

Mark 9:30-50: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 9 verses 30 to 50 They went on from there and passed through Galilee, and he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and when he is killed after three days he will rise again.

But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him. And they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, What were you discussing on the way?

But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve, and he said to them, If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.

And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his hands he said to them, Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives not me but him who sent me.

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. 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, for the one who is not against us is for us.

[1 : 1 7] 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. 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.

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.

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. 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, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. For everyone will be salted with fire.

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. In the concluding half of Mark chapter 9, Jesus once again predicts his death and resurrection.

[2 : 3 0] And once again his disciples fail to understand. They presumably think he is speaking some strange sort of parable here, when on this particular matter he is speaking entirely plainly.

He is giving them the details down to the specifics of the specific people who will be responsible for his death and the day on which he will rise again. The question of who is the greatest, obviously occupied the disciples' thoughts on this and many other occasions.

The typical human desire for exaltation over others is being expressed here. And Jesus' response to it is to show them a child. The kingdom of God does not work in the same way as the kingdoms of this world, the societies of this world.

The child challenges people to humble themselves, not to be people who vaunt themselves over others, who seek to have an expression of their superiority, of their honour, of their status.

We are not to be invested in the competitive games of honour that consume so many other people, and their attention, their concern, it becomes their preoccupation. And it's not to be like that for the people of God.

[3 : 3 9] Rather, the disciples are to recognise their dependence, their unworthiness, their lack of honour and status, and to resist the pursuit of exalting themselves over others.

Greatness comes through loving service of others. If you want to be first, you must be last. If you want to be the greatest, you must be the servant of all. Greatness also comes through welcoming and receiving of the weak.

The section of the passage that we're looking at now has a lot to say about how we recognise each other, and the way in which our receiving of each other, our recognition of each other, and our honouring of each other is a way of honouring and receiving Christ.

Here it's found in receiving the weak person, in receiving the child, in receiving the person who's dependent, who's without honour and status, who doesn't have anything to offer us in return.

As we receive them, we are receiving Christ. And as we receive Christ, we are receiving the one who sent Christ. And we will be rewarded. But instead of trying to exalt ourselves over others, the alternative is not just recognising the goodness of the child, it's recognising that the kingdom works in a very different way.

[4 : 51] As you show honour to those who do not naturally receive honour, you will be honoured by the one who has sent Christ, by the Father himself. Children are highlighted as the example.

They should be seen as representative of the wider group of weak and dependent persons. But they are important in their own right. A number of people have seen Jesus paying attention to children and putting forward children as examples of the kingdom, and have said that he must be referring to something else, that the children must illustrate some other group of persons.

Now, they do illustrate a wider group of persons. But they illustrate those wider group of persons precisely as children, precisely as the sort of group that you would not pay attention to in themselves.

The sort of group that you would think they obviously are referring to some other group. It can't be children. Children lack the mental capacity, or maybe they lack the age to be recognised as part of society.

Whatever it is that might cause us to discount them, it seems to me that Christ is challenging that. That the people of the kingdom are defined by the least, by the weakest among them.

[6 : 00] Those are the ones we are to honour. And as we honour them, we will be honoured by Christ. This is not, then, the pursuit of honour and status for ourselves, of self-aggrandizement that the disciples had exemplified.

Rather, it's about giving ourselves to others. It's about honouring others ahead of ourselves. And that is how we will be honoured. Receiving children means paying attention to and honouring the people who cannot give you anything in return, who might threaten your status rather than raising it. The way that we treat children, the poor, the mentally disabled, the dependent, and other such persons, is how we follow or fail to follow Christ's example.

Jesus surrendered his rights for the sake of people who have nothing to offer, nothing to commend themselves to his attention. And we are to do the same. This incident is followed by the disciples seeing a man casting out demons and rebuking him.

It's reminiscent of Numbers chapter 11 verses 26 to 29. Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them.

[7 : 08] They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.

And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, My Lord Moses, stop them. But Moses said to him, Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them.

Jesus, in his response to the disciples, challenges their sectarianism. Indeed, even the smallest act of hospitality given to an apostle, because they belong to Christ, would not go unrewarded.

Just a cup of water would be enough. This is fleshed out in much more detail in Matthew chapter 25. You should note also here that Jesus refers to himself as the Christ. Jesus had challenged the way in which they failed to recognise the weak and sought to put themselves over others.

Now Jesus is challenging their sectarianism, their failure to recognise people outside of their camp. This is all about how we recognise and honour people. And this theme continues through into the next body of teaching.

[8 : 20] Jesus talks about the importance of dealing radically with obstacles to the weak. The connection to Jesus' teaching on adultery, for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount.

We must deal radically with sin in order to protect, not just ourselves, but others from stumbling. If we do not deal with sin, if we do not deal with those things that might wound others in the body of Christ decisively, then we are in danger of hell itself.

The challenge here is to deal with anything that would lead to abuse, that would lead to a destruction of the weak. We must recognise the weak. It's so often within churches the case that people will treat the weak, the dependent, the people who have no honour, as if they could be collateral damage of those with honour and status and platforms.

That's not how it's supposed to be in the body of Christ. The weak and the dependent and the children are seen by God himself. God sees the orphan and the widow.

He sees the one who is poor. He sees the child. And a Christianity that is unmindful of the weak and allows them to be abused is no Christianity at all. This is, once again, all about how we recognise people, how we honour people.

[9 : 36] The description of the great millstone hung around the neck and the person being cast into the sea maybe reminds us of the description of Babylon the Great. In Revelation chapter 18 verse 21, Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence and will be found no more.

The destruction of such cities can be connected with their inhospitality to the poor, the weak, those in need. And we must not be such people.

A question to consider. How might Leviticus chapter 2 verse 13 help us to read the final verses of this chapter?

