

Sermon Theme: Your Savior is Serious about Serving

Sermon Reading: Mark 9:38-50

It can be hard to be genuinely happy when someone else is better than us; especially when we think it's something we feel we are good at. We might wish to have different talents and abilities, but we can get over that quickly. I wish that I was more artsy and crafty, but it's not keeping me up at night. I've simply accepted the fact that's not one of my gifts. No, what's much more difficult is when someone is either just as good or even a little better than me. You might be crafty, but then someone else makes better crafts and is praised more for it. You are athletic and pretty decent at the sport, but then you find someone who runs faster, jumps higher, and is a better-rounded athlete. You fancy yourself as a pretty good, hard worker, but then someone else comes along who seems to do better—whether that's the job you get paid to do or it's the supermom or dad, the better child, the more decent citizen in society. It just rubs us the wrong way after a while. Now, we understand that we want good, healthy competition because it forces us to be better and to grow. But all too easily—and we need the seemingly constant reminders against it—instead of praising God for the generosity of his rich gifts to us and others, the devil uses them to stir up jealousy and envy in our hearts. Jesus teaches us in these words from Mark 9 the difference between God pleasing ambition and ambition that only looks God pleasing on the outside.

It's really quite an intense section from Scripture. But it shows us how serious Jesus is and how precious each soul is to him. We don't know much about the individual that John brings up to Jesus. We don't know where John and the other disciples would have met the person or seen him doing these things. But evidently this individual was casting out demons in Jesus' name. But like Joshua from Numbers with Eldad and Medad, because this person wasn't part of their main group, John and the disciples didn't think he should be able to do that work. Why? It wasn't being done the way they wanted or expected. It was taking away from what they were able to do. They may have thought that it was only they who should be doing such great acts. Maybe they felt it was cheapening their own capabilities so they weren't as important or noteworthy.

Again we see ourselves in those disciples. When someone else does a task differently than how we want it done, we almost can't help ourselves from thinking, "I could do better. I would have done a better job teaching, I would have mowed the lawn differently, I would have cleaned it this way, I would have made sure more people knew," and on and on it goes. Instead of supporting the work of others, it's easy to knock against and tear down. Instead of praising God for someone else's serving, we tend to nitpick and nag. Or, you expect someone else should do the work, but then question why it was done that way and every decision that is made. Very seldom—if we are truly honest—is this done as constructive criticism to help. No, it's talked about behind the individual's back while keeping a smiling face with the individual because you don't want them to feel bad. Why? For the disciples and us it comes back to jealousy and selfish

ambition; making yourself look better in other people's eyes. Deep down everyone wants to be the boss and the star in different ways. It's not necessarily by being out in front of people, being the most popular. But it's being more appreciated for the work you do, recognized for your efforts, and legitimized with the feeling that you are just as good if not better. Jealousy and selfish ambition really are ugly things that get in the way of people serving God as John and the other disciples did in Mark.

But Jesus responds to John: "Don't stop him." This man wasn't doing anything wrong or harming anyone. He wasn't taking people away from Jesus. In fact, he was supporting Jesus and his work. Jesus explains, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

We don't know how or when this man was brought to faith in Mark. But, we see the proof in the miracle that this man is doing. If he didn't have faith, he wouldn't have been able to do it—Jesus' name isn't just some magic incantation. But with faith connecting him to Jesus and the power of Jesus' name, with God working through him, he cast out demons.

Instead of nit-picking and pointing out all the faults and ways something should be done, consider the miracle that is done in an individual's heart. God, working through his Word, brought you to faith by which you are saved and forgiven. That faith so radically changes a person from someone whose every and only desire is serving self into one whose desire, what we want, is to serve God in various ways with the gifts God has given. Praise God that his Word works in you and with others. Instead of being jealous, praise God that the person was baptized into the name of Jesus and he is using this person, using you, to do his work. He could make rocks sing praises and do the work. But instead he chooses you and me. So thoroughly has he forgiven us of our jealousy and selfish ambition that he not only takes our sins away but trusts us so-to-speak with work to do.

What the disciples didn't realize was the danger with stopping that man from driving out demons in Mark: it may have caused him to stumble in his faith. And so Jesus gives a very stern warning in vv.42, **"If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea."**

Brutal. If you cause one of these little ones to stumble in their faith—not just children, but someone young, new, or even weak in faith—take this big heavy stone, tie it around your neck, and jump into the sea. There would be no possibility of coming to surface and escaping the punishment. But that would be better than facing God's judgment.

