

In My Name

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.” ³⁹ Jesus replied, “Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. ⁴⁰ For whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward. ⁴² “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe (in me) to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁴ ... ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna... ⁴⁶ ... ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, ⁴⁸ where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ (Mark 9:38–48)

Context

As noted regarding the gospel last Sunday, this gospel also continues the teaching and preparation of the disciples. In this passage it seems clear that Jesus is pointing out some of the problems that the community will face – and many of them can be understood as problems of the human condition. The concerns of this passage are: (1) ambition among themselves (vv. 33–37); (2) envy and intolerance of others (vv. 38–41); and (3) scandalizing others (vv. 42–48).

It is good to remember that Jesus has just said to the Twelve: “Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.” (Mark 9:37) In our time we have a different view of children. We hold children to be innocent and precious. This does not seem to have been the view of 1st century. In ancient culture, children had no status. They were subject to the authority of their fathers, viewed as little more than property. Perkins [p. 637] writes: “... the child in antiquity was a non-person... Children should have been with the women, not hanging around the teacher and his students (cf. 10:13-16). To say that those who receive Jesus receive God does not constitute a problem. A person’s emissary was commonly understood to be like the one who sent him. But to insist that receiving a child might have some value for male disciples is almost inconceivable.” Perkins is pointing out that Jesus is telling the disciples that while there are times they will indeed be Jesus’ emissaries, but this is not the problem at hand. The problem is that the Twelve cannot conceive of welcoming the least important people in society, those ranked lowest in human convention. Yet Jesus is saying, “you’ll need to work your way down to the most marginal and lowest (by human convention) in order to find me. I am last of all.” The Kingdom of God involves giving status to those who have none. The disciples are not to be like children, but to be like Jesus who embraces the child, the one held to be least of all in human convention.

The key phrase that has importance for this Sunday’s gospel is: “*in my name*.” The issue of unauthorized prophets appears in the Old Testament as well (Numbers 11:26–30). Use of the “name of Jesus” played an important role in the early church (Acts 3:6, 16; 4:7, 10, 30; James 5:14). The phrase denotes the source of power, but it also will reveal the sense of who is “inside” and who is “outside.” In last Sunday’s gospel, Jesus pulls a child “inside” and bids the Twelve to welcome and include the child. In this Sunday’s gospel we will see how well the lesson was received.

The word “name” occurs frequently in chapter 9:

- Whoever welcomes one such child **in my name**.. (v. 37)
- ...someone driving out demons **in your name**... (v. 38)
- ...no one who performs a mighty deed **in my name**... (v. 39)

- ...whoever gives you a cup of water to because you belong to Christ... [the literal translation of this verse is “because you bear the **name** of Christ.”] (v. 41)

“In Jesus' name” seems to indicate the motivation by which one does something -- welcoming a child, casting out demons, doing mighty deeds. Bearing the name of Christ and acting in Christ's name seems to indicate belonging to Christ or acting as a representative of Christ or perhaps even, being Christ's presence. But as Stoffregen notes, Mk 13:6 states: “Many will come **in my name** saying, 'I am he!' and they will deceive many.” How do we know if those who act **in Christ's name** really belong to Christ or are leading us astray? One way that the early church tried to assure the people that their ordained leaders were truly acting “in Christ's name” was that all pastors had to be ordained, and thus certified to be orthodox by bishops; and all new bishops needed at least three older bishops to certify that the new ones were orthodox in their beliefs and actions.

Commentary: Outsiders

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.” ³⁹ Jesus replied, “Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. ⁴⁰ For whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.

One should not miss the irony in this passage. The disciples were attempting to prevent another from doing what they had just failed to do (9:18).

