

Of Millstones and Necks

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[0:00] Amen. Please be seated. We continue this morning through the Gospel of Mark.

! Starting in verse 38. Last week, we saw how Jesus again taught the disciples as they've made their way to Jerusalem.

They're on their journey to Jerusalem. And He's going there, as He told His disciples, He's going there to be killed. And then after three days, resurrected.

And as the Lord spoke of the cross He was about to bear, instead of the disciples faithfully bearing their own crosses and following their Lord, they grumbled amongst each other.

They grumbled about which of them was the greatest. But Jesus told them, as we saw last week, that the path to greatness in God's kingdom is the opposite of the world's.

[1:25] That is, if anyone would be first in God's kingdom, he must be last of all and servant of all. And I want us to keep this in mind as we look at our passage this morning, starting in verse 38.

As God, as Jesus, as it were, gives a warning against cliques. Starting in verse 38, John said to Him, that is John, the son of Zebedee, the brother of James.

John said to Jesus, Now there is both an astonishment and a comfort that comes from observing the disciples' hard heads and hard hearts in Mark's gospel.

As you read Mark's gospel, you're confronted with it throughout Mark's gospel. These disciples seem to be hard-headed and hard-hearted. But it's a comfort and an astonishment, at least to me. It's an astonishment because you marvel at how dense the disciples seemed to be. Jesus had just said to them, Whoever receives a little child, a nobody, in my name, receives me.

[3:12] And here comes John in verse 38, doing the exact opposite of what Jesus had just said. But as I said, their behavior is also comfort because I know, I know I am just as dense as they were.

And it comforts me that our Lord, who was patient with them, teaching and eventually using them, is the Lord that was patient and eventually was going to empower them and use them.

Their same Lord is doing the same work in me and in you. So that's where my comfort lies, even as I read Mark's gospel. So don't despair.

If you, as long as, don't despair if you're ever wondering, I don't seem to be making any progress. I'm still finding this hard. Do not despair.

Because as long as you remain simply dependent on God, as long as you remain simply dependent on God, then know, know this, that He is ever working in you.

[4:21] to will and to work is good pleasure. He's never going to leave you as you are. And so, here, in these verses, we see John coming in his own mind, having formed an inner group, being the inner group of the inner group, having a privileged status, and seeking to guard that place that he has.

John's nature here is the common human nature, which is to form cliques. And cliques, by definition, are exclusive groups in which we try to keep other people who don't fit our criteria out. That's what a clique is. Unfortunately, the church can sometimes be the place where we do this the most. And I say unfortunately because that is not what the church is meant to be or to look like. Jesus shows us that his followers are to be marked by open generosity towards all. An open generosity towards all in his name.

This generous hospitality towards all is to all who bear the name of Christ. Christ. And that's what it's meant to mark the church, the true church of Christ.

[5:46] So note that it is towards those who came, who named Christ as Lord and are devoted to his gospel and work and ministry. It's to such people we should extend the arm of fellowship.

As such, we should open our doors to them, not close them. But that's what John seems to be doing here in these verses. We must beware of adopting in our hearts or even in our actual practice

the disposition the apostles add towards this man.

You know, they were ready to close the door of fellowship to him. They were ready to close the door of fellowship towards a fellow gospel worker. Because according to John, this particular guy was not following us.

That's what he told the Lord. What John cared about was that the man was not part of his group. That's all that John cared about.

He was he was small-minded. And can you imagine how small-minded and yet puffed up it is to think that God only works within our own little circle or our own little church.

[7:08] It must have been a wonder, I think, to all the apostles to see someone proclaiming the name of Christ and even casting out demons succeeding where they had just failed recently as we saw two weeks ago.

It must have been a wonder to see this. And so maybe a bit of jealousy also is to blame in their need to sort of put him on the outside.

This person is not following us. How does he know Jesus? Where does he know Jesus from? And how could he do these mighty works as a follower of Jesus?

The truth of the matter is that when we act like John does here in this passage, like him, it's oddly God's glory or God's name that we are zealous to protect.

It is our positions, our power, our privileges rather than that we are concerned about protecting as John is here. But Jesus has shown us already that the path to greatness in his kingdom is to be the last of all and the servant of all.

