

“A Serious Faith”

– Mark 9:43-50

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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Mark 9:43-50 *"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—*

"where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' "And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched— "where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' "And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire— "where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' "For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. "Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another."

In our last trip into scripture, Jesus spoke of the very serious ramifications of causing another...*especially a weaker, spiritually less mature believer*, to stumble: *to cause him or her to sin*. But lest we focus too much upon others and not upon ourselves and the seriousness of sin in our *own* lives and eternities, Jesus moves on to deal with the affects...the cost of sin in our individual lives as well as what our attitudes should be concerning it. Perhaps we could say that Jesus, having already spoke about causing *another to sin*, was now speaking concerning causing *oneself to sin*.

We can, if we allow the culture around us to find root in our lives, sometimes begin to treat the concept of sin with a 'light' attitude and a passive heart. We can easily kind of laugh it off and begin to adopt the old byline of the comedian Flip Wilson claiming "...*the devil made me do it*." But Jesus...*and all of scripture for that matter*, never made light of sin, and the Bible throughout speaks of the corruptive attributes of sin and the damning and eternal costs of a surrender to such.

Certainly many of us have a problem wrapping our heads around this passage, as well as does our culture in general. Some folks will criticize the extreme nature of the call. Others on the flip side will throw down the gauntlet of legalistic demand. But few of us are actually willing to adhere to this passage or there would be a lot of people walking around blind and maimed by their own action! I'm sure there has been some extreme cases over time where someone did just exactly what this passage seems to be calling for, and I am just as sure that whatever was the cause, it continued despite their radical attempts to rid themselves of temptation! Meaning I believe one can easily sin without eyes...(IE 'lust'), and without a hand or a foot. We aren't sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners. And all the monastic flagellation and removal of the overt presence of temptation, will not stop you from sin or being a sinner. If it could, then Jesus died for nothing and His Father is a cruel and heartless deity.

Well then, how ARE we to receive this passage?

Throughout the gospels Jesus several times spoke in what could only be a hyperbole. In Matthew 23:24 we read “*You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*” Certainly most English speaking people know the real meaning of that phrase which is something along the lines of “You pay close attention to little things but neglect the important things.” Elsewhere we read “*If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.*” (Luke 14:26) But would Jesus have us *really* HATE our own mother? How would we rectify such a meaning with the rest of His scriptural instruction as well as the Biblical directives as a whole concerning love and family relationships?

Such passages are presented as hyperboles so as to present it with the impact that was desired by the master: so that the reader would clearly see and understand that Jesus was serious about the importance of the concept behind His words. The true meaning of that passage by the way, is that one must put God *first*. That our love of Christ and our commitment to kingdom service and ministry must be so far above and beyond our ‘love’ of family, that such family love would seem as if to be hatred in comparison! Such a passage easily and quite emphatically clears up the ‘family first’ propaganda that is so prevalent within the greater church.

So while I will step out into the breach to say I do not believe God wants us to ‘pluck out our eyes’, I can also say that He is very *very* serious about sin and our dealing with such in our lives. Because while on occasion Jesus used hyperbole, He was not given to exaggeration. Jesus wasn’t kidding around when it came to sin. He clearly meant that we should do whatever is necessary to deal with overt sin and temptation.

It seems clear here that Jesus was calling us to action when it came to sin in general, but more specifically, especially when it came to the sins that are beating us down. Jesus knew then what we all know today. And that is that we all have “skeletons in our closets”...*pet sins that have dogged us perhaps all our lives*. It’s true isn’t it? We all have our “thing.” For some of us, our “thing” is out there for all to see. We have been ‘outed’ sometime in the past, and our sin business went public. Maybe we spent some time in jail, or in court, or maybe we just got caught by a friend. For some of us, our pet sin is no longer private.

But then, for some of us, we are still flying under the radar and our most dedicated sin or sins are still wholly unknown except to ourselves and of course to God who sees all and knows all. Those ‘dogs’ are the easiest to keep feeding aren’t they? It’s a sad day for any of us, when that dog finally gets strong enough to leap the fence and get free, isn’t it? You know...when our sins go public and we’re ‘out there’ for all to see? A lot of us have experienced such a day of reckoning and we would give anything to have that proverbial “cat back into the bag,” wouldn’t we? But we let it go and let it go and we failed to get serious about dealing with it, and one day it just blew up. And again, many of us are still ‘in the closet’ concerning our greatest weakness and quiet about our most dangerous temptations. Yet herein Jesus is quite emphatic about it all. He entreats us to get serious about sin and do what needs to be done to whip it.

It has always been my belief that Jesus will remain seriously in the battle with us if we are seriously in the battle to begin with. Meaning, if I am truly fighting my sin, His grace seems to remain...His patience continues. But if I get lazy or nonchalant about such matters...if I begin to give myself some rope in some issue or some ‘permission’ to push the envelope, God tends to pull the rug out from under us, if only to get our acute attention. It is a grave error to believe that because God’s love and grace is forever, that so is His patience! If such was a fact with our God, then how do you explain the flood? Jonah’s whale? How do we understand what occurred with King Ahab, Ananias and Sapphira, or even King David? Jesus Himself warned in Luke 4:12, “*You must not test the LORD your God.*”

The truth is that we live in a time of “Jesus-lite”...a revisionist view of Christ, His ministry, and His expectations upon the lives redeemed by His very blood. Because of such, there is a wide call today to present a “bloodless faith.” To take the ‘edges’ (or so called) off of the Christian walk. To remove the ideas of sacrifice and effort...even the very blood of the cross, out of Christianity, deeming it an offense to our modern, genteel sensibilities. This very doctrine has cost some that I have known their very relationship with Christ, and some have manifested that they have in fact never known rebirth. Such rejection excludes vast segments of scripture and the very fact that when a person is born again, they are a “new creature.” Still a sinner? Oh yes. But now with eyes open and aware of sin and the path to a holy living. See, salvation doesn’t just *redeem* us from hell, it fundamentally and dramatically *changes a person*.

