

## Life, Death, and the War against Sin      3.4.18 (Mark 9:42-50)

### **We Are at War**

One of the greatest lies ever perpetrated upon the evangelical church is the notion that your salvation is not dependent upon your sanctification – that is, that you do not actually have to grow in your love for, trust in, and obedience to God in order to enter into eternal life, so long as your sins are forgiven through faith alone in Jesus Christ. This is a damnable lie that has destroyed the souls of thousands – millions, perhaps – of nominal Christians, particularly in the American church. For the better part of two centuries now, people have been taught that Christians are called to holiness, that obedience to God is the path of greatest blessing in this life and greatest reward in the life to come, but they have not been taught that unless you actually become holy you will not see eternal life at all. American Christians have been taught that salvation is a static thing, a transaction which takes place between the sinner and God at a particular point in time, wherein the sinner gives to God his faith and in return God gives eternal salvation. And once that deal is done, it is irrevocable. Any change that takes place after that, if it does in fact occur, is optional, a bonus. If you doubt that this is the prevailing theology of salvation in American Christianity, just think of how many funerals you have attended in which the deceased, who lived a life of unrepentant sin, was declared “saved” and “in heaven” because at a particular point in time, usually as a child, he/she made that all-important transaction with God. This is heresy, and it has paved the road to hell for countless nominal Christians.

Salvation is not a static thing; a mere transaction which takes place at a point in time. Salvation is dynamic, for “salvation” encompasses not only our *justification* (which is a once-for-all declaration by God that we are righteous in His sight through no work or merit of our own, but through faith in Jesus Christ on the grounds of His atoning death and the imputation of His righteousness) but also our *regeneration* (the awakening of our souls from spiritual death to spiritual life), our *sanctification* (the progressive growth in faith, love, and obedience to Christ which is the outworking of our new birth), and our *glorification* (the completion of our transformation into the image of Christ which begins in regeneration, continues in sanctification, and is fulfilled in our death and resurrection to eternal life). No one will be saved who is not sanctified, because no one is justified without also being regenerated and transformed. This is why the Bible speaks of Christians not only as those who *have been saved* (cf. Eph. 2:8-9 = σεσωσμένοι; perfect passive), but also as those who are *being saved* (cf. 2 Cor. 2:15 = σωζόμενοι; present passive). So, to state it another way, no one *is saved* (justified) who is not also *being saved* (sanctified), and no one *will be saved* (glorified) who is not *being saved* (sanctified).

So let me state my case clearly and unambiguously, and then I will try to prove it from today’s text. *No one will enter into eternal life who is still a willing slave of sin.* For the sake of clarity, let me state it another way. *No one will enter into eternal life who tries to serve two masters – sin and Christ.* I state that thesis very carefully because I do not mean to suggest: (1) that the war against indwelling sin does not continue to rage our whole life long; or (2) that some who die in the midst of battle, appearing to have lost, will not emerge victorious in the war on the day of resurrection. What I am trying to say is that we are in a war against sin, a war in which eternity is at stake, and that those who acknowledge this fact, arm themselves for battle, and go forth to fight will be saved, and those who surrender to the oncoming assault and let sin occupy their heart like a conquering enemy will be lost. It is as simple as that.

That is my thesis, and in order to prove it, I need to establish two truths, both of which can be proven from this morning's text.

1. We are in a battle against sin, and what is at stake in that battle is our eternal destiny.
2. In order to emerge victorious from the battle, drastic sacrifices must be made.

This morning we will work through Mark 9:42-50, and from the very outset I want to challenge you to sit under the authority of these words of Christ. They are for you. They are not addressed to someone else; they do not apply to someone else's sin. They are spoken to you, and they address you in your sin. The question of the morning is not whether or not you are in a war. The question, rather, is whether you recognize that you are in a war, recognize that your eternal destiny is at stake, and are therefore willing to make the sacrifice necessary to achieve victory.

### **The Stakes of the Battle**

My aim in this first half of the sermon is to establish, first from this passage and then from a sampling of other passages in the New Testament, that we are in a battle against sin, and what is at stake in this battle is our eternal destiny. Let's begin by reading the text:

*"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. 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. 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. 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, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." (9:42-50)*

Under this first heading, I want to make three points. Then, before we proceed to the second part of the sermon, I want to take a moment to address a possible objection.

