

The Lord Teaches His Disciples Not to Have a Sectarian Spirit

Mark 9:30-42

Mark 9:30-42 – “Then they departed from there and passed through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know it. ³¹ For He taught His disciples and said to them, “The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day.” ³² But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him. ³³ Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, “What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?” ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest. ³⁵ And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶ Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.” ³⁸ Now John answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰ For he who is not against us is on our side. ⁴¹ For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. ⁴² “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea.”

Background Notes

The Lord and His disciples left the northern part of Israel and passed south through Galilee. This was the first leg of the final journey. They were making their way, step by step, to Jerusalem for the final week of our Lord's earthly ministry. The Lord did not want anyone to know about His travels because He wanted this time to concentrate on teaching the disciples. His time with them was growing short, and the crowds would only hinder the very important matter of training His disciples.

Why were the disciples afraid to ask the Lord about what He had taught them of His coming death and resurrection (v32)? Most likely it was because, if you remember, the Lord had rebuked them for their lack of understanding on this matter back in chapter 8.

The house in Capernaum (v33) was probably Peter's home. Remember, Peter was married and lived in Capernaum. It's possible that the little child, whom the Lord used as an object lesson, was Peter's child.

In verse 35, we read that the Lord sat down. This was the customary position of a Jewish rabbi when he was ready to teach.

Suddenly John remarked, *“Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us”* (v8). It appears that John just blurted out this comment in the middle of the Lord’s teaching session on humility! Most likely, the Lord’s mention of “My name” (v37) triggered John’s memory about a man whom they had seen casting out demons in Jesus’ name. In verse 37 the Lord had said, *“Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.”* So most likely John was wondering whether this reception policy should be extended to the man whom they saw casting out demons in the Lord’s name. The Lord’s answer is essentially “Yes” - *“No one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me.”*

The Lord went on to say, *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea.”* In those days there were two types of millstones for grinding grain: a small handheld grinding stone, and a very large millstone, that was so big it had to be turned by a donkey or mule. The word that’s used here is the large kind of millstone. Would you survive if a very heavy millstone was hung around your neck, and you were cast into the sea? No way! You would never even float to the surface.

Doctrinal Points

1. Understanding the meaning of the cross is of utmost importance.

The focus of our Lord’s teaching during these final days was His coming death and resurrection. Certainly He taught the disciples other things during these final teaching sessions, but His focus was His coming death and resurrection. The reason, of course, was that His death and resurrection were of historic significance and utmost importance. In fact, these coming events would be **the focal point of human history!**

The statement that the Son of Man would be delivered into the hands of men (v31) has more than just the betrayal of Judas in view. God Himself was allowing the perfect Son of Man to be delivered into the hands of men. This was all part of God’s plan of salvation for mankind - for you and for me. As we read in Acts 2:23, *“Him [Jesus Christ], being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.”*

In Romans 8:32 we read, *“He [God] who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all.”* The meaning of the cross then was not just that a good man was falsely accused and crucified unjustly in the 1st century AD. No, the meaning of the cross was that the Son of Man, the perfect Man, was delivered by God Himself to die on the cross for the sins of the world - and then rise again from the dead, in victory over sin and death!

No wonder the Lord focused His final days of teaching on this crucial subject. Understanding the meaning of the cross is of utmost importance. Do you understand the meaning of the cross? It was not just a travesty of justice that took place in Judea two thousand years ago. **It is the basis of human salvation** - your salvation, my salvation. Understanding the meaning of the cross is of utmost importance.

2. Greatness in the kingdom of God is determined by humble service.

In verse 35, the Lord said, *“If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.”* Greatness in the kingdom of God is determined by humble service. That’s what our Lord was trying to teach the disciples then, and that’s what our Lord is trying to teach us now. But the disciples were slow to learn - and so are we. The Lord asked them, *“What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?”* Does the Lord have to ask us, “What are you Christians arguing about now?” or “Are you still trying to make yourself more important than your fellow-believers?”

They kept silent. It was a silence of shame, because they knew they had the wrong attitude. The disciples were probably using arguments like “The greatest is the disciple who was called first” - or “The greatest disciples are the ones who were on the Mount of Transfiguration” - or “The greatest are the disciples who are the best spokesmen!” Every reason but humble service! The disciples sound a lot like us, don’t they?

