

Mark 9:33-50 "The Struggles of a Disciple"***

Main Idea: Disciples of Jesus tend to struggle in two areas, as did the original twelve as seen in Mark 9:33-50.

- I. We struggle with our view of ourselves (33-37).
 - A. We tend to think of ourselves first (33-34).
 - B. We need to think of ourselves last (35-37).
 1. The Lord calls us to be servants.
 2. The Lord calls us to give attention to insignificant people.
- II. We struggle with our view of others (38-50).
 - A. We tend to be hard on others and easy on ourselves (38-40).
 1. The disciples had a holy-huddle mentality (38).
 2. Jesus took a grace approach.
 - B. We need to be hard on ourselves and gracious with others (41-50).
 1. Genuine disciples serve others in practical ways (41).
 2. Genuine disciples don't cause others to sin (42).
 3. Genuine disciples deal firmly with their own sin (43-48).
 4. Genuine disciples work at living in peace with others (49-50).

Response: Three personal questions to ponder...

1. What do you think of yourself?
2. What do you think of others?
3. What do you think about Christ?

It's not easy to be a Christian. There, it's out in the open now. I don't think we talk as much as we should about how hard it is to live the Christian life.

Please don't misunderstand. It's not hard to *become* a Christian. The Bible teaches that a person becomes a Christian simply by acknowledging his sinfulness, repenting, and believing in Jesus Christ, His atoning work on the cross, and His victorious resurrection. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved," Paul told the Philippian jailor in Acts 16:31. The jailor did and God saved him that very night. No, it's not hard to become a Christian.

But it is hard to live the Christian life. The fact is we don't have the ability to live that life, not in ourselves. The power comes from God, and to experience that power we must learn how to live a Spirit-controlled, Word-centered life. It's not easy to be the kind of husbands and wives God calls us to be. It's not easy to live a godly life on the job. It's not easy to live for Christ at school. There is no part of the Christian life that is easy.

Simply stated, the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ involves *struggle*. Can we be victorious in the struggle? Absolutely. But to be victorious we must face the reality of the struggle head on.

We're not unique. As we continue our journey through the gospel of Mark we come today to an account that shows that Jesus' first disciples struggled, too. By taking a close look at what they did and how Jesus helped them, we can learn much about what it takes to please the Lord in our lives, challenges and all.

Here's where we're heading. Disciples of Jesus tend to struggle in two areas, as did the original twelve as seen in Mark 9:33-50. If we're going to be victorious we must face and then deal with these two areas of potential struggle.

I. We struggle with our view of ourselves (33-37).

I'm not talking about low self-esteem. I'm talking about a tendency we all have as sinners, a proclivity that ruins marriages, strains parent-child relationships, fractures church families, and cripples work teams. It's this...

A. We tend to think of ourselves first (33-34). Just like the disciples did.

Verse 33—"They [that's Jesus and His disciples] came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?'"

A Jewish rabbi would lead his disciples single file as they walked down a road or path (no ancient pupil walked abreast of his teacher). In Jesus' case, His twelve men formed a long line behind Him, thus giving them occasion to talk with each other without their Master knowing the subject of their conversation (or so they thought).

On this walking trip the disciples got wrapped up in a conversation they didn't intend Jesus to hear. It led to an argument. "What were you arguing about?" He asked them. Jesus knew. He always knows, brothers and sisters, for He is the Sovereign Lord.

Verse 34—"But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest." Who's the greatest? Why were they arguing about that subject? They were looking forward to the coming of the kingdom of God, a kingdom they knew Jesus would establish. Never mind He had told them twice He was going to die on a cross first. They wanted the kingdom and they wondered how they would rank on the pecking order when it came to ruling in the kingdom.

We can guess what prompted the argument. Peter, James, and John had just been with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. "We're more important to Jesus than you," they said. "We're His inner circle. Why, He can't even depend on you. You couldn't cast out that demon," they chided.

