

First Serve

Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 9:33-50

Topic

Jesus describes eternal torment using the imagery of worms gnawing the body for eternity

Title

"Gumming Worms"

Introduction

Some of the greatest speeches in American history have been the shortest.

I was surprised the first time I realized that Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was a mere 272 words, which took him under three minutes to deliver.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's Pearl Harbor address, known for the phrase "a date that will live in infamy," was just seven minutes long.

Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech - seventeen minutes in length.

There's a saying among writers, "concise is nice." It's not easy to be concise, however; you have to work harder at it than if you ignored time constraints.

Jesus was the greatest teacher of all time. Fully God and fully human, filled with the Holy Spirit, He had the greatest content, and the greatest authority, of any teacher, ever.

Jesus was concise. The Sermon on the Mount, which is one of Jesus' longer talks, can be recited in under thirteen minutes.

The words in red in our text today can be recited in about two minutes. I'll organize my thoughts about what Jesus said around these two points: #1 Always Choose Last First, and #2 Never Forget Fire Lasts.

#1 Always Choose Last First

(v33-41)

If I were to ask you to name one of Jesus' primary teaching methods, you'd most likely say *parables*.

It's true; Jesus taught by use of parables. But He also extensively used *paradox*.

A paradox is a true statement that either is contrary to conventional wisdom, or is seemingly absurd.

Here are three examples of Jesus' paradoxes:

- To save your life, you must lose it. "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it" (Luke 17:33).

- To reign, we must serve. “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things” (Matthew 25:21).
- To be exalted, we must become humble. “And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted” (Matthew 23:12).

The paradox Jesus introduces in our text today is that if you desire to be first, choose to be last.

Mar 9:33 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?"

I'm loud. I forget that I am loud. I think people can't hear me, but they can. It's sometimes embarrassing for Pam.

Jesus overheard His guys disputing. How very sad, for the Lord. The twelve did not seem to be sensitive to how Jesus must have been feeling. The Lord had just told them He was going to be betrayed and killed. You'd think they would want to minister to Him in some way - not disappoint Him by arguing amongst themselves.

One of the most penetrating questions we can ask ourselves is "what was it you disputed among yourselves?" Whether it is at a Board Meeting, or a Bible study, or some other gathering, we must consider how our disputing might affect the heart of our Savior, as well as our witness to the church and in the world.

Mar 9:34 But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest.

I'm astonished by this. Jesus asked twelve grown men, who had dedicated themselves to following Him, who were submitted to Him, a direct question. **Not one of them answered Him.** It seems rude and disrespectful.

BTW - Make note of the fact they didn't consider Peter "the greatest." He was not their leader. He would become more prominent after Pentecost, as a spokesman. But, even then, James, the half-brother of Jesus, seems to have been the more prominent leader in the church at Jerusalem.

They were thinking only of the Kingdom. If Jesus were about to establish the Kingdom, He'd need to be filling positions very soon. Since they were the King's special twelve, certainly they'd be administrating the Kingdom *with* Him, and *for* Him.

Mar 9:35 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."

Might as well read "if" as "since," because they *were* desiring to be first.

They wanted to be "first" among others in the sense of being over them. It's a part of human nature to want to advance. It's not always a bad thing, out in the world.

But in service to Jesus, you should want to be first in a spiritual sense. Always exercise your choice to be the last, and the least.

It's what Jesus did. He left Heaven to come to earth as a man in order that He might serve mankind as our sacrifice for sin on the Cross. If anyone embodied being last of all, and least of all, it was the Lord.

Mar 9:36 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,
Mar 9:37 "Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me."

The Kingdom of God on earth was going to be postponed. As the New Testament unfolds, you see that, instead of a kingdom, the church is described as a household of faith.

Instead of ruling over men in the Kingdom, in the intervening church age, the disciples would need to treat people the way you'd treat children in your family.

They weren't going to reign over subjects; they were going to receive saints, nurturing them, and building them up.

