

“Whoever is Not Against Us Is for Us”

The Twenty-Ninth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 9:33-50; Numbers 11:16-29

Now that the disciples have confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus turns to the task of preparing them for the difficult days which are sure to come. It is becoming clear to the twelve that the cost of discipleship is very great. Indeed, Jesus demands that all those who follow him deny themselves and take up their cross. This means that followers of Jesus must renounce all reliance upon good works and personal righteousness. Instead, Jesus' disciples must seek his righteousness through faith. But as this process of instruction unfolds, the disciples are having a very difficult time understanding how it is that Jesus can be Israel's Messiah, and yet suffer and die as he has been predicting. What does Jesus mean when he speaks of “taking up your cross?” What does it mean to be identified with the “sufferings of Jesus?” What is all of this talk of a resurrection? Why will Jesus be hated, despised, rejected, and betrayed? If Jesus is truly bringing messianic glory to Israel, won't the nation revere him and make him king? Jesus must deal with all of these issues. He must correct the faulty eschatology of his disciples. Jesus must also prepare them for the difficult days which are still to come.

As we work our way through Mark's Gospel, we are in that section of Mark (chapter 9) in which Jesus is instructing his disciples about the nature and character of true discipleship. This section of Mark (the second half of the Gospel) opens with Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ. Mark has described how after this major turning point in his ministry, Jesus began to speak openly to his disciples about his coming rejection, betrayal, and humiliation. Jesus has now told them three times that his messianic mission would inevitably lead to his death through an intense and final confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders in Israel. But Jesus also spoke about his death culminating in a resurrection from the dead. As Jesus reveals this to them, the disciples continue to be perplexed and wonder “what is Jesus talking about?” How can he be rejected and humiliated, if he is the Messiah?

To help answer some of their questions, Jesus took Peter, James, and John, up on to a high mountain where they were given a brief glimpse of his glory as he was transfigured before their very eyes. This was a glory which Jesus possessed from all eternity and which had been veiled in human flesh, and which Jesus would reveal to his disciples in phases. Not only did the three disciples get a glimpse of Jesus' messianic glory, they also saw Jesus speaking with Moses and Elijah. This amazing sight made it clear to the three disciples that Jesus was not only greater than Moses or Elijah, but that the ministries of Moses and Elijah were intended to reveal Christ to Israel in type and shadow. As the transfiguration came to an end, the three disciples heard YHWH himself proclaim that Jesus was God's beloved son and that the disciples were to listen to him. It was inescapable that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God. God sent Jesus to form a New Israel and he would lead his people in New Exodus through the wilderness of this present evil age.

As we saw last time, while Jesus was up on the mountain with the three disciples, the nine remaining disciples found themselves in a bit of an embarrassing predicament. A man with a demon-possessed son approached the disciples hoping that they could cast out the demon which had afflicted his son. But the disciples were unable to do so—despite the fact that they had been able to perform exorcisms when Jesus sent them out to preach earlier. A number of scribes (teachers of the law)—who were probably in the area trying to find dirt on Jesus—saw what happened with the nine disciples and the demon. The scribes

pounced and were soon engaged in a heated argument with the nine disciples, while a crowd gathered to watch the spectacle. In the midst of this debate, Jesus and the three disciples returned from the mount of transfiguration and walked up unnoticed at first, while the nine embarrassed disciples attempted to defend themselves against the teachers of the law. When the crowd saw that Jesus had arrived, they flocked to him, anticipating the fireworks that were sure to come.

After the man with the demon-possessed son explained his desperate situation and recounted how the disciples had been unable to help him, with heart-break in his voice Jesus laments, “*O unbelieving generation . . . how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you*”¹ While these words are spoken loud enough for everyone present to hear them, Jesus is clearly directing these words to his disciples. Their inability to cast out the demon sadly demonstrates that even though they have come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, they are really not that much different from those in the multitudes who now gather around Jesus for all the wrong reasons. Jesus is exasperated and heart-broken at what he finds. These men are still hard of heart and don’t fully understand what it means to be a disciple.