It's amazing, yet true. Jesus had just taught them about His upcoming betrayal and death (verses 31-32). They didn't understand about that, so they changed the subject and started talking about their favorite subject. Themselves. *I am greater than you are. No, I am. No, I am.*

Is this a problem that was unique to these twelve men? No. It's a universal problem. We have all gone, in the words of Isaiah, *our own way*. That's what it means to be a sinner—we live as though we are God in God's world. We tend to think of ourselves—not of God, nor of others, but of *ourselves*—first.

Jesus didn't let that problem slip by. Verse 35—"Sitting down [that's the posture a rabbi often assumed when teaching], Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.'" Our problem is that we think of ourselves *first*. According to Jesus...

B. We need to think of ourselves last (35-37). Here's the paradox of discipleship. To be first you must be last, the *very last*. In fact, Jesus calls us to two very self-denying actions in this teaching.

1. *The Lord calls us to be servants*. If you want to be first—like you just said you wanted when you were arguing—here's what it takes. You must be the *servant of all*. He didn't merely say, "You need to serve a few people." He said you must be *the servant of all*.

You cannot live as a disciple of Jesus and think of yourself first. There is only one Lord (and it's Him). The rest of us are equal. We are all servants, and our Master calls us to serve each other.

You don't exist for me and my agenda. I exist for you. You exist for those around you. The Lord calls us to

serve one another. When you have a need I have a responsibility. When your fellow brother has a need, you have a responsibility. Not simply to *talk about it*, but to *do something about it*, to SERVE that brother in need.

That might sound a little abstract to us, so Jesus makes it clearer in the next two verses. Verses 36-37—"He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms [the Greek is *enagkalisamenos*, lit. 'holding him in the crook of His arm'; note Jesus' tender affection], he said to them, '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.'" Here's the second self-denying action we must take in order to think of ourselves last.

2. *The Lord calls us to give attention to insignificant people.* What's true of a little child? A little child has no power or influence. He cannot advance your career. A child doesn't give you things. To the contrary he needs things and needs you to do things for him.

Wessel is right, "A concern for children was not invented by the welfare state: it goes back to the teaching of Jesus."

Yet it's not merely those who love children who are commended here. It's those who welcome children "in my name." It's those who reach out to insignificant ones because of Christ that are commended.

And it's not just children either. In the Aramaic language (which Jesus was speaking), *child* and *servant* were the same word. When Jesus told the disciples to receive a little child He was instructing them to receive children, yes, but He's also calling them to receive other insignificant ones, other servants, other disciples.

His promise is staggering. When we do that (when we open our hearts and lives to the insignificant ones), we are opening our hearts and lives to the Lord Himself. Beyond that, we are opening our hearts and lives to God the Father who sent the Son into the world.

Fellow followers of Jesus, know this. God does not measure greatness as the world does. According to the world I am great IF...I have people who wait on me, who answer to me, who do what I want them to do. I am great IF I have power and money and influence and if people listen to me. Not so in the kingdom of God. Jesus says I am great in God's eyes IF...I serve others and thereby point their attention to the Lord, not myself; IF I meet the needs of others regardless of what I get from them. A person who can do that is truly a *great person*.

The Greeks had a story of a Spartan called Paedaretos. Barclay writes, "Three hundred men were to be chosen to govern Sparta and Paedaretos was a candidate. When the list of the successful was announced his name was not on it. 'I am sorry,' said one of his friends, 'that you were not elected. The people ought to have known what a wise officer of state you would have made.' 'I am glad,' said Paedaretos, 'that in Sparta there are three hundred men better than I am.'" And Barclay concludes, "Here was a man who became a legend because he was prepared to give to others the first place and to bear no ill will."

True selflessness is rare. It ought to be common-place in the church.

Let's face it, friends. We all struggle right here. We struggle with our view of ourselves. We think about ourselves too much. We get our feelings hurt because other people don't share the high view we have of ourselves. When we're not invited to the party, we get upset. When we've been sick and no one called, we grow bitter. When we do a ministry and no one recognizes it, we feel slighted. We think we deserve better.

Beloved, people will never treat us as well as our sin-tainted hearts think we deserve to be treated. Your spouse won't. Your coach won't. Your waitress won't. Your deacon won't. Your church members won't. For two reasons. They are sinners and can always do better. And you are a sinner and will always tend to think you deserve more.

