

ON THE MOVE WITH JESUS

IN MARK

(DAY 39)

*A unique, verse-by-verse,
life-application commentary*

by Terran Williams

DAY 39 – BECOMING GODLY (9:42-50)

COLOUR-CODE SUMMARY (THE FOUR MAIN WAYS GOD SPEAKS TO US THROUGH THE GOSPELS):

- **Blue** - something about Jesus' uniqueness and Lordship that shows he is worthy of our devotion, trust and surrender
- **Green** - something about Jesus' character or ministry that we can imitate
- **Red** - something Jesus taught that we can understand or apply to our lives
- **Orange** - insights we can apply based on the way various people responded to him

Causing to stumble

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.

Rather die than spiritually damage people who are of lower social standing than you.

- Jesus was still holding a little child in his arms (v36), and here it suggests that this child also believed in him. He had been speaking about how important it is to cherish, protect, care for and welcome powerless, overlooked people in the world. Here Jesus added the phrase “those who believe in me” to show that he is especially concerned with how Christians treat other Christians who are of lower social standing than themselves. After all, if we can't treat fellow-Christians of lower social standing with dignity and care, then we will never be able to treat people of lower standing out in the world with dignity and care.

- In verse 37 Jesus *encourages* us to welcome the overlooked people of less social power than ourselves. Now in this verse he *warns* us to be very careful about not causing them to stumble. By this he means that we must be very careful not to lead them into sin, or do any spiritual damage to them. And his warning is vivid: rather drown, facing a premature and painful death, than spiritually damage one of these “little ones”.
- Today, we need to be highly alert to those who are of lower social standing than ourselves, especially within our church, and do all we can to help them spiritually, and take great measure not to damage them spiritually. It seems that the best gift we can give them is not merely to try not to cause them to stumble, but better yet, by helping them grow spiritually, we should seek to teach them to walk.
- One more application to us: In every church there are people of lower social standing, people who have relatively less social “power” than others. In many churches this includes the children, struggling single parents, the aged, the handicapped, and the poor / unemployed. In light of Christ’s teaching in verse 37, and here in verse 42, it is a great honour to be involved in ministering to these people!

43-44 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. 45-46 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. 47 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,

Be ready to make regular sacrifices in your quest for godliness, obedience and spiritual growth.

- *What do the hand, foot and eye that cause us to stumble represent?* In verse 42 Jesus introduced the idea of causing others to stumble. He told us to take radical measures not to cause others to stumble, but here he tells us to take radical measures not to allow ourselves to stumble either.
- By “stumble” he refers to that which hinders godliness, obedience and spiritual growth. Obviously bad things and temptation cause us to stumble, but notice that Jesus refers to good things, such as hands, feet and eyes. These are good things in themselves, but sometimes it’s good, natural things that become the biggest hindrances to godliness, obedience and growth in our lives.

- Today, our natural desires for sleep, for touch, for food, for rest, for pleasure, for acknowledgement and recognition, for comfort, for convenience are examples. These desires are not bad in themselves. But we can easily see that if we allow them to dominate our lives, they will soon hinder our godliness, obedience and spiritual growth.
- *What does it mean to “cut it off” and to “enter life maimed”?* Today one of the great misconceptions about real spirituality is this: we think that the goal of spiritual growth is total self-fulfilment, where our deepest desires are satisfied. But Jesus says it’s not true at all. Real spirituality requires lots of routine sacrifices, little and big. Following Jesus will mean that we may need to cut away good, natural things from our lives, simply because our goal is not fulfilment but obedience and godliness. This is what Jesus means by “entering life maimed”. On the path of obedience we will often need to defy and neglect our desires for things like sleep, touch, food, rest, pleasure, recognition, comfort and convenience! We may need to end some unhelpful relationships. We may need to downscale our earthly ambitions, moving into a smaller house, or buying a cheaper car. We may need to get rid of the television set, or seriously curtail our exposure to it. We may need to deny ourselves internet access, if for example pornography is a temptation. We may need to leave great dinners / parties considerably earlier to secure better devotional times with Christ the following morning. We may need to leave those careers or places of work that make it extremely difficult to make any progress spiritually.