The poor man who brought his child to the disciples, won’t give up. He said to Jesus, “*if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.*” “*If you can?*” Jesus asks, pressing the man to see the full implications of his question. The man’s response to Jesus’ challenge is not only a confession of faith, it is an admission of the very thing Jesus has been lamenting. “*I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!*” This man’s response is not only theologically correct (he believes that Jesus can cast out the demon), it is an honest admission that even as believers, we all remain partly unbelievers until we die. Jesus not only silences the crowd and embarrasses the teachers of law, he takes control over the demon casting it out with a single command. Jesus restores the boy to health and rewards the father’s faith.

After this embarrassing incident, Jesus took his disciples aside and explained to them that the reason why they could not cast out the demon was because they did not seek the power of God through prayer. Apparently, the disciples had just gone through the motions—repeat the words of exorcism and the demon will automatically flee. But no, demons don’t respond to mere words, they respond to the power of God. Because the disciples did not seek the power of God through prayer, the demon was able to resist them. Jesus reminds them of this. The disciples must learn to seek the power of God in every situation. True disciples are absolutely dependent upon their master.

Jesus also used this time to explain to the disciples one more time that he must suffer and die and rise again from the dead—although this time Jesus adds that he will be betrayed and delivered over into the hands of men, a prophetic reference to his betrayal by Judas and to the sad fact that his own disciples will reject him as well. Once again, the disciples were troubled by our Lord’s words, they didn’t understand his point, and as Mark tells us, they were afraid to ask Jesus any more questions.

The next section of Mark’s Gospel includes an important series of vignettes in which Mark recounts a number of those sayings from this period in Jesus’ ministry when Jesus is preparing the twelve for the difficult days which lay ahead.¹

The setting for what follows is a house in Capernaum, no doubt, Peter and Andrews’ house which had served as a headquarters for Jesus and his disciples whenever they were in the area. The number of

¹ France, The Gospel of Mark, 370-371. See the helpful discussion of this in: Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 312.

repetitive words in these sayings (i.e., “in my name”) the mention of “hands” “feet” and “eyes,” and their placement as a group here in this section in which Jesus is teaching the twelve about true discipleship, probably means that these were a group of sayings which were memorized by the disciples and may have been incorporated into their own preaching.²

Whenever Jesus asks the disciples a question, our ears should perk up a bit because this means that Jesus is introducing important new teaching. In this instance, Jesus asks the disciples about something which had happened while the group was en route to Capernaum. As we read in verse 33, “*they came to Capernaum. When he was in the house,*’ [i.e., Peter’s house] *he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’*” Whether this debate was related to the previous incident in which the nine disciples were unable to cast out a demon while Peter, James and John were away with Jesus, is not revealed by Mark. But given the scene which preceded this argument, this may likely be the case.

You can just picture these men falling silent and then ceasing to make eye contact with each other when Jesus asked them this question. They were embarrassed to tell Jesus what they were arguing about because the question itself revealed how petty the argument had been. According to verse 34, “*But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.*” The very fact that the disciples would even think to argue about such a thing is yet another sad sign that they didn’t fully grasp Jesus’ words when he told them that they must deny themselves if they follow him. These men were citizens of a nation and culture which placed great stress on status and rank. We can surmise (with good reason) that these common fishermen were now quite proud of being one of Jesus’ chosen disciples. In the world of first century Judaism, they had moved across town to the right side of the tracks (so to speak). We can even imagine that Peter, James and John, were lording it over the others, because they were the ones, after all, who had been chosen to witness the transfiguration.

