

Scripture: Mark 9:42-48

Text: Mark 9:47 -- "©...it is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God.."

Topic: To Enter the Kingdom of God

Proposition: Anything which prevents your "entrance" into the Kingdom of God should be sacrificed ruthlessly.

Dates written: March 6-9, 1972

Dates and places used:

March 12, 1972 - OAKLAND PARK, FLA.

Citations: Mark 9:45-48

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March 10, 1972 - [illegible]

Introduction:

1. A little man applied for a job as a stevedore, helping load and unload seagoing ships. "You're too small," said the gang foreman.

"Oh, give me a chance," pleaded the little guy.

"Okay," agreed the foreman. "We're loading three-hundred pound anvils in the hold of that ship. Get to work."

For a few hours everything went all right. Then the foreman heard a loud splash and a yell for help. Running to the gangplank, he saw the newly-hired helper bobbing up and down in the water.

"Help," yelled the little man, and went under again. He came up spluttering, and yelled for help again, gurgled and went under.

"Help," he yelled again as he came up the second time. "Throw me a rope or so help me I'll drop this anvil!"

He had hold of something which if he held on to would cause him the difficulty of drowning, and if he didn't hold on to might cause him the difficulty of losing his job. At least that would seem to be the only explanation for him holding onto the anvil in such a circumstance.

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"Okay," agreed the foreman. "We're loading three-hundred round anvils in the hold of that ship. Get to work."

For a few hours everything went all right. Then the foreman heard a loud splash and a yell for help. Running to the gangplank, he saw the newly-hired helper hobbling up and down in the water. "Help," yelled the little man, and went under again. He came up spluttering, and yelled for help again, surged and went under.

"Help," he yelled again as he came up the second time. "Throw me a rope or so help me I'll drop this anvil!"

He had hold of something which it he held on to would cause him the difficulty of drowning, and if he didn't hold on tonight cause him the difficulty of losing his job. At least that would seem to be the only explanation for him holding onto the anvil in such a circumstance.

2. In the Scripture that we read we

find some difficulties too. It is difficult to think of Jesus, whom we so frequently describe as gentle, meek, mild, loving, and so on, as saying such harsh words as we read. If we accept the fact that he did say them, it is difficult to take them literally. If we take them literally it is difficult to see how anybody can measure up to them, or to find anybody that has done so.

3. In spite of its difficulties, this Scriptural passage is an important one for people who are interested in a complete and better understanding of the Christian gospel. That's why we spend our time on it as we are doing here. There are similar passages to this in some of the other gospels, but we will not make detailed comparisons as we sometimes do with similar passages. We will approach our examination of this Scripture, and our evaluation of its significance for people today in two ways. We seek to evaluate a literal interpretation and application of these words of Jesus, and then to consider them as symbolic or parable-like teachings.

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I. A literal interpretation and application of our Scriptural passage, or any other interpretation or application should begin with a summary, so we're sure what we're talking about.

1. This incident happened in the town of Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and in a house in that town; which you can find out if you go back to verse 33 of the same chapter in the Bible where our incident is recorded in the 9th chapter, verses 9:42-48. Jesus found that they had been discussing, en route to Capernaum, who would be greatest among themselves, among the disciples. He called them to him, took a child and put in the middle of them this little one, and gave a couple of important teachings which we will not summarize now. Then, with the child still in the middle of the group, he spoke the words of our Scripture, which we have read.

These are direct and harsh words.

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if...", and then he lists some things which are pretty hard comparisons. He mentions a millstone, meaning a huge, heavy stone of a type

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which donkeys pulled around and around, as being hung around a man's neck as he is thrown into the sea as being a better fate than what will happen to him if he causes a little one who believes in Jesus to sin. He says that if a hand or a foot or an eye causes "you" (one of his followers) to sin, it is better to cut it off or (in the case of the eye) to pluck it out and to enter into the kingdom of God than to let it cause you to go to hell. He ends with a brief description of hell as a place "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." This last verse emphasizes the traditional terrible nature of hell, where a man as miserable as a worm lives forever in the suffering caused by the intense heat of hell. Such is our summary, or retelling in our own terms, of the Scripture. It ~~really~~ is a retelling, for we're longer than the original!

2. In the first verse of our passage for today, in verse 42 of this 9th chapter of Mark, the words "whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin," could refer to the child who was in their midst at the time, and probably did. The punishment

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for causing such a "little one," who believes in Jesus ^{to SIN} is great. If you think this saying can be stretched a bit, it could also refer to people who are little or weak in faith: punishment for causing such a "little one" to sin is also great.

3. Verses 43 to 48 follow up on this general idea, but turn the warnings against sinning to ^{ward} the individual hearer and follower of Jesus. The saying teaches that it is better for an individual to maim himself, rather than to use a body member for wrongdoing. If this thought were carried far enough, it could mean that a person would cut off his head when it directs any part of his body to do wrong!

4. Do you know of anybody who has ever taken this warning or teaching of Jesus literally, so that he has cut off a hand or foot or cut out an eye when they were the agents of sin in himself, or about to become such agents? We would lock up such a person in a padded cell of a mental institution, and keep him in a strait-jacket, to protect him from himself, for his own good, wouldn't we? There may be a few historic examples of such self-

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4. Do you know of anybody who has ever taken this saying or teaching of Jesus literally, so that he has cut off a hand or foot or cut out an eye when they were the agents of sin in himself, or about to become such a agent? He would look up such a person in a padded cell of a mental institution, and keep him in a strait-jacket, to protect him from himself, for his own good, wouldn't we? There may be a few historic examples of such self-

mutilation in attempts to keep this teaching in a literal, realistic way; but from my past rather-extensive study of church history I cannot at the moment recall any.

