

"Have Salt in Yourselves"

Some of you might remember a man by the name of Aron Ralston. He's the mountain climber who in 2003 got literally stuck hiking in a remote canyon in Utah. At one point in his hike, he had to boulder over a set of rocks, when somehow a large boulder fell on his right hand and his hand became stuck in the rock. When he got stuck, he only had about a liter of water on him. And he was in such a remote location, there was not any real hope of someone finding him. Well days went by, five to be precise, before he was finally rescued. But he wasn't rescued because someone found him and freed him. He was rescued because he amputated his own arm with his dull pocket knife. The knife was so dull that he had to put a lot of effort just to finally break the skin, then only to find that it wouldn't cut through the bone. He ended up having to apply the right torque and pressure to snap the two bones in his wrist. Then he immediately applied a tourniquet and started hiking back to civilization. Finally, he made it back to where people were and found help. Since then he's written a book titled *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* describing his experience.

Why did Mr. Ralston do this? Why did he amputate his arm? Well, he considered every option and tried everything he could. His water had run out. He determined this was his only option to save his life. And so he made this large sacrifice of removing his arm so he could live. He decided that it was better to continue in life without an arm than to die under that boulder. He had to make a pretty big decision and weight the options.

In our passage for today, Jesus calls us to weigh the options of eternity. Here we find Jesus engaged in an intense time of teaching to his disciples. In the previous passage he just taught the disciples that there are only two camps - those who belong to Christ and those who don't; those who are Christ's disciples, and those who are not. Now in this passage he looks at those same two groups from an eternal perspective. Those who do not belong to Christ are headed on a trajectory toward hell. Those who do belong to Christ, are those headed toward heaven, the place described here as "life" and the kingdom of God.

And so as we look at this passage, we'll see Jesus calling us to weigh the options of eternity. Which is better heaven or hell? And if getting to heaven means making some sacrifices along the way, isn't it all worth it? So let's look at Jesus' warnings in this passage and learn what they have to say about being a disciple of Christ.

In these verses we find four similar warnings by Jesus. The first warning seems to stand alone all by itself, with the last three paralleling each other pretty closely. The first warning in verse 42 is a warning by Jesus about a very specific sin - causing others to stumble. Jesus might still be referring to the way the disciples had tried to stop the man who was exercising demons. Jesus does mention specifically causing "little ones" to stumble, which might make us think Jesus is referring to only children. But commentators generally see Jesus using endearing language here to refer to any of his followers, regardless of their age. Just look at how Jesus describes these little ones in verse 42 - these are little ones *who believe* in him.

And so Jesus says pretty graphically - if someone is going to cause a believer to stumble, they are better off having a millstone tied around their neck and being

thrown into the sea. I used to imagine in my mind when I read this, something like a cannon ball tied on a chain and placed around someone's neck. But that's not actually accurate. The stone Jesus mentions here, this millstone, is a huge stone! It's something that a donkey would pull to grind grain. That's actually the way it's literally written in the Greek - literally a "donkey millstone". Jesus is speaking in pretty extreme outrageous terms. He's basically speaking in a form of hyperbole. He's giving intentional exaggeration to create an effect and to make a point. And what's that point?

In one sense, the point is that it's really bad to lead believers astray. But in light of the next three warnings that Jesus makes, there's also another lesson to be learned here. And that's an eternal lesson. See notice what verse 42 says about this. It says that to throw the man into the sea would be better *for him*. This would be better *for him* - *to be thrown into the sea!* Certainly we can understand how this would be better for the believer who might otherwise be caused to stumble. If someone is going to cause a believer to stumble, and the stumbler is removed from the picture, then that would be good for the believer, because hopefully then he wouldn't stumble. But Jesus isn't talking about that. He's saying that it would be more beneficial for the actual stumbler. It would be better if someone threw him into the sea to die than to let him cause someone to stumble. I submit to you then, that it could only be better for this man, if there is an eternal perspective here. There must be eternal rewards and punishments in view here for this to be better for the man. There must be a terrible eternal punishment for causing believers to stumble, a consequence so bad that it would be better to not be alive than to commit such a sin and face the punishment. And so that's Jesus point here. We need to see that our actions in this life have eternal consequences, and we should act accordingly. What we do in this life has consequences for our life in eternity. And of course, as we go on to read the next three warnings by Jesus, that is exactly what we see.