Jesus said that to the extent a disciple receives the saints in this way, he is receiving Himself, and God the Father.

One of the twelve, John, was either confused or felt like complaining:

Mar 9:38 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."

"Does not follow us" is intended to communicate, "he's not part of our group." He was not one of the twelve. After all, weren't the twelve special? Weren't they personally chosen by Jesus, in cooperation with the Father?

This was profoundly immature. After all, the twelve travelled with Jesus; they lived with Jesus; they had immediate access to Jesus. John was part of an inner circle, along with his brother, James, and Peter, that was with Jesus on certain amazing occasions - like the raising from the dead of a little girl, and the Mount of Transfiguration. These guys were super-privileged.

Yet John was complaining that someone was being used by God to deliver the oppressed from demons. It's the kind of thinking you have if you're more about the *gifts* than you are the *Giver*.

Mar 9:39 But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me.
Mar 9:40 For he who is not against us is on our side.

God wasn't just working through the twelve. He had genuine believers throughout Israel, who were also preaching the Gospel, and performing miracles.

Missionaries to places where no one has ever brought the Gospel often report God has already been working among the people. Never underestimate the Lord's reach.

Jesus assured John that this man would not "speak evil" of Jesus. He wasn't a satanic counterfeit, who would perform a miracle only to draw folks away. He was "on [their] side" in the cosmic conflict.

Christians are all on the same side. Sadly, you wouldn't know it at times from observing us. Within churches, and between churches, there is too much disputing over non-essential issues. We don't have to agree on everything to stand united, on the same side, against the devil, and for the Gospel.

Mar 9:41 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.

John thought the twelve should have exclusive rights to minister in Jesus' Name. Jesus pointed out they the twelve were often ministered to by others. They received the hospitality of other believers, as they travelled. The implication was that all service to the Lord, no matter how small, was equal. The disciples were not greater than the average follower.

The mention of "reward[s]" is a subtle reference consistent with the change in plans. With the Kingdom postponed, believers should not be looking for positions before the throne of Jesus on earth, but be looking ahead to being rewarded at the Reward Seat of Jesus in Heaven.

The principle, "Always Choose Last First," would have prevented the disciples from the mistakes they made:

- There would have been no possibility of a dispute concerning greatness if they were choosing last first.
- There would be no complaining about someone from outside their group delivering people from demons if they were choosing last first.

Many of the practical issues we struggle with are resolved by choosing last first.

Above all, we should enjoy the relationship we have with Jesus, not comparing ourselves to others.

Our roles do not define our relationship. I'm not closer to Jesus because I'm a minister. A missionary is not closer to Jesus than I am because he or she is out in the field.

We are each encouraged to, "draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8).

#2 Never Forget Fire Lasts

(v42-50)

You're probably aware that Jesus spoke more about Hell and eternal conscious torment than anyone else in the Bible. It's been estimated that He spoke of Hell three-times as much as He did about Heaven. It prompted one person to say, "Jesus mentioned Hell and destruction in forty-six verses; *we don't need to know Greek to be able to clearly see Hell is real and eternal.*"

I was surprised by a commentator I trust who pointed-out that when Jesus spoke of Hell, it was always to *believers*, not to *nonbelievers*.

While I'm not 100% sure of that, one thing **is** true: In our text, Jesus speaks of Hell and eternal conscious torment *to believers*.

Is it because we can still go there? No; a born-again believer has been delivered from sin and Satan, death and Hell.

So how are we to understand this warning?

Maybe an illustration will help. Most of us have seen, or are at least familiar with, the film, *Saving Private Ryan*. General George Marshall is informed that three of the four brothers of the Ryan family were killed in action and that their mother is to receive all three telegrams in the same day. He learns that the fourth son, Private First Class James Francis Ryan, is missing in action somewhere in Normandy. Marshall orders that Ryan must be found and sent home immediately.

Ryan is found, and makes it safely home, but not without significant loss of life among his rescuers. The captain who led the patrol to find Ryan, John Miller, is one of the casualties. As he lay dying, he says to Ryan, "James... earn this. Earn it."

