

Mark 9:30–50

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[0:00] Again, that's Mark 9, 30 to 50. And when he was in the house, he asked them, What were you discussing on the way?

But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.

And he took a child and put him in the midst of them. And taking him in his arms, he said to them, Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. And whoever receives me receives not me, but him who sent me.

John said to him, Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us. But Jesus said, Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

[1:37] 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 around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.

It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell to unquenchable fire. And 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.

And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes be thrown 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 has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Good morning. Somewhere in this city is a mother, a father, a grandmother, or a guardian who will be thinking tonight, have I instilled all the lessons I needed to instill before my five-year-old went off to kindergarten.

[3:09] Lessons needed before leaving home for the first time. Somewhere else, perhaps on an educational, institutional, administrative wing, a faculty member or an administrator is looking at the new students who have left home and are arriving, and they're asking themselves, does our curriculum actually prepare the students for all that they're going to need to be productive members of society once they leave this institution as their home?

Somewhere, certainly, there are others who are watching young people not leave for the first time or leave temporarily for a significant time, but those who are leaving home for the last time.

It might be a wedding. It might be a child moving across country. And the question is there pervasively throughout. Have I brought the lessons needed before leaving home?

It should be no different for the church. In fact, one church that I respect has as their motto, when you leave us, we want these things to be true of you from us.

In other words, their entire vision is built around the notion that people leave home and move on, rightly, to works that the Lord has called them to.

[4:55] Well, what's true for the parent of a kindergartner or the administrator of an institution or any of us who are thinking about, wow, I've left home for the last time, is true for Jesus too.

Our text comes at a moment in Mark's gospel where Jesus is cognizant that he is leaving home for the last time.

He's got lessons that need to be learned before setting out from what has been his region of residence, his hometown, even the very house in which he has conducted nearly three years of ministry to an intentional move south, even then beyond the Jordan into Moab and then beneath to Jerusalem.

Yes, he's leaving for the last time. You can see it there in the text. The clues are there. Notice in verse 30, he's going on and passing through Galilee.

Now, Galilee has been in this book from the outset. Chapter 1, verse 14, when he begins to preach the kingdom, he's doing so in the region of Galilee.

[6:19] He's up north, far above Jerusalem, and for three years, he's been conducting his ministry. In fact, all the things that have taken place between chapter 1 and chapter 9 are in this region of residence that he's now on the cusp of departing from.

Notice down in verse 33, it says, and they came to Capernaum. Now, Capernaum, like Galilee, has been in this gospel narrative from the very outset.

Capernaum, in chapter 1, was where he did his first miracles. It's the town, the hometown of Peter and Andrew.

It's a place of residence. And notice it even says there in verse 33, and when he was in the house. Now, we're narrowing down the three-year base for Jesus' ministry in the region of Galilee, in the town of Capernaum, in the house of Peter and Andrew.

Most likely the very place where the paralytic came down. The place where people gathered at the door. And he is now moving from these homespun works to Jerusalem.

[7:45] Notice chapter 10, verse 1. We'll get there next week. But it is the literary backstop of our own paragraph. And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan.

Or verse 17 of chapter 10. Mark's going to tell you he was setting out on his journey. Or in chapter 10, verse 32. And they were on the road going up to Jerusalem.

So we are now in the pivotal moment where Jesus is in the evening hours reflecting like a parent or an educator or a church pastor.

Have my people, have my children learned the lessons that were needed before leaving home?

There are four such lessons he instills in the text for today. Four things that they should not, cannot forget that he wants instilled before he closes the door on the home of Peter and Andrew and heads toward Jerusalem.

[8:56] The first concerns his own future. the next three concern those who will be following him. You could put it this way, the first concerns what he understands to be his destiny.

He wants it planted in them. And the ensuing three, not his destiny but their discipleship. And so what will it mean for our church family?

We're building something here. You don't just attend this church. You're part of the society of his kingdom that is fashioning itself into a local church family.

What are the lessons to be learned? The banner over the entire text is simply this. Your relationships should reflect his kingdom. Let me put it differently.