It's in these last three warnings that Jesus turns away from this specific sin of causing others to stumble and focuses on sin more generally. In verses 42, 45, and 47, Jesus makes three parallel warnings about sin. The first talks about a hand that causes you to sin. The next talks about a foot that causes you to sin. The last talks about an eye that causes you to sin. In each of these three warnings, Jesus advises us to remove the offending part. Cut them off or pluck them out he says! Why? Because the alternative is far worse. Jesus says that a life of sin leads to hell, and so we must get the sin out of the way, no matter what the cost or sacrifice. Jesus basically says in figurative terms, better to be handicapped in heaven than healthy in hell.

Now I want to make two important clarifications here. One, Jesus is speaking figuratively here, using hyperbole. I would not recommend that you literally cut off any body parts. But the radical notion that's involved here is just that - radical. Jesus is making a very, very, important point. And so we need to take it seriously. Our actions in this life head us in one direction or the other, toward heaven or hell.

The second clarification is this: don't confuse this language for a works based message. In other words, don't think Jesus is saying that you earn your way into heaven by your good deeds. Ultimately, we make it to heaven by God's forgiving grace. But Jesus is describing here what a true disciple looks like. A true disciple who tastes of God's forgiveness will not entertain a life of sin anymore. He'll realize that life without the forgiveness of Christ means that his sins send him to hell. And so we should realize that Jesus is showing us the result of our sin here, namely hell. But we should not misunderstand this to be saying that we earn our way to heaven. Because just one sin, is enough to cast us into hell with

a millstone so great around our neck that we could never escape. And all of us have sinned so much more than that in our lives. And so I'll talk more about how we get to heaven by grace in a moment. But what I'd like to think a little more about now is "hell." Jesus talks a lot about hell here. And it's the threat of hell that Jesus says should make us willing to make large sacrifices in our lives to avoid sin!

And so Jesus says here that our sin results in us being cast into hell. Many today don't like the idea of hell. Some say that hell is just a final destruction of the wicked; that the wicked are eternally annihilated. But this passage, along with many others, doesn't allow for that interpretation. Some with that bad view make the claim that the Bible doesn't even use the word hell anywhere, and that it was a concept made up at a later time. But of course our bibles right here have the word "hell" in verses 43, 45, and 47. So who is correct?

Well, the word hell is not a Greek word. The word here in Greek is *gehenna*, and our Bibles have translated the word *gehenna* as hell. The word *gehenna* originally came from Hebrew actually, referring to the Valley of Hinnom, or in Hebrew, *Ge-Hinnom*, and thus in Greek, *gehenna*. The New Testament is describing what we refer to as hell using imagery from the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the Valley of Hinnom was just south of Jerusalem, and it became known as a place of fire, because that's where the Jews would burn their garbage. Kings Ahaz and Manasseh even burned their sons there as an offering to the false god Moloch (2 Chron 28:3, 33:6)! King Josiah destroyed the place in the valley where this was happening as an effort to stop this evil practice. Because of all this, the place known as *gehenna* gradually became used to graphically identify the final resting place of the wicked, the place where they would undergo fiery punishment and torment for all eternity.

So, in some sense, the annihilationists are right. There is no actual word as "hell" in the Bible, because "hell" is an English word, not a Greek or Hebrew word. The word hell comes from old English, with Anglo-Saxon influences. But a word is a word. The English language uses the word "hell" to describe the same thing described by the word "*gehenna*" in the Bible. So, we can't get caught up on words.

Instead, what is the Bible's teaching on hell? What does it have to say about where the unsaved go when they die? Here in Mark it's referred to as *gehenna* and the imagery of fire is attached to it repeatedly. Verse 46 says that the fire will not be quenched. That's describing ongoing torment. Normally fire doesn't keep burning. It burns until there is no more fuel. If you have ever been camping and had a camp fire, you know you have to keep putting more wood on the fire, or eventually it will die out. But the biblical imagery here is that of an undying fire.

If that image isn't clear, Jesus mentions another one in the same verse: a worm that never dies. Worms of course eat decaying things. If you've ever ran into a dead animal, you might have seen worms and maggots eating away the flesh. But eventually the dead animal would be consumed by these disgusting creatures, and that would be the end of it. But Scripture uses the worm as analogy to describe the eternal torments of hell. The worms of hell never go away. They somehow keep on eating.

Do you see the imagery here? Hell is described as a constant torment and punishment. We are not making anything up here. It's just right here in the text. And in verse 48, Jesus is actually quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who gave this exact warning of hell being as an unquenchable fire and as an undying worm. So this was not a new concept even at Jesus' time either.

