically remove? What action do you need to amputate? Colossians 3:5-6 says: ***“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.”*** It was John Owen who said, *“Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”* Billy Sunday was fond of saying, *“One reason sin flourishes is that it is treated like a cream puff instead of a rattlesnake.”*

The word **“hell”** is used three times in this passage – in verses 43, 45 and 47. The word is *Gehenna*, and was used of the city garbage dump outside Jerusalem. The background is pretty gross. In ancient Israel, during the reigns of Kings Ahaz and Manasseh, children were sacrificed to Molech, the pagan deity. Unfortunately, children are still sacrificed in our society as well. These sacrifices happened in a deep ravine that came to be called *Gehenna*.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke out against child sacrifice and King Josiah put an end to it, turning this valley into the city dump. The refuse from the city, including carcasses from animals and the bodies of criminals were deposited in the dump. To keep it from overflowing, fires were started that never went out, being fed constantly by incoming garbage.

When Jesus used the word **“hell,”** people thought of this ghastly garbage pit. Because people considered *Gehenna* a cursed place of judgment and impurity, it came to serve as an illustration of hell. This image of the extreme horror of hell is designed to imprint upon our minds the reality of the never-ending punishment of those who reject Christ.

Are you aware that Jesus spoke more about hell than he spoke about heaven? Here are eight things we know about hell.

- Hell is an actual place (Luke 16:19-31).
- Hell is a place of eternal punishment and judgment (Matthew 25:41).
- Hell is a place of divine wrath (Revelation 14:10)
- Hell is a place of terrible torment (Luke 16:23)

- Hell is filled with misery and pain (Revelation 14:11)
- Hell is a place of unquenchable thirst (Luke 16:24-25)
- Hell is a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:42)
- Hell is where eternal separation happens (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9)

Let's unpack verse 48: ***“Where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”*** The first thing to note is that this is a quote from the Greek translation of Isaiah 66:24: ***“And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”*** Hell is eternal and the fire is absolutely unquenchable. It goes on forever and those in it can never be satisfied or relieved.

- Note the phrase, ***“their”*** worm. Each worm is assigned to an owner in hell.
- The word ***“worm”*** is actually the word ***“maggot”*** and represents the internal torments of the conscience as the knowledge of past sins gnaws away with unending remorse and regret. I'll never forget putting some raw chicken in our garbage can in the garage when we lived in Pontiac. It was in the middle of the summer. When I came out into the garage one morning, the floor was covered with white maggots that had been feeding off the chicken guts. That's repulsive isn't it? Hope you didn't just eat! As gross as that image is, hell is way more horrible than that. I was able to kill the maggots with bleach but the worms in hell never die.
- The unquenchable ***“fire”*** refers to unending external physical torment. The rich man in Luke 16:24 cried out, ***“I am in anguish in this flame.”***

First, we're called to be careful so we don't cause another Christian to stumble into sin. Second, we're to cut off anything that causes us to sin. Finally, we're challenged to live out the cause of Christ.

3. Live out the cause of Christ. As if the passage we've already looked at hasn't been hard enough, verses 49-50 are among some of the most difficult to understand in the entire Bible: ***“For everyone will be salted with fire. 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.”*** The word ***“salt”*** is used six different times in one form or another in three different ways.

- **Embrace suffering and sacrifice.** Salt and fire were key ingredients of sacrifices in the Old Testament. Every acceptable sacrifice had to be sprinkled with salt according to Leviticus 2:13: ***“with all your offerings you shall offer salt.”*** So when Jesus declares, ***“everyone will be salted with fire,”*** He’s telling us that as living sacrifices we’ll be refined through trials and sufferings. Unbelievers will face the never-ending fires of hell. Here’s a question: *“Would you rather endure the fires of hell as a lost sinner, or the purifying fires of God as a sacrifice for His glory?”* We’re called to willingly embrace the salt of a sacrificial life.
- **Pursue purity and don’t become spiritually contaminated.** Verse 50 adds that ***“salt is good.”*** There was a saying in that culture that went like this: *“The world cannot survive without salt.”* In fact, the word *“salary”* comes from the Latin word for salt. Interestingly, Roman soldiers were paid their wages in salt. That’s where the phrase, *“not worth your salt comes from.”*

Jesus continues, ***“Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again?”*** The main source of salt came from the area around the Dead Sea, also known as the Salt Sea. This coarse salt often had impurities in it, causing contamination and ultimately leaving the salt savorless. Salt with no flavor is worthless. Do you have any impurities that are contaminating your commitment to Christ? Have you been compromising as a Christian and have lost your savor? The world cannot survive without the salt of spirit-filled Christians.

