

NCBC Youth Group
February 23, 2020

LESSON ON THE SERIOUSNESS OF SIN
MARK 9:42-50

Introduction

In the last few weeks, we have seen Jesus shift His focus from public ministry to private ministry. There will still be public ministry, but with the cross nearing, the focus becomes private instruction. There was a lesson on faith in Mark 9:14-29, a lesson on humility in Mark 9:30-41, and today is a lesson on the seriousness of sin, Mark 9:42-50.

Sin is not something you hear often today, and many pastors have stopped talking about sin because it is offensive. The culture would rather hear things like, we are good people that do bad things and not that we are sinners who are helpless without Jesus Christ. But, as we will study today, Jesus teaches us that sin is very serious.

If you look at this text, you will see that it is a very dramatic text. We see graphic illustrations and violent threats. But before we study our text, let's first define sin. What is sin? Sin is the transgression of the law of God. When we violate the commandments in His Word, we have sinned. Obviously, we have the Ten Commandments—murder, adultery, stealing, etc.—but beyond that, sin is not just something that we do outwardly. Sin is something that comes from the heart (Mark 7:15). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27). You don't have to physically commit adultery to transgress the commandment against adultery.

Causing Someone to Stumble

Let's turn to verse 42. Here we have a warning against causing someone to stumble. The idea here is causing someone to stumble spiritually, or put it another way, to cause someone to sin. Practically, there are a few ways we can cause someone to sin.

First, we can directly cause someone to sin by enticing them and leading them to sin. For example, when you start gossiping with people and they join in, you have not only sinned yourself, but you have enticed someone else to sin. Let's face it, we are people, and we have a hard time refusing gossip, even if we are mindful of it, it is a difficult urge to control. Or if you get together with some people and plan to cheat on a test or homework. You have enticed them into sin. You may have experienced this. Someone comes up to you and asks to copy your homework or asks you to show them the questions to a quiz or test for

a class you already took. Depending on who it is, sometimes that is difficult to refuse. Imagine if you were the one that asked your friends to help you cheat. That is another way you can cause someone to stumble.

Here is sort of another way that is more subtle, but equally sinful. When you lead others to love the world or draw them away from things that are spiritually beneficial. Maybe you got some tickets to a football game that is the same time as church, and you invite some friends from church to go. There is nothing sinful with going to sporting events, but that takes them away from worshipping and fellowshiping with believers, and you have cause someone to stumble.

So the first way to cause someone to stumble is by directly enticing them. The second is indirect. Ephesians 6:4 says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.” In that example, the parents mean well, but parents could provoke their children to anger when they are overbearing or have unrealistic expectations for their children. Another way is being too nitpicky. Nothing is ever good enough. That could provoke not only children, but adults to anger. So we need to be careful that we don’t indirectly entice others to sin.

The third way to cause someone to sin is by modeling sin. We may not always be aware, but others are looking to us in how we live. Those in positions of leadership need to be especially careful here because people look at how you live. They follow your examples. Romans 14 is a passage on Christian liberty. Take the topic of drinking for example. Just because I can control how much alcohol I drink to not get drunk doesn’t mean everyone else can. If someone is watching my example and see me drinking, they might think, well if he drinks, and he’s in a position of leadership, then I will drink too. If they get drunk, then I could be at fault too. Romans 14:21 says, “It is good not to eat meat or drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.”

Finally, the fourth way to cause someone to sin is not by doing something, but by not doing something—neglect. We cause others to stumble when we fail to stimulate others to righteousness. Hebrews 10:24 says, “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds.” Colossians 3:16 says, “With all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” We should be promoting spiritual growth among one another, and if we fail to do that, we cause others to stumble.

So, we cause others to stumble by what we do and by what we fail to do. We can entice someone to sin, we can indirectly tempt someone to sin, setting an example that causes others to sin, and by failing to stimulate one another to righteousness. Of course, in

all those instances, the person who sins is responsible for their actions or sinful thoughts, but do not cause other people to sin. If you cause others to sin, you are also guilty.

Now, just how serious is it that we should not cause someone to stumble? Verse 42 continues: “It would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone¹ hung around his neck,² he had been cast into the sea.” This is a very graphic and violent threat. It would be better that you died by drowning than to cause someone to sin. Jesus is not just merely suggesting that we refrain from causing others to sin. It is a very serious command.

Matthew adds something interesting in Matthew 18:7, “Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!” Listen, we expect the world under the influence of satan to throw many temptations our way. We expect satan to entice people to sin through the environment. Look around: Advertisements on TV are often very sensual, racy, and materialistic. Movies, music, and TV shows are filled with perversion and explicit scenes and language. Temptations, stumbling blocks are expected. But, woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes. Let the stumbling blocks not come from the Christ-follower.

Personal Sanctification

The first lesson is to not cause others to sin. The second is to maintain personal purity. You cannot lead others to righteousness if you are not righteous yourself. You cannot remove the speck in your brother’s eye without first removing the log in your own eye (Matthew 7:5). And in the verses to follow, we see that we must take extreme action to deal with sin in our own lives.

I will read verses 43, 45, and 47, skipping verses 44 and 46. Verses 44 and 46 did not appear in the earliest manuscripts, and some scribe added those verses into this passage, so we will skip it.

