

## WAR AGAINST SIN

Mark 9:38-50

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

September 30, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 9, verses 38 through 50. It is on page 715 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us the extreme danger of sin. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 9, beginning at verse 38, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>38</sup> John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." <sup>39</sup> But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. <sup>40</sup> For the one who is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup> For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

<sup>42</sup> "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. <sup>43</sup> 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. <sup>45</sup> 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. <sup>47</sup> 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, <sup>48</sup> 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' <sup>49</sup> For everyone will be salted with fire. <sup>50</sup> 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."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Sin is a serious problem. Now that, I suppose, should be obvious to us. But, like other kinds of addicts, we say, "I can handle it. I can quit anytime I want." But if we actually tried to quit, we would find that we cannot. We just don't have the willpower. So Jesus recognizes the need to warn his disciples just how dangerous sin is. And he prescribes that we go to great lengths in order to prevent sin from happening, even to the point of cutting off a hand or a foot, or tearing out an eye. Now that's extreme. It's so extreme that we might think Jesus doesn't actually mean what he says. It sounds like a bit of an exaggeration. I mean, no one actually cuts off their limbs in order to stop themselves from sinning.

But instead of dismissing Jesus' words as exaggeration or just figurative language, we should consider the logic of his warning. His warning actually makes a lot of sense. I know it sounds extreme, because no one in their right mind cuts off their own hand to stop themselves from sinning. But the logic is sound. If your hand is really the cause of your sin, and if that sin will land you in hell, then you should absolutely cut it off.

But before we have a mad rush to the kitchen to find some knives, we should also consider whether or not our hands are really the cause of our sin. So hang onto your hands and feet and eyes, at least until the end of the sermon. We will consider whether or not those members of our bodies are really the *cause* of sin.

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But first it might be worth our time to define what we mean when we use the word “sin.”

The first thing we probably think of is all the actions that are forbidden. You know, “Thou shalt not do murder,” “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” and all the rest. Sometimes our discussions or thoughts about sin are little more than trying to identify what is or is not a sin. There’s this list of rules of what we should or should not do.

But our idea of sin needs to be broader than that. For one thing, it’s not just actions. We sin with our words more often than we sin with our actions. And we sin with our thoughts, more than with our words and actions combined. This is why, every week, we confess “that we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed.” Nothing really changed from the previous week. We sinned in thought, word, and deed before, and then we went and did the same thing.

And there’s a reason we confess these things in the order we do. We start with thoughts, because that’s where our actual sins begin. Before your hand or foot does something evil, and before your mouth speaks something evil, your mind has already thought the thing. It always starts there.

Now sometimes you hear someone say, “Well as long as I don’t do it, it’s okay, right? I mean, I can think it, or I can look, but as long as I don’t actually do anything, what’s the harm?” Sometimes this logic seems okay to us, but that’s only because we want it to be true. But God sees and weighs the intentions of the heart. And God cares about what goes on in our minds, because he created our minds, and he created them to function a certain way. He created them to think what is good, true, and beautiful, because out of these thoughts come actions that are also good, true, and beautiful. We deceive ourselves if we imagine that we can think evil and look at evil without our thoughts and evil desires spilling over into our words and actions. Things like murder, theft, rape, extortion, and every other vile practice come from somewhere. None of these things just happen. They come from an evil mind that has been trained in evil.

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And it’s not hard to train your mind for evil. What’s hard is to train your mind in what is good, true, and beautiful. Our hearts are already evil by nature.

And this is the other category of sin. What we’ve mentioned already is what we call “actual sin.” Those are the thoughts, words, and deeds that are contrary to God’s design for creation. But before we even confess those sins, we confess the source of those sins—“that we are by nature sinful and unclean.”

This is really the first category of sin. We call it “original sin.” It stems from the first sin—the rebellion of Adam and Eve—which resulted in the corruption of our natures. They desired to become like God, and they were deceived to think that knowing evil would accomplish this. They did come to know evil, but they did not become like God, because they didn’t simply come to know *about* evil; they came to know evil intimately. In their rebellion, they actually became evil. And this is the nature that has been passed down to us. So we confess that we are not the way God designed us to be. We “confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean.” Our very

nature is broken and corrupt. Our hearts are not the way God designed them to be, and our actions are not in accord with God's will for how his creation should function.

