

Entering Into The Kingdom Of God

Mark 9:38-50

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

September 30, 2018 – Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost



In the name of the Father, and † of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Do you suppose Jesus, in this morning's Gospel, *really* meant to say what He appears to be saying? To keep from sinning, does He *really* think you ought to cut off your hands and feet – or pluck out your eyes? Could such things actually cause you to miss out on the blessings of heaven? Surely Jesus couldn't have been speaking literally. Well, of course not – but perhaps not for the reason you might think. It's not that such actions would be all that unthinkable, but rather that if it really was that easy for you to eliminate sin and secure salvation by simply removing an offending limb or appendage, then all you would have to do is identify the sinful parts of your body, cut them off along with the sin associated with those members, and you would have made yourself fit for the kingdom of heaven! That would be about as illogical as the man who says: "I'd give my right arm if I just could be ambidextrous!"

The problem with this way of thinking is that your sinfulness *isn't* confined to just one part of your body, for we are all sinful through and through. Sin is such an inseparable part of our nature that it will cling to you, wrap itself around you, and surge through every part of your being until that day you draw our final breath and leave this world for the next. So, simply cutting off an offending hand or foot – or plucking out an eye – is hardly going to take care of the problem of sin in your life. To be sure, Jesus is *not* calling for radical amputation as the answer to the problem of sin. Instead, what He's calling for is nothing less than a complete execution and death of your entire body and life!

And is this not precisely what our Lord does to and for you in Holy Baptism? In a very real way, Jesus holds you under the water until you drown and die. He puts you to death in order to resurrect you to a whole new life – a whole new life which lives, moves and has its being in Him and the righteousness which He freely bestows upon us in Baptism. Through the water of Holy Baptism God makes the life of Christ your life – a life that's spotless, holy, and free from sin. It's because of this new life given in Baptism that anything which is the least bit unholy or sinful in you is to be as unwelcome as a malignant disease infecting an otherwise healthy body. *That's* the attitude, Jesus tells us, *that's* the attitude you must have concerning sin. Sin has to be abhorrent to you. It has to be ugly. It has to be unwanted – so ugly and unwanted, in fact, that you'd be will-

ing to even sever a part of your body to be rid of it completely. *That's* how seriously our Lord wants you to take sin *and* sinning.

Hear how St. Paul echoes this same sentiment in the 16th chapter of his Epistle to the Romans. He writes: "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God – as those who have been brought from death to life – and offer the parts of your body to Him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under Law, but under Grace." When Paul says sin shall not be your master because you are not under the Law, does he mean Christians are to have nothing to do with the Law – or that you are no longer accountable to the Ten Commandments? Most certainly not! Especially as a Christian, God's Law tells you how you are to live your life. It reminds you how, as a dear child of God, you should be absolutely holy in all your thoughts, words, and deeds. The Ten Commandments serve the purpose of showing how God expects you to live. But, in holding up that perfect standard, God's Law also shows you how far short you've fallen – and, furthermore, that the penalty for failing to meet this standard is death!

Therefore, God's Law not only shows you your sin and active disobedience, but it also places you under the judgment of condemnation. When you look into the perfect Law of God, you'll find that you haven't even begun to keep it – and that you rightly deserve the penalty of eternal damnation as a sentence from which you can in no wise ever hope to free yourself. But God in His great mercy sent His Son into this world for two reasons. First, in order that He might obey the demands of the Law in His own body – and thus fulfill that Law of God perfectly in your stead. And, secondly, so that He might suffer and die on Calvary's cross in order to remove the condemnation of the Law which has been imposed upon you because of your willful, constant, damning disobedience against God.

So, because Jesus kept the Law, God took His perfect obedience – His righteousness – and He credited that righteousness to you. He credited it to you as if *you* were actually the one who had perfectly kept the Law instead of Jesus. Next – in an act Doctor Luther liked to call "the great exchange" – God took your sinfulness and imputed it – that is, He gave it to Christ – so that when Jesus went to the cross He went not as the sinless

Son of God, but as if He Himself was not only a sinner, but *the* Sinner. Jesus suffered and died on the cross of Calvary not because He was the Victim of some insidious political plot – or because He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time – but because He had become sin for us all so that you and I might become the righteousness of God – and so that you might not have to perish as you rightly deserve, but instead have everlasting life.