Once again, Jesus will use an occasion in which his disciples fail miserably, to instruct his them about the meaning of discipleship. In this case they will get a lesson in the true meaning of the law, specifically the well-known command to love one’s neighbor (i.e. Leviticus 19:18). Jesus will also reaffirm his call to self-denial. “*Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’*” Self-denial is one of the fundamental points of Christian discipleship! Recall that in Mark 8:34, Jesus had said, “*if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*” Those earlier words are clearly echoed here.³ Since the disciples mistakenly believe that messianic glory is soon to come, the disciples are still thinking in terms of rank and prestige. If Jesus is going to be the messianic king, then it is likely they’ll be members of the royal court. Here is where Jesus must correct them. Yes, messianic glory is soon to come, but the disciples must understand that such glory can only come through a cross and an empty tomb. Suffering always precedes glory in the kingdom of God. A disciple of Jesus must think in terms of being a servant—first of Christ, and then of each other. They must think of themselves as least, not as the most important. They must cease all this talk of greatness, rank, and prestige.

To illustrate his point, Jesus uses a very appropriate example. In verses 36-37, we read that Jesus “*took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me*

² Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 338-339.

³ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 339-340.

but the one who sent me.” That Jesus loves children is a prominent theme in the gospels. In this case, the child was probably familiar to all and a member of the household. But there is much more going on here than just the sentiment, “oh look, Jesus loves children.” The Aramaic word for “servant” is the same word used of children.⁴ The symbolism is not focused upon “childlike characteristics,” (i.e., innocence and trusting) but upon the fact the children had few legal rights and are under the care and custody of others. Therefore, true greatness is a matter of humble service and low-standing. When someone welcomes (literally, “serves”) a child (who because of size, immaturity, and most importantly, lack of social standing) who is among the least, that service will be accepted as though it were done to Jesus himself. And service rendered unto Jesus, will be regarded as service rendered unto God.⁵ Although it is easy to overlook, notice that these servants have been sent by their master, just as the disciples will be sent to Israel by Jesus. The disciples must understand the nature of their mission. They are not great men of rank and privilege, rather they are sent to Israel as servants.⁶ How they are treated, reflects how people truly feel about God.

The theological point is this—since the disciples come to the people of Israel as Jesus’ representatives, then those who receive them, receive Christ and the blessings of YHWH.⁷ Because Jesus has called them to be his disciples does not mean that they are somehow superior to the people of Israel whom Jesus has not called to belong to the twelve. Being numbered as one of the twelve is not a matter of prestige. Rather, Jesus has called the twelve to serve. They are to go about their work without regard to status. Nor are they to seek anything other than the best interests of the kingdom of God.

The next saying follows closely upon the theme of true discipleship being equated with service, not status. If the disciples saw themselves as possessing a certain degree of status and prestige, because they were called by Jesus, then it would follow that they would seek to preserve that status for themselves. Jesus’ comments about true greatness, at some point then prompts the question asked by John in verse 38. “‘Teacher,’ said John, ‘we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.’” Having been a part of Jesus’ inner circle, John now recounts how the twelve saw themselves as superior to outsiders, and that they actually sought stop those someone who was performing an exorcism in Jesus’ name. The twelve were the chosen agents of Jesus, so how dare this “outsider” perform an exorcism without *their* approval? The fact that the twelve even think this way, is once again indicative of how little they grasp about the nature of discipleship.

John’s question to Jesus immediately brings to mind the account in Numbers 11:26-29 of Eldad and Medad who were prophesying when Joshua came to Moses and asked him to make them stop. John’s words virtually echo those of Joshua, while Jesus’ words are virtually identical to Moses’. What troubles them is that while they failed in their most recent attempt at exorcism, here was a man, unknown to them, who knew how to call upon the power of God and was successfully casting out demons when they could not. Who does this guy think he is? Certainly the twelve outrank him in greatness. Why doesn’t Jesus stop this outsider? He’s not one of them! He’s not part of the twelve. John had not even considered the

⁴ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 340.

⁵ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 308.

⁶ France, The Gospel of Mark, 375.