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And this, I think, is how we should define sin. Instead of defining it merely as a list of dos and don'ts, we should define it in contrast to the order of God's good creation. If it's just a list of dos and don'ts, then it might seem arbitrary—rules that God pulled out of nowhere. But if we define sin in contrast to the order of God's good creation, then the specifics of sin are not arbitrary. So here's the definition: Sin is the opposite of God's design for creation. When our nature is corrupted, that is the opposite of how God designed us to be. And when we sin in thought, word, and deed, that is contrary to the way God designed us to function. These sins result in even more brokenness and corruption. And all of this sin results in death, which is also contrary to the way God designed the world to be. Sin is whatever is contrary to the perfect pattern of God's initial creation.

And I hope you don't think this definition of sin is purely academic or theoretical. I hope it actually helps you in your daily battle with sin. When you are tempted toward a certain sin, remember that that temptation comes from a corruption of what is good, and carrying out that sin will cause even more corruption to God's creation. We might not immediately see how that sin will result in further corruption, but it will; it always does. And this becomes a matter of faith—trusting that our heavenly Father has not given us arbitrary commandments, but his commandments are good, and they protect us from further brokenness and corruption.

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This is why Jesus warns us about the danger of sin. First he warns about causing a little child to sin. And there was actually a little child sitting in Jesus' lap when he said this. This gospel lesson is a continuation of the one we heard last week, where Jesus took a little child in his arms and said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (9:37). This is the same conversation. So imagine Jesus and his disciples sitting in a circle. And there's a little boy in Jesus' lap when he says, "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" (9:42).

The first thing we learn, then, about little children, is that they can believe. This is one of the reasons we baptize infants instead of waiting until they can explain the Apostles' Creed. Children—little children—can believe.

In fact, children are the model of faith. Too often we think of faith as an intellectual thing. We think, *I decided to place my trust in Jesus, and that's why I'm saved*. But that's not right. We think that way because we want to be independent, but there's nothing independent about faith. Faith is complete dependence on Jesus. The faith of a child is the model for faith, because children—especially little children like the one in Jesus' lap—children are completely dependent. They trust someone else to provide for their needs, because they have to. They don't have a choice. They're not even given a choice. So one of the ways we can define faith is a complete dependence upon Jesus. We are completely dependent on Jesus, just as little children are completely dependent on their parents.

And according to Jesus, little children can trust in him too. This little boy in Jesus' lap was living proof of that. So the first thing we learn about children is that they can believe in Jesus.

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The second thing we learn about little children is that Jesus takes their faith seriously. He cares deeply for them and will not tolerate anyone who would rob that faith from them. The Greek word here is “scandalize” (σκανδαλίζω). It’s almost exactly the same as the English word. It means “to cause to sin” or “to cause to stumble into unbelief.” Literally, this verse could be translated, “**Whoever scandalizes one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.**”

That sounds pretty serious. It kind of makes you think of a mafia movie where they put someone’s feet in cement and send them to sleep with the fishes.

A millstone was a big round stone used to ground wheat into flour. Literally, it’s “the millstone of a donkey.” It’s the kind you couldn’t roll yourself. You had to hitch it up to a donkey. Jesus says it’s better to wear one of these for a necklace and go for a swim than to scandalize a child who believes in him.

Now the idea isn’t so much that if you cause your kid to commit one individual sin you’re doomed. Every individual sin is bad, but that’s not the point. To scandalize is more along the lines of causing a kid to stumble into unbelief or a sin that results in unbelief.