That's another reason why we need Jesus. You need Him to deliver you from the power of your sin as well as the penalty of it. And He will, if you'll call on Him.

Some of us need to pray right now, "Lord, please forgive me for being so self-focused. Please help me to begin thinking of myself last rather than first." And He will.

There's a second area of potential struggle we must face, as did the twelve disciples.

II. We struggle with our view of others (38-50).

Here's what that means specifically...

A. We tend to be hard on others and easy on ourselves (38-40). Like John was in the next scene.

Verse 38—"Teacher," said John, "we [the 'we' shows that John is speaking for the rest of the disciples, too] saw a man driving out demons in your name [that means, 'with your authority'] and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

John will later be known as the "apostle of love." But that's later. He has a ways to go before his natural instinct is Spirit-produced love. We don't see love here. We see a sectarian spirit, a censorious attitude. "He's not in our camp so we tried to stop Him, Jesus. We knew You'd approve."

What was the disciples' problem? Simply stated...

1. *The disciples had a holy-huddle mentality (38).* The "us four no more" view of God's work. "We're the only ones that are really doing anything for God around here." Be careful.

Why did the disciples get upset with this man? Perhaps they're remembering their own failure to cast out the demon in the last scene.

It's ironic that back in chapter 3 the scribes saw Jesus' miracles yet deliberately discredited them, saying they were the work of Beelzebub. Here we see Jesus' own disciples basically doing the same thing. They, too, as discrediting a work done in Jesus' name.

That last point is significant. This man was doing his work *in Jesus' name*. Jesus isn't saying that everyone has a right to do ministry however they want, nor that every ministry is a legitimate one. There are some people who *aren't* ministering in Jesus' name. That's another issue. If a person claims to be doing God's work but denies Christ, he is an apostate or false minister. Other Scriptures tell us what to do with those kinds of ministers: "warn them" (Titus 3:10); "command them not to teach false doctrine" (1 Tim 1:3); "have nothing to do with them" (2 Tim 3:5).

Those passages don't apply here. John says this man was driving out demons *in the name of Jesus*. That's a good thing. He was setting people free from demonic control, and he did so in such a way that it brought honor to Jesus. That's a good thing, right? To help people and to point people to Jesus is good, but not everyone agrees. John didn't. The other eleven didn't. This little poem sums up their thinking (is it *our* thinking?):

Believe as I believe, no more no less,

That I am right, and no one else confess.

Feel as I feel, think as I think,

Eat what I eat, and drink what I drink,

Look as I look, do always as I do,

Then and only then, I'll fellowship with you.

Far too often we have the holy huddle mentality. What about Jesus?

2. *Jesus took a grace approach.* Verses 39-40—"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."

John assumed that if a person isn't one of us it means he's against us. Jesus turned it around. If a person isn't against us, he's for us. That's the grace approach. Grace is willing to give people the benefit of the doubt. The first instinct of grace is to give, not ask for credentials.

That's a struggle for us. Chuck Swindoll's observation is worth pondering: "It is a curious fact that jealousy is a tension often found among professionals, the gifted, and the highly competent. You know, doctors, singers, artists, lawyers, business men and women, authors, entertainers, preachers, educators, politicians, and all public figures. Strange, isn't it, that such capable folk find it nearly impossible to applaud others in their own field who excel a shade or two more than they? Jealousy's fangs may be hidden, but take care when the creature coils...no matter how cultured and dignified it may appear."

Beloved, if we're going to please our Savior we must face the fact that we tend to be hard on others and easy on ourselves. What's needed?

B. We need to be hard on ourselves and gracious with others (41-50). That's what Jesus taught in the following verses. He highlighted four characteristics that He wants His followers to exhibit. Indeed, genuine disciples will do so—and in each case it will cost them.

1. *Genuine disciples serve others in practical ways (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."

A cup of water. Nothing big, perhaps, but it's big in the Lord's eyes.

"If anyone gives you a cup of water *in my name*"—that phrase indicates his motivation; he's not doing it for mere humanitarian reasons; he's not doing the good deed to get a tax deduction, nor recognition on some plaque as a do-gooder; he's giving the water *in Jesus' name*, that is, because of His gratitude for what Jesus has done for him and his desire to see Jesus receive honor.