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 340-341.

fact that Jesus may have authorized this man to do this very thing. After all, the man was casting out demons in the Jesus' name.⁸ What offends John (and the others) is that this man was not authorized to do this by the twelve. They think this is about them and their role in Jesus' mission.

Jesus response is very direct. “*Do not stop him,*’ Jesus said. *‘No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us.’*” The disciples are to stop interfering with others. The very fact that the man can do this is a strong indication that he is not an enemy. In fact, he may even have been commissioned by Jesus, although Jesus says nothing about this and gives no hint that he even knows the man. Whatever this exorcist was doing, he was doing it in Jesus' name, which implies that he understood that it was not the words of exorcism which caused a demon to leave its host, but the power of God which comes through prayer. In fact, he was doing what the disciples could not do—actually casting out a demon. He was certainly not a threat. He may even be an ally.

The basic principle that Jesus' kingdom is bigger and more extensive than the disciples presently envision is reinforced when he tells the disciples in verse 41, “*I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.*” Offering someone a drink of water was a very common and ordinary act of courtesy in first century Palestine. Anyone who gives such a courtesy “in Jesus' name,” at the very least implies that the drink is given because the recipient is likewise a believer in Jesus' messianic ministry. In this humble act of ministry, the one giving the drink not only acts as servant, he does so in the name of Jesus, and therefore in the name of God. Jesus certainly does not mean here that people enter the kingdom by doing works of service—i.e., meriting a reward. What he means is that those who are members of his kingdom do not worry about status or trivial tasks, they simply go about the business of serving others. Meanwhile God is aware of the faith and obedience which is present in his people, as shown in their devotion to Jesus.⁹

It is in this context of service and discipleship that Jesus goes on to say, “*And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.*” The NIV translates the Greek far too narrowly here. The passage literally reads “cause to stumble” not “to sin.” Since his disciples are to be devoted to service, such service should do never do anything to bring about the stumbling of another disciple (i.e., causing them to trip up). Specifically, this encompasses the idea of doing anything which might weaken or harm their faith in Jesus as the Messiah.¹⁰ Jesus warns those who would do such a thing that he is the protector of his disciples (even the littlest), and that someone who willfully causes another to stumble will find themselves better off had they been drowned in the sea, rather than face Jesus in the judgment. The disciples are not to oppose those who are “not against us.” They are not to draw the circle of discipleship so narrowly to preserve their own status. Neither are they to do anything which would cause another follower of Jesus to stumble and fall from faith.¹¹ This offense is so horrible, Jesus says it would be better had they drown before they committed it! The disciples would have known precisely

⁸ France, The Gospel of Mark, 377.

⁹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 344-345.

¹⁰ France, The Gospel of Mark, 380.

¹¹ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 313.

what Jesus was talking about, since the Romans had recently tied a millstone to the neck of a certain Judas the Galilean and then threw him in the Sea of Galilee for leading an insurrection against Rome.¹²

By now, the disciples are beginning to realize that following Jesus does not entitle them to great status or privilege. Jesus has warned them about causing others to fall from the faith, now he warns them not to be ensnared by their own sins.

In verses 43-48, Jesus' words are direct and to the point. Since Palestinian Jews did not like to speak in the abstract, but in the concrete, Jesus mentions specific parts of the body which commit specific sins. *"If your hand causes you to sin, 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. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. 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 than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."* The point is not that when we sin, we cut off the offending part of the body! The point is that when we sin, we are fully responsible for our actions. No blaming sin on someone else. No blaming sin on the devil. No blaming sin on the fact that my parents didn't buy me the bicycle I wanted when I was eight. When we sin, we are fully and solely responsible for our actions.