### ***This Is a Warning to Disciples***

First, lest we imagine that these warnings are not addressed to the church, to the disciples, but rather to those outside the faith, to those who do not possess the eternally secure guarantee of salvation, let us establish the intended target of these terrifying words. There is no textual reason to believe that the audience of verses 42-50 is different from the audience of verses 33-41. In other words, all of Mark 9:33-50 appears to take place in a private home in Capernaum (9:33), most likely Peter's, in the context of private instruction given by Jesus to His twelve disciples, instruction that was prompted by their boastful conversation along the way as to who among them was the greatest (9:34). These words were spoken to Peter, to James, to John, to Andrew, to Matthew, to Nathanael, and to the rest of the eleven who heeded Christ's warning and thus entered into eternal life. And these words were spoken to Judas, who tried to serve two masters and thus departed into the eternal fire. So this warning is addressed to the disciples, to the church, to us this morning.

Such is the case with all of the warnings in the New Testament. The books of the New Testament were written to churches, and within every church there are wheat and there are tares,

there are Peters and there are Judas's. And the warning itself serves as the winnowing fork which separates the wheat from the chaff. How do you know if you are a wheat or a tare? How do you know if you are a Peter or a Judas? You know by how you respond to warnings like this. Those who are being saved, those who have been born again and in whom the Spirit dwells, respond to such warnings with fear and trembling, and are stirred up to work out their salvation by making war upon indwelling sin. Those who are perishing, who have a form of godliness but deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5), who have an external attachment to Christ but no inward affection for Christ, ignore such warnings, believing they apply to someone else, and continue to allow sin to reign in their mortal bodies. So yes, this warning is addressed to the church, applies to disciples, and those who are being saved will heed it.

### ***The Stakes Are Heaven and Hell***

Second, what is at stake in this battle against sin is not, as I heard so often growing up, a loss of reward, as if those who wage war against sin and overcome it by the Spirit gain more jewels in their crown while those who surrender to sin lose their potential rewards while still being saved by the skin of their teeth, so to speak. No, those who overcome sin enter into eternal life, while those who succumb to sin enter into eternal fire. The stakes in this battle really are heaven and hell. This is evident in two ways in this passage.

First, in verse 42 Jesus says that those who by their own sin cause one of these “little ones who believe in me” (which I take to mean other believers who are weaker/younger in faith) would be better off having a millstone hung around their neck and being drowned in the sea. There is an historical background to this image with which all Galileans, like the disciples themselves, would have been familiar. When the disciples were children (around A.D. 6), a Jewish Zealot named Judas the Galilean had led an unsuccessful revolt against Rome, during which the Zealots had drowned those Jews who were loyal to Herod in the Sea of Galilee.<sup>1</sup> When their revolt failed, however, the Romans responded in kind by doing the same thing to the leaders of the revolt.<sup>2</sup> According to Kent Hughes,

“The apostles knew what Jesus was talking about and in their imaginations could see the drowned bodies of the victims tethered to great millstones as they swayed to and fro with the currents.”<sup>3</sup>

It is a horrifying image, and Jesus intends it to be. And it raises the question, what fate is worse than drowning? Because that fate worse than death is what awaits those who by their sin lead other believers into sin. The answer can only be hell... eternal punishment.

Then, in verses 43-48 Jesus graphically describes the choice that lies before us. In verses 43-44, those who cut off their hand rather than touch sin will enter into life, while those who do not will depart (ἀπελθεῖν) with two hands into hell (τὴν γέενναν) – the unquenchable fire (τὸ πῦρ τὸ ἄσβεστον). In verses 45-46, those who cut off their foot rather than walk into sin will enter into life, while those who do not will be cast (βληθῆναι) with two feet into hell (τὴν γέενναν). In verses 47-48, those who gouge out their eye rather than look upon sin will enter the kingdom of God, while those who do not will be cast (βληθῆναι) with two eyes into hell (τὴν

---

<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* XIV. xv. 10; cited in James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 293.

<sup>2</sup> Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum* i. 67; cited in William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 346.

<sup>3</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 225.

γέενναν), “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” This final phrase is a quotation from Isa. 66:24, and is a reference to those who have been slain by the LORD in the final judgment (Isa. 66:15-16).