One example of this would be bringing your children to God in Baptism, but not bringing them back to church and teaching the Christian faith in your home. In our Baptism liturgy we always remind ourselves “that God gives the gift of faith in baptism, but that this gift will be lost unless the child is taught the Word of God, upheld by prayer, and given a Christian example to follow” (“Baptism of Children,” *Ministerial Acts*, 22). To neglect the teaching of the Christian faith is to cause them to stumble back into unbelief. It is good, of course, to bring our children to God in Baptism, but if we also cause them to fall back into unbelief, Jesus says it would have been better to have a millstone tied around our necks and be sent to sleep with the fishes. That fate would be more tolerable than the judgment of God on the Last Day.

A pastor friend of mine also gives the example of one of his friends who wanted to marry his girlfriend. They were Christians, and it would have been a God-pleasing marriage, but the girl’s parents objected. They wanted her to finish college first, so they would not approve of the marriage. So instead of getting married, they did what lots of people do. They moved in together. Sadly, the parents of the girl had no problem with this. They caused their daughter to stumble into a great and serious sin by forbidding what was good and approving of what was evil. Better a millstone.

That might sound kind of harsh. And if I have misrepresented Jesus’ warning, you should tell me so. But if not, take heed. We should not avoid Scripture’s serious warnings. To do so would be to cause his children to stumble. Instead, we should give careful attention to the most serious warnings, and this is certainly one of them. There could hardly be anything worse than causing one of God’s children to stumble into sin and unbelief.

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Jesus cares about his children, which means he cares about you. So Jesus also warns us to watch ourselves and the temptations we encounter. He tells us to cut off anything that might scandalize us, or cause us to stumble into sin or unbelief. If your hand is really what causes you to sin, you should cut it off.

Now, if you were paying attention earlier when we talked about what sin is, you should have learned that your hand is not really the cause of your sin. Neither is your foot or your eye, so you can keep these things. Our hearts are the real problem, and they are tempted to sin by

the things around us. What we should cut off, then, are the temptations in our lives. Think about the sins in your life. Then identify the things that tempt you to commit those sins. Then cut those things off.

Most of this is common sense. If you have a problem with shoplifting, don't go shopping by yourself. Take a Christian friend who knows about your problem. If you're addicted to pornography, cancel your internet, or get some monitoring software. If you are prone to fits of rage, stop watching the Vikings. And if you're tempted to murder someone, get rid of your guns. Whatever it is that causes you to sin, cut it off.

And don't blame the thing that tempts you. Our hearts are the problem. We get a hold of good things, and we do evil with them. And these evil actions, if left unchecked, have the power to drag us away from Christ, into unbelief, and eventually into hell. Jesus simply appeals to common sense when he teaches us to avoid this at all cost.

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But the big problem we have, and maybe you've noticed this, is that the real cause of our actual sins is our sinful nature, and what do we do about that? We can't just cut that out; it's engrained in our very being. Try as you may, you won't change your nature. So what do we do?

We might be tempted to just give in and let sin have free reign. That's the wrong thing to do. That's stumbling into sin and unbelief. Coming to realize the depravity of our sinful nature is not cause to give up, but to stand and fight against temptation. And, even more, it is cause to cling to Christ for mercy. We live in a constant battle with sin, but our Savior, Jesus Christ, has already won the war. Our hope is not in our own victory over sin, but in his.

This is what faith in Jesus Christ means. It means trusting and depending on another for salvation. Just as a little child is completely dependent on its parents, so we are completely dependent on Christ for our salvation. Without him we would die and be cast into the unquenchable fire of hell.

We can cut off some of our temptations, but we cannot cut out our sin. For this we need a Savior. We need One who has taken our sin into his own body and has been cut off for our sake. "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus Christ—the righteous and holy Son of God—assumed our sin into his very own body, and

"he was cut off out of the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of [God's] people" (Is. 53:8).

He did what we are unable to do.

So if Jesus bore your sins in his body on the cross, where are they now? They are gone. He died with them, he carried them into the grave, and he rose from the dead without them. He left them in death. And as surely as he is risen from the dead, we shall be raised with him and like him. We will be raised without this brokenness of sin.

We still, of course, struggle with sin. We fight against it. But as you struggle against it, remember that this is merely a battle in a war that is already won. So don't try to win the war, but face each battle knowing that your Savior has won the war and has given his victory to you as a gift. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.