

Mark 9 (Part 3): 33-50 - The Kingdom of God

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Mark chapter 9. This is our last installment in this chapter. It's a fairly lengthy chapter, but we're picking it up in verse 33. Follow along as I read. It says,

“And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?”³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them,³⁷ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us.⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

⁴² “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.⁴³ 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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁷ 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,⁴⁸ ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’⁴⁹ For everyone will be salted with fire.⁵⁰ 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.” (ESV)
Let's pray.

Lord, we thank You for Your Word and we thank You for the wisdom that comes from it. And as we take time this morning to meditate on these verses and talk about what they mean, we pray that You would open our hearts, open our understanding, give us ears to hear and eyes to see.

Lord, cause us to have a heart to receive. Let us put aside, Lord God, our stubborn refusal and our prideful refusal to hear Your Word, but instead, Lord God, may we listen with eager expectation that You will fill us today with every good and perfect gift, which comes from above. We pray it in Jesus' name, amen.

Mark sets aside his brevity earlier on in this chapter. Mark is the, we've said this before, Mark is the short writer of Gospel writers. He makes things much briefer.

Earlier in the chapter, he actually expanded a story. We talked about this last week that some of the other Gospel writers gave less of. Now he's moving back to his brevity again. And he's going to explain in just a couple of short paragraphs what Matthew took an entire chapter to talk about.

But Jesus, you'll remember, has been telling His disciples on an ongoing basis about what is going to happen to Him. He's telling them as best He can. I'm going to Jerusalem for the very last time. There, I will be turned over by the religious leaders to the Gentiles. I will be abused, ultimately crucified, and rise again on the third day.

And just to prove that these guys didn't get it as far as what He was saying. As they're walking along, they're discussing which of them is the greatest. And it seems kind of crazy in light of everything going on. But you'll notice in verse 33 that Jesus confronted them by basically asking them, what were you guys talking about? In fact, the idea here is, what were you arguing about? You may have a Bible that says, what were you contending with one another about on the way?

And you'll notice that He's met with an embarrassed silence. Nobody speaks up and says, oh, well, we were talking about which one of us is the best or anything like that. They just—I don't know.

Isn't it interesting when we think Jesus isn't around, or we kind of forget that He's around, we forget about His presence altogether? We'll do and say things that we wouldn't otherwise do and say, and then suddenly, if we get the sense that Jesus is right there, everything changes. Yeah, don't want to talk about that. Isn't that interesting?

But we're very much like that, aren't we? I mean, that is very similar to the way we live our lives. And when the disciples didn't think that Jesus was listening to them along the way, they were talking about which one of them would have the greatest place of honor.

Because you got to remember, these guys are still locked into the idea that Jesus is going to go to Jerusalem. Somehow He's going to work out all the problems, and the religious leaders are going to say, oh, yeah. Oh, we were wrong. He is the Messiah, and they're going to crown Him king, and He's going to usher in the new kingdom.

And pretty much all 12 of these guys, I think, pretty much had it in their mind, there was a throne with their name on it, that they were kind of thinking about quite a bit and preparing for and talking about among themselves, which one was going to be seated close to Jesus. And this is what's going on in their mind. This was occupying their conversation. Funny though, when Jesus asked them about it, suddenly no one wanted to speak up.

We're told in verse 35, if you look in your Bible, it says, Jesus ... *sat down*... ” That may sound like a very small sort of thing for Mark to record, but whenever a rabbi sat down, you were going to be in for a little teaching time. Because that's what they did.

In the Jewish synagogues, they would get up and read the Scripture, and they would stand for that as they rolled out the scroll and read from wherever they were reading that particular Saturday on the Sabbath. Then they would roll the scroll back up, put it away, and the rabbi would sit down and he would begin to teach.

So it says, Jesus sat down, and He began to speak to them. And what He has to say to them is absolutely incredible when we stop and think about it. And hopefully, we'll take some time here today to stop and think about it.

But here's what He says, if you look with me in your Bible in verse 35. “...*If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.*” Now you got to understand something about what He's saying here. He's not talking about your last because you were chosen last. Some of you guys know what it's like to be out on the playground when you were a kid, and they're choosing up sides for a particular game. You're not necessarily the most athletic person in the world, and so you get chosen last. And now, all of a sudden, in the kingdom of God, that means you're the greatest.