Your social interactions, our social interactions should be shaped by the society that he's building. The first one is right there in verses 30 and 32.

[10:05] It concerns his own death and resurrection. Notice, it says, he didn't want anyone to know where he was for he was teaching his disciples. This is like a parent who sits down and says, now before you get out from behind my door, which I know is imminent, you've got to remember this.

And it isn't remember who you are. In one sense, this lesson is remember what is ahead for me. For the second time now, death, resurrection.

Simply put, what he wants them to know is that his sufferings are inevitable. That his death and resurrection was a divine necessity for your salvation.

Now, that's what he wants his followers to know. You can't live life out in his family without the front door of his death and resurrection as critical for your salvation.

It's really the second time he's laid that out with clarity. He'll do it again, and we'll say more about it when he does. But that's his future. The church of Jesus Christ must learn the lesson on the necessity and the inevitability of death and resurrection, sufferings for salvation.

[11:34] Without it, we don't have a church. We don't have a mediator. We don't have payment. the promises of God from the Old Testament about a coming forgiveness of sins are enacted by a payment that was required and is extended to us through his death.

Never forget it. It is the matter of first importance. But it moves from his future to really a bundle of three paragraphs here about our following.

It moves from his destiny to our discipleship. What do we need to learn here? Well, let's just break them out one at a time. First, service over significance.

Service over significance. That's what I take as the summation of this lesson that comes in verses 33 through 37.

It says, And when they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house, he asked them, What are you discussing on the way? But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was greatest.

[12:54] Now, this is just part and parcel of what an immature family acts like. It almost feels as though, it's not quite there, but you almost get the sense that the disciples are already wrestling with the idea of his departure and what it means for them in regard to their succession.

You're leaving, I don't quite understand it, but it does make me wonder who here is the lead sled dog. You're on your way out, well, who's on their way up?

Who's the greatest among us? Greatness. In the church, it can be a preoccupation with a place of prominence.

It can be privilege. It can be power. There are people who these things. I've been in rooms where I've been witness to a bunch of alpha males within evangelicalism, and you can see not only the stature, but you can see at some time the rivalry.

Who's the greatest at this table? You can see individuals either refrain from speech or take on speech in an effort to denigrate the stature of one and elevate their own.

[14:49] One. I've often wondered when I was sitting in an environment like that, well, who is the greatest? And there were some, fortunately, more than a handful, but there were some, but in my mind it always came down to those who exercise their leadership with the greatest humility in service of the others.

greatness. That's what this paragraph is doing here. They're arguing about greatness, but notice the principle. He sat down and called the twelve, verse 35, and he said to them, if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.

That's the lesson to be learned before leaving home. It's actually the lesson to be learned for our life together. Service over significance.

Notice how he illustrates. I mean, normally when you're preaching, you would take a principle like that, and he might tell a story, but he doesn't tell a story.

He doesn't quote a piece of literature. He doesn't even forward some mental image by way of analogy.

[16:08] The illustration that he looks for is actually sitting in the room itself. He says in verse 36, Mark tells us, he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives not me, but him who sent me.

He simply states the principle and applies it with the presence of a child. Now, what is it about the child? Well, a child doesn't have any position in the room.

A child doesn't have any prominence in that home at the moment. I mean, Jesus is there with all the disciples. disciples.

The child doesn't have any ability really to be looked at as anything other than a servant. Just think of it in our own homes.

When guests are invited of some stature, you might turn to your eight year old and say, can you please get the water for everyone? See, the child is not prominent, not powerful, not in a position of strength.

[17:29] And he's saying, if you want to be great, then you become, you become the servant, the servant of all.

And think of Jesus saying this, the son of man who came to serve and not be served. So in other words, in his own social interactions, he's exemplified in his family what he wants to see before they leave home.

He exemplifies what life ought to look like as we live with one another as Christ Church Chicago, his own church family, servant of all.

So our reception among ourselves of the humble who will have something to offer you actually proves the lesson to be learned before leaving home.

