

Live The Sermon

9-30-2012

Mark 9: 38-50

38 "Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." 39 "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, 40 for whoever is not against us is for us. 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. 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. 43 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. 45 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. 47 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, 48 where " 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' 49 Everyone will be salted with fire. 50 "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."

To a certain degree, the disciples have a pretty good thing going. They don't understand everything that is going on with and about Jesus, but they know that there is really something special about him. Last week we heard about them arguing about who was the greatest in their little group. They had a group, their own special little clique. They were the chosen. They had been given special powers by Jesus; they were the ones who had been with Jesus from the beginning. Oh sure, there were others who had followed for, a while, but them, the twelve, they were special. Now, some outsider was driving out demons and using Jesus name; how dare he! John was upset. Listen to verse 38: **"Teacher," said John, "we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."** There's the clique, he's not one of us. With everything Jesus had been trying to teach them, they still didn't get it. In The Gospel of Mark, we have heard time and time again, where Jesus does his best to explain something to the disciples and well, maybe they're just a little thick to understand. I can just hear Jesus now: come on guys, how many times do I have to explain things to you before it sinks in. OK guys let's try this again: verse 39: **Do not stop him," Jesus said. "For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, 40 for whoever is not against us is for us.** Jesus just threw the door wide open. It's not just about the disciples anymore. It's about everyone. And it doesn't make any difference, male or female, Jew or gentile, rich or poor, whoever is not against us is for us. There goes the clique. It's not just about you twelve; I'm here to help everyone and everyone is welcome to do things in my name, not just you twelve. He goes on to admonish the disciples again. Are you being a stumbling block, are you doing something to get in the way of someone coming to me? Verse 42; **If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.** Around the end of August I did a sermon where we talked about stumbling blocks that hinder our relationship with Jesus Christ. I asked what some of your stumbling blocks might be and I asked if any of your actions might be construed by non-believers to be stumbling blocks. Jesus had some pretty strong opinions about stumbling blocks. He talked about using capital punishment on someone who was being a stumbling block. In Jesus time, we obviously know about crucifixion being a form of capital punishment. We have also heard of stoning someone to death. But tying a millstone around someone's neck and throwing them in a body of water was also a form of capital punishment. It was used by the Romans, the Greeks, and the Syrians. I don't think I was quite that emphatic back in August. But I have to go back to the question I asked in August. Are we doing anything to be a stumbling block to believers or non-believers? Are we doing anything to be a stumbling block to ourselves? In 1991 I left the high school in Farmville and moved my teaching career to Pitt Community College. The second quarter I was there I was assigned a course to teach: Industrial Safety. This was a three hour a week lecture course. Trouble was, all three hours were taught on Friday from 9 to 12. Safety being what the course was supposed to be all about, I felt it my obligation to prove to my students just how important safety in the workplace really was. The first day of class, I had each one fill out a personal information sheet in the ruse that

I wanted to get to know each of them better. I asked questions like what was their favorite type of music, their hobbies, did they like to hunt or fish, whether they were left handed or right handed, etc. When they came in the next Friday I explained to them that we were going to simulate losing their dominate thumb to an industrial accident. I reminded them that I had their information sheets so they couldn't claim to be the opposite of their real dominate hand. I passed out several rolls of inch-and-a-half wide adhesive tape and had them tape their thumb to the palm of their dominate hand. For example, I'm right handed so I would have taped my right thumb. Good point right...now let's drive the point home. I made them keep their thumbs taped, and then I lectured for the rest of the three hour period with them trying to take notes without using their thumbs to help hold their pencils or pens. I was not their most popular teacher that day. The next week when they came in, I passed out slings and had them put their dominate arm in the sling, and then tape their arm in the sling to their body. Once again I proceeded to lecture for three hours with them trying to take notes using their off hand. At break they wanted to take off the slings, but I wouldn't allow them to. I wanted them to see how it would be to lose an arm. Needless to say I was really unpopular that day. The next week they were scared to come to class. Over the years I have run into some of the guys in that class. Each of them have remembered the object lessons they learned those two days and have actually thanked me for driving the point home. Fast forward twelve years or so; karma has a way. As most of you know, I lost a finger on my left hand because of a tumor. The amputation came on the fourth surgery, only after the first three surgeries didn't cure my problem. (Kelsey calls me a cartoon character. I hope it's because I only have three fingers.) The guys in my safety class only had to endure being taped up two days at three hours per day. Try not being able to use your hand at all for several weeks at a time. I think those students would appreciate the irony in that one.