It's in that manner of speaking that Paul can say you no longer live under the Law as far as its *condemnation* is concerned. For the truth of the matter is that when Jesus died on the cross He not only took away the penalty of your sin, but at the same time also fulfilled *in your place* all the righteous requirements of the Law. In His death and resurrection, Jesus granted you His mercy so that you might live under His grace. Contrariwise, what this means is that all who refuse to place their trust in that grace of God still have the sentence of death looming large over their heads. The Law is still there threatening with everlasting punishment because such persons falsely believe it's up to them to make themselves acceptable to God. What they are unable to see is that the harder they try, the more miserably they fail. Recognizing this, they soon grow bitter toward God and resent every effort He makes to extend them His grace – so that eventually they begin to see Him as the One responsible for their guilt.

But understand this well: it won't be for their many sins that God will punish unbelievers on the Final Day. Rather, it will be because of their stubborn refusal to receive God's mercy. It will be because they despised the gift of God's love and forgiveness which was purchased *on their behalf* by the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of His only begotten Son. Dearly beloved, *your* sins have been forgiven in the very same way. It took nothing less than Jesus' death on the cross and His suffering of hell in your place, to remove the condemnation of eternal death which was hanging over your head – a condemnation we all rightfully deserve. Your life meant Jesus' death. And it's for that reason, when you willfully give yourself over to sin, that you're making light of what took place on the cross. Christ gave His life so that the penalty for your sin – the threat of hell, where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched' – might be removed from you forever. How then can *any* Christian ever again think of sin and sinning with indifference or disdain?

Indifference toward sin and apathy concerning the need for God's forgiveness will almost always result in a loss of saving faith, because faith is all about trusting

in the life and death of Jesus Christ who delivers us from our sins. Because it's impossible for faith and casual indifference toward sin to coexist together in the same heart, Jesus says, "Get rid of it! Be separated from it! Cut it off! It's better for you to enter life maimed, crippled, or blind, than to go into hell." But what can you do about your sin – that condition which permeates not just your hands, feet, and eyes, but your entire being? Well, *you* can't do anything about it. Rather, Christ must do it for you. And this He does through the promise of the Gospel. He puts you to death and raises you up to a new life in Holy Baptism. He assures you that if you confess your sins, He is faithful and just to forgive you those sins, and in Holy Absolution He will cleanse you from all your unrighteousness. He feeds your soul with the heavenly food of His body and blood in order to fill you with His life and bring you life everlasting.

Jesus once posed this question: "What does it profit a man," He asked, "if he gains the whole world, and yet loses his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" The answer, of course, is "nothing." Nothing is more important – nor can anything ever take the place of life everlasting in heaven. Nothing! No bitterness or resentment, no indignant claim of an offense committed against you, no earthly pleasure, no wealth nor prideful desire can ever be allowed to come between God's grace and a faithful, humble heart which confesses its own personal guilt before a righteous, holy God.

Dear Christian, Jesus' own eyes beheld the offensiveness of mankind's bitterness and hatred. His hands and His feet bore the pain of the nails which this sinful world drove into them. As He hung on the cross, He was "cut off" from His Father in heaven. But He was willing to endure that sacrifice *for you* – willing to undergo all of it so that on the final day, your spirit, soul, and body might be raised up incorruptible to live with Him forever in His heaven. No longer will you have to contend with the offending members of sin which are so much a part of you now, for on that day you'll be like Jesus Himself – your entire being glorified, holy, and living for eternity! Truly, it can be said – in the words of Jesus – that no matter what things sin, the world, or the devil entice you with in this life, it's most certainly, "better for you to enter the kingdom of heaven!" And that Kingdom is now yours through the grace of Christ Jesus our Savior. Amen!

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