No, that's really not what He's talking about. He's talking about you choosing to put yourself last. In other words, what He's saying is, if you would choose to be first, if you desire to be first, then you must choose to be last. I want you to think about that. And I think it's really safe to say that this sort of attitude doesn't just bubble up naturally in our hearts and minds. You know what I mean?

It's not something you and I do. We don't go around thinking about, gee, I just really want to be last, and I'm going to choose it for myself because that's cool. Because we're raised in a culture where being first is best. I mean, I remember as a kid playing king on the hill. I think you guys played king on the hill. That was fun. You find just a little mound of dirt somewhere, and somebody stands up on it. He looks at all the others, and they all know what's going on. It's time, and I'm going to defend my hill. And these guys are going to come, and they're going to try to get up there, and I'm going to fight them down and stuff. And that's just the world we live in.

We take that same mentality from when we're children playing king on the hill, and we turn it into our adult activities. And we've learned very well, as people living in the world, if you want to be significant, you get up on that hill and you stay there.

And Jesus comes along and he says, no, actually, greatness has a completely different definition in the kingdom of God. It has nothing to do with getting up on top of the hill and fighting for your position of prominence. It has everything to do with choosing to be the least. Choosing to be the last. Choosing to be the servant of all.

Now, you and I can hear this, and I trust you are hearing it, and I can say it. Obviously, these words come out of my mouth. And I'm talking about how, in the kingdom of God, we're told that greatness is defined as those who are last. But we really don't get it.

I mean, we get it intellectually, but as far as putting it into practice in our lives, it's like one of the wackiest things we've ever heard because it just doesn't—we can't relate. We can't relate. It just doesn't compute. Essentially, choosing—voluntarily choosing—to have the lowest spot. To be at the tail end of the line. Choosing to be at the tail end of the line—that doesn't come naturally.

The flesh wants nothing more than to advance myself, to advance my position so that I'm significant, right? So that I'm important. And of course, we have ways to do that. But in the kingdom of God, it's the opposite. And so what that means for you and I is this is otherworldly. It's not our world. It's otherworldly.

So it shouldn't surprise us that when we think of the kingdom of God, we're pretty much always talking about the opposite of the way we've been raised and the things that are kind of hardwired into our DNA.

And then as if to offer kind of a visual example of what he's talking about, you'll notice in verse 36 that Jesus takes a child and says, “...*he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and (then) taking (the child)... in his arms, he said to*

them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.””

Before I actually comment on this particular statement by Jesus, because it's very important that we understand what He's saying here, I want to show you how Matthew kind of further developed this idea in the 18th chapter of his Gospel account. I'll put it on the screen for you. It says in verses 1 through 4:

Matthew 18:1-4 (ESV)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (He goes on to say) Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

He begins to say, first of all, you must be like a little child, even to enter the kingdom of heaven. And then you must be like this child to be somebody in the kingdom of heaven.

All right. How does the world define greatness? How does the world achieve greatness? Well, we do it by running after the three Ps—possessions, power, and popularity. Right? Possessions, power, popularity. That is what makes someone significant. It's what makes someone important in the kingdom of man.

It is exactly the opposite. That is not the case in the kingdom of God, and the best way for Jesus to illustrate it is to take a child and have this child stand in the midst of them.

Now, I want to help you to understand something here. Jesus, by taking a child, is saying something significant to these guys about greatness, but it might be lost on a modern audience because we think differently of children than they did back in those days.

In Jesus's day, you need to understand that a child had no rights under the law. Societally speaking, as far as general society was concerned, children were considered to be insignificant and unimportant. Okay? Once they come to a certain age, well, then it's different for a young boy when he comes through and goes through that bar mitzvah and he becomes a man—it's a different thing

altogether. But up until that point, Jewish society saw children as essentially insignificant, unimportant, and with no rights under the law.