We don't always take these words to heart as God's people who are all given the responsibility to share Jesus; especially as pastors, teachers, and parents. There's already such a mountain the Gospel must climb when it comes to our sinful natures. But then one can add larger mountains, more obstacles, and more stumbling blocks in the way one may treat the Word. We see that with the always convenient excuses that are used, accepted, and even promoted, the me-first

attitude, the getting-in-the-way of people serving, and just bad, lazy attitudes. What a horrible thing to cause one of those little ones to stumble away from Jesus. Jesus says it's better for you to be violently thrown into the sea.

But Jesus isn't done. It's not just leading others to watch out for, but it's you causing yourself to stumble that Jesus warns against. He continues in verse 43 and following, **“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where ‘the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.’”**

Just brutal. The logical conclusion should be that we need to start lopping off limbs because you know how your hand has reached out and grabbed onto sin. You know how your feet have led you into temptation jumping head first into doing something you knew was against God's will. You know how your eyes have betrayed you but you didn't want to look away. Jesus is saying, if it causes you to stumble at following God's will, get rid of it. It's not worth losing your place with God. It's better to be down one hand, one foot, one eye than to be lost and thrown into hell. God is serious. He's serious with how much he wants you to be in heaven and is serious about how horrible hell is where **“their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”** You know how it is when you are lying in bed trying to sleep and that's when you remember that one conversation where you said something you shouldn't have, that one time you did something just horrible, and it feels like that thought just works through your mind. It's like a worm digging and eating away reminding you how it could have been different. It's miserable. In hell that worm doesn't ever stop reminding you what you should have done differently, showing you the opportunities that you did have, and gnawing away forever where the fire is always burning and never goes out.

Therefore, if it could save you from that horrible experience and place, it's better to be thrown into the sea, it's better to get rid of the hand, or foot, or eye. But why stop at the one hand? It's only a matter of time before the next has caused you to sin. Same goes for the other foot, for the other eye. That's what Jesus wants you to see. He isn't promoting self-mutilation with these words. He is teaching us that outward actions cannot save us from God's punishment.

Having actions that only seem God-pleasing on the outside cannot and will not save you. It's a heart problem. Too often we get hung up on what other people should be doing, or could be doing, or what they aren't doing. But the Law of God's Word forces you to look at yourself and your own heart. It shows you the problem is you; it's me. The salt of the Law stings the wound of sin to show you rotten, decayed, and dead. It shows you how our selfish ambition entraps us,

how our entire beings, our very nature leads us to sin. It shows me that it's not about me and how good I have been; look at the mountain of evidence of my failures that negate it all.

No, it's not what you or I could or have done. It's about what Jesus has done for me, what he did for you. Jesus is serious about his people. And so he gives us this warning because he wants you to be honest with yourself and how you live. It's between you and God whether or not you are being honest and faithful. Repent and turn from yourself.

And then be at peace because when you do something in the name of Jesus, God is pleased. Jesus doesn't ask us to do these great grandiose acts of service; he doesn't tell you have to sell everything and go live in the monastery or go drive out demons. Look again at that simple act in v. 41—it's just a glass of water. You wouldn't think twice about giving someone a drink of water. But look at how God responds: **you will not lose your reward in heaven.** You see, God's focus isn't on the actual action being carried out, but on the one who does the action. It's like how a parent reacts when their child is young and draws them a picture; there's a good chance that will never end up in the art museum or be considered a masterpiece. But for the parent they are mighty proud and hang it up on the fridge because you know your child made it for you. That's how God feels about you when you do something in his name. To an outside observer it may not seem like much, in fact it might seem quite small. But because you who are God's child did it in Jesus' name, he is so proud of it. In fact he is so proud that he rewards you for it. Because it's not about the action *per se* it's because of what you are.

In baptism, when you were washed with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit you were made a child of God. Already then God was well-pleased with you because you were washed of every sin and clothed with Jesus' perfection. You were made a new creation whose heart was changed receiving what Jesus accomplished. So serious is Jesus about his people that he came to this earth to do the unthinkable—while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. In the name of Jesus your sins have been forgiven. With his perfect life of service in your place and his innocent death on the cross for you, your sins have been removed forever. You are a child of God. So thoroughly are you forgiven that even a good work that is stained with bad motives is still accepted by Jesus. This isn't to give us a license to sin, do what we want, or have a bad attitude. But it does give us encouragement and peace. Baptized in Jesus' name means everything you do that is according to God's will is done in Jesus' name—even when it's as small as giving a glass of water—and it is pleasing to him because you are his child. Go and live in the peace that is yours in Jesus. Serve and support each other as we serve God. Amen.