

Water Works

Mark 9:38-41 February 11, 2026

What a thrill it must be to win a gold medal. After so much dedication, study, training, expense, and effort, to receive that glorious award. Olympic events can be incredibly demanding. Consider the biathlon, where athletes must first cross-country ski with “all-out intensity,” then suddenly pivot to calm, “steady aim” as they shoot rifles both prone and standing at targets 50 meters away.¹

To bring home the gold in this event is quite a feat. In fact, the United States has *never* medaled in the biathlon. It’s the *only* winter Olympic event we’ve been shut out of.

But if you’re looking for something a little...*simpler*...you could consider being the third man in the bobsled. Effectively all you need to do is sprint for 50 to 100 feet. Jason Hartman, the strength and conditioning coordinator for the U.S. Olympic bobsled team, once said, “Honestly, after those five seconds, they’re kind of trying to stay as relaxed as possible while leaning into the turns.”²

Whether you’re a biathlete, a downhill skier traveling at 95 miles per hour, a hockey team playing seven grueling, hour-long matches, or the third man in a bobsled just trying to be as relaxed as possible - the medals are the same: 500 grams of *silver* covered by 6 grams of gold, with a melt value of about \$2,500.³

There are two very different yet connected parts to our text tonight. It’s sort of like a biathlon’s skiing and shooting. On the one hand, this passage is about Christ adjusting the attitude of the disciples, which is dysfunctional at the moment. He’s still teaching them how to have servants’ hearts rather than trying to exclude others or lord over them.

But alongside that lesson, He formally discloses a remarkable truth. He takes the simplest act of care and hospitality and elevates it to be on par with a miraculous healing. He says, “These things, done in My name, will be rewarded.” Not just in a “that’s a nice thing to do” sense, but in the eschatological sense. When we are brought into eternity and ushered into Christ’s forever Kingdom, those who hand out cups of water are rewarded *alongside* those who exorcise demons.

Mark 9:38 - ³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he wasn’t following us.”

There is a *lot* going on in this verse. From the words, to the actions, to the context, and the apparent attitudes - we want to break it all down. But this is one of those times where we’re not *sure* how this was said or the exact motivation behind it. I know I automatically come to this scene *assuming* some things about how and why John said what he did.

¹ <https://www.olympics.com/en/milano-cortina-2026/sports/biathlon>

² <https://barbend.com/winter-olympics-bobsled-team-workout/>

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/winter-olympics-2026-gold-medal-prices/>

Did he say this because he was *ashamed* by what Jesus had just said in verses 35 through 37?⁴ Jesus said, “if you want to be first you must be last and the servant of all.” And, “Whoever welcomes a little child in My name welcomes Me.” So maybe John is convicted and confessing here.

Or, could it be that John is trying to change the subject? That perhaps, as was so often the case, the disciples really weren’t hearing what Jesus said and now John brings this up expecting *praise*?⁵

Or maybe John just didn’t know *what* to think. That Jesus gave them the teaching of 35 through 37 and was saying, “Well, now that You mention it, did we do right or wrong when we did this...?”⁶

We can’t be sure. And we don’t actually know *when* this interaction with the unknown exorcist took place. I always think they just came from confronting this guy, but they’re still in a house in Capernaum in a teaching session with Jesus. So this happened at some point in the past.

But let’s consider *what* John said. First, it wasn’t only John. He says “we,” speaking of all the 12.⁷ At *some* point, they witnessed this other fellow casting out demons in Jesus’ name. He didn’t come to them and try to join the 12. He didn’t come and tell them they should support him. He didn’t come and try to *buy* power like Simon the Sorcerer did in Acts 8. He’s doing his thing and *they* engage.

This was a guy who clearly *believed* in Jesus and was being used by God. I say that because he was successful at casting out demons. The supernatural power of God was at work in him.

There’s a story in Acts 19 where some *Jewish* exorcists try to use Jesus’ name to cast out demons and the demon says, “Yeah, it doesn’t work that way.” And proceeds to mess them up. They didn’t have *real* belief, so throwing the name of Jesus around like an incantation didn’t do anything.