The word translated “hell” in each of these verses is the Greek word *Gehenna*. The origin of this word comes from the Valley of Hinnom (*Gehenna* transliterates *Hinnom*), which is the steep ravine southwest of the old city of Jerusalem. During the reign of the wicked kings Ahaz and Manasseh, it had been the location of child sacrifice to pagan gods (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). During the reforms of King Josiah, the practice of child sacrifice was abolished and the Hinnom Valley was desecrated and made into a garbage dump where the refuse of Jerusalem was perpetually burned. It was a dirty, defiled, horrific place of maggots and unending fire (“where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched”). According to James Edwards, *Gehenna* “became a symbol of divine wrath and punishment in subsequent Judaism and Christianity, or of the darkness, pain, and torment resulting from it.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, “hell” is a pretty accurate translation of the word. And because it is set in parallel to “life” in “the kingdom of God” which is eternal, the punishment of *Gehenna* must likewise be eternal.

So you tell me, what is at stake in the war against indwelling sin? To the victorious, eternal life in the kingdom of God. And to the defeated, a fate worse than death on the burning trash heap outside the gates of the kingdom, where the worm does not die and the fire never goes out. Beloved, do not shrug off this warning, and do not toy around with sin.

But does this notion that your eternal destiny hangs upon whether you overcome sin or succumb to sin find support elsewhere in Scripture? It most certainly does. We could literally spend the next two hours walking through passages which teach the same truth and issue the same warning, but for the sake of time and sanity, let’s restrict ourselves to four, one from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament.

First, I want to take us back to Ezekiel 36 and to the promise of the new covenant in order to show you that holiness (sanctification) is part of the new covenant promise:

*“I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (Ezek. 36:24-28)*

The people of the new covenant will be a clean and holy people, having a heart of flesh instead of a heart of stone, being indwelt by the Spirit of God, and being *caused* to walk in obedience to God’s commands. Therefore, if someone does not have a heart of flesh (thereby exhibiting new affections for God), and does not walk in new obedience to God but continues to serve their idols of sin, then they are not truly among the new covenant people of God, they are not indwelt by the Spirit of God, and they will not dwell in the presence of God in the new covenant land (the new heavens and new earth).

Second, let’s journey to Romans 8 and hear from the apostle Paul.

---

<sup>4</sup> Edwards, 294.

*For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Rom. 8:13)*

To live according to the flesh (to succumb to sin and let it reign over you like an occupying force) results in death. But rising up against the enemy of sin, waging war against it by the power of the Spirit, making every sacrifice necessary (cutting off hands and feet and gouging out eyes), results in life. For Paul, just like for Jesus, heaven and hell are at stake in the battle against sin.

Third, let's go to the book of Hebrews, where the author urges his readers to

*Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. (Heb. 12:14)*

Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. And holiness does not just come by passively waiting for it. You must strive for it – by cutting off hands and feet, and tearing out eyes.

Finally, let's go to the book of Revelation, where God differentiates between those who enter into the New Jerusalem and those who will enter into the lake of fire.

*The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. (Rev. 21:7-8)*

The inheritance, the new heavens and new earth, belongs to those who conquer. Those who conquer what? The parallelism with verse 8 make clear that what the LORD has in mind is the conquering of sin. Those who conquer cowardice, faithlessness, detestable acts, murder, sexual immorality, sorcery, idolatry, deceit, and all the other sins which hold mankind in bondage, will be the heirs of God's everlasting kingdom.

So, yes, we are in a war against sin, and the stakes of this battle are heaven and hell. And with the stakes that high, defeat is not an option. We must be willing to take any steps necessary to overcome sin and win the battle.

### ***There Is Collateral Damage to Sin***

The third truth to draw forth from this passage under the heading of the stakes of the battle is that there is collateral damage to sin. As in any war, there are casualties not only among the combatants, but also among the civilians. When a bomb drops on a munitions factory, and the resultant explosion kills the family in the house next door, that is called collateral damage. It is the unintended yet inevitable consequence of war. The same thing happens in the battle against sin. In other words, it is not merely our eternity which is at stake in the battle against sin.

Our sins can have devastating consequences upon others, particularly those “little ones” who are younger or weaker in faith than we, those who are children or children in the faith, so to speak. The textual links<sup>5</sup> between verse 42 and the verses preceding indicate that Jesus still has

---

<sup>5</sup> I find two textual links at the beginning of verse 42. First, in the Greek (not the ESV) v. 42 begins with καὶ ὅς = “and whoever”, the καὶ indicating a continuation of the thought in v. 41. Second, the presence of the demonstrative pronoun τῶν μικρῶν τούτων (“these little ones”) indicates that Jesus has particular “little ones” in mind, specifically the unnamed exorcist of v. 38.