[8:26] And here is the pitfall that we must be aware of, the devil, wily and cunning as he is, knows this about us. And too often he uses this tendency to guard our own little fiefdom.

He uses that tendency to sow division and inhibit the progress of the gospel in Christ's church. And we must be extra aware of that.

I've found that I've often have to ask God to help me to trust him, to grant me the grace to be about building his kingdom and his name instead of my own position and my own place.

It's a constant prayer of my heart to help me to guard against what that kind of zealous protection of position that John is exhibiting here.

because when we give into this tendency of excluding people because they do not follow us, we've lost the plot and that we've allowed the devil a foothold in our hearts and in our midst.

[9:43] This is why Jesus' words in chapter 8 must always be in our hearts. That we must die to ourselves and daily bear our cross and follow him.

That is the path of the disciple. That is the path of the follower of Jesus. Daily death to self, daily death to selfish ambitions and selfish aims and bearing the cross, being last of all, being willing to be servants of all.

and as following our Lord and his example in this. That's how we are, how we are to extend open homes of fellowship and generous hospitality to those who bear the name of Christ along with us. Of course, we also have to admit that there are reasons to exclude people, or rather there are criterias by which people are excluded from the body of Christ.

from the church, the gospel of Jesus. And as a result, the church itself, the church of Christ, is a wonderfully inclusive place.

[11:05] We must acknowledge that. But the way in which it is inclusive is that all are welcoming. But it is also very exclusive.

How is the church exclusive? everyone is welcoming. Everyone is welcoming. But the door to which you must enter is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ alone.

That's why it is an exclusive place. But it's not an exclusivity that we get to guard, or we get to erect. It's not an exclusivity that is our own personal preferences.

It is the exclusivity that has already been wired in to the body of Christ, that God himself has established. The only way in is through the door, that is Jesus Christ.

Christ. And this is the kind of Jesus Christ that is revealed in the pages of all these scriptures. Not the Jesus Christ of our own imaginings. That's why this same apostle John will later write in his epistles, in 1st John and 2nd John and 3rd John.

[12:21] He writes to the church. This same John will write to the church, and he will say to the church, be on God. What is he telling the church to be on God for?

To be on God, not to associate, with those who name the name of Jesus with their lips, and do not follow him in practice, and do not follow him in obedience, as instructed in the apostolic teaching. And so we must understand the difference between old John, who writes 1st, 2nd, and 3rd epistles of John, and young John that we see here in this gospel of Mark.

Young John was concerned, not with the glory of Christ, or with the name of Christ, young John was concerned with membership in the authorized apostles incorporated ink.

That's what he's concerned about. He didn't care that the man that he's just tried to kick out of the group is the man that shared the same allegiance and the same obedience to Jesus as he does.

[13:26] He doesn't care about that. Young John only cares that the only thing that matters is that he is not following us. He's not in our little group. But old John, what matters to old John?

Old John cares that the man bears the name of Jesus Christ. Old John has borne his cross. Old John bears his cross daily as suffered for the name of Christ.

Old John has counted a joy to suffer with his Lord and Savior and he cares above all else about the glory of his Lord, the name of his Lord, the renown of his Lord.

And there's only one thing that old John cares to God, the glory of Christ, the truth of Christ. And so he writes to the church, that is what you should be about, God in.

may we be like old John and banish all hearts of stone that young John has.

[14:36] But here again is my comfort, isn't it, that the Lord is patient and he's patient with us as he is with Apostle John. Now Jesus returns now in verse 42 to the connection to the little ones.

If you see it there, the little ones that he had been talking about in verse 37 earlier. Now Jesus returns to that same connection. Remember earlier Jesus has said that whoever receives a little child in my name receives me.

But now he gives a severe warning to anyone who's tempted to harm his little ones. And what does he say in verse 42? Whoever crosses 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 was thrown into the sea.

Now, it's a very, very morbid and stark warning that our Lord has for us in verse 42. Whoever crosses one of these little ones, who are the little ones?

those who believe in me, those are the little ones. Those who believe in the name of Jesus Christ, those who follow him, those who like that man who was proclaiming Christ and preaching Christ and doing the works of Christ in the name of Christ, to the glory of Christ, those are the little ones.

