

A Servant of All

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[0 : 00] Our text today, Christ has stern words, doesn't he? They're quite assaulting words. Assaulting words, arresting words for the people that are closest to him as disciples.

And it's a passage that calls for a strong commitment to discipleship. And I hope you are challenged by the passage this evening. But before we get there, I just want to remind you that Mark's gospel is a story about the initiative of God to save us.

He did not have to, but of his own free will, God welcomes us, chooses us, saves us. And we've seen lots of that in the last month, the story of Christ's salvation and the overwhelming, abundant grace that is available.

And so we saw this in the story of the sorry Phoenician woman and the feeding of the 5,000. All this basket of fish and bread that was left over. The abundant grace, the overflow of grace.

So within the context of the story of grace, Christ speaks sternly to us. Point one, teamwork.

[1 : 19] So I think hearing that Jesus was going to die, as Christ had told them, I'm going to die, I'm going to rise again. I think the disciples were kind of working on a succession plan.

And on who would get to take over when Christ died. And in their mind, it should be the greatest among them. And I think Peter and James and John would have dominated that conversation on the way.

They would have felt pretty good about themselves being the ones chosen to go up the mountain and witness Christ glorified. We can read those first few verses, right, and feel like, man, those guys are just ridiculous.

Like, I would never have that conversation, you know. But I just don't think we can put so much distance between us and them.

Even though it seems so silly what they were talking about. Because like us, they were people that were thoroughly culturally saturated, impregnated.

[2 : 22] And status was a really big thing in this culture. It was a really big issue. As I was writing this sermon, I was thinking about my high school experience.

I went to a school called Auckland Boys Grammar, which was a proper grammar school. You learn Latin as compulsory. It's uniforms year-round. Shorts. Socks with little garters.

No garters. You're sent home. They would beat you at the school. You'd get caned if you were naughty. And it was, I think there'd be no question about it, the best boys' school in the country.

And I was very lucky to go to the school because it wasn't a private school. It was a public school. Anyone could go. But in order to go, you had to be in the grammar zone, in this geographic zone, right? And it just happened to be in the most wealthiest suburb in the whole country.

But the zone, the catchment area, included this industrial area. And my father was a janitor. And we lived in a building. That was in this zone. And because it was a janitorial job.

[3 : 25] It was like a live-in job. You looked after the building, right? So we lived in this little apartment in this industrial complex. And so I was in zone for this very privileged school. And it had a profound effect on me, the school.

Because there was... When you entered the school, when you first go into the assembly, which they had every morning, I mean, you had a Latin school song you'd sing every morning and stuff.

But all around this huge cathedral-ceilinged building, the assembly room, you were surrounded by success. So over in this corner, in Gilded Letters, were all of the Rhodes Scholars that had come from the school.

And the Girdler Scholars, which is the Cambridge equivalent, right? And then there were these sets of exams you can sit in New Zealand called scholarship exams, which don't really get you any money. But they're this kind of super-privileged set of exams.

And no one sits them, right? Nobody sits them in the country. Because they're extra hard, extra exams you sit on top of the normal exiting of high school exams. But, of course, our school, you know, hundreds of people sit them every year, right?

[4 : 24] So Gilded Letters, surrounded from 1850, all the people that had passed this exam. And when you enter the school as a third former, which is grade 9, you get put in a class according to how smart you are.

So if you're quite clever, you're in 3A. And then the next level down is 3B. 30 boys in each class. 3C, 3D, 3E, all the way down to O. And you go through school knowing kind of where your mates are, right?

They're kind of, well, I've got a mate in 3G and I've got a mate in 3A or whatever. Happens all through high school. Within the class, you're graded. And at the end of the year, you're ranked from the smartest person in the school to the person who did the worst according to the exams.

And it's all published. It's all open. And you work very hard to go up or down in that ranking or change classes, go up to maybe 4D next year or down to 5G the following year. And it is very hard not to come out of a system like that and equate power with goodness.