the context of verses 38-41 in mind. By trying to stop the unnamed exorcist who was casting out demons in Jesus' name, the disciples were in danger of discouraging him and causing him to stumble (σκανδαλίση). I want to read James Edwards' comment on this verse, because I think it is particularly helpful in identifying the point of Jesus' terrifying warning:

“[Mark] 9:42 is a sober warning against inhibiting, injuring, or destroying the faith of simple and ordinary disciples. The Greek word translated ‘cause to sin’ (*skandalizein*) means ‘to cause to stumble’ or ‘to offend,’ and in this instance refers to destroying the faith of a fellow believer or causing a believer to fall away from God. The punishment for such an offense is calamitous.”<sup>6</sup>

The apostle Paul expresses the same thought in 1 Corinthians 8:11 when he warns us not to destroy the weaker brother for whom Christ died.

Beloved, there are always people watching your life. Your own children, the children of this church who look up to you, weaker brothers and sisters who are newer to the faith, and they are all affected by your sin. So bear this truth in mind, that it is not only your eternal destiny that is at stake in the battle against sin, but the eternal destinies of others. So heed this warning, and do not by your sin destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

### ***Yet Salvation Remains Entirely of Grace***

Now, before I move on to the second heading, let me answer a possible objection to what I have been saying. The objection goes as follows... If you say that our eternal destiny is dependent upon whether or not we are victorious in the battle against sin, does this not make our salvation dependent upon our works rather than grace? Does this not ground our salvation in our own righteousness achieved through self-effort and law-keeping rather than in the righteousness of Christ received through faith? It is a good question, and one that requires far more explanation and exposition than we have time for this morning. So right now I will simply answer “no,” salvation remains entirely of grace, grounded solely upon the blood of Christ shed upon the cross and the righteousness of Christ imputed to us through faith. And I will give you four brief reasons why.

First, though sanctification is necessary for all who would enter into eternal life, justification remains the sole grounds of our acceptance before God. And justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, because of the blood and righteousness of Christ alone. No one enters heaven on the basis of his own righteousness. Those who enter will do so on the basis of the righteousness of Christ alone, received by a faith that then pursues righteousness.

Second, good works are merely the fruit of true faith, and true faith is the only kind of faith that justifies. A dead faith that does not pursue righteousness is a faith that does not save. Therefore, the statement, “Only the righteous will enter into heaven,” is no different from saying, “Only those with a true and living faith will enter into heaven,” for a true and living faith always produces the fruit of righteousness.

Third, the only reason true righteousness is possible is because we have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, which is a sovereign and monergistic work of God. To use another illustration, when Lazarus was raised from the dead, he did not come forth from the tomb boasting in his own ability to walk. He came from the tomb boasting in Christ's ability to raise the dead. Lazarus' walking is merely the inevitable result of Jesus' raising. So our good works, which are necessary to our entering into eternal life, are merely the result of God's sovereign and gracious power in raising us from the dead.

---

<sup>6</sup> Edwards, 293.

Fourth, even our works of righteousness are the fruit of the Spirit's work within us. Sanctification is not a work of the flesh, but a work of grace, through faith, in the power of the Holy Spirit. When the author of Hebrews says, "Pursue that holiness without which no one will see the LORD" (Heb. 12:14), he does not mean, "Grit your teeth and try your hardest to be good." He means, "Walk by faith in the Holy Spirit's sin-killing, righteousness-producing power." When Paul says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12), he does not mean, "Bring your own salvation to pass." He means, "Walk by faith in the promise that God is bringing you to salvation by willing and working in you for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13; cf. Phil. 1:6).

So there is no contradiction whatsoever between the statement, "You must kill sin or you will not enter into eternal life," and, "Salvation is entirely of grace." When it comes to theology, we must be biblically precise, for it was a lack of biblical precision which got us into this mess to begin with.

### **The Sacrifice Required**

Now that we have established the truth that we are in a battle against sin and that our eternal destiny is at stake, let's conclude by talking about how to emerge victorious from that battle. The simple truth is that if you are to win the battle against sin, which is a battle for your very soul, drastic sacrifices will have to be made. You will have to launch an all-out, costly, violent assault upon the strongholds of sin in your life. Passivity in the fight will not achieve victory. You must storm the strongholds of sin and destroy your enemy where he lies. That is the sense of Jesus' statements about cutting off your hand and foot, and tearing out your eye.