But, the 12 saw this guy doing his thing, and then they go over and say, “Stop it. You’re not allowed to do this because you don’t follow *us*.” Did you notice that detail? It wasn’t even, “Jesus didn’t personally call you to be a disciple.” It was, “You’re not in *our* group and you’re not *under* us.”

The 12 were still very worried about which one of them was the greatest in the group. They argued about it openly. But at the time they *also* assumed they had a special place *above* everyone else.

So they told him to stop. There are two ironies here: First, they had the audacity to try to forbid him from successfully exorcising demons when *just a few verses ago* they had been *unable* to cast out a demon! And second, they say, “We *tried* to stop him.” Meaning, they were unsuccessful at that! So, they think they have the authority to lord over people, but they couldn’t even convince this guy to comply with their demands!

⁴ Marvin Vincent *Word Studies In The New Testament*

⁵ Archibald Robertson *Word Pictures In The New Testament*

⁶ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown *Commentary Critical And Explanatory On The Whole Bible*

⁷ Walter Wessel *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*

This was all flowing from a faulty mentality. You can see it even in John's words. He calls Jesus "Teacher." Not *Christ*. Not Lord. Not Son of Man. Instead, he used a term that was *usually* only used by *outsiders* in the book of Mark.⁸ Why? I don't know. But it exposes a skewed attitude.

Now, a wrong attitude can happen to the best of believers. In the book of Numbers there's a scene where the Holy Spirit falls on seventy elders of Israel. Two guys who had *not* come when Moses called also received the Spirit and began to prophesy. When it happened, Joshua says, "Moses, my lord, *stop* them!" And Moses says, "Are you jealous on my account? If only *all* the Lord's people were prophets and *all* of them had the Spirit!"⁹ But in the moment, Joshua wasn't sure if what they were doing was appropriate.

Were the disciples of Jesus jealous for *Him* or for themselves? The latter seems to be the case. Because their attention was *not* that some tormented soul be *freed* from demonic possession, but that this unknown exorcist must *follow* after them. In the interaction, they were acting more like Pharisees than like Jesus.

Mark 9:39-40 - ³⁹ "Don't stop him," said Jesus, "because there is no one who will perform a miracle in my name who can soon afterward speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For whoever is not against us is for us.

Jesus uses the same verb that is used in the LXX when Joshua said, "Moses, *forbid* them!" Jesus says, "*Don't* do that." He acknowledges that this man *really* believes in Jesus. He calls this exorcism a "mighty work" - the same terminology that Mark uses of Jesus' own miracles.¹⁰

But now let's pause and consider the implications of what Jesus says here for our own day and age, our own interaction with other Christians - particularly those with whom we're not in fellowship. Other groups, other ministries, other churches, other believers who you may interact with but aren't closely connected with.

Some say that it's wrong that we have different churches and different denominations - that all Christians should just unite and agree. It gets said from time to time, because it's *easy* to say.

But notice what Jesus *did* and *didn't* command here: He said that they should not make themselves *enemies* of this man. Don't try to stop him. But Jesus *did not* say, "Go join him." He didn't say, "Have him come join *us*." He didn't say they needed to get together and make an exorcism program.

As Christians, we are to be welcoming to one another, kind to one another, not combatants against one another - as far as in the church universal. But there is a difference between an ally and a partner. We can be allies with brothers and sisters who do things differently or have differences of opinion on non-essential issues. But that doesn't mean we're failing if we don't *partner* together.

⁸ Morna Hooker *The Gospel According To Saint Mark*

⁹ Numbers 11:24-29

¹⁰ R.T. France *The Gospel Of Mark*

The important issue is *not* whether we're plowing together in the same direction. The important issue is whether we are for or against Jesus. There's no middle ground there. We are either *for* Jesus or we are *against* Him. And elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus would say it in reverse: "If you are *not* for Me, then you *ARE* against Me."¹¹

There are those who try to say they will come to Jesus before they die. There are some who believe it doesn't matter whether they consider the issue here and now. But this is the principal concern of a human life: Are you *in* Christ? Do you belong to Him?