What's the point? Hell is a bad place. Hell is a place of eternal torment. Just because this message is not popular in our culture, doesn't give us the right to not talk about it. Jesus in our passage is using it as a threat to wake people up. He wants people to see that the result of sin is the eternal torment of hell. If that's the case, we should make every effort we can to make sure we don't end up there. We must do whatever it takes to stay away from that place! Jesus says that there is no sacrifice too big to stay out of hell.

But here lies the problem, doesn't it? If our sin sends us to hell, doesn't that mean it's too late for all of us? Haven't we all sinned and therefore are deserving the punishment of hell? Yes, scripture does say that. Or let's think about it from another way. Let's say we did follow this advice, and literally sever limbs to keep us out of sin. Does that mean, as we might seem to read, that in heaven, we will literally be without those limbs, full of battle scars so to speak? Would we be handicapped for all eternity, enjoying heaven, but not quite as good as it could have been if we could have enjoyed it in our entirety?

Well the answer to all these questions is Christ. You see, in Scripture we don't see a description of saints in heaven with handicaps or battle scars. Heaven is described as a place of eternal bliss. It's described as a place where our frail bodies are renewed and transformed into something incorruptible! And yet in Revelation chapter 5 there is a visual image of one in heaven with battle scars being seen. John sees in Revelation 5:6 a lamb standing as if it had been slain. Guess who that is? Jesus, of course! It's a visual picture of Jesus, the one who was slain for us!

Jesus sacrificed more than limb or eyesight. He gave up his entire life. But he didn't do this so that he could enter eternal life. No, he already earned that by his life of perfect obedience. He made this greatest of sacrifice so that we could enter eternal life. And so if we are to enter eternal life, it is not earned by our own cutting off body parts, it's earned by Christ's cutting off of himself for us.

Do you see how this answers our questions? Even though we've already sinned, and deserve to go to hell, we are forgiven by Christ. It was too late for us, but Christ intervened to save us! Through his sacrifice he saves us from the fires of hell! And because of this, he took the wounds upon himself, the nails piercing into his hands, the stab wound in his side, the stripes on his back from the whips. He suffered for our sake, so that we could be taken to the place where our bodies are completely renewed and healed! He sacrificed for us, not so that we could only barely escape the fires of hell, with a broken battered body entering into heaven. No, he sacrificed everything so that we could be brought into heaven and be made whole. He did this so we could taste of the great reward reserved for his people.

But if that's the case, then why did Jesus give these warnings here? If we are just forgiven of our sins, and saved from hell, why do we even need to worry about the warnings given by Jesus here? Well, remember, we started off by saying that there are two groups of people: those who belong to Christ and those who don't. To those who don't belong to Christ, this passage is a warning to them. It says they are headed for hell. It should call people to flee to Christ. It should call them to look to Christ who can save them out of this eternal damnation. But what about for us? Do we have nothing else to learn from this passage? Should we just stop at being thankful to God for saving us from, literally, our selves?

No, not at all. If Christ was willing to sacrifice so much to save us, then these warnings should speak all the more to us. If Christ was willing to give up his

very life for us, shouldn't we be willing to make sacrifices now in this life to keep from sin? Yes, we should, and in fact that's what Christ is telling us to do here. He saying that for those that belong to him, we should now hate sin. We should do whatever it takes to keep from it. Because we know what sin deserves and because now it has been revealed to us that Christ took on that punishment for us. Maybe the disciples then didn't realize that fully yet. But we do now. And so we should all the more be willing to make whatever sacrifice is necessary to keep from sin. That's what we should take away from this. That Christ now wants us as forgiven disciples to no longer live a life characterized by sin. Instead he wants us to live a life characterized by godliness and righteousness.

That's why this passage ends with a discussion of salt. We who are Christ's disciples are being called away from sin into a life of "saltiness". Verse 49 says that we all will be seasoned with fire, literally, it says we will all be salted with fire. This seems to be an allusion back to Leviticus 2:13 which describes how every grain offering is to be seasoned with salt before it's offered up. Here Jesus applies that to discipleship. In the Old Testament, the grain offering was almost like a tithe. It was a portion of God's blessings to you that you give back to God. But the law required you to season that offering with salt. Here that is applied to us as individuals. We are to be like that grain offering, we are to give back ourselves to God who has saved us so wonderfully. But we too are to be seasoned with salt. Salt is a purifying agent. And so that is what we need going on in our lives. As we offer ourselves to God in service and discipleship, he is calling for our lives to be salted. We are to be refined and grown. We are to be salted now with the fire of God's Holy Spirit in our lives, so that we will not taste the fires of hell later.