Now you begin to understand what Jesus is trying to say when He takes this child and places the child right in the midst of these men to make his point. And by likening kingdom greatness with the social status of a child, Jesus was basically taking the world's idea or definition of great, and He was setting it on its ear. And He's basically saying in the kingdom of God, it is not those who gather or who possess and have, it is those who divest themselves of what the world would otherwise consider to be important.

That is what is important in the kingdom of God. That is what is greatness, or at least how greatness is defined in the kingdom of God. It's not about gathering. It's about giving up. It's about laying aside in the kingdom of God. That is what defines greatness.

And so He's taking this child, who is insignificant because he doesn't have anything. He hasn't had the years to possess and to become popular and to own all these possessions and all these other sorts of things. He's just a child. He has no rights. He takes this child, sets this child in the midst of them, and says, be like this. This is great in the kingdom of God. He's not saying that children don't deal with the same kinds of sinful issues that adults do. He's talking about how children were seen societally.

In other words, the things that you and I consider important, this child does not exemplify those things. Therefore, be like this child. Become like nothing in the eyes of the world.

That's what the Apostle Paul talked about. He came to the place of understanding this. Let me show you another passage from Philippians chapter 3:7. Paul writes,

Philippians 3:7 (ESV)

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

...whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ."

Paul wasn't saying, I lost everything that I once had. He's saying, I willingly gave it up. Because he's talking about the things he's noticed. He says, to my profit. Paul is basically saying, whatever made me significant, whatever made me somebody in the eyes of the world, I've given it up. I've laid it aside. I've chosen to go stand at the end of the line and to be nothing. I have chosen to be likened to the refuse of this world. All the things that would otherwise make me somebody—my education, my standing, my societal, cultural—all those other

things, I've chosen to put aside so that I might be found in Christ, not to be found significant in the eyes of man.

The disciples—I'm sure when Jesus was saying all these things—He probably was met with about a dozen blank stares from these guys because I'm sure this was like craziness. But most of them would eventually come to terms with this information, and they would grow to understand it when they dealt with persecutions and trials and difficulties because they belonged to Jesus.

But what does it say in the Book of Hebrews about such people? It says, the world was not worthy of such people (Hebrews 11:38). They were special in God's sight. They were refuse. They were throwaways as far as the world was concerned.

So what does it take for you and I to change our attitude about what it means to be someone, what it means to be significant? And from the very first day, practically, that we're born, we want to be significant. I love having people like me. I don't know if you feel the same way—most of us do. I like having people appreciate me. I like having people honor me. I like that. It feels good.

And I'm admitting that because I don't think I'm alone. That's just part of who we are, and we spend our lives trying to create a name for ourselves so that people will see us as significant. See us as somebody. We come to Christ, and he comes along and says, what, in my kingdom all those things don't even matter.

Then he goes on—look what he says here in verse 37. Look with me in your Bible again. He says, *"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me (not just me) but (they receives the one) him who sent me."*

Now, this is a great statement. What He's saying here, to emphasize what He's been saying, is that nobody would send someone of no importance to represent them.

Okay, let me give you an example. If our president wanted to go and meet with the ruler of another nation, but he couldn't go himself, he would send a representative, correct? So who would he send? He would send some high-ranking diplomat or some important political official, maybe even the vice president, to go in his place to represent him and to say, I'm coming in the name of the president, and what I say is just like he's saying it. By receiving me, you're receiving him. Do you get the connection of representation? I think we all understand that we have a government of representation.

Who in the world, if you are sending someone to someone else very important, would send an individual of no importance, someone whom society considered to be insignificant or unimportant? Society might look down on somebody who's homeless, for example, and think, gee, poor guy, whatever, throw him a few bucks once in a while. But other than that, he's just not important.

Would the president choose a man who was homeless and send him to another country to represent him? That's not the way the kingdom of man works. The kingdom of man works differently, and yet the kingdom of God doesn't work that way. What does Jesus say here?

He says, if you receive one such child, and again, He's talking about when you receive someone who is one of mine but is insignificant in the eyes of the world, you're receiving Me. And you're not just receiving Me, you're receiving my Father in heaven.

You see, in the world, man has to be something himself to represent someone else. He has to be important. He has to be significant to represent someone who's significant. In the kingdom of God, the one who is of least significance can represent the King of the universe. Isn't that amazing?