5. Yet this harsh teaching in Mark, from the mouth of Jesus, generally is regarded as being authentic. ~~They~~ ^{SCHOLARS} think that Jesus really said words of this type and meaning, though of course in translation we do not have the exact words. The only way that I can honestly look at this teaching is that it is a strong parable, a graphic and striking teaching, to get across a point which was very important. This means that it is important that we look at

II. The symbolic meaning of our Scripture.

1. So often we miss the meaning of the Bible, especially of Jesus' ^{TEACHINGS} ~~words~~, because we get hung up on the words themselves and miss the spirit and intent. We treat the Bible like it is a lawbook spelling out the minute details. Though some passages in the Old Testament, like much of Leviticus, ~~is~~ like that (and we ignore most of it)

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II. The symbolic meaning of our Scripture.

1. So often we miss the meaning of the Bible, especially of Jesus' words, because we get hung up on the words themselves and miss the spirit and intent. We treat the Bible like it is a handbook spelling out the minute details, though some passages in the Old Testament, like much of Leviticus, are like that (and we ignore most of it).

Jesus' words need to be taken with more imagination.

2. There is a story, which to me is funny, which may illustrate this problem. A salesman was driving along a lonely country road when his car's engine suddenly stopped. He got out, lifted the hood, inspected the motor, and remarked aloud, "The trouble's in the carburetor."

"No it isn't," said a voice behind him. The salesman swung around. The only thing he could see was an ancient horse watching him over the pasture fence. Frightened, the man began running down the road and didn't stop until he came to a small crossroads garage. After he had recovered his breath, he explained the situation to the garage man.

"And you say you saw no one near you but the horse?" inquired the mechanic.

"That's right," said the salesman.

"Was it an old brown horse with a flop ear?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well," said the mechanic, "just pay no attention to him. He doesn't know a thing about engine trouble."

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"And you say you saw no one near you but the horse?" inquired the mechanic. "That's right," said the salesman.

"Was it an old brown horse with a long ear?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well," said the mechanic, "just pay no attention to him. He doesn't know a thing about engine troubles." The mechanic missed the point, as

far as the salesman was concerned, that the horse could talk, a highly unusual and important thing (unless, as would be probable, he was adding to the kidding of the salesman).

We miss the point all too often in our study of the words of Jesus by seeing only the obvious and then not knowing what to do with it.

3. The first thing that Jesus meant had to be: that to enter the Kingdom of God is an all-important matter, the all-important matter. Nothing else is as important, and it is urgent that you do anything and everything you can to obtain this state of being, residence in the Kingdom of God.

4. We have to recognize that for us to define the Kingdom of God is a matter of disagreement and difficulty. Countless books, article, sermons and lessons have been centered on attempts to understand the nature of the Kingdom. So it is not exactly clear. It seems clear enough that ^{THE KINGDOM OF GOD} ~~it~~ is not a kingdom of a worldly type, ^{NOT} based on materialistic values, ^{NOT} established and maintained by military force, ^{NOT ONE} in which dictatorial authority is exercised by

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the majestic human figure of God. The Kingdom of God ~~certainly would be~~^{is} a situation in which God is known personally ~~and completely~~, a state of being with God, in his presence. It is a state of being or a place of and for people who love God, who try to please him, who feel comfortable in his presence and want to be there very strongly. It is easiest and best achieved (some would say only achieved) by people with faith in Jesus Christ, who develop in their personalities as many Christlike attitudes and virtues as they can. It is an eternal state of being which never ends, but one in which we can begin living now to some limited degree. These statements do not say all there is to say about the Kingdom of God, nor satisfy everybody in what they do so, but for most of us they are acceptable as statements which we can go along with.

5. Jesus' teaching in our Scripture made the strong symbolic point that anything which gets in the way of achieving the Kingdom of God should be put aside ruthlessly. If it is love of money, addiction to any kind of habit or sin, thinking more highly or less highly of yourself than you ought to

The majestic human figure of God. The Kingdom of God is not a political or social system, but a state of being with God, in his presence. It is a state of being or a place of and for people who love God, who try to please him, who feel comfortable in his presence and want to be there very strongly. It is easiest and best achieved (some would say only achieved) by people with faith in Jesus Christ, who develop in their personalities as many Christlike attitudes and virtues as they can. It is an eternal state of being which never ends, but one in which we can begin living now to some limited degree. These statements do not say all there is to say about the Kingdom of God, nor satisfy everybody in what they do say, but for most of us they are acceptable as statements which we can go along with.

2. Jesus' teaching in our Scripture made the strong symbolic point that anything which gets in the way of receiving the Kingdom of God should be put aside ruthlessly. If it is love of money, addiction to any kind of habit or sin, thinking more highly of Jesus highly of yourself, than you ought to

think, or whatever; if it distracts you from loving God and your fellowman, it becomes a hindrance to your participation in the Kingdom of God, and you ought not to do it.

Conclusion:

1. In the Scripture which we have considered here we have an account of Jesus in a warning, negative sort of way advising people to do everything they can to avoid wrong doing and to seek "the Kingdom of God." In other teachings he makes the seeking process more positive, but in today's study it is plain that he considered it a very serious and threatening matter to do anything which prevents one from knowing God and his kingdom.

2. For us, now, here, it means that we must try determinedly not to insult, hurt, harm, or lead astray anybody else in the seeking of better understanding of Jesus and of God's Kingdom. For others and for us, the most important thing in the world is "To enter the Kingdom of God."

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