

SALT, PEACE & FIRE

MARK 9:38-50

Gospel Reading: Mark 9:38-50

John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

THE SYMBOL OF FIRE: Fire symbolizes many things, including passion, desire, rebirth, resurrection, eternity, destruction, hope, hell and purification. These symbols have been used in literature, film and religious texts for millennia. Fire has been used by humans for over 400,000 years.

Here in Mark the words hell and fire have a contextual meaning in the culture of the time. The words have different meanings as we explore the text.

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having your two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire” (v. 43). In the Old Testament, Gehenna was the place where the wicked were punished. The name Gehenna comes from the Hebrew, *ge Hinnom*, which means the Valley of Hinnom. This was a valley near Jerusalem where human sacrifice was sometimes practiced (2 Kings 23:10) and where rubbish from Jerusalem was burned in fires that never cooled. This valley, therefore, stands as a metaphor for a place of eternal, fiery damnation.

In verse 42, Jesus uses hyperbole—exaggerated language—to dramatize his point. He has talked about the danger of one person causing another to stumble—an outside threat. Now he talks about danger of temptations that rise up within us—an inside threat.

“It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having your two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire” (v. 43b). These references to hell are difficult for many Christians today who are uncomfortable with the idea of hell. However, they are Jesus’ words, and we dare not discount them. They draw our attention to the holiness and justice of God, which are as real as the grace of God. This is the only reference to hell and its torments in this Gospel, and we should note that it is disciples who are in danger rather than unbelievers. Both the stumbling Christian and the Christian who causes others to stumble are subject to judgment.

“where their worm doesn’t die, and the fire is not quenched” (v. 48). This is derived from Isaiah 66:24: “They shall go forth, and look on the dead bodies of the men who have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

In its original context, the verse from Isaiah warned that those who opposed God would be subject to a loathsome judgment. Jesus quotes that verse to warn that such judgment is still possible.

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SYMBOLS OF SALT & FIRE MARK 9:49-50.

49“For everyone will be salted with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. 50Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, with what will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

The sayings of verses 49-50 appear to be three independent sayings that Mark brings together because they all refer to salt.

“For everyone will be salted with fire” (v. 49). Both salt and fire are useful in preserving meat, and temple sacrifices require salt as well as fire (Leviticus 2:13). Now Jesus uses salt and fire to represent the hardships that disciples will experience for their faithfulness (Edwards, 296; France, 383), suggesting that the disciples will be the offerings and that they will be salted with persecution—a present reality for Mark’s church, which was living with persecution at the time of the writing of this Gospel.

“Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, with what will you season it?” (v. 50a). Salt is good because it makes food palatable and functions as a preservative. Pure salt does not lose its saltiness, but salt found on the shores of the Dead Sea is often intermixed with impurities to the extent that it is no longer fit to use for seasoning or preservation. Adulterated salt serves as a metaphor for disciples who become adulterated with the world’s values—thus losing both their faith-flavor and their ability to make a difference in the world.

“Have salt in yourselves, (or “among yourselves”) and be at peace with one another” (v. 50b). My understanding of this verse is that Jesus is calling his disciples to maintain the saltiness of their faith while also maintaining their peace with one another—a difficult balance to achieve.

This is a helpful word for the church today, where peace is often threatened by Christians who insist on imposing their own agenda rather than working peaceably with others. In a sense, this verse is related to verse 39, where Jesus commands John not to stop the man who is casting out demons in Jesus’ name. In that instance, Jesus is calling us to be at peace with outsiders. In verse 50, he is calling us to be at peace with insiders.

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In Conclusion: It is crucially important to understand context, translation, culture and tradition when reading the bible. Taking these bible text literally in the context of our own culture and traditions is a misrepresentation of the accounts written in the name of Jesus. Here one could, and some have, use this passage as a way to insight fear into the hearts of believers. Understanding the context in which Jesus was speaking helps us understand that fire, salt, hell are words used to make a point about the judgement of others as well as how important it is to work with people of different faiths, cultures, background for the greater good and equality of all people. God is love and those who speak love speak of God and with the power of Jesus Christ. *Mrs. Kimby Tharakan*

Activities, Putting Our Faith into Action:

Challenge #1: Read about one other religion this week. Focus on the good they do. Ask yourself how you could work with them to further that good?

Challenge #2: Read all of Mark 9. What else can we learn from this chapter?

Challenge #3: The Episcopal Church website <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/> is a great resource if you would like to see how our faith community is living out the gospel of Christ by supporting interfaith relations for the good of all people.