

FIRST OR LAST? Mark 9:30-50

One of the things about boxing, which is more of an individual sport, is that there's always this competition to be the greatest. And someone will rise to the top as the greatest for a while, and then next thing you know, someone come in and defeats them and then they're the greatest. There is a constant desire to be greater than others. Actually Muhammad Ali said that "I am the greatest. I knew that even before I knew I was." There's something in us that always wants to be the greater than others and greater than others in the world's eyes but we don't seem to be concerned very much about who is the greatest in God's eyes.

This personal desire for greatness, or self-exaltation, is something rooted in the pride of the flesh and is something that Jesus Christ is going to address in the disciples today. As we have been studying in our journey through the Gospel of Mark, Mark writes to a persecution-suffering original audience in Nero's Rome and writing with an emphasis on Christ as the **Suffering Servant**. Jesus has just started revealing to His disciples that He is not going to be setting up His kingdom on earth yet but is going to suffer and die. There's some prophecies that they missed about His 1st Coming but they still haven't laid aside their plans. They're still talking about who's the greatest among them and therefore have it the best, but Jesus Christ is talking about suffering. Knowing this, Jesus seems to take a turning point from the highly practical teaching about ministry and focus on cultivating their character. If they are going to be leaders and disciple-makers, **they must be men of Christlike character**. And in our passage today, we're going to study **three threats, or dangers, that can ruin the effectiveness of any disciple** and especially leaders like these twelve men are. It's kind of like a **Leadership 101** class for these men but also for any disciple's life and mission.

"From there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it. For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.

They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, "Who receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me."

John said to Him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not hinder him, for there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is for us. For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he will not lose his reward.

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea. 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, not the unquenchable fire, [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] 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, [where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.] If your eye causes you to stumble, throw 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, 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 becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

So again, we’re dealing with 3 threats or dangers to the effectiveness of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

I. 1st THREAT TO EFFECTIVE DISCIPLESHIP: THE DESIRE FOR PERSONAL GREATNESS (VV. 30-37)

This is seen in the contrast between made between what is on Jesus’ mind and what’s on the mind of the disciples.

What is on Jesus’ mind? Well you’ll notice in verse 30 that we’re no longer in Caesarea Philippi but are south of there, passing **through Galilee** and He’s talking about His upcoming passion, where He is delivered up into the hands of men to be crucified and raise again. In verse 33 you’ll notice He **stops briefly** in Capernaum. In 10:1 He’ll be in Judea and by 11:1 He’ll be just outside Jerusalem where He makes His royal entry. Jesus is travelling south, and on His mind is the cross. And there’s a sense of compulsion seen in His desire to “not want anyone to know about it.” The compulsion is there because He has a messianic mission to complete and the prophecy to fulfill.

We are on our way to *the Passion* (like the movie) where Jesus, the Suffering Servant, lays down His life for us. And this is something Jesus is trying to get across to the disciples, speaking very plainly about it, because it **has direct bearing on the missionary, disciple-making character of the 12 and on the entire Church. Our life and mission should not be characterized by who is the greatest but be characterized by loving, sacrificial service because our Savior’s was characterized by loving, sacrificial service.** Crosses, not thrones. Jesus said “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.”

But what’s on the disciples’ minds? Thrones. It’s Christlike for us to be patient though with the disciples here because they’re having to rework in their minds much of their concept about the Messiah’s coming that they’ve been taught and prophecies they missed (Is. 53). But the fact is, you’d think they start releasing their plans and embrace His since their plans involved thrones now. And His didn’t. It involved a cross.

When Jesus asks them about what they were discussing, they don’t say a word – “they kept silent.” What for? Because they knew in their heart something wasn’t right about it. They had a guilty conscience. It’s like when your mom or dad asks you as a child, “Who drew all over the wall with crayons?” They’re not really asking. They’re revealing to you that they know and you need to admit it and they have something to teach you. Jesus wants to teach these men the servant-hearted nature of discipleship.

Jesus’ voice here probably isn’t the same as some of your parents when you get caught drawing on the walls. What we’re discussing today with millstones and hell, some people like to think Jesus was standing up and yelling or pointing fingers and pounding a pulpit. But His tone, I think, can be indicated by His posture. He sits down in verse 35 and calls them to Him. He’s saying, “Drop everything, come over here and listen. Focus.” Because He has something important to tell them –

a precept that you don't want to forget and it's that the way to **greatness in God's kingdom is not up, but down. Not by being a ruler over everyone, but by being a servant of everyone.**

❖ **The way up is down.**

"If anyone wants to be first [*to be greatest in God's kingdom*] he shall be last and servant of all." **His answer is in keeping with the proclamation He just made about His passion.** Greatness is in the **service of love and sacrifice.** But these disciples weren't used to that idea. In this world, they were used to looking at leaders like the Roman politicians and the religious Pharisees who threw their weight around and controlled people by force or manipulation. But the expectations of a leader in the kingdom of God is the exact opposite. It's upside down – completely inverted – to the ways of the world. It's **Christlike, sacrificial, loving service.**

And Jesus uses the **living illustration of a child** to demonstrate this truth as well. Children in this culture were not considered great by any standard. They were small and weak and helpless and because of that, they were considered useless – a drain on resources – and were often abandoned to the elements to die, especially if they were female or unhealthy baby boys. But **disciples of Jesus will serve and care for the insignificant and helpless like the children and babies or handicapped who can't defend themselves.** I don't know if you know this but it wasn't the welfare state's idea to care for children. It dates back to Jesus' teaching through Christians who applied His teaching.

❖ **Christ's disciples are characterized by sacrificial, loving service to others.**

Jesus is also saying that **disciples are to identify themselves with children and become "little ones" themselves, who have no basis for pretensions to greatness.**ⁱ Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3-4). **Children exhibit trusting, teachable, eagerness to learnⁱⁱ, humble, dependent.** So we must be in our relationship with God.

❖ **Great one exhibit childlike qualities:**

Jesus has a huge heart for children and to receive one is to receive Him but the analogy progresses in that the statement that to receive a little child is also equivalent to receiving Jesus should be interpreted of the disciples. Verse 37 then, in effect, means that **to receive a little one, being another disciple of Jesus Christ, is to receive Jesus and the Father who sent Him.** That links us to the next threat to effective discipleship because the twelve have tried to hinder a man who is a disciple from exercising his faith in Jesus Christ.

II. **2nd THREAT TO EFFECTIVE DISCIPLESHIP: THE FOLLY OF A SECTARIANISM. (VV. 37-42)**

In verse 38, John says, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us." What this comment and the action of the disciples reveals is that John and the other disciples had developed **an attitude of superiority and extreme exclusivity.** This man was not one of the twelve or seventy who had been commissioned and were therefore "authorized" to act in Jesus' name as His representative with His power. Whoever this man was, he didn't fit into their organizational structure and wasn't "authorized" as the disciples were defining it and so to them, he wasn't a true follower of Christ. But their action toward this man is really centered deep down, in **their desire for preeminence,** because here they have just failed to cast out a demon and here he is having no problem at all. I think they were jealous of him. And by the warning Jesus gives, it sounds like they did a lot of damage to him.

What this shows us is that **they're scope of the work of God was too narrow or too exclusive**. I think they understood themselves to be the chosen ones and were thinking that this man must come under their authority soon as followers of them. Jesus' response is not to hinder this man, "for there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is for us." By the way, that statement reveals **there's no neutrality with Jesus. You're either for Him or against Him**. But His response tells them their exclusivity has gone a little too far. **Just because someone isn't actively part of their group, doesn't mean that God isn't or can't be with them or can't work through them**. He's teaching the disciples that God is working in people and in places that they don't know about or have the right to stop.

They've underestimated the number of peoples' loyalty to Jesus and underestimated the work of God in others apart from them. Entrance into God's kingdom is by faith in Christ and not by membership to a specific organizational group. Work in God's kingdom is done by faith through the Spirit of God in individuals who respond. So there's really a spirit of rivalry here and unnecessary division between the disciples and this man. And Jesus is saying it must go, as it is reinforced by His command to be at peace in verse 50.

The wideness of God's work is blown open by His statement that **even if the gift of a cup of water in His name won't lose its reward!** That's *how wide participation can be in God's mission*. Even a little act of hospitality is a token of faith and obedience.ⁱⁱⁱ It really stresses God's awareness of all who are involved in His work. He wouldn't distinguish so much between important and trivial tasks like they do. You know, we need to remember, like the disciples, that **God's paintbrush is wide** and He paints with a variety of colors. Everyone has different gifts and combinations of gifts and personalities and talents and backgrounds that create different all these different kinds of ministries that all bring glory to God.

❖ **God is aware of the smallest, "trivial" tasks done in His name.**

And there's a warning against hindering this wideness. In verse 42, even though it may be the beginning of a new paragraph in your Bible, I believe it is the final comment on the dialogue about **this sectarian mindset that hinders people from exercising their faith in Christ**. "Whoever causes one of these little ones [*disciples*] who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea." A heavy millstone is something that was used to grind grain into flour. There were smaller, hand-size millstones but this word is the word for a large, mule driven millstones (*mylos onikos*). About this time, a historian said that Romans had so drowned insurrectionists in Galilee this way and also a group of Galileans had done the same to some of Herod's supporters.

The disciples had probably heard about these events and He's using these events to warn them, for them to take heed because not heeding this warning is how you end up with denominational type of groups that think they're the only ones who really have the truth and only they can really administer in the name of the Lord. They start coming up with ideas like unless you're a member of our church or receive our (works-based) baptism you can't be saved. It enslaves people to their system and controls them, which is exactly what those who want to be First, love – control.

Sectarianism hinders people in that church who might really have faith in Jesus, from exercising their faith in Him and hinders outsiders from coming to know Jesus. One must be clergy in a sect to do much of anything. My wife and I have some personal acquaintances who came out of a strict sectarian and lone church where they believe that only they have the truth and are really saved. And

only the “*real apostles*” in that church do the ministry. Years ago when we told them we were going to be missionaries in South America for a while they asked, “*What’s a missionary?*” Sectarianism is arguably the greatest hindrance to gospel ministry today. In the Church, leaders & pastors are not supposed to be the First’s, the professionals in robes who do the ministering while everyone else sits on the sideline. **The pastor’s job is to be Last and help equip *all the saints* for the work of the ministry, building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12).**

But let’s not just make our non-denominational selves look good. Let’s ask the question, “Is there love in my heart for disciples of Jesus Christ who don’t believe exactly what I believe and don’t go to church here but maybe to another church in town?” Because as long as we hold onto the same core beliefs/primary doctrines as someone from another church... like salvation by grace through faith in Christ, the incarnation, literal resurrection, literal physical return of Christ, trustworthiness of the Bible... **there should be a right hand of fellowship extended** even though we might disagree on some details like eschatology/prophecy. But we also don’t want to go too far into doctrinal minimalism where we forsake doctrine for the sake of unity if that unity’s going to be superficial. One of the ways we know we’ve become too sectarian personally is when we can’t fellowship with anyone who believes a little differently than us, maybe causing us not to go to church at all.

III. **3rd THREAT TO EFFECTIVE DISCIPLESHIP: THE FAILURE IN MORAL SELF-DISCIPLINE (VV. 43-50)**

In verses 43-48 there is repetition and hyperbole where Jesus says that it is better to cut off members of our body, like hand or eye or foot than to keep both hands or eye or feet and be thrown into hell. Like with the millstone, the **repetition** and **exaggerative hyperbole** are used to get a very serious matter across and hammer it home in our hearts that we’d better be genuine.

He is **not demanding physical self-mutilation but is in the strongest manner saying that it is necessary to part with sin in order to be a disciple of Jesus Christ**. He’s telling us a couple of things: **1)** Sin in our life must be renounced at all costs and **2)** Our here and now physical life is not nearly as important as where we spend our eternal lives after death because once we’re on the other side, the decisions we’ve made in this life is **irreversible**. There’s no second chances. The fire of hell is eternal, being never quenched. And their worm does not die, meaning it’s a place of everlasting destruction.

The word Jesus uses here for hell also gives us a vivid image. It is sometimes transliterated **Gehenna** from the Greek, which comes from the Hebrew name for the valley of Hinnom^{iv} the southwestern side of Jerusalem. There is a steep ravine and in this place two OT kings used to practice human sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). King Josiah later abolished that practice and turned the ravine into a garbage dump and it was where fire burned day and night. Smoke was continually rising. When I was doing missionary work in Antofagasta, Chile there was a ravine east of the town, where they too, pushed all of their trash in, burned it, and would bury it. I took pictures of it because it reminded me of the valley of Hinnom or Gehenna. It smelled constantly of burning.

There is great reward for faithful disciples and leaders but grave penalties for leading people astray and causing them to stumble because of your own lack of moral discipline. He is not talking about a loss of salvation (Rom. 8:1) but pressing the need to be led by the Spirit and not the flesh (Rom. 8:14). By the Spirit we put to death the deeds of the flesh. And those who live in immorality give evidence of their lack of salvation or become a **stumbling block** to those who are seeking the truth.

The word **stumble** can literally mean “to slam shut” or “to close on something”. By our example, we either open doors or slam doors shut on those seeking truth or eager to grow in it.

He’s ultimately characterizing false teachers. Jesus said you will know false teachers in the same way you know what trees are – by their fruit (Mt. 7). They will do things in Jesus name, maybe prophesy, cast out demons, even do miracles... But He’ll say to them “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” False teachers love the spotlight. They want to be first. They become sectarian in their desire for power and control over people. And they also are known teaching **lawlessness**, by which I mean **treating God’s grace like it’s a license to sin**. It is characteristic, by the way, of the last days, the age in which we live as the Church (2 Peter 2:1-22; 3:3-4). Jude 17-19 says, “In the last time there shall be mockers, walking after their own **ungodly lusts**. These are the ones who cause **divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit.**”

The final illustration Jesus uses is **salt**. “For everyone will be salted with fire.” In the OT, the temple sacrifices had to be seasoned with salt (Lev. 2:13; Ex. 30:35). Well, like Jesus, **every disciple is sacrifice for God** (Rom. 12:1). The metaphor is appropriate because in this life we will go through fiery sufferings and trials we go through for Jesus’ sake. All of this really sheds light on those in Mark’s original audience living in Nero’s Rome, doesn’t it? They’re losing members of their bodies for Christ, like their heads. They’re suffering. They’re going through trials. But, it refines them in Christlike quality.

❖ **Every disciple is a sacrifice for God and should expect fiery trials to refine them.**

Fires separate the dross from the gold in the gold ore, leaving the gold. It also separates the saved from the unsaved, showing him what he really is.^v Ultimately, I think **there’s a choice here for us between the *eternal fires of hell* for rejecting Jesus in our life or *temporal fires of purification* for living for Jesus in this life.**

He continues, “Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again?” Matthew’s gospel adds, “It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under foot.” “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Salt is one of my favorite illustrations that Jesus used because as a former taxidermist, I used to work with salt a lot and I worked with salt yesterday because my friend shot a doe and I am preserving the backhide for him. After cleaning a raw animal hide, I rub salt into it and then leave it under a thick layer of salt for a day, then resalt it for another two days and it would dry out so I could ship it to a professional tannery to get a good tan. Salt **preserves** things and **prevents decay** and in food, **enhances flavor**. But one of the things I learned working with salt is that **it’s only good for so long**. After a while, the salt will quit working to preserve and prevent decay on hides and so you were always replacing it. I never liked the feeling of having to dispose of salt by the bucket-full, but I did it because it’s not useful for anything anymore. You just bury it.

❖ **Stay salty! Stay useful!**

And that’s what Jesus, in effect, is saying here. They are in danger of losing their saltiness. But **if you have an obedient, loving and servant heart you’ll have a preservative effect on all men and prevent decay and you will enhance the blan lives without Christ**. And that’s our responsibility in this world toward men – to be salty. But if you lose your saltiness by being **First, self-absorbed** rather than servant-minded, divisive rather than pursuing peace, and immoral rather than exercising moral self-control by the Holy Spirit, you will no longer be **useful**. 2 Timothy 2:19-22 says the same thing: if you want to be useful to your Lord, you have to be a clean.

“Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: “The Lord knows those who are his,” and, “Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.” In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use. Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be **instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.** Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”

Fiery hell or fiery trials? Useful or useless? First or last? These are the decisions we must make. Are you a disciple or not?

I want to close with some practical insights that show us the difference between those who are first and those who are last.

1. First want glory and Last give glory.

First want all the attention and promote themselves but the last want to people to focus their attention on Christ and promote Christ.

Because of this, the Last have **an unwavering sense of purpose that is *beyond themselves.***

2. First serve themselves and Last to serve Christ.

Last want to be what Christ wants them to be and not what the world wants them to be. They want to serve and give, not get. Last are producers and First are consumers.

3. The First see themselves as owners and the Last as stewards.

Those who are first will have a major crisis when they lose things in their life because they want to hold on to everything and can’t let things go – like their will – to serve Christ. But the last see themselves simply as stewards of God’s thing. That everything belongs to God and they simply caretakers of what God has entrusted to them, so He can do what He want with His stuff. Last see their possessions, time, children, natural talents, spiritual gifts and even their very life-breath as things that they are stewarding for a time which ultimately are from God, for God. God is the owner.

4. The First don’t know who they are and the Last know exactly who they are (in Christ).

The first are always trying to find their identity in *externals* – what they do, what they have, who is following them, who is not. But the last find their identity in Christ, whether anyone follows them or not. They do what the Lord calls them too and aren’t impressed with externals & numbers.

5. The First cannot release control but the Last desire to pass on control.

First are always trying to accumulate more and more control until the day they die but Last expect a release of their responsibilities someday and want to see others take the torch of Christ. They live to see other take that torch.

6. The First lord their power over people but the Last influence people by the power of love.

ⁱ William Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 340.

ⁱⁱ Charles Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible*, 1202.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lane, 345.

^{iv} Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Living Insights: Mark* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 257.

^v Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), 2 Th 1:5.