Again, that's not the way you and I think. But it's the way God thinks. It's the economy of His kingdom that's being put in place here.

Alright, the conversation continues now. And one of the disciples speaks up, and we find out that it's John. In verse 38, it says, *"John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.'"*³⁹ But Jesus said, *"Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me."*⁴⁰ *For the one who is not against us is for us.*

Alright, stop there. What's he talking about? What's this passage talking about? Is He talking about casting out demons? No, it's not talking about casting out demons. Again, what Jesus is doing is contrasting the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man and how they operate very differently from one another.

Notice that John volunteered this information. He comes along and he says, Jesus, just wanted you to know we're doing our job. We saw a guy out there. He was casting out demons in your name, and we told him, knock it off, because he wasn't one of us, alright? Just wanted you to know.

And John gets a rebuke of his own. Jesus says, no, don't stop him. Nobody who does a mighty work in my name is going to very quickly afterward say something against me. So, I mean, what's the problem here, John?

What is going on here? What is John doing, and what is Jesus responding to him about here? You have to understand—here's what's happening in the passage. John is jealous. He's jealous of the standing that he has been one of the twelve because that afforded them a certain kind of significance, right? Because crowds were coming, right? These big crowds coming to hear Jesus. And I'm one of the twelve. Not only was John one of the twelve, he was one of the three.

Jesus took Peter, James, and John into places that the other nine didn't get to go—like on the Mount of Transfiguration, into the house to heal Jairus' daughter, so on and so on. So John was of this very important group of three among the twelve. And he was jealous for that standing and what it afforded him. The significance that reflected into his life was predicated upon that standing.

And what this is all about is putting my personal ambition before the greater good. See, that's what John was doing. It's something the Pharisees and religious leaders did all the time.

That's why they talked down what Jesus did among the people down to them. They tried to make it seem like it was part of the work of the devil or whatever—however they could try to malign the work of Christ. Why? Because it was impinging on their status. They were jealous for their own social standing.

And now, this guy's getting all the crowds. All the people are going to listen to him, right? And the Pharisees loved that attention they got in the crowd, with people stepping aside and speaking to them, calling them by these special names. What do those names say? You're significant. You are really important. And they loved it. They got very used to it, and they didn't want it to end.

So what they would do is put their own ambition ahead of the greater good. Rather than the Pharisees saying, wow, this Jesus guy, he's doing a lot of cool stuff. No, they're not going to do that because that would take away something of what they were receiving.

We understand this. We get this. Human nature—we understand what it means to protect what's mine. Protect what people think as something good in my corner. I'm going to protect that.

Here we have the disciples, or John anyway, confessing the same attitude that Jesus rebuked in the Pharisees—selfish ambition at the expense of the greater good. And we all understand the attitude. You want to see the opposite? One of the most wonderful Bible characters is a man in the Bible who never did one single solitary miracle his entire life. All he did was just baptize people and get them ready for the Messiah.

And there was a time in John's ministry, I'm talking about John the Baptist. There was a time in John's ministry where things began to wane in terms of his popularity. The crowds began to thin. What does that say to you and I? It says my significance is waning as well. We don't like that. We become very jealous of that when our own personal significance begins to erode. Check out this passage. This is from John chapter 3. It says,

John 3:26-27, 30 (NIV84)

They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan – the one you testified about – well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him." To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven, He must become greater; I must become less."

They came to John (meaning his disciples came to him) and (they) said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan – the one you testified about – well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him." To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven, He must become greater; I must become less."

Just let that attitude sink in for just a moment. Let it just kind of wash over your heart. Doesn't it resonate with you? As a believer, we know when we hear something that's godly. We may not be able to exemplify it necessarily, or reproduce it. But we can, when we hear it, we're going, yeah, that's pretty cool. To be able to say, it's not about me. It's not about my popularity. It's not about the ambition of my life and what I can kind of gather around me in terms of my kingdom, my popularity. It's about glorifying God.

Here's the point. And I love what John says, "*A man can only receive what's given him from heaven.*" So listen, my life is to glorify Him and to point people to Him. That was John's ministry to point people to Jesus. You want me to give you a quick definition of our ministry? Point people to Jesus. Right? Not point people to ourselves, but to point people to Him. It's all about Him. It's not about us.