Let your fear of punishment and your desire to experience God’s kingly power at work in you, motivate you to make these sacrifices.

- Jesus motivates why we need to make regular sacrifices in our quest for godliness, obedience and spiritual growth. In verse 47 he says that it’s the way to “enter the kingdom of God” rather than to be “thrown into hell”.
- *What does “enter the kingdom” mean?* Given the context, it does not mean “take the first steps of becoming a Christian”. Jesus was speaking to believers, to his disciples. Eaton says that the word “enter” here is used in the sense of “experience”. In other words, “enter the kingdom” means to “experience the kingdom”. Eaton paraphrases this to mean, “experience the blessings of God’s kingly power working in your life”. So the first motivation for making regular sacrifices in our quest for godliness and obedience is that it’s the only way to experience the blessings of God’s kingly power working in our lives!
- *What does it mean to be thrown into hell?* Let Eaton answer this too: “In *this* passage, being thrown into hell refers to the salvation through fire (as Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 3:15) where the punishing, purifying fire of God

seriously deprives the believer of his reward if he has lived a rebellious, inconsistent life”. God has rewards for us in this life, and in the next — and the surest way to lose them is to refuse to give ourselves to a serious quest for godliness and obedience, and to the required sacrifices that come on this quest.

48 where

“ ‘their worm does not die,
and the fire is not quenched.’ [a quote from Isaiah 66:24]

49 Everyone will be salted with fire.

Rather turn from all disobedience and compromise now than experience the unrelenting purifying punishment of God later.

- In the previous verses Jesus mentioned “hell” three times. Now he tells us a little more about what hell is. The literal word used for “hell” in these verses in the original language is Gehenna, which is the name of the valley that was the rubbish dump of Jerusalem. The dump was marked both by rotting material (which explains the mention of worms) and by fires which people sparked in order to destroy the rubbish. In the first century Gehenna was often used to describe both the destruction of lives that wandered off God’s path, as well as the eternal punishment of hell after death.
- Jesus is vividly warning us disciples that we are in danger of ruin and destruction if we drift off his path, and give in to the temptations, compromises and distractions that come our way.
- In this passage, however, Jesus is not speaking about eternal punishment. Eaton refers to Eerdman’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* and says that in effect the use of “undying” worm and “unquenchable” flame does not refer necessarily to the *eternal* duration of punishment, but to the *steady, unrelenting* punishment of God until such time as the punishment is complete.
- Further evidence that these verses do not speak about the eternal punishment of someone, but rather about the temporary purifying punishment of the disobedient believer is seen in verse 49, which says that “everyone will be salted with fire”. Salt speaks of purification. And “everyone” here refers to “every believer”. In other words, to the degree that there is disobedience and compromise in our lives as disciples, God will deal with us firmly until such time as we are purified. This purification can happen while we are alive, and it also happens when we die and stand before the judgment seat of Christ, where (if

there is still compromise and sin in our lives) we experience “salvation through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15). Best we clean up our act now!

50 “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

Pursue a transformed character, being very careful not to allow your godly character to erode.

- Jesus changes the theme slightly, but picks up on the mention of salt (v49). Now he speaks of having salt in ourselves. This refers to the quality of our character and godliness. To the degree that we refuse compromise and disobedience, and pursue godliness and obedience, to that degree we are salty. Jesus says “salt is good” which is another way of saying, “Pursue saltiness with everything you have.” Dangerously, through carelessness, we can lose our *saltiness* (the erosion of godly character), which is difficult to regain. (One way to regain it is to “be salted by the fire” of God’s purifying punishment (v49).) But Jesus says to us, “have salt in yourselves”. And, of course, to the degree that our characters are transformed to that degree we will have “peace with each other”. It turns out that personal godliness is key to our relationships.