As we look at today's scripture lesson, we see Jesus telling the disciples that if something is causing them to stumble, to move away from God...well, let's listen to verses 43 thru 47 **If your hand causes you to stumble, 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 stumble, 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 stumble, 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...**

Amputations, gouging out eyes, that all sounds pretty serious. Did Jesus really mean that; probably not. I think he was just trying to drive a point home to the disciples, just like I was trying to drive the point home to the students in my safety class. Sometimes we need to exaggerate to get people's attention. I really think that the point of the lesson is that if there is anything that is causing you to stumble, to distance yourself from God, then do something about it. And you need to be willing to go to any length, to use any means to do something about it. That's why Jesus used capital punishment and self-mutilation as examples. That's how serious Jesus was and is about our need to be close to God. Do whatever you have to do to bring your relationship with God back where it needs to be. Live your life so that no one can see your actions as a stumbling block to God. Don't do anything that will cause someone to say if that is Christianity, then I want no part of it.

I picked this story up from the internet but it again drives home the point of today's lesson. Legend has it that a missionary was swept overboard while traveling on very high and rough seas, and was subsequently washed up on a beach at the edge of a remote village. Nearly dead from exposure and lack of food and fresh water, he was found by the people of the village and nursed back to health. He lived among them for twenty years, quietly adapting to their culture and working alongside them. He preached no sermons, and made no personal faith claim. Neither did he read scripture to them.

But, when people were sick, he sat with them, sometimes all night. When people were hungry, he fed them. When people were lonely, he gave a listening ear. He taught the ignorant and always took the side of the one who had been wronged.

The day came when some missionaries entered the same village and began talking to the people about a man named Jesus. After listening for a while to their story, the native people began insisting that Jesus had already been living in their village for many years. "Come," one of them said, "We'll introduce you to him." The missionaries were led to a hut where they found their long-lost companion.

I have no clue whether this story is supposed to be true or not. I'm not going to pass it off one way or the other. However, it made such a point I had to relate it to you. For twenty years, the missionary did not create one

stumbling block. Instead, he lived the sermon he never preached. There were three basic tenants he lived by. First, he adapted to their culture. Never once did he try to change them to his culture. Rather than attempting to impose his agenda on them, he settled in to their culture. He never preached a sermon, never tried to impose a particular doctrine or faith on anyone. He respected them and their beliefs. He never considered himself better than anyone in the village. Instead, he became a part of their community and culture. Secondly, the missionary worked alongside the people who took him in. In other words, he got involved. He had compassion for the sick, helped those with needs, such as feeding the hungry and attended to those who were lonely. He taught those who needed an education and he was an advocate for the underdog. Third, the missionary was committed to and had passion for the Christian faith. He didn't have to tell them about the love of Christ, they experienced it in their midst through the way he lived; through the way he treated them. There was no need for the newly arrived missionaries to tell them about Jesus, they had already met him.

Unlike the missionary in the story, I don't think any of us will ever be mistaken for Jesus. By our own nature as humans, none of us will ever reach that plateau. However, as Christians, each of us should try to live that sermon. Each of us should live a life that will never be a stumbling block to drive anyone away from Jesus and a relationship with God. I know it's a cliché, but it's worth repeating: your life could be the only sermon someone ever sees. Live the sermon.