We're expendable. He's the one who saves. And saves to the uttermost. You and I can't do that. I love this attitude. Such a contrast between man's attitude in the kingdom of man and the attitude of those who have surrendered to the kingdom of God.

One more example, verse 42, look in your Bible: "*Whoever causes one of these little ones (remember little ones means those whom society deems unimportant, no rights, whoever causes one of these little ones who have no rights and society considers them unimportant) who believe in me (who causes them) to sin,*

it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

Again, kingdom of God, contrasting with the kingdom of man. Jesus says, even those who are societally unimportant, God considers important. And the wrath of God will be expended even against those who are considered refuse.

In our culture, in man's kingdom, if something is done against a homeless person, and I'll keep using that example, to somehow take away his rights, or to somehow violate his rights, we all kind of just take it in stride. It's like, well, he's a homeless guy.

But if something is done to violate the rights of someone who is with great standing in society, everybody gets all up in arms and he himself gets up in arms and he's got the money to get up in arms and to hire some highfalutin lawyers. And then I'm going to fight this thing and you're not going to get it. And we all are yeah, get behind that rally to that sort of a thing. Because yeah, you don't do something to somebody like that. Do you know who you're messing with sort of a thing?

Well, a homeless guy would never say that. He wouldn't look at somebody who's violating his rights and say, Do you know who you're messing with? They'd say, yeah, I think I do. And it doesn't matter. That's the kingdom of man, right?

What is Jesus saying here? Listen, if anyone causes one of these little insignificant ones to sin, it will be like they did it to what society considered to be the greatest person. God is still going to hold them accountable. And it would be better for them if they had a millstone tied around their neck and were cast into the sea. Listen, God is going to follow up on those things even though society doesn't think they're important, God does. Again, Jesus is contrasting kingdoms. And it's important that we see it for what it is.

Now we come to the last section, verse 43: *“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.”*

All right, stop there. It kind of goes on in the next couple of verses, talking about cutting off your foot and then finally gouging out your eye. All rather disturbing imagery, we'll all admit here. But Jesus is using a picture of these things—the cutting off of hand and foot and gouging out of the eye—not to speak literally, but to make a point metaphorically about sin and how it needs to be dealt with drastically in our lives.

Why do we know Jesus isn't talking literally? Well, because your hand doesn't cause you to sin, nor does your eye, nor does your foot. You'll remember Jesus had already talked about this in the Sermon on the Mount. You guys remember in Matthew? He said, listen, if you even look at a woman lustfully, you've already committed adultery with her in your heart. You don't have to touch her. So you see, sin is not about touch, what you—this sort of thing. It's not a physical sort of manifestation. It happens in the heart.

Now, it might play itself out physically, but it begins in the human heart. So again, Jesus is talking here about dealing radically with the things that lead us to a place of sin in our lives. And He basically is telling us whatever it is in your life, it must be removed. And He's using this very graphic language to make several different points.

But one of the ones I want to bring out—and I think this is the reason he makes it so graphic and so almost reprehensible—I mean, we can read these verses, and I've read them so many times, I'm sure you have too. Pretty soon, you're thinking about what it really means. I mean, you're not really picturing in your mind somebody cutting off their hand or their foot or gouging out their eye.

If we saw that happen—where someone was doing that to themselves, the self-mutilation—we would go, ah, stop that! Or we... I mean, nobody in their right mind would do it anyway, so it's very reprehensible to us. It puts us off. We're repelled and repulsed by that sort of thing.

I think that's why He said it. I think He said it because it repels us. He knows that there's a survival mechanism that's in each one of us to say, I'm not going to cut my hand off. That would hurt. Neither my foot nor gouge out my eye. Are you joking? No way in the world. What's the point He's making? You're pretty much going to feel the same way about sin.

We think that they're two different categories. It's like, well, I would never cut off my hand. I mean, I'd never do that. It'd be too hard. Who could do that, right? But then we're confronted by sin. And one of the first things Christians do is say, I got to get a handle on this, and they think they can do it. I've got to...