Learn how to relate to one another, he's saying. Your relationships with one another are really important. So it's worth asking, how are we doing?

[18:45] How are you doing? How am I doing? That's why we talk here about the importance of every member serving. It's worth asking.

If someone asked me, what tangible expression of childlike service for the welfare of others under our roof am I engaged in that his family would demonstrate itself to be service oriented over significance?

It's a great question to ask. And if you're like, well, I don't know. Well, then prayerfully seek ways to serve rather than to be served.

I was thinking of this in some sense. There are those Christians who enjoy the benefits of existing in his community while there are others who actually strengthen the bonds of community in which others can come and exist.

There are others who are carrying water, as it were, and others who are simply receiving the water. And the great ones, the great ones in his family are those who are creating community through sacrificial service rather than thinking all ought to be done for them as a matter of pointing to their own significance.

[20:33] Now, this is just a great thing for us. This is what we want from Christ Church Chicago. Chicago. We are not this morning an assemblage of individuals who have simply walked into a door to exercise our privatized worship to God.

We are members of one another, says the scripture, who have taken covenantal vows to live and walk with one another.

And as we do that, we exemplify greatness through service. Wow, what a wonderful testimony that is in our midst, and what a wonderful example it will set as we continually understand this is the lesson I need to learn even while I'm still living in this home.

There's more because exemplifying healthy relationships with one another is not the only lesson to be learned before leaving home.

Take a look at verses 38 to 41. It's not just how we view one another, it's how we view other Christians outside of our church family.

[21:53] Look at verse 38. John said to him, Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he was not following us. I take that to mean us, the disciples.

But Jesus said, do not stop him for one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. Now what's going on here?

It isn't so much service over significance. When we think of those outside of our church family whether they be in Woodlawn or Chicago or across the world who are Christians and are doing things in the name of Christ, here it is, we are to be big-hearted not narrow-minded.

Pity the church that fills itself with members who are narrow-minded who begin to think that we've got it right and nobody else really knows what's going down.

[23:01] And the disciples here were in danger of kind of this spiritual elitism. That if you weren't following them, well you were somewhat deficient and you ought to be dissuaded from doing it.

I mean it's really quite something, it's ugly really, relating to other believers, speaking to other believers in the case here, or speaking to one another about other believers in ways that downgrade their contribution to the cause of Christ, in ways that dismiss their usefulness to the kingdom.

See the disciples thought this way, if you're not with us, or that is behind us, if you're not behind us, you're against us. Jesus is like, what?

That's not the way it is at all. What Jesus is saying really is, if you're not against us, well in Jesus' name, you must be with us.

See the difference? Big heartedness versus narrow mindedness is the lesson to be learned before leaving home.

[24:22] Think of the state of the church generally about the way Christians speak of other Christians that are somewhat just not perfectly aligned with their understandings.

It's often ugly. It's often elitist. It often betrays an inability to be gracious even when there might be issues of substance but they don't actually undermine the strength of the gospel itself.

You know, I had a mentor, a pastor, our pastor, Kent Hughes, who wonderfully demonstrated for us and in a sense then the whole church picked up this kind of graciousness by way of DNA in regard to how we thought about Christians beyond the scope of his own convictions.

See, there are some Christians who, my conscience will not allow me to speak positively or engage with those who differ from me.

And then there are other Christians who be like, well, actually, your conscience is worthy of my protection even at times of the cost of my convictions.

[25:55] So how do you think about the broader work of Christ? How do you speak about those who don't share all of your convictions theologically?

Where's the graciousness of speech? The disposition of soul that speaks well of others, knowing that if they're doing things in the name of Jesus, they won't long be able to speak evil of him.

Or even that last line, it took me a while to figure it out. Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. I think he's saying is, hey, look, you've got to realize that when they are doing things in my name, even in which you might benefit, they're going to get a reward.

So be a little less judgmental. Be maybe a little more gracious to the broader Christian community. This is a lesson to be learned before leaving home.