"Because you belong to Christ"—if two people belong to the same Christ, then they belong to each other and should care for each other. If you have a need, it should matter to me for it matters to Him and we both belong to Him. My motivation in meeting your need is to please Him. And the person who does so, according to Jesus...

"Will certainly not lost his reward"—rewards are coming; those who serve well in this life will be rewarded richly in the life to come.

John Paton was a faithful missionary in the South Pacific in the 1800's. He faced cannibals, malaria, and other hardship. He had a successful ministry going in Scotland when he made it known that God was calling him to take the gospel to the New Hebrides Island (now known as Vanuatu). One old Christian gentleman tried to talk him out of it, exclaiming, "The cannibals! You will be eaten by cannibals!"

To this Paton good-naturedly responded, "Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own

prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms. I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by cannibals or by worms. And in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer."

How do you spot a genuine disciple? They serve others in practical ways, for Jesus' sake.

2. *Genuine disciples don't cause others to sin (42)*. "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."

It's possible Jesus is still holding that little child (36). As mentioned earlier, "little ones" here probably doesn't refer only to children as such, but is generally speaking of Jesus' followers.

His warning is severe. It's one thing to choose to sin, and that's bad. But it's another thing to make choices that cause others to sin.

You say, "Can we do that?" Absolutely. When a man decides he wants to skip church and play golf on the Lord's Day, it's a sin that reflects his value system. But when his little boy doesn't get to go to church because of dad's choice, and when his little boy begins to view the worship of God as "optional" because of dad's choice, that father has a double problem on his hands, his own sin and the sin he is causing, and he will give an account for both. Jesus says it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a stone around his neck.

Yes, people are responsible for their choices. But we influence those around us, and we can influence them to make sinful choices. And if we do we are heading for severe consequences.

Don't miss the weight of this. How we treat fellow Christians, especially young Christians, is very serious to the Lord.

There's a third way in which genuine disciples will be hard on themselves...

3. *Genuine disciples deal firmly with their own sin (43-48)*. "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 Lord calls us to be gracious towards others, but there's one person with whom we are to be very firm. That's ourselves. I am not to justify or coddle sin in my life. I must deal with it. *Cut off your hand. Cut off your foot. Pluck out your eye.*

Tragically, some have taken Jesus' words literally. The most famous case was Origen of Alexandria, who had himself emasculated in an attempt to gain victory over his sensual lusts. Not long after that the Council of Nicea outlawed this practice. Hughes is right when he writes, "Such mutilation is not only contrary to Scripture, but it is possible to be minus hands, feet, and eyes and to be neutered and still be the most libidinous, materialistic, proud person in town...What Jesus is calling for is not physical mutilation, but spiritual mortification."

Which is better, a momentary feeling of pleasure that comes from using my hand for sinful purposes, momentary pleasure followed by guilt and anguish and potentially eternal punishment, OR momentary pain, pain due to taking firm action to get rid of sin in my life, momentary pain followed by eternal pleasure? Which

is better? It's a no brainer. Five minutes of pleasure followed by an eternity of suffering, is it worth it?

Sadly, so many don't face the reality of this gamble. They naively think, "Well, if it feels good, I should do it." So they do it (they engage in premarital sex to get a thrill; they put a drug into their body to get a high; they watch porn to get a moment of excitement). And then what? They reap a consequence.

Beloved, if you live by your feelings you are in trouble. What's at stake? Jesus says *hell* is at stake. The word translated "hell" is *gehenna*, a Greek form of the Hebrew words *ge hinnom* ("Valley of Hinnom"). This was a valley on the south side of Jerusalem. In Old Testament times it was used for human sacrifices to the pagan god Molech (Jer 7:31; 19:5-6). King Josiah put a stop to that horrid practice. In time this valley became a place where human waste and garbage, including animal carcasses, were disposed of and burned. It became a symbol of the place of divine judgment.