Sometimes people will say to me, even, well, Pastor Paul, I'm just really—I'm still working on this. Really? I got the saw out, Pastor Paul, and I'm working on this sin in my life. But they're going back and forth, but it's not even touching the skin. Listen, you're not going to do it. It's reprehensible.

Getting rid of sin in our life is just as reprehensible as cutting off your foot or your hand or gouging out your eye. And listen, apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, you will not do it. You cannot defeat your flesh by using your flesh. In other words, your flesh will not defeat itself.

It will not even restrain itself. The flesh will not fight the flesh. The flesh must be conquered through the power of the Spirit. And I think that's one of the reasons Jesus uses such strong and disturbing imagery when He talks about this radical action that's needed. He's saying, listen, just as you're not going to want to cut off your foot or your hand, you're not going to want to cut sin out of your life either because sometimes the sin that we need to get rid of is something we love desperately.

Sometimes, it's something that we love with all of our hearts. You try cutting something out of your heart that's intertwined with your very being. It's not going to happen. Not apart from the Spirit. Now, through the power of the Spirit—by the way, that's called spiritual circumcision, the cutting away of the flesh—it is something that can happen through the power of your spirit. But ridding our lives of sin by ourselves, that's not going to happen.

Now we come to the two final verses of the chapter. It says, *“For everyone will be salted with fire.”*⁵⁰ *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.”*

What in the world is He talking about here? I mean, this is just like, huh? He makes three statements in these two verses, and you'll notice that each one of them talks about salt. It's best to interpret these passages by understanding the role that salt played in that culture. For you and I, it's a seasoning element that we put into our food or cooking, whatever, so that it gives it a little bit of flavor, brings out flavor, and so on and so forth.

Now, they used it for seasoning back in those days, but that wasn't the primary use of salt by any stretch. It was used as a preservative. It was because they didn't have refrigeration. And so you butcher a cow or a goat or a lamb or something like that, and you want to save that meat for a period of time, what are you going to do? Well, they knew how to use salt back in those days to preserve meat so that they could keep it almost indefinitely.

I mean, it's what we do to beef jerky. Have you ever noticed you don't have to put it in the refrigerator? It's so filled with preservatives and salt, primarily, that it just hinders that decaying process. Yes, that's what salt does. I want you to think about the primary use of salt as a preservative, inhibiting the process of decomposition and decay, alright?

And let's look at what He says here in these verses. The first statement, verse 49: *“For everyone will be salted (or, if you will, preserved) with fire...”* In other words, people will be preserved with fire. Interesting sort of a statement. He's talking to believers now.

Whenever we talk to unbelievers, and we talk about fire, we're not talking about preserving them with fire. We're talking about destroying. Fire is used as a destructive element in the lives of those who have rejected God and His salvation. For believers, fire has a completely different functional use, and it is one of purification. It sanctifies. It purifies. And so Jesus is saying everyone will be preserved through fire, right?

So in this context of cutting away sin, dealing radically with the sin in our lives, Jesus begins to speak or reminds us about the work of God in our lives to preserve our lives by using fire as a purifying work.

Now, what do we know about fire? Well, we learned very early on in our human years that it burns. It's hot, and it burns. And it hurts. And you get burned by fire. Some of you guys have been burned seriously by fire or even something hot. But that burning process, in the life of a believer, is said to burn away the unnecessary elements of our lives. In other words, the chaff, so that the real, true fruit or the kernel, if you will, of the wheat may remain.

Let me show you a passage from 1 Peter 4 that speaks of this rather poignantly. Peter writes,

1 Peter 4:1 (ESV)

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,

Isn't that a fascinating passage? You could take those words "...suffered in the flesh..." and apply what we've just learned in this passage. Whoever has been salted with fire has ceased from sin. We're not talking about someone who has become sinless or entered into sinless perfection, but we're talking about those areas of sin in our lives that God will sometimes just enter into our lives and eliminate it from our lives because we were unwilling to eliminate them on our own.

Have you ever had that happen in your life? I have, and it's very painful. I can tell you right now, in all honesty, there have been times in my life when I have refused to deal with sin, and God will take the salting work of His fire, that purification fire, and He will cause something to no longer be in your life so that you might cease from that area of sin.