This ought to exemplify the characteristics of our church family, even as we speak about others outside. Now, I know there are differences and I know there are times when you can say, wow, I wouldn't recommend walking in that world.

[27:21] It's fine, but are you able to learn from others? Are you able to appreciate what God is doing? You know, in the city of London, back in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, there were three works of the Lord through the life of three local churches that I was aware of that were very different from one another in regard to all of their convictions.

St. Helen's Bishop's Gate, set right as a Church of England ministry in the financial center. Didn't pay attention, really, originally to Sunday services.

Was trying to reach businessmen on Tuesday lunches. God mightily blessed them. There was the learned John Stott at All Souls in the west end, not in the center city with the finance, but where all the tourists like to go.

And God was doing a wonderful but distinct work there. And there was a third church tucked behind a massive building that you could never find unless somebody took you there, named Holy Trinity Brompton.

Now, I didn't share all of their convictions, but from that little church emerged an alpha course and regardless of your critique on the gifts or the spirit, I can only tell you that millions of people have been spiritually benefited and blessed and set on their way through a ministry like that.

[28:57] All three going on at the same time. It's almost as if God is up in heaven looking down on the city of London in that era and going, yeah, wow, they don't think quite the same, but I think I'm going to get some harvest from that one in this way.

I'm going to get some harvest from the other one like this and oh, watch this, I'll reach the end of the earth through a little alley next to a graveyard from this.

Now, how do you think of these works? I think, other than to praise God, to say he is much bigger than I am. What's amazing is that he can accomplish anything through me at all and that he would choose to do so.

Oh, Lord, give us as Christ Church Chicago a disposition that is not only service-related rather than significance-oriented, but one that is, as we live life together, one that is big-hearted, not narrow-minded, and knowing that to each who labors for the Lord, they will not lose their reward.

But, these two lessons are not enough. I know you can see the text is still pressing on, and so will I. service over significance, big-heartedness over narrow-mindedness, but how about be fully committed, not foolishly compromised?

[30:36] See, the first paragraph deals with our relationships with one another in the church. The second paragraph deals with our relationships with other Christians outside the church. This third

paragraph deals with yourself.

It's all about you. how do you handle yourself? You know, the founding fathers of this country knew that a society such as they envisioned would only hold as long as it created citizens that had a moral virtue and wholesomeness.

In other words, the importance of the individual in a free society well, they really better be self-controlled. They really better not serve their worst instincts.

They really better know how to govern themselves for the welfare of the society in which they exist. And the same thing is true in the church. How are you handling yourself?

Verse 42, 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 around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. Wow, what a stern warning.

[31:57] And I take what he means here by little ones, not simply children in church, but the little ones who are like the child of the earlier passage, meaning followers of Jesus, or as John will later say, my little children.

So anyone who is actually treating a follower of Christ in ways that cause them to sin, well, may judgment fall upon you, because you're not handling yourself well.

You know, I used to say this to my kids, you know, when one of them is down on the floor in the supermarket rolling around making an embarrassment of me. No, just joking.

I would say, look, if you don't control yourself, who will? They looked at me puzzled, and now that they're all adults, they probably still don't understand it, but I believe that as firmly today as I, when I said it then, if you don't control yourself, who will?

Don't, don't control yourselves in ways that are inhibiting the growth of others. Take interest in them more than yourself. In fact, he goes on here, doesn't he?

[33:12] Verse 43 and following, this idea of being fully committed to a life that honors the Lord rather than being foolishly compromised because you want other things out of life for yourself.

And he says, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Better to enter crippled than with two hands and go to hell to an unquenchable fire. If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off.

It's better to enter a life lame than with two feet than be thrown into hell. If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It's better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to go into hell where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

Now this is not a passage about self-mutilation. This is a bodily image in order to present a spiritual truth. If there are things in your life that you are given to that are not representative of the cause of Christ, get rid of it.

stop. I'm done with it. Don't just regret over and over and over. I regret that I've done this again.

[34:20] I regret, I regret, I regret. Regret is not repentance. Repentance is putting it away and moving on. And so this is really important for us.

