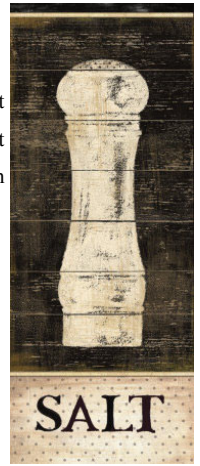


Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
 Psalm 19:7-14
 James 5:13-20
 Mark 9:38-50

Salt
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EVERY ONE WILL BE SALTED WITH FIRE

Our lesson in Mark this week is a collection of sayings spoken by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and at other times in his ministry. Mark wrote as if all these sayings followed our Lord's words in 9:33-37, which is certainly possible considering his description in v.35 of heaven's measure of greatness versus the world's. More often than not, on a scale of one to ten, the formula is [greatness in the world] = 10/[greatness in heaven].

Mark 9:38-41. *John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us." ³⁹But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰For he that is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward."*¹

- *"We forbade him, because he was not following us"* (v.38). The apostles were the inner circle. They were the men closest to Jesus. They had more reason to forbid others to act in his name than certain believers today do when they say, "You must do it our way." Jesus rebuked the disciples and said, *"Do not forbid him ... he that is not against us is for us."* We have here a lesson on tolerance within the body of believers.

Review the preceding passage, Mark 9:33-37, where Jesus rebuked the disciples because were arguing about which of them was the greatest: *"If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all"* (v.35). In today's lesson the disciples were again tempted, as some in the church (especially those in ministry) today are tempted, to be jealous of their status. Your standing in the church or in the kingdom of God is not meant to raise you above others – it is the gift of God's grace, not your own doing

- *"He that is not against us is for us"* (v.40). There is the other side of the coin here as well. In another context (speaking to the unbelieving Pharisees), Jesus said, *"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters"* (Matt 12:30). There are limits to what we may "tolerate" in our church doctrine, and this is always a difficult line to walk. Suppose someone says, for example, "There are many ways to God." Now this person may mean one of two things in saying this:

(1) He may mean, "There are many ways for a person to find Christ," that is, one may learn about Jesus in church, from a friend, from a book, or directly from God. One may come to faith in Christ over a period of time, or on a particular day, or in a crisis, or in a time of reflection, or even in a dying moment.

(2) Or he may mean, "There are many ways to God, and Christ is one of them."

The only basis Christians have for accepting (1), or (2), or both, or neither, is the Bible, and on that basis we must accept (1) and reject (2). (1) simply allows God to bring people to Christ in whatever way he chooses, and we must not begin to tell him how this is best done. But (2) clearly refutes our Lord's statement, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me"* (John 14:6), as well as Peter's saying, *"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12), as well as other verses, and must therefore be rejected.

Our Lord's statement in Mark, *"He that is not against us is for us,"* speaks his love for all men – his unquenchable optimism – his unwillingness to *"break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick"* (Isa 42:3), to slam the door on a person's future, no matter what his past has been.

Jesus lived his own words. His disciples forsook him, but he never forsook them. Peter denied him, but he never denied Peter. Paul was against him, but he saved Paul. He even saved the thief on the cross in his

¹ Bible quotations are from the RSV.

dying moments. There is not one among us who has not denied or forsaken him at one time or another. We can all rejoice in his saying, "He who is not against us is for us."

The saying in Mark is for us to live by for other reasons as well: (1) The Bible says God created man. We keep getting this backwards. The complete body of truth about God is forever beyond our understanding. We say the Bible reveals God to man. What we mean by this, hopefully, is that the Bible reveals things we can understand about God – not everything about God. Some things are beyond words and beyond language. Psalm 19 begins, "*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*" There are things about God that cannot be expressed with words.

(2) The way to God is also not revealed to men in all its aspects. Jesus said, "*I am the way ... no man comes to the Father but by me.*" But there are many paths to life in him. The testimonies of people who have new life in Christ are as varied as the flowers in a mountain meadow, and so are the people themselves. Thus, to follow the One who said, "*He who is not against us is for us,*" it is safer to talk about what has worked for you than to talk about what won't work for someone else. And if you see someone you believe is unqualified doing a good work *in the name of Christ*, it is safer to let that person go ahead."

Mark 9:42-50 (Note: the most reliable translations omit v.44 and 46, as does the RSV.) "*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 round his neck and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵And 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. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck 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, ⁴⁸where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. ⁴⁹For every one will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.*"

- "*Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin...*" (v.42). Jesus may have been rebuking the disciples for their sin of intolerance – preventing the man from driving out demons, and thus driving him away from Christ. There are other things, such as teaching false doctrine, that attract, rather than drive, a person away from Christ. Either way, the great sin is to cause separation between another person, or persons, and Christ. We must take this sin seriously. The *great millstone* Jesus spoke of was a huge stone, turned by animal power, used for grinding grain. It was heavy enough to drown anyone.

Moreover, this is the only place in Mark's gospel where *hell* is described. Hell is a real place, and those who cause others to become separated from Christ, by whatever means, are in danger of spending eternity there, forever separated from the kingdom of God.

The lesson we have is to be tolerant and not prevent someone from doing a good work "*because he was not following us,*" as John put it, but also not become tolerant to the point of accepting doctrine contrary to Scripture, because either of these things can separate a person from the love of God in Christ.

- "*For every one will be salted with fire*" (v.49). The meaning of this verse is uncertain. The NLT translation is, "*Everyone will be tested with fire.*" In the Bible, *salt* is associated with preservation, and *fire* with purification as well as judgment. Discuss, for example, Zech 13:8-9. Those destined to be saved, God will "*put into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested ...*"
- "*Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another*" (v.50). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "*You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?*" (Matt 5:13). You matter greatly to God. It is followers of Christ who are preserving the goodness in our world (see 2 Thess 2:7-10 for example), as salt preserves the goodness in a piece of meat going bad. The Spirit living in you is the essential ingredient that keeps hell from taking over, just as salt is the essential ingredient that keeps decay and rot from taking over in a piece of meat. So "*Have salt in yourselves,*" is our Lord's command to each of us, "*And be at peace with one another.*"