After we can answer yes to that question, *then* we can learn to serve Him, understand our calling, welcome others, interact with brothers and sisters, even if they're not part of our tribe, and be in alliance or partnership according to God's leading. As we grow in Christ, we should be growing in knowledge of what He wants *us* to be doing, but also growing in grace *toward* others who are called to other things. I shouldn't become more *narrow-minded* when it comes to Christian brotherhood, but more willing to give what Paul calls the "right hand of fellowship" to other, genuine believers.¹²

Mark 9:41 - ⁴¹ And whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in my name, because you belong to Christ—truly I tell you, he will never lose his reward.

There's a sudden pivot from skiing to shooting. Jesus was not only talking about who is allowed to do the work of God, but He expands what gold-medal events are available in His Kingdom. He says, "Truly I tell you." This is *official heavenly policy!* And notice how John had said, "Well, this guy was casting out demons *in Your name.*" Now Jesus talks about a cup of water *in His name.* He elevates the most basic act of kindness and provision to be, in some sense, in the same category as a miracle. That in the Kingdom, *both* are events for which you can receive a great reward.

Let's marvel again at just how *generous* God is. This is the *smallest* service we could do for someone.¹³ The Lord is so *excited* to reward us in eternity. He so lavishly repays what we do for Him. In some cases, even when we didn't even realize we're doing it for Him!¹⁴

But a couple of thoughts about this closing verse are important. First, notice that, in the image Jesus is painting for them, it is *the 12* who are the thirsty ones. *They* receive the cup. This assumes that there will be times when Christians - *even apostles* - will face difficulty, need, even desperation.¹⁵ In those times, one of the great provisions God has given us is the Church to meet needs. Christians are called to love our enemies and reach out to the world - that everyone around us is our neighbor. But we are *specifically* commanded to give care and attention and compassion

¹¹ Luke 11:23

¹² Galatians 2:9

¹³ JFB

¹⁴ Matthew 25:38-39

¹⁵ David Garland *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*

and support to our brothers and sisters, near and far.¹⁶ To do the one another commands for each other. That we learn to live as a connected body where each part has its own functions, but all parts are conscious of the health or hurt, strength or weakness of the other parts.

Here the image is of a Christian helping another Christian with a cup of water. And the Lord says this is a *wonderful* thing to do. It assumes that one person is *thirsty*. If you came up and handed me a bottle of water right now, it's not necessary because I'm not thirsty. Really, it would be more distracting than a blessing.

It's exciting to know that even *small* acts of kindness or provision or hospitality are counted as rewardable in Christ's Kingdom, but we need to pay attention to who is thirsty. Or earlier, while Jesus was talking about the kind of gracious, welcoming attitude a Christian should have toward others, Jesus picked a kid out of the group that was there in the room.

In the book of Acts and the epistles, we don't just see Christians doing acts of kindness to check a box. That's the Pharisee mentality. Do certain acts to earn points with God. But that's not how it works. In Acts we see the Church doing things like this: Certain widows were underserved, so they make a specific effort to serve them. The Jerusalem church was suffering with material needs and the Gentile churches sent relief money to them.¹⁷ Dorcas saw that widows needed clothes, so she made them.¹⁸

In the biathlon, when it's time to shoot, you shoot at a target. You need your own eyes to hit center. Rather than look for people to exclude, which is what the 12 did in verse 38, Jesus was encouraging them to look around at who they could serve. Who they could welcome. Who they could support. *Some* fellow Christians will be out there doing what they do and we don't necessarily *partner* with them. But we want to be people who are looking around to serve in the name of Jesus. Who might be thirsty? I mean that figuratively or literally. Who might be struggling in a way we could help if we only knew it?

Jesus is compassionately observant. And He invites us to live with that mentality. And He throws in the wonderful revelation that, "Oh, when you do that for someone else, you're also doing it to Me."

The disciples were worried about their prestige compared to this exorcist. Instead, they should've been worried about the demon-possessed person. Better that they look for thirsty people. And, ironically, when we become the servant of all, *that's* what puts us on the podium in the Kingdom. As we follow Jesus and live for Him, He leads us to people we can love and serve and bring to Him. It's a cup given *in His name*. It's welcoming someone *in His name*. It's all empowered by and attached to the Gospel. It's not about our greatness, it's about His glory and His goodness. And, as we go, we can celebrate the other brothers and sisters running their races both near and far.

¹⁶ Galatians 6:10

¹⁷ Romans 15:25ff, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4

¹⁸ Acts 9:39