

Who Is the Church?

Mark 9:38-50

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It is an unfortunate truth that Christians are not exactly known for their unity. This is a reputation we have earned through the years by the consistent tearing down of one another and constant divisions. We have an endless litany of hoops that someone must jump through to be considered a “true” Christian. Max Lucado told a (fictional) story that illustrates the absurdity of how Christians view one another.

Sometime ago I came upon a fellow on a trip who was carrying a Bible. “Are you a believer,” I asked him? “Yes,” he said excitedly. I’ve learned that you can’t be too careful who you fellowship with, so I began to ask him some questions. “Do you believe in the virgin birth?” I asked. “I do,” he said. “Do you believe in the deity of Christ?” “No doubt,” he replied. Could it be that I was face-to-face with a real Christian brother? Nonetheless, I continued my checklist. “Do you believe in the return of Christ?” “I believe it is imminent,” was his response. “What about the Bible?” “It is inspired,” was his immediate answer. I was getting excited. “Are you a conservative or a liberal?” He was getting interested in me, too. “I’m a conservative.” I asked him as my heart began to beat faster, “What denomination are you a part of?” He said, “I am a member of the Southern Congregationalist Holy Son of God Dispensationalist Triune Convention.” I was excited, because that was my denomination. I asked him, “Which branch of that denomination are you?” He said, “I’m a part of the pre-millennial, post-tribulation, non-charismatic, King James, one-cup communion branch.” My eyes misted over. That was my branch as well. I had only one other question. “Is your pulpit wooden or Plexiglas?” “Plexiglas,” he replied. I recoiled in horror. “Get away from me, you heretic,” I said, as I walked away.¹

While this is exaggerated, there’s more truth to it than we’d like to admit. It is this tendency to attack Christians who are different than us which I believe Jesus speaks today in our passage. He reminds us how we are to view other believers, and how we are to conduct ourselves in the world around us.

The Exorcist

Our passage today begins with the apostle John coming to Jesus to tell Him about something they had done—probably expecting Jesus to commend him for his diligence and initiative, but Jesus has a different response.

³⁸ John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he wasn’t in our group.” ³⁹ “Don’t stop him!” Jesus said. “No one who performs a miracle in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ Anyone who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I tell you the truth, that person will surely be rewarded. (Mark 9:38-41, NLT)

¹ Lucado, Max. *A Gentle Thunder* Thomas Nelson Publishers (2001).

John and the disciples saw someone outside their small group casting out demons in Jesus' name. Believing that this was a misuse of Jesus' name, they told the man to stop. Jesus, rather than commending them, corrects their understanding and seeks to broaden their view of the world.

This passage raises many questions. For example, what does Jesus mean when He says that "No one who performs a miracle in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me."? Is He saying that a person who drives out demons in Jesus' name must be a true Christian? I think that must be what He is saying. There are a few reasons for this.

One of the attacks of the religious leaders claimed Jesus was casting out demons by the authority of Satan. Jesus pointed to the absurdity of this claim—saying that a house divided against itself cannot stand. He said that Satan cannot drive out Satan. This means that if the exorcist was truly driving out demons (and not merely trying to deceive people), he had to have been doing so by the power of God. And remember, just a short time before, the disciples, who had been given power by Jesus to perform exorcisms, found themselves unable to drive out a demon. So this man, it would seem, must have truly trusted in Jesus and thus received power to do this work.

The other reason I suspect this is because of a strange story in the book of Acts. There, we are told about the seven sons of Sceva, who tried to cast out demons using the same formula they had seen Paul use. Like Paul, they invoked the name of Jesus, but unlike Paul, they were unable to cast the demons out. In fact, the man possessed by the demons laughed at them and attacked them, so that they ended up running away bloodied and naked! Simply claiming to have authority over demons "In Jesus' Name" is not enough. I think Jesus was saying that since the Lord was working through this man, they ought to let him continue his work—even though he wasn't one of them.

The hard part of this passage comes when we try to figure out what it means for us. We tend to believe we've got the corner on the market for truth. We all know that the Union Church in La Harpe is the one place that has everything right, therefore anyone who disagrees with us on any point must be wrong...or at least that's sometimes how we act. The reality is that the Lord works through lots of people, and the body of Christ is much larger than we might realize. We might have all sorts of litmus tests for what makes a person (or a church) a true Christian. Ultimately, though, it comes down to one thing. Do they submit to and worship the Jesus of the Bible? Do they look to Him for salvation, forgiveness, and guidance? If so, they are believers...and the Bible says we are on the same team.

This is hard, because we all want to build our own little kingdoms. We want to see the things we are involved in grow and thrive and make an impact in the world around us. It is hard when we see others having the kind of success we would like to see happen in our own sphere of influence. But therein lies the problem. The goal is not to build our sphere of influence...it's to build God's kingdom! As such, we work together with other believers, not worrying about whether we get the credit, but whether people are pointed to Jesus. That's the challenge of what Jesus says in these verses.