And it's hard to come out of a system like that. It was a wonderful school, but I came out feeling like life was a journey socially, financially, powerfully, upwards.

[5 : 41] And I'm sure that you know the tendency in your heart for that, even if you didn't go to a school which was so acutely known for this kind of thing, right?

And then, of course, Jesus here, when he teaches his disciples, he says, folks, this idea of status and moving up in the world and being the greatest, that's not kingdom thinking.

That's not how the kingdom works. And so he gives this brilliant visual example. He takes a child, verse 35. Probably maybe one of the kids from the disciples, and he puts the kid on his knee.

And he says, if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all. And he took a child and put him on his knee. And in the midst of him and taking him in his arms, it's a beautiful picture, right? 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. See, Christ reverses all expectations that these guys had about greatness.

[6 : 55] And it has been a work in my heart that Christ has been doing this since these very formative years of my life. Because true greatness does not feed your ego, and true greatness does not primarily ask questions about, am I fulfilled?

Am I happy? Am I satisfied? Am I self-actualized? True greatness, in what Christ is teaching here, true greatness serves, and serves even the least important, which in this society were children.

Now, if I think I asked you the question, you know, who do you serve, I think that would be letting you off the hook, because I know that 70 or 80 of you in this congregation, a good third of the congregation serves the church family in some way.

So let me ask you a more radical question, because I think it's a more radical thing that Christ is saying here. I think the more radical question would be, are there people, or some people, do you feel like you don't want to serve?

Because in your heart, you'll think perhaps your time is worth more. So I'll leave that question with you to think about and bring to Jesus. At this point in the story, John, the disciple John, who's probably earned brownie points perhaps, you know, disastrously says, Jesus, you know, he jumps into this teaching, and he goes, Jesus, listen, we saw a guy casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him.

[8 : 16] You're welcome, Jesus. You know, like, we're so awesome. You should have seen us. We totally tried to stop him. And the reason he gives for stopping him is nuanced, right?

You've got to watch it. Look, verse 38. Because he was not following who? Not following us. It says he was not following us. We need to stop this guy. He's not one of us.

He's not in our group. John failed to recognize the work of God in this man's ministry. Or perhaps he did, but just didn't like it, because it wasn't them.

It wasn't the inner guys doing it. Perhaps he would rather see God's work not done at all if they couldn't do it. Sectarianism and denominationalism is a blight on Christianity.

It is a sin of the heart, a sin of the ego when we say, you know, they're not part of our group. And it's an easy thing for Anglicans to do, especially Anic Anglicans, especially Evangelical Anglicans, I

think.

[9 : 21] I think we're susceptible to this. We have a wonderful couple in the church called Alistair and Julia Stern, who are plant...

I don't think they're here tonight. I think they're probably asleep after the retreat. They're church planters. And so they have attached themselves to St. John's and will be attending here over the next year.

And we'll be gathering a core group of people around them and planting a church downtown Vancouver. And they have wonderful people. Wonderful people.

They're doing a great thing here. On my best days, I am just over the moon about it. I just think it's fantastic what they're doing. I'm just delighted.

And on my bad days, it hurts me because I think they're going to take people from me, people I really like. My congregation will get smaller.

[10 : 21] Maybe their service will be better. Maybe more people will become Christians in their service than mine. And that will feel hard on my ego.

It's petty, right? It's not big-hearted. And it's not kingdom thinking because the kingdom of God is not about something we harness or hold onto or own.

We celebrate it when it moves forward. And the disciples should have been celebrating what this guy was doing, this exorcist, what he was doing. And he was a Christian. He was a Christian man because Christ later on calls him one of my little ones.

So folks, let's be big-hearted when it comes to the ministries of other people. Let's be, I mean, it's a crass way of thinking about it. Let's be team players. I don't know how to say it, kind of fancy, but let's be team players, you know, in the gospel.

All right, onwards. Verse 42. And Jesus really kind of gets stuck into these guys, and he gives them two big challenges.

[11 : 28] First, he says, watch your example with others, particularly new believers. And then he says, watch your temptations in your life. So first, watch your example in the teaching of others.

