

## The Treatment for Sin

*Mark 9:38-50*

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Not many pastors preach on this passage. I can't imagine why not, as it's so up lifting.

This isn't tender Jesus, meek and mild, is it? This is crazy Jesus, weird and wild. What do we do with this Jesus?

"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched" (Mark 9:43-48).

I think it is only fair to start this sermon this morning by acknowledging that I am clearly not an expert on this passage. I still have both of my hands, both of my feet, and both of my eyes. But no matter where this sermon goes from here, I will say this: this passage is evidence that even the most literal interpreters of scripture have their limits. Otherwise, there would be a lot more peg-legged, hook-handed, eye-patched Christians in the world. All of us would be walking around looking like pirates!

It's better for you to go through life blind and maimed than to be thrown into hell — "where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched." That's what it says.

Maybe this would be a good time for some of our ushers to... uh, as discreetly as possible... get up and lock the doors before any of our guests try to make a quick getaway, because it looks like I'm preaching "hellfire and damnation" this morning.

Of course, anyone who knows me at all knows that's not my way.

As a kid, I was terrified by even the notion of hell. I was once handed a "gospel" tract entitled, "Where will you spend eternity?" I opened its pages to find an all-too-real-looking image of people whose skin was melting off of their bodies as they stood waste deep in a lake of fire. I had nightmares for months. There are some things you simply can't unsee.

Growing up, my church taught of a literal hell — a literal place of eternal burning and punishment, a place where "their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched." Hell was used regularly by some of our pastors to try and "motivate" us to *do* the right thing, to *think* the right thing, to *be* the right thing. And every misstep was a step toward hell.

When Christen and I were newly married, we attended a baptist church where every Sunday without fail, the pastor preached on God's wrath, God's judgment, God's anger, and the eternal consequences of our sins. His sermons always seemed to start with how we were totally depraved even in the womb — not an ounce of goodness in us. And they always seemed to end with threat of eternity in hell. Even when the man preached on grace — we was sure to close with, "but it's only grace because what we deserve is to spend eternity in hell!"

For a while, it worked. It motivated me to try harder. So Christen and I became faithful attenders, never missing a Sunday. We started helping with the youth group, teaching Sunday school, helping with lock-ins. We occasionally sang special music in worship. We tithed regularly. We helped with evangelistic efforts, going door-to-door. We even went to Sunday evening worship with all three or four others who, apparently, hadn't been beaten up enough by that morning's sermon. So, we went back for a second helping on Sunday night so we could feel really terrible about ourselves as we headed back to work on Monday.

But after a while, it stopped working. In fact, it started having a particularly negative effect on me and on my faith in God. Imagine that — a prolonged and continued sense of guilt started to have a negative effect on my mental health. Who'd have thought it?

At that time in my life, I was already struggling with depression and going to church each week seemed to make it worse. I would come home from church feeling more depressed and more hopeless than before I went.

So one Sunday, we came home from church feeling like we'd just been raked over the coals yet again. We walked in the door, dropped our coats on the floor, and as we fell onto our Kmart futon, I sighed and said to Christen, "If this is really who God is — angry, wrathful, vengeful — then I don't think I want anything to do with God any more."

And that was the day that Christen and I decided to leave the Church — not just *that* church, but *the* Church.

Now — spoiler alert — that clearly wasn't the end of our story. But maybe it does help you understand why I refuse to preach "hellfire and damnation" sermons.

I think it's also in part because it seems to me that the people most obsessed with hell are the ones who assume that other people are the ones that are in danger of going there. And too often, such people wield it like a weapon, inflicting not care nor compassion, but harm on others.

Kathleen Norris tells this story:

"Years ago, when I was writing a series of human interest stories for the *Rapid City Journal*, I interviewed a local undertaker who had grown up in the business... This man

was about to retire after more than fifty years, and he told me that the worst experience he had had in all that time was with a Lutheran pastor [from a rather fundamentalist branch of the denomination].

An infant, the first child of a young couple, had died, but when the minister came to help plan the funeral [with the family] and learned that the child had died without being baptized, he said, 'There's nothing for me to do. That baby's in hell,' and walked out" (*Amazing Grace*, 313-314).

Is that who we believe our God is – that God would send baby to hell because it hadn't been baptized? What about that sounds *anything* like Jesus?

And yet, reading the same Bible that you and I read, that pastor somehow walked out of that funeral home believing he had done the right thing; his righteousness preserved, even if it had come at the expense of a newborn baby going to hell.

For some, hell is a crowbar for leveraging their own righteousness – and I have a hard time believing Jesus would tolerate it.

So what do we do with Jesus when he says "If your hand... your foot... your eye causes you to sin, it's better to cut it off or tear it out than to keep it and be thrown into hell – where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched?"

What do we do with Jesus when he says, "Everyone will be salted with fire?"

It's unnerving to me when I see Jesus siding with who preach not on God's love, but on how we're all "sinners in the hands of an angry God." That's the Jesus, that's God that made me leave the church the first time. Notice I didn't say, "the last time." What do we do with this Jesus?

I think there are two things that we need to take into consideration when we start trying to make sense of this Jesus who seems all too ready to condemn sinners to hell.