Part of our problem is that we spend much of our time around people like us. If we were to meet Christians from other parts of the world, we would discover that though they worship the same God that we do, what that looks like is very different. They may have different emphases in their faith, they may have some practices that seem strange to us (that goes both ways), we might disagree on some points of theology, and we might feel out of place in their worship gatherings. But that does not make them any less Christians. Jesus is challenging us to see that we don't have everything figured out. We should work together with other believers, even though we may not agree on every point of theology or practice. The good news is we don't have to agree on everything to serve the Lord together. We simply need to agree on serving our Lord! If we do that, then He is honored, and His Kingdom grows. That's the goal we should seek.

The other statements Jesus makes here are equally confusing. He also says that anyone who is not against us is for us. Some have taken this to mean that all God requires is that we maintain at least a neutral position toward Him—that as long as we do not oppose the Lord, we are on His side. Some would go so far as to say only those who oppose God will be punished. But that's not what Jesus was saying. Jesus was merely saying that in a world that is hostile to Christianity, we ought to be grateful for anyone who helps us to carry out the mission God has called us to—even if that person comes from an unexpected place, and even if they aren't believers. Jesus' next statement makes that clear.

He said that anyone who even gives you a cup of cold water because you belong to the Messiah will be rewarded. I don't believe Jesus is only speaking of Christians here; He is speaking of anyone who helps the cause of the gospel. This doesn't mean a person is saved because they helped out the Lord's work, but they will experience some kind of blessing. We should be grateful for anyone who assists us in doing what God has called us to do. We should be wise in the way we approach the world. We should speak the truth. We must never compromise the message of the gospel. But we must also remember that God can provide help from unexpected places. We should be grateful for the Lord's provision, whether that comes through Christians or through the world.

Christian Practice

The second part of this passage speaks not so much about our struggle to get along with other believers, but about how we live out our faith—recognizing that how we live affects others in the Kingdom of God.

⁴² “But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone hung around your neck. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better to enter eternal life with only one hand than to go into the unquenchable fires of hell with two hands. ⁴⁵ If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better to enter eternal life with only one foot than to be thrown into hell with two feet. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. It's better to enter the Kingdom of God with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ ‘where the maggots never die and the fire never goes out.’ ⁴⁹ “For everyone will be tested with fire.

⁵⁰ Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? You must have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live in peace with each other.” (Mark 9:42-50, NLT)

Jesus uses some harsh imagery in these verses. He first speaks of the danger of leading other people astray. He says that if we cause any of the little ones who trust in Him to fall into sin, it would be better for us to be drowned in the sea than to face the judgment of God for such actions. The first question is, who are these little ones Jesus is speaking of? Are they merely children, or someone else? I think Jesus is certainly including children in this instruction, but I also think He is telling us that if we lead any other believers astray or into sin, the consequences will be severe.

New Christians tend to look at those who have been believers for a long time for cues on how they are to live. They look to us for guidance on what kinds of things are ok to do and what things aren't. When they see longtime believers engaging in certain behaviors, they conclude that those behaviors are good and right for Christians to engage in. The problem is that when we are engaged in sinful behaviors, we are unwittingly teaching the next generation of Christians that such things are ok.

The same is true with teaching. We must be very careful that we accurately teach the things of God, because we do not want to lead others astray. We must be very careful to point people to the Bible as their authority and not to our interpretations or guidance. We must handle God's Word with care, lest we lead others astray.

Jesus says the stakes are so high that we should take drastic action to ensure we are living correctly. In verses 43-49, He says that if our hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off. If our foot causes us to sin, we should cut it off. If our eye causes us to sin, we should gouge it out. Because being without one of those things is far better than spending eternity in Hell.

If you are reading from a modern translation, you may have noticed that the verse numbers skip from 45 to 47, and there is no verse 46. Why is that? If you look at the bottom of the page, you'll find that verse 46 is written there in a footnote. The reason verse 46 is not included in the main text is that since the verse numbers were created, we have discovered many more early manuscripts of scripture. The earliest (and thus, least likely to have been changed) manuscripts do not have this verse. So, to be on the safe side, modern translators make it clear that this verse may not have originally been in the text by removing it from the main body and including it in the footnotes instead. The goal isn't to change or edit the Bible, but to be as accurate as possible.

With all of that said, the far bigger question is what did Jesus mean when He tells us to cut off parts of our body?

Obviously, Jesus is not speaking literally here. The Old Testament law forbids such mutilation. This is hyperbole—He is intentionally using severe language to illustrate the lengths we should go to ensure purity in our lives. So what is Jesus saying then? I

believe He is saying that we should go to whatever lengths we must to rid ourselves of sin. We should be willing to take steps that seem drastic to the outside world in order to remove sin from our lives.

