

DAY 7: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LEAST

Mark 9:30-50

THE SECOND PASSION PREDICTION (MARK 9:30-37) Jesus predicts of His own death a second time: *“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men”* (9:31). The handing over of the Son of Man is the will of God. But even handpicked disciples *“did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask Him”* (9:32). How vastly different are God’s ways from ours. As Jesus finishes speaking of His coming humiliation and suffering, a debate breaks out among the disciples about which of them is the greatest!

While Jesus speaks of surrendering His life, the disciples vie for status and prestige. Jesus tries to correct them: *“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all, and servant of all”* (9:35). Jesus illustrates by embracing a child and saying, *“Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me”* (9:37). Children, to Greeks and Jews, were *“last of all.”* Jesus’ point is that it is an act of greatness and true humility to serve and *“receive”* a little child in His name. The act is tantamount to welcoming the Son of God and *“Him who sent Me,”* God the Father.

THINK ABOUT how the closer we draw to God, the more humble we become. The more we are overwhelmed by His holiness, the more we will be aware of our unholiness—a realization that produces humility within us. Christian humility looks for ways to serve others—and do so inconspicuously. It means treating others with respect, regardless of their background, age, sex, the work they do, etc. It means resisting the temptation to show preference to people because of their position or money or fame. And it means giving practical help to those who need it—the poor, the lonely, the elderly—those who, like children, are unable to fend for themselves.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS BIGGER THAN OUR EXPERIENCE OF IT (MARK 9:38-41) Can one who is not a member of the Twelve be a disciple of Jesus? John (son of Zebedee) asks, *“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us”* (9:38). John’s question expresses an insider-outsider mentality. The question of the disciples is whether this man can rightly participate in ministry using the name of Jesus if he is *“not one of us.”* Jesus’ response is more tolerant than John might have expected. *“The one who is not against us is for us”* (9:40). Jesus warns not to discount a person’s faith because he is not affiliated with a specific Christian circle.

DISCIPLESHIP: A CALLING WORTH THE SACRIFICE (MARK 9:42-50) Jesus’ teachings in this passage are loosely ordered around several key words and phrases—*“causes ... to sin”* (9:42-47), *“fire”* (9:48-49), and *“salt”* (9:49-50). The contexts in which Jesus originally spoke them have been lost, making it difficult to know the best interpretation. It is clear that Jesus is not speaking merely of children here, but of immature or new disciples—*“one of these little ones who believe in Me.”* Whoever *“these little ones”* might be, Jesus warns the Twelve not to jeopardize their faith by their judgments. The Greek word translated *cause to sin, skandalizo*, means *to destroy someone’s faith, or cause one to fall away from God*. The punishment for such an offense will be calamitous, says Jesus: *“It would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea”* (9:42).

Mark 9:43-47 shifts the focus from jeopardizing the faith of others to endangering oneself.¹ The point Jesus seeks to make is so important that He uses hyperbole, a figure of speech that exaggerates to make its point. Jesus is not advocating masochism or self-mutilation. His point is that God is more important than even eyes, hands, and feet—which are nearly indispensable—and that nothing, not even physical life itself, should stand in the way of eternal life. The choice is eternal life—that is, entering the kingdom of God (9:47)—or eternal death.



In the Greek the word for *hell* (9:47) literally is *the Hinnom Valley*, the ravine to the southwest of Jerusalem where human sacrifice once had been offered. King Josiah condemned it as the city garbage dump. Ever since, it had been a symbol of divine punishment. The lurid description of hell (9:48) comes from the final verse of Isaiah 66:24: *“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.” Jesus’ description stands as a solemn warning of the judgment that will befall those who rebel against God. The purpose of this gruesome imagery, however, is not to predict the fate of the wicked in the world to come but to soberly warn the disciples of the consequences of their unwillingness to “hear” Him.

Mark’s picture of eternal hell-fire gives way to the refiner’s fire for living believers: “*Everyone will be salted with fire*” (49). Here Jesus mixes the dissimilar elements of salt and fire. Old Testament offerings had to be accompanied by salt, one of the necessities of life in the ancient world that prevented meat from spoiling. Fire also has a purifying effect and, in this instance, may refer to trials and adversity that beset the faithful. As the Son of Man *must* suffer, so must His followers. Their pain purifies and refines so that they better serve as salt and light to the world. God has appointed believers to be a source of redemption, preservation, purification, and hope in a world that, left to itself, would go bad. They should be known by their exemplary lifestyles, consistent kindness, and inviting love and peace within their fellowships.

A lukewarm disciple is marked by behavior that conforms to this world’s patterns. With strong imagery, Jesus says this “salt” is useless, “*no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet*” (Matthew 5:13). Again, He appeals to radical, life-changing discipleship.

PERSONALIZE this lesson. Jesus taught in no uncertain terms that anything that causes us to sin must go. Just as radical surgery, though painful, may prevent physical death, spiritual surgery may prevent spiritual death. Are you aware of anything in your life—a goal, a relationship, an activity—that often causes you to sin? Ask God to show you if there is something He wants you to “cut off.” Prayerfully surrender the area to God and ask Him to show you what steps to take to rid yourself of this harmful source of temptation. Trust Him to give you the strength to do what He shows you. You may want to share your conclusions with a close friend who can encourage you, pray for you, and hold you accountable.

REVIEW: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LEAST

13. Share one way in which the teaching or the Commentary ministered to a specific need or concern in your life.

ⁱ Verses 44 and 46, which are only found in a few translations, show signs of textual uncertainty. Apparently, a later scribe inserted verse 48 after both verses 43 and 45, presumably to achieve parallelism. The oldest and best manuscripts of Mark, however, omit these lines and the ESV wisely follows their lead.