A religious blog I read made the statement “we don’t need a Lord, we need a Savior.” Well *scripture* says you need both! *Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* (Romans 10:9) Scripture clearly tells us that if we reject His Lordship, then we are NOT a new Creature, and therefore not really born again. For salvation is essentially a *surrender* to Christ...to His control and His new lifestyle as well as its demands. Anything else relegates rebirth to some magic words to recite and *voila* we’re heaven bound and square with the house! Scripture tells us to “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*” (Philippians 2:12) Clearly Christianity is not a one shot immunization and you are ‘good to go.’ Are you saved instantly upon conversion? Yes. But such is the *beginning* of a process that will take a lifetime of growing, failing, repenting, maturing, and experiencing God’s grace as well as His discipline. It has been said that we are *saved*, that we are *being saved*, and *will be saved*.

Somewhere along the way, such words as ‘discipline’ and ‘effort’ were unilaterally ejected from the Christian faith. I think they vanished ‘round about the time they disappeared off the American secular landscape. And many folks have bought into the rather idealistic approach to faith that says that since “God does it all” that means faith requires no response from me. Yet the apostle Paul even entreated us to “*Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless indeed you are disqualified.*” (2Co 13:5) and he called us to “*let a man examine himself.*” (1 Cor 11:28) He said elsewhere “*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.*” (1Co 9:24) He also wrote “*They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.*” (Tit 1:16) and “*But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.*” (1Co 9:27) The writer of the Psalms wrote “*I thought about my ways, And turned my feet to Your testimonies.*” (Ps 119:59) John wrote in Revelation “*Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.*” (Rev 2:5) and in John 14:23 he wrote “*If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.*”

How can we ever read scripture and avoid such passages as 1Corinthians 15:58 *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.* And Peter put it all to rest in his second letter, 2 Peter 1:5-9 “*But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.*” Such passages are found throughout the Bible, and all the denying in the world will not change that fact!

The fact is, we need to be deadly serious about sin! And Christ could not have been more emphatic as He is in this passage before us. We need to be willing to move against the sources of temptation in our lives with a vengeance. Jesus refers to the “*hand*,” the “*foot*,” and the “*eye*”. The “*hand*” refers to “*the things we do*.” The “*foot*” refers to “*the places we go*.” The “*eye*” refers to “*the things we see or desire to have*.” These three words tend to describe all the areas where we humans are tempted to sin. We are apt to embrace the gift of grace and use it...as Paul warns us against, as a license to sin. When instead Jesus is calling us to “cut it off” or “pluck it out.” Sounds serious to me!

We may claim we have a freedom to have a beer, but for many of you, that is a slippery slope to a drunken night in jail and alcohol treatment. The bible doesn’t prohibit you from having a computer, but for some, it is a doorway to the bondage of porn and life meltdown. That goes for the movies we watch, the places we go, and the people we associate with, the people we date, and the list goes on. How far are you willing to go to cut that sin out of your life? The Holy Spirit of God will give you the ‘mo to follow through with this if you are willing to step out and act. But He will not force you. **We** must “cut it off.” Please note that He doesn’t say *HE* will cut it off, but rather He asks you to do so. Response is requested. Action by you and me is required.

Sometimes that may mean things most precious and personally important! But Jesus will never take a back seat. He will not allow us to “have other God’s before Him”, even if they come in a bottle, on a screen, or with beautiful eyes. The issues we have mentioned however are the easy shots. But what about the more nebulous? I have known some whose jobs are the issues. They illicit a possessive spirit and a competitive and jealous spirit because of their position. That is sin also, and God doesn’t generally grade sins. Do you have a hobby or possession that is sucking up all your time and interfering with your fellowship and service unto God? Is fear or desire for comfort keeping you out of the game? Do you eat too much? Is a smoking habit killing you? Just how far are you willing to go to “cut it off?”

Let us not miss the final language in this passage. In an age of “lite-doctrine” and “easy faith”, Jesus reminds us of a place called hell, and pointedly reminds us that HE believes there is such a place. I believe in the security of one’s salvation...that you cannot lose your salvation. But I cannot avoid the passage before us. Such supports my contention concerning redemption being an event as well as a “work in progress,” as well as Lordship being critical to a new life...a life redeemed! We cannot ‘snack’ on scripture, picking and choosing which passages are true and just and which doctrines of Christ we are to adhere to. Because of such a practice, the Bible warns us, there will indeed be many in judgment that will claim a plethora of religious activity but will still be lost because “*He never knew you.*” (Matthew 7:23)

We are overwhelmed with evidence and calling that our lives must pursue holiness and will indeed ***if God is in you***. Such will be normative if I seek to “*love the LORD thy God with all my heart, and with all my soul, and with all my might.*” If I understand the breadth of my sin and its consequences, ...if I grasp the gospel message and its salvation, ...if I turn my life and my everyday living over to Christ as not just *Savior* but *Lord*. To embrace any other path is to reject His path and we are lost therein.

The good news today is that if you are hearing these words, it is not too late to repent and change your life. Jesus already ‘stepped up to the plate.’ Will ***you***? Are you willing to do whatever is necessary to break the bounds of sin? Perhaps it is the initial salvation that needs to be dealt with. Maybe it is a discipline issue, a Holy Spirit possession issue, a love issue or a need to “cut off” of the arm that offends us. But remember, it doesn’t just offend Jesus...it offends *us*. That is the language. That is the text.

That is the truth.