



Life Lessons for His Disciples (Mark 9:33-48)

A Handout

Following Peter’s moving declaration of Jesus as the Christ as well as Jesus’ powerful teaching that true life lies in Jesus for those who would deny themselves and follow Him, we find Jesus giving us a series of practical ways in which we can live out that selfless, loving life that flows into and out of us through the blood of Christ. Yet, even deeper, these are teachings that are especially momentous in light of Jesus’ appearance and forthcoming (at the time) death and resurrection.

A) True Greatness in God’s Kingdom: Warnings Against Coming First (Mk 9:35-37)

33 They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, “What were you discussing on the way?” 34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. 35 Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, **“If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.”** 36 Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, 37 **“Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me.”**

- Context: (2nd) foretelling of His death and resurrection: eschatological (end times) context
- Concepts of First and Last: Two Standards (The World and God- What does each value?) (v35)
 - ✦ First (World’s Standard): Material prosperity, Emotional security, Power, Can do or obtain whatever he desires
 - ✦ Last (World’s Standard): Restricted from doing what one wants because of money, people, institutions
 - ✦ First (God’s Standard): Spiritual prosperity and security (stable, trusting, humble healed relationship with God)
 - ✦ Last (God’s Standard): Spiritual depravity (yet unhealed relationship with God; eternal separation and judgment)
 - ✦ Eschatological context important: Spiritual prosperity/depravity is with respect to judgment outcome in the end
 - ✦ Two standards not mutually exclusive: God may give to those whom He wills (to whom He knows can accept humbly) things the world considers most valuable, but both material prosperity and material poverty are to be used for His kingdom
- Illustrating True Greatness (v37)
 - ✦ Jesus’ illustration of true greatness: children in both Jewish and Greco-Roman society held lowest societal status
 - ✦ We ought to place even a child, the lowliest disciple, above ourselves, so that you may be first in God’s eyes
 - ✦ Another practical look from Keller: Parent-child relationship- as parents freely and unconditionally love their children, so too do the same humbly with each other
 - ✦ In doing so, we receive- i.e. appropriately welcome God’s offer (of salvation)- Jesus and ultimately, the Father
- Importance of Jesus’ First/Last Teaching
 - ✦ Teaching is repeated in Mk 10:35-45, with similar context (9:32-37 follows second foretelling of death and resurrection, Mk 10:35-45 follows the third foretelling)
 - ✦ Disciples’ reactions to each foretelling: 1) Peter rebukes Jesus, and Jesus rebukes Peter (8:32-33), 2) Disciples do not understand but afraid to ask; discuss which of them is greatest (9:32), 3) Disciples argue over position
 - ✦ Jesus’ teaching after each foretelling: 1) Deny self, lose life to find it, 2) first shall be last, 3) to be great, be a servant
 - ✦ Repetition intimately links the gospel and our appropriate response: a servant life in Christ in light of the cross

Summary: To strive for true greatness and what is truly good, we must in love deny our own passions, desires, and needs in order to attend to the needs others. The cross is the foundation for our own reconciliation with God from which these fruits grow for God’s glory, and the glory of God through such fruit is the purpose of the cross.

B) Warning Against Division (Mk 9:38-41)

38 John said to Him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us.” 39 But Jesus said, **“Do not hinder him, for there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. 40 For he who is not against us is for us.”**

41 For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly, I say to you, he will not lose his reward.”

- Disciples try to stop someone not with them casting out demons in Jesus’ name (v38)
 - What is the problem? Perhaps disciples viewed him as competition, or perhaps it was in response to their own failure (Mk 9:14-18), or perhaps they felt that he did not have authority from Jesus
- Jesus’ response
 - Disciples should not hinder him (v39)
 - No one can truly perform a miracle in Christ’s name (i.e. by His authority and person, and love and mercy) and then speak evil of Christ afterward, as the attitude to perform in Christ’s name contradicts such a case (v39)
 - There are only two groups: those for and those against (v40)
 - Not only when it comes to miracles, but also when it comes to the seemingly small and mundane like hospitality (v41): from small to large, we must do it in Christ’s name out of His love, and we must know that we who do so are all on the same side, together in Christ (Phil 1:18)

Summary: As Jesus’ disciples and coworkers in the mission to preach the gospel, we must recognize each other as coworkers and work together, acknowledging differences in peace, trusting in Jesus in whom we are joined. We put aside such differences so that the gospel may advance from us unimpeded so that people may be reconciled with God.

C) Warning Against Stumbling from Faith (Mk 9:42-48)

42 “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, 44 [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] 45 If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell, [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] 47 If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, 48 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”

- Stumble: With end times context, stumbling refers to falling away from allegiance to Jesus and its dire implication
- All must come to terms with the fact that God has a place of judgment for those whose sins have not been forgiven, which is called hell
- Description of hell (Grk: “Gehenna,” trans. “hell”) in 9:42-48
 - ♦ Unquenchable fire (43, 45); [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched] (44, 46, 48)
 - ♦ Worm and fire imagery: “Gehenna” transliterated from two Hebrew words meaning “Valley of Hinnom,” a place south of Jerusalem where children were once sacrificed to the pagan God Molech (see e.g. Jer 19:5-6 and others). Later, during Josiah’s reforms, such sacrifices were forbidden (2 Kings 23:10), and the site became a refuse dump where fires burned continuously to consume regular deposits of worm-infested garbage. In Jewish thought, the imagery of fire and worms vividly portrayed the place of future eternal punishment for the wicked. (John D. Grassmick)
- Causing oneself and/or causing others to stumble has dire consequences
- Reality of judgment and hell help us to understand the urgency with which Jesus calls us to rid ourselves of sin
- Similar analogy repeated three times (hand: what you do; foot: where you go; eyes: what you see), all reflecting inner desires or inclinations that stifle our fruit, the fruits of others, and the gospel
- Larger Scale: Eyes (do you see the kingdom of God or the world?); Feet (are you walking the narrow path or the wide path?); Hands (do your actions worship God or someone/something else?)

Summary: We must turn and repent from our sin, lest it impede the fruits of our sharing, testimony, and witness to the gospel. The gospel is real and the kingdom of God is at hand. Judgment and hell are real; this reality must drive us to the same urgency that Jesus spoke with, so that people would not be lacking on the day of judgment in what truly matters: that their sins have been purified through faith in Jesus so that they will never be separated from their loving, merciful God.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the eschatological context help us understand Jesus’ warnings here in Mark 9:33-48?
2. Do you see fruit in your life? How does your reconciled relationship with God produce and grow the fruit that you bear?
3. How does either division or unity in the church affect our witness? Can you give examples of either that you see, either in the context of a local church, or on a larger scale (e.g. level of denominations, organizations)?