The Lord corrected their wrong thinking with an object lesson. He brought a little child into their midst, then took the child up in His arms and said, *“Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.”* In that society a child was unimportant compared to a mature adult. After all, a child could not advance your position; a child needed to your help.

So in the object lesson, the little child represents the lowly believer. The point of the object lesson is that you are truly great if you’re willing to humbly serve - even so-called “insignificant” believers, like the widow who doesn’t have any money to leave you when she dies, or the blue collar Christian who doesn’t have important business “connections,” or the family in your church that lacks social graces. Serving these “insignificant” believers is serving the Lord Himself.

Greatness in the kingdom of God is determined by service - ***humble service***. Have we learned this truth, or are we (like the disciples) still striving over our importance?

3. A sectarian spirit that causes stumbling is serious sin.

The disciples showed a sectarian spirit when they told the man (v38) to stop casting out demons in Jesus’ name, because he was not part of the exclusive company of the Twelve. Maybe there was some jealousy there, too. Remember earlier in this chapter, when the disciples couldn’t cast out the boy’s demon (v14-29)? Well, the Lord said that a sectarian attitude is wrong. Verses 39-40: *“Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side.”*

Verse 40, by the way, is ***not*** a contradiction of what the Lord said in Matthew 12:30, *“He who is not with Me is against Me.”* There, the Lord was speaking of the doctrine of His own Person; we must be properly squared away on our Christology. If you’re not a follower of Christ, forget it. You are against Christ. But here the Lord is speaking of service. Christians do not have to agree on everything in order to serve the Lord. Although you may not want to join or support a particular group or ministry, don’t forbid them or tear them down if they’re true believers and seeking to serve the Lord. There must be tolerance and love.

The sectarian spirit is not only wrong - it's a **serious sin** because it causes stumbling. That's really the context of verse 42: "*Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble.*" If you cause a young believer (a new Christian or one who is young in the faith) to stumble in their faith, or to be hindered in their growth in the faith, this is serious sin. The context here is particularly a sectarian spirit. Have you ever said, "Those people aren't really Christians because they're not "with us" - they're not in our church; they're not in our denomination; they're not in our tradition." When I was a young Christian I was almost stumbled by some older Christians who, in spiritual pride, looked upon Christians who were not in our particular group. They implied those believers were "second-class" or "untaught" Christians, who didn't have "the truth"! It's serious sin to stumble a young believer. If we are involved in this sin, it really would be better if a millstone were hung around our necks and we were cast into the sea. Better for us to die now and go to Heaven before we do further damage! Remember, a sectarian spirit that causes stumbling is serious sin.

Practical Applications

1. Let's not be too quick to judge another's salvation.

If you were to have asked the disciples whether the man in verse 38 was a believer or not, they probably would have said immediately "No, he's just a Jewish exorcist." So the Lord had to correct their wrong thinking. Not only that, the Lord said in verse 41, "*For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.*" Not only spectacular works (like casting out demons), but even small services (like a little refreshment done for others in the name of Christ) are an indication of faith in Christ!

This is not salvation by works, by the way. But even small services done in the name of Christ are evidence of faith.

So let's not be too quick to judge another's salvation, particularly with respect to folks who are not in our denomination, or in our church, or our tradition. There may be some little services that we don't see, that God sees, that are evidence of that person's true faith.

2. Even our cups of water will be rewarded.

We tend to think that only our great acts of Christian service will be remembered and rewarded. How many people have we led to Christ? How many Christian books did we write? How many churches did we help to start - or pastor? How many students were in my Bible study? But the clear implication of verse 41 is that even our cups of water will be rewarded!

What an encouragement! Giving "a cup of water" doesn't cost anything, and anyone can do it - but it can be life saving for a thirsty person. It may be an encouraging word, or a ride to church, or some produce from your home garden, or a thoughtful note, or a cup of coffee. The point is that these "little" services done for fellow believers in the name of Christ will be rewarded. "*Assuredly I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.*"

God sees, and God remembers! So be encouraged! Continue to do the little things for fellow believers. Even our cups of water will be rewarded.