

SLIDE 1

Stumbling Blocks

Mark 9:33-50
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Sunday, July 11, 2010

SLIDE 2

Mark 9:43–48 (ESV)

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.'

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Between a Rock and a Really Hard Place

On Saturday April 26, 2003, Aron Ralston set out climbing in Blue John Canyon near Canyonlands National Park in southeastern Utah. It was to be a one-day hike. But as he used rock-climbing gear to negotiate narrow canyons, the unthinkable happened. Ralston pushed his arm into a crack in the canyon wall, and an 800-pound boulder shifted, pinning him.

He tried using a dull pocketknife to chip away at the boulder--without success.

He tried to rig a makeshift pulley with ropes to lift the boulder--that failed as well.

After three days, having gone through most of his three liters of water and his food, he decided to sacrifice his arm to save his life. First bending his body in order to break his wrist bone, he proceeded to use his knife to amputate his arm just below the right elbow.

Amazingly able to remain conscious, the 27-year-old climber applied a makeshift tourniquet and rappelled 60 feet to the canyon floor.

"I'm not sure how I handled it," the mechanical engineer-turned-adventurer said, the stump of his right arm in a sling. "I felt pain, and I coped with it. I moved on."

According to Sheriff's Department Sgt. Mitch Vetere, Ralston would have died if he had stayed in the canyon. "He had a will to live."

Although Jesus spoke in figurative language, he challenged his followers to make similarly painful decisions for the sake of their spiritual survival.

Associated Press (05-02-03); submitted by Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, Illinois

Introduction

We love being followers of Jesus when He doesn't ask anything of us, when it doesn't cost us anything—when he talks about loving our neighbor as ourselves, we generally nod our heads and agree. When he talks about caring for the poor, again we generally agree.

But when Jesus takes out the mirror, and asks us to look into it, and says that we need to take sin so seriously, that we should not count out amputation of the offending body part, rather than risk the fires of hell, then we quickly look for the door.

What is Jesus getting at?

To unlock we need to look again at the context in which Jesus speaks these truths.

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It begins in Mark 9, verse 30. Mark 9:30–32 (ESV)

Jesus Again Foretells Death, Resurrection

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, **“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”** ³² But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

Who could blame them for being afraid to ask! The first time Jesus told his disciples that this was what his purpose was, Peter made a suggestion about this, Jesus rebuked him strongly? Remember in Mark 8:31–33 (ESV)

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Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, **“Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”**

So at the beginning of today's text we see Jesus for the second time tell the disciples that His way is the way of the cross. This way is the way of true leadership. Not grasping onto self glory, but instead being willing to become nothing, taking on the very nature of the servant. But the disciples miss it again. Rather than embracing this, they instead debate "who is the greatest."

Perhaps Peter, James and John, having just been "invited" by Jesus to personally witness his transfiguration before them, are feeling quite proud of themselves, that they, of all the disciples, were chosen by Jesus for this honor. So now, just to settle things, they get into an argument about who is the greatest.

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Mark 9:33–34 (ESV)

Who Is the Greatest?

³³ And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

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One time I remember we were asked, "What is the sin that is behind all sin?"

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It is pride isn't it?

Behind murder is the pride, I know who stands in my way, I know who needs to be eliminated for me to experience and be who I want to be.

Behind adultery is pride, I know what I need, I understand my needs, I will take what isn't mine.

Check it out, is there a sin that can be name that pride, self sufficient pride, is not behind?

Even the very first sin in the garden has in its origin pride.

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Genesis 3:4–6 (ESV)

⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and

that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

So Jesus warns the disciples, avoid the stumbling block of pride. Be on the look out for it. And here is how you tell if it has got you: If being a servant is below you, if setting your life goal to serve is beneath you, then pride has gotten you.

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Mark 9:35–37 (ESV)

³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

The most accurate way to tell if you have “terminal pride” and to see if pride is tripping you up is that you have rejected your role, your primary job description as a Christian: You were saved not so you could serve yourself, but so that you would be completely free to serve others.

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This is the way to “firstness,” this is the way to “greatness.” Jesus says: You make the rest of your life’s goal to serve others.

Jesus does not exactly repudiate prominence and greatness, but he redefines them. The challenge is to be great in things that matter to God. Nothing is greater in God’s eyes than giving, and no vocation affords the opportunity to give more than that of a servant (10:43).

The word for **servant** is *diakonos*, the ordinary Greek word for waiting tables (Luke 17:8; John 12:2; Acts 6:2). It refers to personal devotion in service as opposed to service as a slave or for hire or as a priest, for example. The Greek world generally considered service demeaning and undignified; “How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?” (Plato, *Gorgias* 491e) expressed the basic Greek attitude toward service and servants. In Jesus’ teaching, to the contrary, the concept of service grows out of his concept of love for one’s neighbor. Jesus’ selfless service of others fills the concept of servant with entirely new content; the posture of the servant is a visible manifestation of the reality of God’s love. Greatness in God’s economy is not reserved for the gifted and privileged; rather, it presents itself to every believer in the common and simple tasks of serving others. Indeed, the more common and humble the task, the greater the deed, for humility is the essence of him who said, “ ‘For I am among you as one who serves’ ” (Luke 22:27). Service to others is *the* primary way in which believers imitate and fulfill the mission of Jesus (10:43–45).¹

Edwards, J. R. (2002). *The Gospel according to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament commentary (287). Grand Rapids, Mich; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos.

The simple profundity of this truth is better *enacted* than spoken. 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.’ ”

In our society we exalt children, we form our lives around them. But not so in Jesus day.