Now, you are reasonable, intelligent people, and you know rhetorical hyperbole when you hear it. Jesus is using exaggerative language for rhetorical effect, and his words are not meant to be taken literally. He is not advocating masochism or mutilation. So do not be like the early church father, Origen of Alexandria, who allegedly castrated himself in order to kill the sin of lust.<sup>7</sup> If you do that, you will soon find that your hand, your foot, your eye, or any other body part is not the problem... your soul which is infected by the disease of sin is the problem.

The point Jesus is making is that violent, decisive sacrifice will be required in the battle against sin. As an example, when a man comes to me and confesses that he is addicted to pornography, I have gotten to the point where I won't even help him until he is ready to do two things (see if these sound familiar):

1. Admit that his battle against lust is a battle for his very soul, with heaven and hell at stake;
2. Take violent action against his sin (cut off his hand and foot, tear out his eye), which entails making confession to his wife/girlfriend, loading Covenant Eyes on his computer, tablet, and smartphone, and sending the accountability emails to both his wife and me.

Until a man is ready to take those two steps, he is not really serious about killing his sin. If he is, though, then the battle is already half-won. We take those steps, and then begin to talk about how to put sin to death by the Spirit (Rom. 8:13), attacking the sin of lust by pursuing a superior pleasure in Christ and all that He is and has for us.

That is the kind of violent action of which Jesus speaks. So in order to get very practical (and I hope, therefore, very helpful), let's divide Jesus' words into three categories<sup>8</sup>:

---

<sup>7</sup> Hughes, 227.

<sup>8</sup> These categories come from Edwards, 294.

- The “hand” represents what you do that causes you sin. What do you reach for in order to fill that void, that emptiness in your life, yet when you have done so you feel ashamed, guilt-ridden, and even emptier than before? Is it an illicit relationship with someone who is not your spouse? Is it an addiction to drugs or alcohol that you are using to cope, to mask the pain rather than bringing it into the light in order to deal with it? Is it an illicit source of income that you hope no one else knows about, that could get you in trouble, but you can’t let it go because you like what it buys? Cut it off. Kill it. Put it to death. It is not worth forfeiting eternal life and departing into the eternal fires of hell.
- The “foot” represents where you go that causes you to sin. Are there places you go where you always manage to get into trouble? A gym where a certain person has attracted your attention? A social media site where you pursue relationships that you would never dream of pursuing in person? A place where you find yourself with people of the opposite sex where there is no accountability? Cut such places off. It is not worth the price of your immortal soul.
- The “eye” represents what you see that causes you to sin. Movies you watch, television shows you devour, websites you visit, the list goes on and on... Cut it off. Kill it. Put it to death. And save your soul.

When it comes to killing sin and achieving victory, passivity won’t do. Merely praying won’t do it. Now, listen carefully to what I mean. Many, many people simply pray for God to take away their sinful desires and sit back and wait for Him to do it, then wonder why it doesn’t happen and blame Him for their continued iniquity. God has not called us to passively wait for Him to remove our desire to sin. He has called us to take violent, decisive action to put sin to death, and to do so in faith that the path of obedience is the path of greatest joy and lasting pleasure.

In the battle against sin, great sacrifice is required in order to achieve victory. I think that is the meaning behind verse 49:

*“For everyone will be salted with fire.” (9:49).*

In the Old Testament, the temple sacrifices had to be accompanied with salt (Lev. 2:13; Ezek. 43:24; Ex. 30:35). In the new covenant, we are the living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1), and these fiery trials, these battles against sin in which we make these painful sacrifices for the sake of victory and eternal joy, this is the salt that seasons the sacrifice of our lives and produces the pleasing aroma to God. But if we fail to make these sacrifices, to fight against sin, our seasoning becomes unsalty, our sacrifice is defiled, and we are rendered unacceptable in the sight of God:

*“Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” (9:50)*

Violent, decisive, sin-killing sacrifice is the salt that seasons our lives, making us acceptable in the sight of God, and salty (preservation, taste) in the sight of others.

### **“Be Killing Sin”**

John Owen, the great 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan pastor and theologian, famously wrote in his book *The Mortification of Sin*, “Do you mortify [put to death]; do you make it your daily work;

be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.” And I say the same to you this morning. Make war on your sin. Send out scouts into every last recess of your heart and life to see where the enemy of sin may be lurking, then launch an all-out, violent, decisive assault upon those strongholds. Destroy it, for what is at stake is the destiny of your immortal soul. First Baptist Nixa, be killing sin, or it will be killing you.