

Those against Jesus and those for Jesus

Mark 9:38-50 - Littlebourne October 10th 2021

This is the last time we'll see Jesus in Galilee - he's leaving to go to Jerusalem, for the final chapters of Mark that record the final week leading up to his death. Verse 30 tells us he was passing through Galilee this last time in secret, for he was busy teaching his disciples. We're seeing the last bit of that teaching, with some verses that are not necessarily easy to interpret.

Last week, the disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest. They have been thinking about exclusivity, but in an earthly way - which of themselves is the best, what sets each of themselves apart from each other, rather than what it is that sets them apart from the world around them. And they're not done with this train of thought:

v38

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."

We start off with John telling Jesus that someone else is using Jesus' name and he's not one of them. Look what John says: 'Not following us', rather than not following Jesus.

The disciples aren't so much annoyed that this person was casting out demons, not that he was using Jesus' name to do so, but that he wasn't one of the group. Remember two weeks ago, the disciples themselves were powerless against a demon in chapter 9 verses 14-18. In that instance, Jesus stepped in to help. This time, are they jealous that this person, whoever it is, can do what they can't?

This is the only time in Mark's gospel that John is singled out for something. We've seen Peter, in chapter 8, John here and James (along with John) in chapter 10 - the three figures who witnessed the transfiguration, Jesus' most trusted disciples - all failing to understand things, all getting things very wrong. In this instance, it looks like John is speaking for everyone, when he says they tried to stop this person.

So what does Jesus say about this?

v39-40

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."

First, he says "don't stop him". It's not the disciples place to determine who is really a follower of Jesus or not.

Then Jesus points out that this "no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me". Genuine mighty works done in the name of Christ do glorify Him.

This teaches us an important lesson - that not only those with credentials have a ministry. Not just those that have formal training can work for Jesus. This man, unknown to the disciples, is not one of the trusted inner circle, but he still has a part to play, which is valuable. Likewise, we that don't have any qualifications, no dog collars or robes, can still be part of God's plan and he uses such people for his purposes.

In Numbers 11, we read of a similar situation (starting at verse 26):

Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, "My lord Moses, stop them." But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!"

Moses says that it would be better for all to be used by God as he is. How do we treat other denominations or groups of Christians that have slightly differing beliefs? We should be very careful to determine what does and doesn't matter when we evaluate others that are claiming to work for God.

Some of the darkest days in church history have been when otherwise good Christians are unable to abide a particular difference of opinion over something unimportant.

In 1532 Fritz Erbe was imprisoned for the crime of not baptising his children. At any point he could have recanted and been released. The last 7 of those years he was held not 150 metres away from the place where Luther had translated the Bible in to German 15 years earlier, the translation that Erbe read to come to his convictions on baptism. He died in a tiny cell in 1548, having spent 16 years imprisoned. Those who were holding him there were fellow reformers, Lutherans, protestants.

When someone should be baptised - either as an infant or when someone professes belief - is not a matter of great importance today. We can and do agree to disagree about it. But back in the 1540s, even after so much about the sacramental system had just been upturned, people were willing to kill and be killed over it.

We mustn't make an idol of our particular ways of doing things. What major disagreements do we have presently, that will later come to be seen as unimportant? We're all blind to our faults in this regard, so I don't have an answer to that.

Maybe the question to ask is this: Is our neighbour warring against Satan? Is he really trying to labour for Christ? Paul says in Philippians chapter 1 verse 18:

Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

The disciples too should have rejoiced that good things were being done in Jesus' name.

Now that doesn't mean that absolutely anything goes - scripture tells us that there are instances that are clearly not right, that set someone up as a false teacher, such as denying the deity of Christ (John 8:24) or adding works to justification (Galatians) or advocating sinful lifestyles (2 Peter 2). If scripture is our guide in this, then we need to be clear on what scripture determines are the essentials of following Jesus, what we can reasonably disagree about.

There are just two sides ultimately - with Jesus or against him. We're warned many times that there are false teachers and those that lead people astray. But those that are working with us in the same work, are with us, even if they have different ways of doing things or differences of opinions on minor things.

v41-42

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.

Where the disciples want to judge on the basis of who's in the official team, Jesus distinguishes differently. The real distinguishing feature of a genuine follower of Christ is not whether they have the right labels, but what they are doing, how they are acting.

Jesus says this in Matthew 7 (verse 15-20):

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”

The false teacher is him that causes one of these little ones to sin, likewise the true teacher is him that treats Christ's body well. Not just do we recognise them by their fruits, but all will reap the consequences of their actions, good or bad.

v43-48

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.’

Now after we've seen that there are consequences for causing others to sin, causing ourselves to sin is considered.