Similarly, verse 50 goes on to say that we must have salt in ourselves. We must be an agent of salt in our own life, and in how we interact with others. One of the results of this will be peace with others, as it says in verse 50. As we are the salt of the world, God uses us to make a difference in our lives and in the lives of others.

In other words, this imagery of salt in the last couple verses sum up what Jesus was saying in these four warnings before. As disciples who belong to Jesus, we must no longer live unsalted lives. Before we lived unsalted lives - lives characterized by sin, living in constant rebellion against God and his laws, and that landed us on the way to hell. But now that Christ has intervened in our lives, he has come not only to save us from hell, but to save us from our sin. He salts our lives by his Spirit. He does this so we will begin to live more and more free of sin. This is all a part of what he came to do in our lives. This is what discipleship is all about. It's growing more and more in the salvation which Jesus has brought to our lives. And that salvation isn't to only save us from hell; it's also to save us from sin. Jesus doesn't want us to sin anymore!

Saints of God, I'd like us to think about applying this passage to our life in one specific area. Here's something you hear a lot from Christians: I am struggling with a specific sin. Really? Are you really "struggling"? What does that word even mean, "struggling?" One dictionary defines the word struggle as "a task or goal requiring much effort to accomplish or achieve" (Dictionary.com). If you really believe you are struggling with that sin, may I ask, what are you really doing about it? If you are struggling with it then maybe that means you are up all night praying and fasting about it? Maybe it means that you are searching the scriptures daily for wisdom on trying to overcome it? Maybe you are getting counseling to help you overcome it and asking brothers or sisters to keep you accountable. Maybe you are losing sleep as your heart constantly aches about this sin that you "struggle" with? Is that what you mean?

Or do you really mean, well, I have this sin in my life that I keep doing. And after I do it, I repent and ask for forgiveness. And so when I say I am struggling with it, I actually mean to say that I am finding a Christian way to make an excuse for why I still commit this sin. Really, are you just giving lip service to the fact that you are fairly content to still engage in this sin? Maybe you've rationalized your sin in your mind - I'm a sinner, so I'm just going to have struggles with sin. Maybe you write it off in your mind, "Well God made me this way, a sinner, so he must be content for me to continue to be a sinner."

But that's not what Christ says in this passage, is it? Yes, Christ acknowledges here we are sinners. We are born as sinners and live as sinners. But Christ didn't come to leave us as sinners. He came to purify us and refine us. He came to set us free from sin. And then he calls us to turn from sin with the power that he gives us.

Hebrews 12:4 says, "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." I think that's a related verse to what we are describing. If we are really struggling with sin, what should it look like? Jesus describes it in our passage in radical terms, with cutting off limbs and plucking out eyes. We've talked about what that didn't mean. It didn't mean literally cutting off body parts. But what then does it mean? What then does it call us to do?

I think it calls us to *really, truly*, struggle with sin. Not to just say we are struggling with sin, and then go on our merry way. We need to stop just saying we are struggling with sin and actually make sacrifices in our life. Maybe it means we need to cut out of our life the bad influences that keep bringing us down into sin. This might mean giving up certain good things for the sake of something better - that is, not sinning. Maybe you need to give up enjoying a fine beer or wine because you actually end up drinking too much and fall into the sin of drunkenness? Maybe you need to give up the Internet because you end up succumbing to the temptations of pornography? Maybe you need to stop going to buffets if you are struggling with gluttony. Maybe you need to rethink who your friends are if they are more of a bad influence on you than you are a good influence on them, at least until you can start being the salt of the world to them. I don't know what your specific sins are - only you and God do. But think about how this might apply to you. Let's not just say we struggle against sin. Let's actually struggle. Let's actually fight. Let's actually make sacrifices. Let's get some battle scars for Jesus. That's why passages like Ephesians 6 talk about putting on the full armor of God. As we strive to live for Christ, we will be striving.

For Aron Ralston to cut off his own arm with a dull knife wasn't easy. But he made the sacrifice because he was convinced it was worth it. Surely that was tough. Surely the sacrifices we will make for Christ will be tough.

But that's okay. It should be a sweet joy to suffer in this way. It should be a sweet joy to make sacrifices in this world to keep from sin. Because we know what Jesus did for us. He gave the greatest sacrifice for us so that we can have eternal life. So that we could be brought into his kingdom. His sacrifice had eternal ramifications for us. Whatever sacrifices we end up making in this life now, are but little in comparison. But isn't it worth it? To offer up praise and thanks to the Lord who saved us? This is what Christ calls us to do today, and he promises to give his Holy Spirit to work this out in our lives by his grace. Praise be to him. Amen.

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