[16:09] Those like early on, like the little child that Jesus brought on his lap and said that this is what it means to be great in the kingdom of God, is to receive such representatives as this little child, who to the world seems like a nobody.

Those who cause people like that to stumble, to sin, how do you cause someone like that to sin? whoever is the cause of another's disciples shipwreck, to shipwreck their faith, to lose their faith, or to stumble away from the Lord. And so you can sort of start telling Jesus has been subtly rebuking John for trying to rebuke that man for preaching the gospel, but now Jesus has a harder word, not just for John, or for all the apostles, but also for us, and for the whole church.

Beyond just the soft rebuke, here is now a harsh, dire warning that we must all take to heart.

Whoever crosses one of these little ones, who are the little ones again?

It is us who are gathered here, disciples of Jesus, who are following after him. those who have just recently come to faith in Jesus Christ, who are learning what it is to walk in discipleship, growing in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.

[17:51] It is our children, our covenant children, that we are raising in the faith of Jesus Christ, and teaching, and that are learning at our feet, how to know God, how to serve God, how to follow God.

Those are the little ones. And mind you, as I read this, I take this warning to heart as a minister of the gospel. But I want you to take the warnings to heart as well.

You might think to yourself, well, I don't stand up there and preach the gospel. I don't even teach the Bible. So this has nothing to do with me. But it very much has something to do with all of us who name the name of Christ.

Whoever crosses one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he was thrown into the sea. What's such fate?

What's the fate of such a person? It would be better if a great millstone. Now, you hear that word millstone, you might think of this little mortar and you used to mill things.

[19:02] There are two kinds of millstones. There is the small one that you might have in your kitchen, no matter how big it is, it's still sort of movable, right? But then there is a great millstone, which can only actually be operated by a donkey, because it's so big, a mule, to mill millets and stuff.

And that's what Jesus has in view, a great build millstone, hung around a man's neck, and then cast, thrown into the sea.

That's certain, sure and certain death. That's the picture that Jesus is painting. In fact, it's a practice that was a practice of capital punishment back in Jesus' day, both utilized by the Romans.

The Romans are very good about inventing many ways of capital punishment. There's one such way, but also utilized just probably, I think, in Palestine in Jesus' day. So they would have identified, they would have readily know what Jesus was talking about.

They would wrap something like that, a great big stone, around your ankle or your leg, and throw you into the water. But here, Jesus goes even further.

[20:19] It's not around your ankle, it's around your neck, and then thrown into the sea. And what is Jesus saying about this picture that he's painting? To eat would be better.

That fate of sure uncertain death will be better for you than what will be in store if you were to lead one of my little ones to stumble, to fall into sin.

sin. And what is the fate that will endure for such people who cause us little ones to fall into sin?

I think we have to read on to verse 43 to 47. That's what Jesus has in view. And he gives a warning.

Here's the warning. I walk with the Lord in community is in community.

Our faithfulness to bear in the name of Jesus Christ, we do so in community. And what we do affects not only us, but affects others around us.

[21:34] And so Jesus says in verse 43, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go into hell to the unconscionable fire. If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off.

If it's your eye that's causing you to sin, tear it out. It is better, it is better, it is better to be lame, to be crippled, to be blind, one eye, than to be thrown into hell.

It is better. Jesus goes on to warn against the temptations to sin. The language of cutting off the offending body parts that Jesus uses here is metaphorical language.

It's not being literal. Unfortunately, some have read, through our church history, some have read this passage and thought that Jesus was being literal. One such person is Origen, one of the church fathers.

He went as far as to cut off his members because he thought Jesus was being literal here. But Jesus is being literal. Because what do we know? If we've read the gospels and we've read Jesus, what we've also looked at already in Mark, where the sin comes from.

[22:45] Is it from the eye that causes you to sin? Is it from the leg? It's from the heart. So if you really want to be literal, then just tear your heart out.

Because that's where the sin comes out from ultimately. And so Jesus is using metaphorical language here. but because it's metaphorical language doesn't mean, does not lessen the severity of what Jesus is saying.