If you are a Christian, it's because God mounted a rescue mission to find you, and to save you, amidst the ongoing spiritual warfare on planet earth. Your Savior suffered significantly on the Cross during the rescue. Because of what He did, you are delivered from sin and Satan, death and Hell.

Make it count. Walk in the victory Jesus has won for you. Live in such a way that you will "earn" spiritual rewards.

Then think of yourself as part of the spiritual band of brothers that is out on patrol, in the conflict, seeking to bring the Good News of salvation to those who are yet perishing.

I think Jesus spoke to believers about Hell to remind us of our rescue from it; and so that we will remember the seriousness of preaching the Gospel to those who are oblivious to Hell, but who are on the broad road that leads to Hell.

In a way, Hell is more terrifying to a believer who has been delivered from ever going there, than it is to a nonbeliever, because you fully understand the very real danger you were in, that your unsaved loved ones are still in, along with the rest of lost humanity.

Mar 9:42 "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.

Jesus continued with the illustration that saints were to be nurtured like you would children in your family. Unfortunately, you can also "stumble" them. You can hinder their spiritual growth - even cause them to backslide.

Why this millstone imagery? I think it is to convey the simple truth that you should be as far from ever stumbling God's saints as possible. Someone weighted-down by a 100-pound millstone, then sunk to the sea floor, is as far away as possible. There's no way he or she is going to stumble anyone. That's the idea.

In horror films, often the person who turns into a monster will lock themselves away in order to not harm others. That's the idea here.

How does this work out in practice? I'll give one example. It is somewhat typical of believers who have certain liberties in Jesus to exercise them indiscriminately. According to Jesus, **you can never act indiscriminately as a Christian**. You can never act without careful judgment because of the seriousness of stumbling saints. Lock yourself away and do them, if you must.

Jesus next explains that you should beware of stumbling blocks in your own path.

Mar 9:43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched -

Mar 9:44 where 'THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.'

Mar 9:45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched -

Mar 9:46 where 'THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.'

Mar 9:47 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire -

Mar 9:48 where 'THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.'

For a teacher Who was always concise, to repeat a phrase no less than three times is pretty significant. Let's start there.

The Greek word translated as "Hell" is *Gehenna*, and is a combination of two Hebrew words meaning "Valley of Hinnom." It is a place south of Jerusalem where children were once sacrificed to the pagan god Molech. Later, during the reforms of King Josiah, the site became Jerusalem's refuse dump where fires burned continually to consume maggot-infested garbage and human waste.

In Jewish thought the imagery of fire and worms at Gehenna vividly portrayed the place of future eternal punishment for the wicked. Hell is *like* Gehenna. It is an awful, foul place on the earth that can illustrate Hell, to a small extent.

Hell, however, is eternal, and its suffering is eternal conscious torment:

- The "worm does not die" seems to suggest eternal *internal* torment.
- The "fire is not quenched" seems to suggest eternal *external* torment.

I'll mention in passing that it has become popular among Christians to try to argue, from the Bible, that there is no Hell - no place of eternal conscious torment. The most popular of the positions is *Annihilationism*, where nonbelievers cease to exist.

The plain sense of Jesus' words, here and elsewhere, teach differently. Hell is real, and a place of eternal conscious torment, both internal and external, for those who choose to go there.

Yes, you choose to go there. God loved the world so much that He sent Jesus to die for you, so you need not perish in Hell, but instead receive eternal life now and on into Heaven. To get to Hell, you need to step-over the body of Jesus that blocks the way.

Before I leave the subject of who goes to Hell, let me say a word about the destiny of people who are unevangelized. What if a person never hears about Jesus?

We hold to a biblical position that can be called "The Wider Hope."

We affirm that God, in grace, grants every individual a genuine opportunity to participate in the redemptive work of Jesus, and that no human being is excluded from the possibility of being saved.