It's significant that no one ever spoke stronger words about hell than did the loving Son of God. But there was no smug glee in His voice. Please note that He talked about hell, not to publicans and "big" sinners, but here to His disciples and elsewhere to religious people. Cole observes, "Jesus therefore spoke of hell to professed saints, and of heaven to acknowledged sinners, unlike many preachers." And when He spoke about such judgment, He wept (Luke 19:41).

Let's take some inventory. Have your feet been taking you places you ought not be? Have your eyes been observing images they ought not see? Have your hands been engaging in activities unbecoming to a follower of Jesus? If so, what must you do? Cut off a foot, cut off a hand, pluck out an eye. Not literally. But take drastic action to make it difficult to use that foot, that hand, and that eye for sinful purposes.

Men, if you struggle with porn, cancel your internet subscription and destroy your movie rental cards. You say, "That's radical." Yes, so is cutting off your hand, and that's Jesus' point. Get serious about getting rid of sin.

If you struggle with alcohol, what's needed is more than prayer, as important as that is. You need to radically restructure your life to get rid of influences and temptations and replace those negative influences with godly influences (church, the Word, Christian service). Take whatever step is needed to amputate that sin.

You say, "Are drastic measures really warranted?" Yes! According to Jesus, if a person isn't willing to deal with sin in this life, he's heading for hell.

Someone will object, "That doesn't fit my theology. I believe once saved always saved." I believe that too, that once God saves a person He keeps that person saved. And one indication that a person is truly saved is this—he deals with sin in his life. If a person excuses personal sin it's evidence that he doesn't know the Savior. It's not that he lost his salvation, for he never had it to begin with.

My friend, if you have sin in your life and aren't willing to get rid of it, take heed to Jesus' warning. "It's better to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to be thrown into hell with two eyes." Genuine disciples deal firmly with their own sin—and do so, of course, by the gracious help of God.

4. Genuine disciples work at living in peace with others (49-50). "Everyone will be salted with fire. '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.'"

Barclay says these verses "are among the most difficult in the New Testament." Wessel says that verse 49 is "admittedly one of the most difficult verses in Mark."

When Jesus says, "Everyone will be salted with fire," what's He talking about? According to Old Testament instruction, sacrifices at the temple had to be accompanied by salt (Lev 2:13; Ezek 13:24; Ex 30:35). Salt,

then, speaks of sacrifice.

We might think of it this way. You can sacrifice now OR later. It's *pay me now*, OR *pay me later*. It's suffering now, OR suffering later. It's deal with your sin now, OR deal with it in the coming judgment. "Everyone will be salted with fire." No exceptions.

In verse 50 He gives a command, "Have salt in yourselves." What's that mean? Cole's comments are helpful: "Those who have lived in the third world may not be able to give a chemical explanation, but they will know that salt is often adulterated, as sugar is, and many another commodity, by unscrupulous local retailers... The real point is that such *salt*, salt only in name, is now useless."

Saltless salt isn't good. Christless Christians aren't either.

In the sermon on the mount Jesus calls His disciples to be the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13). Salt is a preservative. We are to have a preserving influence upon a world that is rotting away.

But to do that we must be right with each other. And so He says, "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with each other."

Remember what just happened. The disciples had been arguing with each other about who is the greatest, then censoring another man for doing work in Jesus' name. They weren't getting along with each other nor with other believers. How would they ever reach lost people? They wouldn't, not until they learned how to have peaceful relationships with each other. Instead of rebuking others, these men should have been looking in the mirror and taking heed.

And what about us?

Response: Three personal questions to ponder...

1. *What do you think of yourself?* Have you been thinking of yourself *first*? Choose today to see yourself as a servant and then live like one. It's all about Him, not us.

2. *What do you think of others?* Have you been hard on others while being patient with your own shortcomings? Choose to stop today. It's time to start being gracious with others while at the same time being hard on sin in our own lives. You say, "But I'm too weak. I can't change." Yes, you can. The key is how you answer the third question.

3. *What do you think about Christ?* He came to save people from their sins. Do you believe that? Do you believe *in Him*? Call on Him now. He is willing to save you—that's why He went to the Cross. He is able to save you—He conquered the grave.