- **Intentionally influence those who are lost.** Look at how verse 50 ends: ***“Have salt in yourselves”*** is a present imperative, meaning Christ-followers must constantly be evaluating the amount of influence they are having on the world around them. Salt served as a condiment, a preservative, a flavoring, and an antiseptic.

We need to live salty lives, making people thirsty for Jesus. One of the best books on evangelism I’ve ever read is called, *“Out of the Saltshaker”* by Rebecca Pippert. Salt doesn’t do any good if it doesn’t come in contact with that which needs seasoning, does it? Too many of us keep our salt in the shaker instead of sprinkling it in our neighborhoods, workplaces and campuses.

I had the joy of speaking at a Christian gathering of college students at Madison on Thursday night. The name of the ministry is called *Cru*. After the meeting ended at 10:30 pm, I talked with students until about 11:30, which is well past my bedtime! Many I talked with are living on mission in their dorms, fraternities and classes. I was greatly moved by how many students are looking for ways to intentionally influence the lost as they season a secular campus. Many of you are doing the exact same thing right here!

The final challenge is for us to ***“be at peace with one another.”*** This completes the thought raised earlier in the passage when the disciples were arguing about their personal status and group superiority. Listen. As Christians, if we aren't at peace with each other, we won't be able to offer the peace of God to those who are at war with Him. Quarreling Christians short-circuit our witness for Christ.

Here's a summary of what we've learned today:

- Avoid causing a follower of Christ to sin
- Cut off anything that causes you to sin
- Live out the cause of Christ

I want to give a challenge to two groups of people present in this service.

1. Salvation for those who are not yet saved. *Have you ever asked where you will be 100 years from now? You will be somewhere and you will be conscious because everyone will live forever. You will be among the damned or the delivered, in hell or in heaven.*

Hell is where everyone is headed...unless Christ rescues us. Jesus says people will be ***“thrown”*** or ***“cast”*** in violently. Listen. You don't have to go to hell. We see in verses 43, 45 that we can ***“enter life”*** and verse 47 uses the phrase, ***“enter the kingdom of God.”*** Jesus didn't come to bring judgment he came to bear judgment. Jesus took hell for us.

Check this out...

Life is short

*Death is sure
Hell is hot
Jesus saves*

When Jesus spoke of judgment, according to Luke 19:41, he cried: ***“And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it.”***

Listen to Ezekiel 18:23: ***“Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?”***

Will you turn from your sins right now and put your faith in the finished sacrifice of Jesus Christ right now so you will live? Anyone ready to do that right? Simply raise your hand and I will lead you in prayer in a few minutes.

2. Surrender for those who are saved. It's time to surrender fully so you don't lose your saltiness! Casual Christianity will lead to Christian casualties and casual Christianity will never change the world.

The dam in California has been slowly eroding and this has caused cracks and holes in the spillway. Do you have any spiritual erosion going on? Have you been compromising? Coasting? If so, you're headed to a catastrophe. If you're ready to recommit and surrender to the Savior right now, will you raise your hand?

As I pray will you join me silently? When I finish praying I want you to listen carefully to the words of our closing song called, “Slow Fade.” If it would help you, I urge you to slip out of your seat and come up front where a pastor will be happy to pray for you.

Salvation/Surrender Prayer

*Be careful little eyes what you see
It's the second glance that ties your hands
As darkness pulls the strings
Be careful little feet where you go
For it's the little feet behind you that are sure to follow*

*It's a slow fade when you give yourself away
It's a slow fade when black and white are turned to gray
And thoughts invade, choices are made, a price will be paid*

*When you give yourself away
People never crumble in a day
It's a slow fade...it's a slow fade*

Closing Song: “Slow Fade”

New Member: Shannon Gabrilson (Saturday night)

Benediction: From the closing verses of 2 Corinthians - *“Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”*