We know that a person can quickly go from simply having an infection to becoming septic and ultimately dying if we don't take immediate action. Sometimes, to save a person's life, doctors must amputate part of their body. It's an extreme measure, but it's necessary to save the patient. This is the analogy Jesus is using. He is saying that sin is so dangerous and infectious that we must take action to remove it before it spreads—because it will if we do nothing.

What might this look like for a believer? It might mean that we change the things we do. If we find that certain activities lead us into sin, we should cut them out—even if the activities themselves are not inherently bad. If we realize that the things we watch or listen to are negatively affecting our thought patterns and leading us to sinful thoughts and actions, then we must change what we allow to influence us. We may need to cut certain media out of our lives, at least for a period of time, in order to cut the sin out of our lives as well. There are myriad applications to this, but the general principle Jesus is teaching is this: we should do battle with the sin in our lives, no matter the cost. Look at the sins you struggle with over and over—what sets you off down that path? What leads to those behaviors or thought patterns? Jesus says when you identify the things that lead you down the path toward sin, cut them out! It's hard to cut out people, activities, or practices we enjoy, but it's worth it. It may seem like the cost of giving up these things is great, but the cost of doing nothing is greater.

Which leads to the next aspect of Jesus' teaching—the teaching about salt. Throughout Jesus' ministry, He compared Christians to salt. Salt makes things flavorful, it creates thirst, it serves as a preservative. All of these things describe the task of Christians in an unbelieving world. I think the emphasis in these verses is that Christians are to be distinct from the world around us. Our presence should draw people closer to the Lord. If it does not, then we are as worthless as “salt” that isn't salty.

It is unfortunate when people are surprised to learn that someone is a Christian, because they didn't see a difference in us as compared to the rest of the world. Wherever we go, we should be representing our Lord. Our presence should cause people to want to come to Jesus, not push them away from Him. We should have a positive effect on those around us. If not, then we are not serving the Kingdom as we should. We are about as useful as “unsalty salt.”

Conclusion

This passage is challenging in a lot of different ways. It challenges us to dig deeper in our faith and not to settle for a surface-level obedience to the Lord. It challenges us to examine our own selfishness and pride, and to sacrifice whatever we need to make progress in holiness. So as we close, I've got a couple lessons we should take home.

First, we must be humble in how we view other churches and believers. For the serious student of God's Word (which all Christians should be), it makes sense that we should wrestle with questions of faith until they make sense to us. We'll have convictions about certain points of theology. That's good. But we should also remember that we are sinful human beings who do not have everything figured out. As such, we should be gracious in our dealings with other believers. We should remember that people can serve the same Lord and disagree with each other on secondary issues. We must keep the main thing the main thing, and not allow secondary things to divide us.

Second, we must remember whose kingdom we are building. It's hard for churches to work together, and for individual believers to work together, because often we're concerned about who will get the credit for what happens. That shows we are concerned with building up our kingdom. This passage reminds us that we aren't supposed to be building our kingdom, but the Lord's. Don't tear down work that others are doing for the Lord. I sometimes hear people attack the work others are doing because they say they're only looking to build their own kingdom. That may be true. If their motivations are incorrect, the Lord will deal with it. But if the Lord is being honored, if people are being pointed to Jesus, then we should rejoice and get on board, because it's His kingdom we are building, not ours.

Third, we must treat sin like the dangerous infection it is. While Jesus was not speaking literally about cutting off parts of our bodies, He was using that analogy for a reason. There may be things that we find very painful to give up, but if we recognize that those things are standing between us and the Lord, then that sacrifice is worth it. We must sometimes take drastic steps to cut out the cancer of sin in our lives. Jesus puts things in perspective for us. Though it may be painful in the short-term, it's far better in the long run. Look at your life and see where you're being led into sin. Look at what is leading you to step away from God, and cut those things out. The pain you experience in cutting those things out of your life will spare you far more pain in the future.

Finally, we should have a redemptive effect on those around us. We are supposed to live differently than the world. In so doing, we should be pointing others to Jesus. Whenever you go somewhere, ask yourself, did I make an impact for the Lord? Have I helped to advance the kingdom or have I hindered it? This is the focus we should take into each and every interaction we have. We are supposed to be salt in our world. After spending time with Christians, people ought to be more like Christ. If they're not (or worse, they are less Christ-like after spending time with us), then we have lost our saltiness. Jesus says that makes us worthless.

These verses are not telling us how to be saved, but they are telling us what the person who is saved does. Saved people build God's Kingdom, not their own. Saved people remember that we are on His team, not vice versa. And saved people make progress in holiness, doing battle with sin and leading others to do the same. Jesus paints us a pretty clear picture—it's our job to make it a reality.

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