Mark continues to narrate the on-going saga of the Twelve and their presumptions about their privileged position close to Jesus. Now another prominent disciple, John (viz. Peter in 8:32) speaks for the group: “we saw...we tried...not follow us.” What seemingly had disturbed the group was the exercise of Jesus' name and power by an outsider. The implied question seems to be: “He not a member, he hasn't traveled with us, who authorized him, and besides... he didn't listen to us when we tried to get him to stop.” John and the others of the Twelve fail to grasp the irony: they are the “insiders” yet they were unable to cast out a demon earlier (vv.14-18). And now an “outsider” was successful in the same endeavor. Is this another mark of their own ambition, a case of us-versus-them (“he does follow us” – us or Jesus?), or, more deeply, a significant lack of understanding about the mission and the work of God?

The unnamed outsider clearly understood whom he was following. He did not try to oust the demon in the “name of the Twelve,” but in the name of Jesus. We should note that others try to invoke Jesus' name for exorcism to no avail (Act 19:13-16; Mt 7:21-23). Their failures point to a point of clarity. The unnamed man likely held a trust in the person of Jesus and obedience to mission of the Kingdom. In this way our unnamed man is a true witness to the will of God working in the world.

Mark shows in this way that even the most privileged of the disciples failed to understand what the Passion signified for their life and mission. The use of the first person plural (“we saw ... we forbade him ... not following us”) indicates that John was speaking for all of the disciples. Is this an echo of the scribes (3:22) who assailed Jesus as being himself possessed by a demon because he was outside the group of recognized religious leaders and “thus” must be casting out demons by means most nefarious? The unnamed, outsider exorcist is unlike the scribes in that there is no indication that he spoke against Jesus. This is perhaps what leads to v.40: “For whoever is not against us is for us.” As Perkins [639] notes: “The final saying (v. 41) reminds the disciples of the conditions of their mission. They are to depend on those among whom they work. Therefore, they must trust others to provide the basic necessities of life. Such outsiders will also receive a reward. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus seeks to draw the boundaries between those who are “with Jesus” to include as many people as possible. He came for sinners, not for the righteous.”

Causes of Sin

⁴² “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe (in me) to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna... ⁴⁶ ... ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, ⁴⁸ where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ (Mark 9:42–48)

In seminary exegesis courses one is taught to look for details that indicate a change of scene, location, or other markers to indicate the boundaries of a particular pericope (a technical word used in exegesis meaning “narrative” – and a word that auto-correction keeps wanting to change to “periscope,” which given my history serving on nuclear submarines is kinda’ interesting.). There are no such markers in the text. It is a safe bet to assume Jesus is still in Capernaum, surrounded by the Twelve, with a child in their midst (9:33-37). The expression “*little ones*” may well also include those given a cup of water because they bear the name of Jesus (v.41).

Some scholars note that these are likely a series of independent sayings about sin that are inserted here. That might well be true, but the question still lingers, “Why were they dropped in here?” I would offer that there is an implied return to the idea of what it means to serve: “*If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.*” Christian service always has a point of pointing to Christ as the foundation of all service. What could be of greater disservice than to point another towards sin? The opening saying is clear as it sharply denounces such behavior and its resulting consequences. The underlying expression for “*to sin*” is more literally, “to cause to stumble” or “to scandalize” (*skandalizo*). This might point to more than simple sin in its varieties of kinds, but more pointedly to a loss of faith. This loss of faith is the sense of the expression’s use in 4:17 and 14:27,29. It is this latter understanding that might be better suited to the consequences. If loss of faith implies loss of the eternal reward of the Kingdom, then the Christian disciple, who is at root of this loss due to their service, suffer the same fate.

Because of the expression “*one of these little ones*” we easily think of the child references in vv.33-37, but what about the unnamed exorcist “*who believe[s]*?” How did he or she respond to the disciples trying to stop them from ministering in the name of Jesus? Were the words scandalizing? Were the words used in that attempt as severe as the ones Jesus now uses as he teaches the Twelve? Just as Peter rebuked Jesus and received a direct and pointed reply, so too John and the disciples in this scene.