So listen to these very stern words of Christ here. Verse 42. Whoever causes one of his 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.

I just, I can't remember Jesus saying things like this before. When he's referring back to the guy that the disciples bullied, that they scolded, new believers are obviously very precious, very precious things to Christ.

And it seems like he's saying, I mean, I don't know how I was to read this except that Christ is saying, if you cause somebody like this guy to lose his faith, the judgment on you would be so harsh that your best case scenario would be if you drowned.

That would be a better scenario for you. And of course it's hyperbole, but don't let that take away from the seriousness of Christ's words. And Christ here is calling us to be very wise and gentle and welcoming and loving of new believers, even if they're kind of a little bit wacky or doing unusual things.

[13 : 05] So, summary so far. Teamwork. Don't be sectarian. Denominationless. Celebrate the work of Christ going forward in the city, even if it's not happening in your church, in your home group or amongst what you're doing.

Next, watch the way you treat new believers. They are very precious to Christ. Next, he says, watch your temptations, verse 43 to 48. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.

I feel like this would be much better if it was a German. Cut it off! You know, like, but it's, I think with my gentle New Zealand, it loses a little bit.

Or maybe a Russian accent, which I don't know what it sounds like, but I'm sure it would sound more effective. But there's lots of like, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off.

Your eye, tear it out. Because you can, you know, you don't want to go to hell kind of like, all there. Wouldn't you rather walk lame into the kingdom of God?

[14 : 07] Again, clearly hyperbole, not to be taken literally. Although some people did take it literally in the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, which was like a large gathering of the early church where all the, you know, big names came forward and kind of hashed out some stuff, right?

They had to pass a law banning priests castrating themselves. So, obviously, some guys were taking it fairly literally, which is not the way you should take it.

And at that point, I absolved myself of any legal issues. Right. So, but, let's not, let's not, it's not literal, but clearly, the kind of language that Christ is using, it means he's taking this very, very seriously.

He mentions hands, feet, eyes, hands, the things that we do, feet, the places we go, the eyes, what we, what we desire. being a follower of Christ means among many things, but amongst those things it means discipline and sacrifice.

And the refrain of the passage is, it's better to participate in the kingdom blind and lame than fully functional ending up in hell, which in the Greek is Gehenna.

[15 : 23] It's this, it's this valley in Jerusalem which was a trash heap where they just chucked everything in Gehenna. It was constantly on fire, just smoldering constantly. Folks, hell is real and the kingdom of God is real and it's awesome, so awesome that it is worth giving up very precious things for.

Okay, the last, just the last little bit before we close up here. The last little bit is quite confusing because there is words which join quite different ideas and I'm just going to pick out sort of one of the ideas here.

So verse 50, salt is good but if the salt has lost its saltiness how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves but be at peace with another. And there was an ancient saying and the ancient saying was this, the world cannot survive without salt.

Not because of its seasoning, because of its preservative qualities I'm assuming, because it was used to preserve meat to stop it from going bad. And so I think what Christ is saying here is that if salt can't do what it's supposed to do, it's a bit useless, right?

Like it's it's just white kind of grain but it doesn't do anything. So this lovely line, right? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.

[16 : 46] It's a lovely summary of everything that Christ has said. Be visibly Christian in the way you conduct your lives. Guard those qualities. What the Holy Spirit is doing in your heart, guard that stuff.

Protect it. And that guarding can be painful. It can be difficult. It can bump up against your ego. It can bump up against the values of the world.

It can call for sacrifice. So it's hard, right? But it is worth it because the kingdom is so wonderful. And lastly it just says work on getting along with one another.

Resist prideful attitudes. Resist the urge to rank and judge. And do all of this under the umbrella of grace which protects us from God's judgment when we fail.

And a final reminder that all of this happened. If you think this feels harsh and heavy I want you to remember that all of this happened. All this speech happened on the way it says at the start. On the way.

[17 : 58] Where? On the way to the cross. Can I get an amen?