We need to be fully committed, not foolishly compromised. We need to be rigorous. This is just good old fashioned piety. This is Scottish pietism at its best. Men and women and children that are knowing how to take care of themselves, that are exemplifying the social norms of his kingdom, that are reflecting the image of his likeness in his family, that are looking more and more like Jesus the longer and longer we know him.

It's simply put, don't have a foot in both worlds. What he's saying here is getting into the kingdom, the eschatological kingdom, is everything. That's kind of what he's saying.

It's everything. Or as Philip Henry wrote in a diary in 1662, long before Jim Elliot would paraphrase it, on his way to Ecuador as a missionary, Henry pens, he is no fool who parts with that which he cannot keep when he is sure to be recompensed with that which he cannot lose.

You don't want to lose the kingdom because you're living in two worlds here. That's tragedy. So what he's saying is entrance into the kingdom is everything.

[36:07] Getting in is worth giving up all other detriments to your own soul. soul. Why?

Well, because the stakes are high. Notice the language here about hell, about unquenchable fire, or the very end of, or the verse 48, the quotation of the last verse in the book of Isaiah, chapter 66, 24, where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

For over 2,000 years, the orthodox position of the church has been that hell, as spoken of here, in relationship to unquenchable fire, is a place where the worm never dies, and it is a place where the punishments associated with rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ entail a destruction that goes on

forever.

The quotation here from Isaiah 66 would have been understood by the disciples as such. The prophecy of Daniel, the very last chapter of Daniel, closes on a similar note.

It indicates that there will be a day when those who sleep in the dust of death and the earth shall awake. And then it says, some to everlasting life, not conditioned, everlasting, forever, endless, and then parallel and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

[37 : 37] Not mitigated by a temporary contempt, but an everlasting contempt. Endless. ongoing. Jesus himself, not just the history of the church, but Jesus himself speaks about the immortality of souls in both believers and unbelievers alike.

In Matthew 25, he says that the unrighteous will go away into eternal punishment, whereas the righteous will go into eternal life. Notice the lexical parallelism.

the eternal life, which is ours everlastingly, is directly in parallel with the eternal death, which is the punishment of those who would reject him.

Now, I'm aware that today some think differently, that hell could be just a cessation of existence, that a soul death is really what awaits those who repent, that at the tribunal of God at the end of time, or shortly thereafter, the death of the soul will catch up to the death of the body.

But don't forget Genesis 3, where the inverse is actually in play. When God said, on the day you eat of it, you will surely die.

[38 : 56] On that day, soul death preceded physical death because soul death is spiritual, alienation from God being under his wrath, everlastingly so, without repentance and faith in his son.

So to die, to die, death, is to remain in an animated state but separated from God without hope. This is what's at stake.

So what he's saying is, boy, you better get this right before you leave home. My death is your life. Your lives with one another really matter.

Your disposition to those who are outside of your family that speak of me, may it be gracious. And when it comes to yourself, be rigorous because getting in is everything.

And eternal consequences await for those who don't. Well, no wonder he closes, and so shall I, with saying everyone's going to be salted with fire.

[40 : 15] Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how will it be made salty again? Have salt in yourselves. You see, what he's saying here is that this life is going to be subject to testing fires, and you're going to need that perseverance within your makeup.

It's going to have to be like marbled into you. This refining fire, it requires us to properly preserve our faith by living in fidelity to his word.

So there it is, before leaving home, these are the lessons Jesus wants to instill before they get out of the door. Dear church family, service over significance, big-heartedness over narrow-mindedness, fully committed, not foolishly compromised, and come back next week, because two more intimate relationships will be in play, that of one's marriage, marriage, and that of children.

Our Heavenly Father, we give ourselves to you. We want to be a family that really lives well for you. Help us to know and remember that your sufferings are essential for our salvation, that our life with one another is to be marked by service, that our disposition to those outside us is to be marked by graciousness, and that our life with ourselves would not be such that we're living in self-deception, but that we are rigorously working to be conformed into the likeness of Christ.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.