The punishment by drowning while being weighted down might have been known to the disciples. Acts 5:37 notes the insurrection of the early Zealot leader, Judas the Galilean. The Roman historian Suetonius and the Jewish historian Josephus, both report Judas and his follower’s execution by such downing. But what follows v.42 moves from history to hyperbole.

Among Christians that might argue how literally to interpret Scripture, one would be hard pressed to find a group that would take vv.43-48 as a literal command of God. But I would offer that all understand the underlying message: each man and woman is a concrete moral agent who is responsible for their actions and the consequences of those actions. This is the realism expressed in this very Semitic thought. The radical demand that the hand or foot should be amputated or the eye plucked out, gruesome as those demands are, point to the intrinsic differences between physical life and the absolute value of imperishable life given by God alone. Jesus calls for the renunciation of possessions and family (Mark 10), as well as life itself (8:34) if these things stand in the way of following Jesus. In this same way, Jesus calls for the complete renunciation of a sinful life and activity. These expressions are not a call for radical, mutilating actions, but the continued call for sacrifice to set aside those things

that keep you from God. This is emphasized as Jesus moves into the personal: “*If your hand...*” and “*If your foot...*” It is a direct plea and teaching for his disciples.

“These sayings challenge us to examine the quality of our discipleship. Is following Christ at the core of our being, something too precious to be surrendered lightly? Or is our Christianity merely a matter of taste and convenience, something we shelve at the slightest difficulty or inconvenience? Belief that is easily set aside cannot be the faith that Jesus calls for among his disciples.” (Perkins, 641)

Notes

Mark 9:43 *If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.* Jesus now follows with three illustrations that take the same form. If a hand, foot, or eye is a cause of sin, one should “cut it off” or “pluck it out.” The remark is rhetorical (note that Deut 14:1 prohibits self-mutilation). On tracing sin to different body parts, see Job 31:1, 5, 7; Prov 6:16–19; Rom 3:1–18.

Mark 9:43 *Gehenna*: *Gehenna* is derived from the Hebrew *ge-hinnom* = “Valley of Hinnom”. There some of the kings of Judah engaged in forbidden religious practices, including human sacrifice by fire (2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6; Jer. 7:31; 32:35). Jeremiah spoke of its judgment and destruction (Jer. 7:32; 19:6). King Josiah put an end to these practices by destroying and defiling the high place of the valley of Hinnom (2 Kings 23:10). Probably because of these associations with fiery destruction and judgment, the word “Gehenna” came to be used metaphorically during the intertestamental period as a designation for hell or eternal damnation. Perhaps more than a place (the place of the dead is usually called “Hades” in the NT); it represents a state of judgment and punishment.

Mark 9:43 *the unquenchable fire.* In 9:48, Jesus states that in Gehenna, the “maggots never die and the fire never goes out.” Judith 16:17 gives a Jewish view of judgment as endless conscious torment, since the condemned weep forever. See also Sir 7:17, where fire and worms await the dead. Some argue that Mark’s image is of a fire that burns endlessly, not of a body that burns endlessly. Judith does not read that way. See also *1 Enoch* 27:2; 54:1–6; 90:26–27; *4 Ezra* 7:36–44, which do appear to teach annihilation; see *4 Ezra* 7:61, where the dead are extinguished by fire, so also *2 Baruch* 85:13–15. In contrast, *Sibylline Oracles* 2:283–312 foresees eternal torment.

Mark 9:44, 46, 48 *where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.* Mark 9:44 and 9:46 are part of a textual problem since many key manuscripts do not include them. The parallelism with the end of v. 48 that vv. 44 and 46 reflect might suggest that the verses belong to Mark, as then all three illustrations would be virtually parallel in wording. It is harder to explain how the verses dropped out, if they were original, so it is likely that 9:44, 46 were not originally part of Mark. However, 9:48 is original to Mark, itself a modified citation of Isaiah 66:24.

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