Jesus is telling the disciples in a very vivid and graphic manner, that whatever it is that tempts them (and which may cause them to stumble and fall away from the faith), must be cast aside. Since Jesus has called these men to abandon everything to follow him, they must be prepared to give up anything, no matter how dear to them, which may potentially sever them from Christ. This is not something they ought to do when they get around to it. This is something that all of Jesus' disciples must do, and do it now! Let us also notice that it wasn't mean Calvinist and Puritan theologians who invented the doctrine of eternal punishment. Jesus speaks here of a horrible punishment which never ends. If Jesus is not speaking of a literal fire, he is speaking of something so much worse that words cannot capture it. Suffice to say, literal fire or not, Hell is that place where God is present in all his wrath, without the cross and mediation of Jesus Christ to stand between God and sinners.

In verse 49, Jesus goes on to tell them *"everyone will be salted with fire."* That is, all of God's people will experience continual purification as they struggle with sin and cast off those things which risk severing us from Jesus. The disciples (who had undergone great persecution by the time Mark wrote his Gospel), surely understood these words to mean that they will endure suffering and they will struggle with sin. But God will turn this to their good, just as salt has a preservative quality. This is why Jesus can tell them in verse 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."* In other words, quit fighting with each other about who is greatest. "Be at peace with one another!" Failure to do so, will limit the disciples' ability to serve as a preservative agent within Israel (like salt) and among the people of God.

Thus the disciples must not only seek to do that which is necessary to keep themselves from stumbling by casting it away, they must realize that in seeking to be the greatest in the kingdom their behavior not only puts them at risk of judgment by causing themselves or others to stumble, not seeking to live at peace with each other will only negatively effect their allegiance to Jesus and the gospel. This will cause them to lose their saltiness, so to speak, that preservative quality on those around them.

¹² Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 346.

What, then, can we take with us in terms of application from these sayings of Jesus?

From these sayings of Jesus, three important themes emerge. First, membership in the kingdom of God is bestowed upon us, we don't earn it. The very idea that membership in this kingdom bestows some kind of new status and prestige upon us which will impress others around us is not only absurd—the world will hate those who follow Jesus, to even think in this way betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, because his call is not a call to greatness, but to service. The cross comes before the empty tomb, even as our own suffering must precede our entrance into glory. As servants of Jesus, in turn, we must become servants of others. We must think of ourselves like children (not because children are innocent and naive), but because children are among the “least” in terms of rank and standing. Christ is our head and we are his servants. As he denied himself, so must we.

Second, Jesus warns us not to draw the circle of who is “in” and who is “out” too narrowly. Yes, Jesus has disciples outside our narrow little Reformed circle. And while we are on solid biblical ground when we define a true church as possessing certain marks (the proper preaching of the word, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the proper administration of church discipline), there are plenty of true Christians in non-Reformed churches. Just as Moses warned Joshua and Jesus warned John, those who are who are not against Christ are our allies. In an age in which we face the threats of secularism and militant Islam, we need all the allies we can get! As one of our host pastors once told me, while he is an Adventist by conviction, eight years of imprisonment in a Cuban jail along with other pastors from various Christian churches, made it clear to him what Jesus meant when he said he is who not against us is for us. Let us be clear about what we believe and let us defend our faith. But let us do so without seeking to have Jesus make everyone else stop doing what it is that they are doing! For whoever is not against us is for us!

Third, Jesus warns us that all those things which cause us (or others) to stumble must be cast away. Let us never seek to do anything which weakens or destroys the faith of another. Better to be drowned than do that. Therefore, let us cast away anything which may cause us to stumble. Let us remove anything from our lives which may interfere with our allegiance to Jesus Christ. Let us get rid of it now, before it causes us to stumble. Let us be last by renouncing all claims to prestige or status because we are followers of Jesus. Let us deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. For Jesus is our righteousness and in him, we have everything we will ever need to receive a status beyond anything this world can ever imagine—that status which truly matters, that of being a disciple of Jesus. While this means being least in the eyes of men, it means being great in the eyes of God, who sees all Jesus' disciples through the lens of Jesus' blood and righteousness. Amen.