The first is this: we ought to note that "hell" isn't actually the right word. The word that Jesus uses is *Gehenna*, from the Hebrew, *gehinnom* – the valley of Hinnom.

Andrew Foster Connors points out that "the valley of Hinnom is the place where Jerusalem used to burn its trash. Like any landfill, it was the place where maggots never seemed to die. So much trash was burned there that the fires never seemed to go out.

But the valley of Hinnom was even worse than that. It was the place where the bodies of soldiers were piled up during war. It was the the place where the bodies of executed criminals were disposed of. It was also the place centuries before Jesus where followers of the Canaanite gods had practiced child sacrifice. 'The people of Judah have done evil in my sight,' God says in the seventh chapter of the book of Jeremiah. "In the valley of the son of Hinnom they build a temple to burn their sons and daughters in the fire,

which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind” (A Sermon for Every Sunday, September 30, 2018).

Jesus’ hearers weren’t thinking about *Dante’s Inferno* or Jonathan Edward’s ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.’ They were thinking about that landfill; that waste of human life; that place that symbolized the worst that our kind can do to each other — violence, destruction, and death.

“It is better to do violence to yourselves now,” Jesus tells his disciples, “to take drastic action on yourself now than to participate in the kinds of things that can put you on the path to Gehenna, where our destruction of each other — our waste of each other — seems to never end.”

That is the first thing we ought to consider. The second thing is this:

People who *like* to talk, who *enjoy* talking about, who *revel* in talking about lakes of fire and never-ending torment, always seem convinced that *they* are safe, but *you* are not. But the most important words Jesus uses in this passage are not Gehenna or fire or worms, but the words “you” and “your.”

“If *your* hand causes *you* to sin... if *your* foot causes *you* to sin... if *your* eye causes *you* to sin...” This isn’t a passage about pointing out the sins of others, but about facing our own sin.

Do you remember what set Jesus off on this tangent about hell in the first place?

Just before this, the apostle John said to Jesus, “We saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us” (Mark 9:38).

That’s how a lot of self-righteous, judgy remarks start, isn’t it? “We saw someone doing x, y, z.” I saw so-and-so coming out of the liquor store. I saw so-and-so talking with so-and-so, and you know he’s no good. I saw so-and-so checking Facebook during the sermon last week.

But Jesus won’t have it. “Why are you so worried about what someone else is up to? You don’t have enough sin in your own life to keep you busy? Why don’t you focus on *yourself*? If *your* hand... *your* foot... *your* eye causes *you* to sin... Why don’t you try dealing with *your* sins?”

In another place and at another time, Jesus said it like this, “Why do you insist on picking the speck out of someone else’s eye, when you have a log in your own?”

It’s not our job to judge others. That job belongs to someone else.

Billy Graham said it like this: “It’s the Holy Spirit’s job to convict, God’s job to judge, and my job to love.”

The thing is, we can take Jesus seriously here, without taking him literally.

I don't think Jesus ever meant for a single person to actually maim or cripple themselves in an effort to keep from sinning. His point wasn't that cutting off a hand could actually serve as a treatment for sin. Sin at its root isn't a hand issue or an eye issue, but a heart issue. Cutting off a hand won't cure sin.

So, his point wasn't to offer a treatment for sin. His point was that if we judged ourselves, for once, as harshly as we tend to judge others, then we might just stop being so hard on others.

St. Catherine of Siena once said, "It's heaven all the way to heaven; and it's hell all the way to hell."

Those of us who have made a hell of our lives know just how true that can be. And sometimes when we have made a living hell for ourselves, it can be easier to throw stones at someone else than to have to face our own mess. But Jesus says the only way out of our mess is to face our part in making it.

Catherine of Siena makes another point that we should be sure not to miss. Just as the gate to hell is everywhere, so is the gate to heaven.

And if that's true, then maybe our hands, our feet, and our eyes aren't just tools for sin, but can also be the means by which we *bless* others. Maybe the gate to heaven is about letting the very same parts of bodies be used for good instead of evil.

"Christ has no body now on earth, but yours;  
no hands, but yours  
no feet, but yours.

Yours are the eyes with which is to look out Christ's compassion on the world.  
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.  
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."

I am convinced that when St. Teresa of Avila wrote those famous words, she had this passage of scripture in mind. She understood that the best way to stop judging the sins of others is to start blessing others instead.

"It's the holy spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge, and [our] job to love."

Surely you've heard this story:

"A man died and arrived at the pearly gates. The Lord himself came out to greet him. The man asked the Lord about the nature of heaven and hell, to which the Lord replied, 'Come, I will show you hell.'

Together they entered a large room where a group of people sat around a huge pot of stew. Everyone there in hell was starving and desperate. Each person held a spoon that could reach the pot; but each spoon had a handle that was too long, making it impossible to feed themselves. So, the suffering was terrible.

'Come,' said the Lord, 'now I will show you heaven.'

They then entered another large room which was identical to the first: the pot of stew, a group of people around it, and the same long-handled spoons. But there everyone was happy and well-fed.

'I don't understand,' the man said. 'Why are these people happy and well-fed when the people in hell were so miserable?'

The Lord smiled, 'Ah, it is simple, my child. Here in heaven they have learned to feed each other.'"

It is heaven all the way to heaven. And it is hell all the way to hell.

May we model now what we hope for eternity.

Amen.