The Greek word here for hell, in verse 43 and 47 is a transliteration of Gehenna (γέενναν), the valley of Hinnom, the rubbish dump outside Jerusalem. This is where infants were formerly sacrificed by some of the Kings of Judah (Jeremiah 7:31). The site was desecrated by King Josiah (2 Kings 23:10) and consigned to the burning of rubbish. Here, literally, the fire is not quenched and the worm does not die. In Jesus' day, this would have been the closest to a literal hell on earth that the people he was talking to would have understood.

Jesus is quoting the very last verse of Isaiah (chapter 66 verse 24) when he says "where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched". In this verse, the LORD says:

“And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”

There is no mistaking that Jesus is referring to the punishment due to those that rebel against God.

Our sin is a serious matter - the consequences will be dire, if something is not done about it. Hell is real, and whilst we don't know the specifics, we do know it's bad. It's better to lose any number of body parts, than go to hell.

Does Jesus mean that we should *literally* cut off our hands and feet and pluck out our eyes, to prevent us from sin, to avoid hell? If that were the case, the disciples, who we've seen were far from sinless, would be all walking wounded by the end of the chapter.

It's hyperbole, exaggeration for effect. Similarly, Jesus says in Luke 14 (verse 26):

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

Again, I don't think this is to be taken literally, but the call to place our love of God above love of ourselves or our families is clear. I think that Jesus is calling us to take sin so seriously that we would be willing to give up things fundamental to ourselves. That our sin offers such a barrier between us and life, that whatever radical steps are required to rid ourselves of it should be taken.

What we consider sin to be helps us to understand this. If the problem of our sin is just individual acts of sin, just the things we do, then it might make sense to cut off the body part that contributes to the sin, in order to eliminate the possibility of sin. But our problem is much deeper than that.

Romans 5:

...sin came into the world through one man...

...many died through one man's trespass...

...because of one man's trespass, death reigned...

...as one trespass led to condemnation for all men...

...the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners...

The problem, our sin, goes further back than our birth. We are born of Adam and share his doomed status. It's not enough to merely avoid sinful acts, not even enough to have the individual acts of sin we commit expunged. We must be born again, no longer born of Adam, but born of Christ, united with Christ.

When we cut off hand to prevent the sin committed with the hand, we are still left with the sinful heart, the sinful desire. We are left with the sinful nature. If sin is part of our nature, therefore the solution to our sin must be more than anything we ourselves can do. We need a saviour to avoid hell and to instead enter what Jesus here refers to - the Kingdom of God.

v49-50

49 For everyone will be salted with fire.

Verse 48 talks of the fire that burns up the wicked. Verse 49 talks of the fire that, like salt, preserves. There are differing interpretations of this verse:

1. This refers to those in hell - that they will not be burned up, but rather preserved in everlasting misery.
2. That this refers to the fire of the Holy Spirit, that will preserve those who have Him.
3. This refers to tribulations and trials that we face, that we will, like 'living sacrifices' (Romans 12:1) be seasoned with salt as the Old Testament sacrifices were (Leviticus 2:13, Ezekiel 43:24, Exodus 30:35). Your bible might have a footnote on this verse or might include a bit more that says 'and every sacrifice will be salted with salt' which is in some Bible manuscripts.

It's not easy to choose between these interpretations, all make sense to me.

v50

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."

This conversation started with the disciples talking about who among them was the greatest, and went on to their annoyance and pride in the face of others working for Jesus. Jesus ends it with this, 'have peace with one another'. Preserve that peace among the church, like salt preserves. And do not lose that salt, that preserving power, as once lost, it is not easily regained.

Conclusion

We often read the Apostle's Creed together here, which includes the line 'He descended into hell'. Some translations of the creed render it 'He descended to the dead' or 'He descended to the grave'. Some churches have removed the phrase all together. What does it mean that Jesus descended to hell or descended to the dead?

The creed was not written by the Apostles, rather it's intended to be a summary of the Apostle's teaching, written some time after, and like everything it's a product of its time. The inclusion of the phrase was likely to combat some particular heresy, but unfortunately we don't have details of why it was included.

The problem here is that we've been talking of hell in the sense of Gehenna, the place of torment, but the creed talks of the place of the dead, or the grave, where dead people are. The Greek form of the creed uses the word hades, which implies death, but not torment. Jesus does not just know what it's like to die, he knows what it's like to be dead. All those that are no longer with us here, who are awaiting the resurrection, waiting in whatever form that takes, are not left alone, but Jesus has visited them in death and his ascension into resurrected life shows us and them that this is what is coming.

Maybe we should change to the other translation of the phrase, which is probably better, but in either case, know that the creed teaches that Jesus really did die and go to where the dead are, but his mission there was not to experience torment, but to liberate.

Jesus suffered and died on this earth, took the wrath that God rightly would have poured out on us, so that we would be spared from Gehenna, hell in the miserable sense. As this passage teaches us, there are only two categories - those who are with Jesus, that have had their sins paid for, and those that are not.