Within the Wider Hope camp there are different views on the nature and timing of God's offer of salvation. But they all agree that there is real opportunity to be saved.

The other thing packed into these verses is the amputation of hand, foot, and eye. Jesus didn't need to say He was speaking figuratively because everyone understood that no amount of physical amputation would overcome the source of your sin, which is your flesh.

He was simply, but powerfully, saying that you should take every measure to avoid sin, no matter how radical it might seem.

I can use brand-new believers as an illustration. Not always, but often, immediately after a person is saved, they will make radical changes in their lives.

- They'll pour-out all the booze.
- They'll flush-down all the drugs.
- They'll throw-out all their CD's and most of their Blue Ray discs.

Over time, certain things are reintroduced. Is it always wrong? No, but each of us, in conversation with Jesus, need to determine if it is really something good and profitable, or if it is our hand, foot, and eye lusting back after the sin Jesus died to give us victory over. If it is from lust, from the flesh - **amputate**.

The idea, again, is to make the most of the victory that was won for you on the Cross. Jesus suffered and died to set you free from sin; why go back to it?

Mar 9:49 "For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt.

Almost all the commentators mention that verses forty-nine and fifty are the hardest two verses in the Gospel of Mark - if not in all the New Testament.

Notice that "everyone will be seasoned with fire." *Everyone* includes nonbelievers, and it includes believers. Let's talk nonbelievers first.

In context, Jesus had just been describing Hell and it's eternal, unquenchable fire. For nonbelievers - those who die without receiving Jesus, who walk-over His body to get there - Hell's fire will be like a seasoning rubbed all over them, to preserve them.

All nonbelievers from all time will be raised from the dead in a body that will be tormented for eternity.

What about believers? Believers are exposed to a different fire:

- While on the earth, we are exposed to what the Bible describes as "the **fiery** trial which is to try you" (First Peter 4:12). We are told, "in this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by **fire**, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ..." (First Peter 1:6-7).

- When we go to be with the Lord, after our death or after the rapture, "each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by **fire**; and the **fire** will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through **fire**" (First Corinthians 3:11-15).

Jesus drops the word "sacrifice." I can't help but think of Romans 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."

You are to present yourself, every day, as a living sacrifice. Add to that the understanding that, every day, you are subject to the refining, purifying fire of trials. The imagery, then, is of yourself on the altar, submitted to God, subject to Heaven's controlled flames.

On the altar, in the fiery trial, you are to be "seasoned with salt." We know what this means, because one of Jesus' most famous declarations to His followers was, "You are the salt of the earth."

Salt was a preservative, and a purifying agent, as well as providing nourishment and flavor. Christians are to be like that, out in the world. We're to be pure salt, making a difference.

According to the really smart guys who wrote *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, "salt was regarded in the ancient near east as not being destructible by fire."

Can we put all these thoughts together? Yes.

You've been saved from Hell and are to go out into the world as the salt of the earth to have a purifying, preserving effect on those who are still going to Hell for lack of the knowledge of Jesus. You're to daily consider yourself a living sacrifice, realizing that, on God's altar, you will face fiery trials that are intended to further refine you.

Mar 9:50 Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another."

Salt, in its pure form, *can't* "lose its flavor." The salt in Israel, however, wasn't always pure. It could be mixed with alkali salts from around the Dead Sea. Water could leach out the pure sodium chloride, leaving the impure alkali salts intact, so that it looked like salt but tasted bland.

Once again, the exhortation is to make your Christian life count. You **are** salt - pure salt - but by mixing with the world, you can dilute it, and lose your saltiness.

"Have salt in yourselves" is thus a word of correction. Instead of disputing about who was the greatest, or about anything else, for that matter, the twelve should strive to remain the salt of the earth in order to win the lost, nurture young believers, and avoid stumbling anyone. Instead of disputing, they should "have peace with one another."

As a greeting to other Christians, maybe we should start saying, "Have salt in yourself!"

I see a t-shirt in our future.