The language of cutting off the body parts is to warn us, to warn us of the consequence of not eating the warning, which is hell.

hell. And hell, as Jesus uses it here, is not metaphor. At this point, Jesus is not being metaphoric.

Hell is a real place. Hell is an actual place of suffering, of torment, and that's the warning that Jesus has given us, to warn us away from that destination.

[23:52] temptation. Oftentimes, it's very hard for us to talk about hell in the church and otherwise. But do you know who spoke of hell the most in the Bible?

More than the apostles combined, Jesus Christ himself warned against hell and the torment there. And I think it's good that it was Jesus Christ who warned against it. Because if it was maybe the apostles, we might say, well, we might just do the thing that we do with Paul. Oh, yeah, that's just Pauline theology. He just made that up.

It's not Jesus. Because hell is such an awful place when you read the Gospels and Jesus' description of it. It's such an awful place that it is just as well that it is our Lord himself who tells us of it most in the Bible so that we may take it seriously.

And so we may not excuse it away, as some apostles' imaginings or invention. Hell is a very real place. And that's why the silliness of the warning is here.

[24:56] That's why the language that Jesus uses is here. If anything tempts you towards sin, cut it off. Vote for your own good. Cut it off.

Now, again, we said it's metaphorical language so it doesn't mean literal cutting off. But it means intentional cutting off the things that is leading you towards sin. If it is your eyes, shut it off.

Run away from that which is tempting you to sin. Be diligent in doing that. Be one-minded towards that end of turning away.

If it is your leg that is making you walk towards to associate and accommodate sin or walk towards assembly of sinners, cut your leg off.

That is, stop walking there. Move away from it. Paul uses the language of fleeing. Fleeing as if a roaring lion is coming on you and you're running for your life.

[25:59] Flee from sin. That is the language, the imagery that the Bible gives us. And why is this warning given? sin is so that we may run away from the hell fire that is the destiny of those who walk away from God and causes others to sin.

We have, we've heard, I think some of you might have even heard more recently, but we hear all the time of ministers of the gospel who fall into sin and disrepute and bring dishonor to the name of Christ.

when we hear such things, we should go to our knees in prayer. Go to your knees in prayer, pray for your pastors, pray for yourself, pray for other ministers of the gospel, for grace to stand firm, for grace to resist sin and temptation, for yourself as well.

Knowing this dire warning of the Lord is ever before us. But I don't want to leave with just a warning. I want to leave here with a word of comfort.

The thing that Jesus calls us to do here, to cut off the things that causes us to sin so that we may not stumble ourselves or cause others to stumble, he goes on and we didn't read it here, but it's in verse 49 and 50.

[27:36] For everyone will be salted. If you have your Bibles, you can follow along there. He says, for everyone will be salted. Salt is good, Jesus said, but if the salt is lost, it's saltiness, how will you make it salty again?

Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another. Jesus is arching back to sort of the Levitical sacrifices, of sacrifices for sin.

sacrifice over fire and salt. And Jesus here is using that language to picture what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. He's already been picturing it so far.

Everyone will be salted with fire. To follow Jesus and what it means to die to self, it means it's to be salted with fire.

But there are two kinds of fire. There is the fire of hell, which is a judgment fire, which annihilates, which condemns, which is the wrath of God pouring out on you.

[28:39] And then there is the purifying fire that Jesus is talking of here in verse 49, which purifies and takes away all vestiges of sin.

And that's what Jesus is inviting us to. So as you fight against sin, as you struggle in your walk of discipleship, and you war against flesh and the devil and the world, know this, brothers and sisters in Christ, that your Lord is with you.

He is refining you through his word, through the Holy Spirit, convicting you of your sin, through the repeated rhythms of repentance and hearing the forgiveness of the Lord towards you.

through the feeding with the sacrament. All of these things your Lord has given to you as a way of sanctifying you, of drawing you closer to himself.

What is left for you to do then? To remain steadfast. To remain, to stand firm, to not lose sight of that means of grace that the Lord has given to continue to proclaim the name of Jesus Christ and seek his glory above all else.

[30:01] There is all left for you to do. God has not left us alone. He has given us the Holy Spirit and he has given us his church.

Thanks be to God for that. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.