Verses 43-47 says, “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire. [45] If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than having your two feet, to be cast into hell. [47] If your eye causes you to stumble, throw

¹ There are two words for millstone. This is the upper millstone or the heavier one. This is the one that is turned by a donkey, not the one used by people. This is a heavy stone used to grind grain.

² This carries the idea of “wearing” the millstone like a collar by having one’s head inserted through the hole in the millstone.

it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell.”

Here we see the call for us to deal with sin. We see hand, foot, and eye, representing what we see, where we go, what we touch, and what we do.³ We must deal radically with our sins. Now, the text is interesting because it tells us to cut off our hands and feet and to pluck out our eyes if that causes us to sin. The Bible is certainly not speaking about actually removing a body part if it causes you to sin. Just the mere outward act of removing a body part does not mean we have ceased from sin. Paul tells the Colossians that in Colossians 2:23, “These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

So, the Bible is not talking about physically removing a limb or an eye, because our sinful desire is still there. What it is saying is that we need to take extreme measures against sin in our lives. Listen, if watching TV entices you to sin, stop doing that. If your best friends entice you to sin, don't go where they go. Take extreme actions to deal with sin in your lives. If you sin, you might cause others to stumble.

This is not a passage that teaches perfect obedience and sinlessness. We will never achieve that on earth, but as Christians, when we sin, we confess our sins. This is talking about a continual sin,⁴ where sin is the pattern of one's life. Christians are not dominated by a continual pattern of sin.

Christians must deal with sin in their lives, and we must continually deal with it. The alternative for not dealing with sin is hell. There is no middle ground, there is no gray area, and there are no second-class Christians. You either are a Christian and deal with sin or you are not a Christian. Verses 43, 45, and 47 all invoke hell as the alternative. Obviously, Christians cannot lose their salvation, but what you do in your life is telling of whether you are a true Christian or not.

Gehenna

The word for hell in verses 43, 45, and 47, is *gehenna*. *Gehenna* comes from valley of Hinnom, which is south of Jerusalem. If we go back in history, we find that the Scripture

³ First John 2:16 talks about sin this way, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.” Lust of the flesh, what we touch, and lust of the eyes, what we see.

⁴ The word “cause” is in the present tense, indicating continual action.

records two kings who sacrificed children in the valley of Hinnom: Ahaz (2 Chronicles 28:3) and Manasseh (2 Chronicles 33:6). The prophet Jeremiah recorded this in Jeremiah 32:35, “They built the high places of Baal that are in the valley of Ben-hinnom to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I had not commanded them nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.” Of course, this practice is abominable to the Lord and is prohibited.⁵ In fact, most of us would cringe to hear of the practice of sacrificing children, infants.

A godly king came along. His name was Josiah, the grandson of Manasseh, and under his reforms, he turned the valley of Hinnom into Jerusalem’s garbage dump.⁶ In addition to the garbage and sewage being burned there, corpses of dead animals and dead criminals were also burned there.⁷ As a result, maggots and worms infested that place.

This is a very vivid and graphic imagery that Jesus used, making *gehenna* synonymous with hell. The continual fire at *gehenna* is likened to the eternal torment and punishment of unrepentant sinners.

Total Dedication to the Lord

Finally, verses 49 to 50 tell us that our lives must be characterized by total dedication to the Lord. Verse 49 is very difficult to understand, but commentators generally agree that it carries the idea of self-sacrifice. Here’s how the words in verse 48, “For everyone will be salted with fire,” is linked to sacrifice. In the Old Testament, salt and fire come together in sacrifices. One offering in specific, the grain offering, fits this passage well. When you think of sacrifices and offerings in the Old Testament, you might think of animal sacrifices, but grain offerings—offerings that do not involve animals—are also common.

Leviticus 2:13, describing the grain offering, says, “Every grain offering of yours, moreover, you shall season with salt.” Grain was used to make cakes—similar to our pancakes—which was a common food item in those days. The grain offering symbolized the need for total devotion to the Lord.

Salt was also a component of the grain offering. Leviticus 2:13 continues by saying, “So that the salt of the covenant of your God shall not be lacking from your grain offering.” Salt is a preservative, and whatever is salted endures; thus, the sacrifice brought before God should be enduring. Salt is also pure, and our sacrifice to God must be pure. If we have

⁵ Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5.

⁶ 2 Kings 23:10

⁷ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Gehenna.html>

a total devotion to God, our sacrifice will be enduring and pure because of our obedience to His Word.

Total dedication, pure, and enduring obedience to the Lord means we will deal with sin radically in our lives. What good is salt if it becomes unsalty? Look at the end of verse 50: "And be at peace with one another." The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest (Mark 9:34). That kind of argument provoked each other to the sin of pride. As we follow the Lord, let us take extreme actions to deal with sin, let us not cause others to stumble, let our obedience to the Lord be total, pure, and enduring, and let us be at peace with one another.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying sin is serious. Churches that rarely mention sin are leading people into a very dangerous predicament of neglecting our Christian duty of dealing with sin. One thing that I enjoy when we worship at a Presbyterian Church is that confession of sins is always a part of worship.

Remember that we cannot achieve sinless perfection, but as 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." As we come before God every day in Bible reading and prayer, let us always remember to confess our sins. Let us ask God to show us our sins (Psalm 139:23-24) that we might confess it.