We are mistaken if we imagine that Greek and Jewish society extolled the virtues of childhood as do modern societies in general. Societies with high infant mortality rates and great demand for human labor cannot afford to be sentimental about infants and youth. In Judaism, children and women were largely auxiliary members of society whose connection to the social mainstream depended on men (either as fathers or husbands). Children, in particular, were thought of as “not having arrived.” They were good illustrations of “the very last” (v. 35).

The conclusion Jesus draws from the child in his arms is subtle and surprising. The child is not used, as is often supposed, as an example of humility, but as an example of the “little” and insignificant ones whom followers of Jesus are to receive. “ ‘Whoever *welcomes* one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.’ ” Disciples are thus not to be like children, but to be like Jesus who embraces them. It is Jesus, not the child, who here demonstrates what it means to be “the servant of all.” It is in the small and powerless that God appears to the world, as Jesus so trenchantly described in the parable of the nations (Matt 25:31–46). Our response to the hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, sick, and imprisoned is our response to God, for “ ‘whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’ ” (Matt 25:40). The humblest act of kindness sets off a chain reaction that shakes heaven itself, for whatever is done to the little and least is done to Jesus, and whatever is done to Jesus is done to God!²

Illustration

So if the first stumbling Block is pride, the second is exclusiveness, or exclusion.

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Mark 9:38–41 (ESV)

Anyone Not Against Us Is for Us

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.” 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

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the one who is not against us is for us. 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.

First the disciples desire to be view as greatest trips them up, now their desire to be viewed as exclusive is there downfall.

It is only human nature to want to be associated with someone who is well known. How many of us when we travel outside of Alaska are asked do we know “Sarah Palin?” And what do we do then, tell some story or antecedent about when we saw here, or shook her hand, or knew her when. We want others to know we are in the exclusive group who knows or who are known by the great ones.

The disciples want to keep their group, and their association exclusive.

We do this in the church don’t we? We are very proud of our church heritage, that we are a Bible Church, that we are the guardians of the word, the followers of the true Word. And when someone comes along, and they have a healing ministry, or a miracles ministry, or some other interpretation of Scripture that is slightly different than ours, we are quick to exclude them, quick to no longer associate with them.

Jesus has much to say about this attitude. He says:

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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.

Could this Scripture be especially timely for us? Is it time for us to reach beyond our particular “brand” of Christianity, and bless the work of God we see amongst our brothers and sisters, even if we do not agree with some points of their interpretation of Scripture? If they confess Jesus as savior, and if they are striving to live out their Christian walk according to the nuances of their interpretation of Scripture, and if we see the work of God and the fruit of the spirit, should we reject them, should we tell them to stop, because they are “not one of us?”

Jesus warns us if we do, it is to our peril and loss. And we have experienced this loss in the last decade. Fourteen years ago you send out a church, Crossroads church. You did it prayerfully, thoughtfully, and with intention. You did it at great personal cost and sacrifice. And now, because they have chosen a different way of worshipping Jesus Christ, and a slightly different way interpreting Holy Scripture, we have rejected them. We no longer “associate” with them. Indeed, some of us have even gone as far as telling them to stop. And what makes this so astonishing is they have not rejected us. They see us as their “mother” church. They bless us as their mother church. They gave us a great gift in this carpet that they gave us a check for.

Do we have differences in fine points of Christian theology—Yes. Have they taken a different direction in the way they live out their Christian life than we do? Yes. Do they pray, and worship differently than

we do? Yes. But do they serve the same Lord Jesus Christ? Do they have the same hope of heaven that we do? Do they depend on the same grace of God through Christ that we do? Have they not become a significant and important church in the valley?

Would Christ not say to us today: , **“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.**

Nothing is more damaging to the Christian soul than the pride of “rightness.” The pride that says, “I am right and you are wrong.” Maybe we should not make it our mission to “fix” Crossroads, now called “Northgate” Church’s Christian theology, but instead live ours more sincerely, with more humility and less pride—and welcome and rejoice in the work of Christ that we see in our daughter church.

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So pride is the first stumbling block, exclusiveness the next, and third and last—diminishing the seriousness of our own sin.

Which brings us to the text we started with.

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Mark 9:43–48 (ESV)

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 I am not going to ask for a show of hands, because if each of us took this literally, we would all be handless and footless in this room, because it is true, “That all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

The instruction to hack off body parts that cause one to stumble is an example of metaphoric hyperbole characteristic of Jesus and is not meant to be taken literally. Both masochism and bodily mutilation (with the exception of circumcision) were strictly taboo in Judaism (Deut 14:1; 23:1; 1 Kgs 18:28; Zech 13:6). Both Jesus and early Christianity eschewed a dichotomy characteristic of Greek Platonism that made the body and the material world inferior to mind or spirit. On the contrary, the Gospels and epistles repeatedly affirm that the body (e.g., sexual morality, financial integrity, the treatment of others) is often the manifestation of spiritual reality.

Indeed, the giving of a cup of cold water in v. 41 immediately preceding attests to the spiritual and eternal consequences of bodily acts.³

Jesus warns us to be on guard—for our own pride, our own “exclusiveness” and our own tendency to diminish the seriousness of our own propensity to sin. All of these are stumbling blocks to the rich and free life in Christ that He beckons us to.

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Conclusion

What should be our response? Repentance.

Today we invite you to come forward if you would like. If this Scripture today has identified pride, exclusiveness, or dullness to your own sin, perhaps you would like to come to Jesus Christ just as you are, and pray, and spend some time with the Lord.

Edwards, J. R. (2002). *The Gospel according to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament commentary (293). Grand Rapids, Mich; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos.