

Sermon Draft

Text: Mark 9:38–50

Sermon: “Salt Is Good”

To praise or bless the name of the Lord is, of course, to praise or bless the Lord himself to thank him for both who he is and what he does. All his wonderful works can be seen as expressions of his name: ***“These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. . . . When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground”*** (Psalm 104:27, 30). Likewise, anything we do has real value only when done in God’s name: ***“As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. . . . Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord”*** (Epistle, James 5:10, 14).

Our Gospel for this Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost includes some of the more difficult verses in the entire Gospel of Mark. Those most difficult verses aren’t when Jesus says, ***“Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward”*** though those verses could easily be misunderstood to turn Gospel into Law.

The toughest verses aren't even Jesus' instruction, ***"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off"*** (v 43) as difficult as that is for us to hear. No, among the toughest verses in Mark's Gospel are these words: ***"Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you salt it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace among one another"*** (vs 49–50).

Just what does Jesus mean with that metaphor of "salt" and "salting"?

"For the one who is not against us is for us." (v 40) In our text the disciples are troubled to see a man casting out demons when he's not one of the Twelve. We see the similarity to the incident in today's Old Testament Reading when Joshua is troubled by Eldad and Medad prophesying back in the Israelite camp (Numbers 11:24–30). This is a matter of seeing some people as "insiders" and others as "outsiders."

Like the Twelve, we may also be troubled when things done in our congregations don't seem quite according to Hoyle, that is according to the plan our plan. We see the person doing the questionable behavior as an "outsider." However, Jesus tells the disciples not to forbid this man from exorcising, for ***"he who is not against us is on our side."***

We must allow God to “do his things.” God uses all kinds of people to accomplish His will both insiders and outsiders.

There is to be no “insider/outsider” distinction among those who share in Christ’s kingdom. Jesus says that the one who is kind to you (as in, giving you a cup of water) because you are “in the name of Christ” will not lose his reward. This is where we could turn Gospel into Law. Jesus’ focus here isn’t on the one giving the drink (commanding us to do that though we should). His focus is on the one receiving the drink emphasizing how precious the recipient is to God. A kindness to a Christian is in fact a kindness done to Christ himself. ***“And the King will answer them, Truly I say to you, as you did it one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”*** (Matthew 25:40.) We are worth so much to God that someone who cares for us is rewarded as caring for Jesus! God wants no one especially ourselves to cause us to stumble, to be lost (vs 42–48).

Now comes the section of the text that we hear as difficult, the part about stumbling, where we are told to cut off our hand or foot or pluck out our eye or be drowned with a giant millstone tied around our neck.

Are we really supposed to do that? Almost certainly not. However, Jesus is clearly teaching the seriousness of stumbling, of being bound to one's old ways of trusting in self and thus turning away from Christ. Drowning or mutilation really would be better than to go to eternal fire in hell. And Jesus may also be pushing us to consider the deeper question at hand.

Is it really a matter of hands or feet or eyes that might cause us to be lost? No! It's from the heart that sins come (Mark 7:20–23). Jesus reminds us that this, too, is a matter of the heart. Yet this difficult section, too, shows us how much we Christians are worth to God. Jesus talks of stumbling because he doesn't want it to happen to anyone. Woe to the person who causes you to lose your faith in Christ! God doesn't want us to cause ourselves to stumble. Remember that evil heart of ours! The real threat to being a follower of Christ lies in oneself! We are worth so much to God that Jesus will speak in the greatest extremes to warn us against falling away!

Though it's plenty cheap nowadays, in the ancient world, salt was precious. In fact, in Roman times salt was literally worth its weight in gold, and Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt paid a monthly *salarium*, so-called because *sal* was the Latin word for salt. Hence our English word salary today. And from this, too, comes our description of someone we value highly, just as a Roman general would value a good soldier: "He's worth his salt."

Think, then, of what Jesus means when he says, "**Have salt in yourselves**" (Mark 9:50). The implication isn't that we're to get salt for ourselves, but rather that you have salt already. In making us his people, God has given us something that valuable, worth its weight in gold and much more, this "salt." In Christ, we have eternal *sal*, salvation. That, in turn, shows how much God values us, because we know he gave his own Son into death so that we could be saved. To God, we who are in Christ Jesus are worth our salt!

To God, we are worth every grain of salt we have (vs 49–50). Here are indeed some of the most difficult verses in all of Mark’s Gospel! These verses are difficult because the metaphor could refer to any of the ancient uses of salt: Seasoning for food, Preservative or purifier of things contaminated or rotten, A medium for destroying the fertility of land, An addition to offerings or incense.

“Everyone will be salted with fire.” To which of the uses of salt is Jesus referring? Probably the cleansing function of salt. On the Last Day, we know, fire will purge away all that is incongruent with God’s kingdom. But this will be a good thing for God’s people, for when all that is unhelpful is purged, salted, burned away, we will be blessed with full participation in the reign and rule of Christ.

“Salt is good, but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you salt it?”

This time Jesus can’t be talking about salt as the fire of the Last Day. That salt/fire can’t lose its saltiness. This salt is different. This salt is us! We, Jesus says, are good because we are in him. We are the ones who work against the evil of the world.

But what a stern warning: We are good only in Christ, so without him, nothing can make us good.

“Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace among one another.” Since we are in Christ, we are invited into fellowship with all others who share the faith. And Jesus doesn’t seem to be telling us to get salt that leads to this sweet fellowship. Rather, he’s saying that we have it. We have the salt that leads to fellowship since we are in Christ, who came to us, died and rose for us, and brought us to be baptized into him and his death and resurrection so that we could be in him.

So, then what do we have with Jesus’ discussion of salt and with this entire passage and for the bigger picture of our life as people who are in Christ? Well, we have this: We are worth so much to God that he sees those who care for us as caring for Christ himself. We are worth so much to God that he doesn’t want anything or anyone, including our own sinful hearts, to cause us to stumble away from him. We are worth so much to God that he deems us worth every grain of salt we have. In Christ, you are worth your salt.

Amen