He loves you that much. And right about the time we think, God hates me, God couldn't—what does the word tell us? God disciplines those whom He loves. But what does it go on to say? No discipline seems pleasant at the time. But what? Painful, right? But later, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by that purifying fire.

The second statement, verse 50: *“Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again?...”*

Now, our purification process for salt is such that it really cannot, from a scientific standpoint, a chemical standpoint, it can't become unsalty because it is what it is. In those days, they didn't have the ability to purify salt like we do today. What can cause salt to become less salty? It's when the salt is mixed with impurities.

And that speaks of when you and I allow the world to get in. And we begin, through compromise, to bring impurities into our lives. What we were intended to be, which is the salt of the earth. And you'll remember Jesus said that to us. You are the salt of the earth, right? (Matthew 5:13)

How can we become unsalted? By allowing the impurity of sin into our lives in such a way that our saltiness loses its ability to preserve any longer in the society in which we live. That's our role, right?

The Holy Spirit is the restraining element of sin in this world, but who is He working chiefly through? The body of Christ. That's why this world is going to go down real fast when Jesus comes and catches away His bride. The mechanism through which God has chiefly been bringing the preservative element into this world, hindering the decay process of sin. When the element of the church is removed from this earth, listen, it's going to go down real fast.

Meanwhile, you and I are the salt of the earth. We are there to preserve. We are there to hinder. We are there to hinder that process of decay. Have you ever been at work and walked into the break room or something like that, and somebody was in the middle of telling a dirty joke? And you walk into the room, and they know that you're a believer. And so they stop. Why? What did they do? They stopped telling that thing because you walked into the room, right? Because they know you're a Christian. You wouldn't appreciate that kind of stuff.

And we get all kind of apologetic. Ah, you guys, don't worry about it. I've heard all those jokes anyway. No! Be the salt! Stop that decay process! The fact

that you are there does hinder that decay process. So great! Be who you are! And be careful that you don't take so much of the world in and the impurities of sin that you then lose your saltiness in the world.

The final statement is, “...*Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.*”

Again, if you see this whole idea of salt metaphorically as this—well, it's not just metaphoric, it's physically a preserving agent that hinders decay. The statement, “...*Have salt in yourselves...*” seems very much like an exhortation to continue to yield to the Holy Spirit as He comes to convict us of sin and bring us to a place of repentance.

So do this: “...*Have salt* (have that preserving agent) *in yourselves* (in your relationship with God through the Holy Spirit, and therefore, as a result of that,)... *be at peace with one another.*”

You see, if I'm not listening to the Holy Spirit, if I'm not hearing the conviction of the Spirit about the areas of sin in my life, what's going to happen? Am I going to be at peace with you and you with me? No, because we step on each other's toes from time to time. Have you noticed? In the church, we mess each other up all the time, and that's going to happen because the church is filled with sinful people.

Anybody who leaves church because the church was a place where they got hurt had their eyes on the wrong goal. We're supposed to have our eyes on Jesus, not on other people. You guys are going to let me down, and I'm going to let you down. Just want to prepare you for that. Okay.

So what are we going to do if we have salt in ourselves? In other words, if we allow the preserving work of the Holy Spirit to convict us of that sin and we respond to that conviction and we get right with God as it relates to that, the result is going to be, we're going to have peace among us.

But if we refuse to deal with those issues of sin and confront sin in our own lives, we're going to be at odds. Good grief. Churches, whole churches have split down the middle. Because people just wouldn't resolve their issues. They wouldn't have salt in themselves. They wouldn't allow that preserving work of the Holy Spirit.

Look what James says in James chapter 4, verse 1 on the screen here. He says,

James 4:1 (ESV)

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?(What causes those kinds of divisions?) Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”

Yeah. What causes church problems? What causes church splits? Oh, it's because this group was right and this group was wrong. No, they were both wrong. They were allowing their passions to be at war so they couldn't possibly resolve the issue.

Jesus says, have peace, have salt in yourselves and be at peace. That's only going to happen as we allow that preserving purifying work that salt represents to be operational in our hearts, amen.