

Laying Off Of Hands

Mark 9:42-50 February 18, 2026

In the early 400's, there was a Christian monk named Ammonius who lived in the Egyptian wilderness. They said he "reached the perfection of the love of God."¹

Ancient writers venerated him for several factors. They recorded that he could recite the entire Old and New Testament, as well as 6,000,000 lines from the church fathers. But the main reason he's remembered is for his extreme asceticism which even included self-mutilation.

Ammonius did not want to be ordained as a bishop. He did not want to receive that "promotion." The problem is, he lived during a time when people were sometimes ordained by force.

The people of a nearby city really wanted him to be their bishop. So the bishop of Alexandria said, "If you get him here, I'll ordain him and he'll *have* to be your bishop." The townsfolk found Ammonius and started taking him by force. Ammonius took out a pair of scissors and cut off his own ear. He said, "Leviticus 21 forbids a mutilated person from serving as a priest." The people went back to Alexandria, and the bishop said, "We're Christians and the Law doesn't apply to us." So, the people went *back* to Ammonius, who then told them if they tried to take him, he would cut out his own tongue. At which point, they left him alone.

But that wasn't all. It's also recorded that whenever Ammonius felt desire, he would heat an iron and burn himself, so that he "became a mass of ulcers."

Is *that* what it means to love God? Do we look back on those choices and think that Ammonius was doing God's will? I, for one, look on his story with sadness and pity. We understand that God has not called us to a life of self-inflicted pain and isolation, but of life more abundantly. We agree with C.S. Lewis who wrote, "In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to *enjoy* Him."²

How then do we square our perspective with the serious words of Jesus in this text? Remember: Jesus is in a *formal* teaching session with His disciples. He's explaining what it means to be great in the Kingdom, how disciples should conduct themselves, and what God requires of His servants.

So, we want to try to understand what Jesus is saying, why it matters, *and* know why we don't need to leave our homes, move to the desert, taking only a hot iron and a pair of scissors with us.

Mark 9:42 - 42 "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to fall away—it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

¹ Palladius *The Lausiac History, Ch XI*

² C.S. Lewis *Reflections On The Psalms*

Let's remember the lead up to these verses: The 12 had been arguing on the road about which one of them was the *greatest*. And, John admitted to Jesus they tried to forbid this other Christian exorcist from casting out demons in Jesus' name because that guy didn't follow after them.

Jesus is totally reshaping and rehabilitating their understanding about what it means to serve in His Kingdom. The major point in *these* verses is that, rather than be worried about who they're *greater* than, or being worried about *outsiders*, they should be worried about the evil within their own hearts that can cause eternal damage to themselves and others.³

The Lord has been talking about how disciples should include not exclude others. Now He warns them not only about whether they *include* others, but how they *influence* them.

If a person causes a child, or someone young in the Lord to stumble - if they put an obstacle in the faith of one of these little ones,⁴ it would be better if they died this grisly death. This imagery of being drowned by millstone is vivid enough for us, but for the Galilean disciples, it would've been all the more graphic. The Roman government had taken some early Zealot insurrectionists and drowned them in the Sea of Galilee as punishment.⁵

We'd expect that from the ruthless Romans, but from the mouth of Jesus? Add to that the fact that Jews considered death without burial to be the worst kind of death.⁶ But Jesus says, "No, *that* - *all of that* would be better than stumbling one who believes in Me."

Now understand, Jesus is *not* talking about simply offending someone, or saying something you shouldn't. Falling away here means to cause the shipwreck of someone's faith.⁷ The term is used of a baited animal trap.⁸

But, this is a serious warning. We must reckon with the reality that our choices and behaviors have an impact on the spiritual lives of those around us. If we live lives of hypocrisy and duplicity and selfishness while saying we love Jesus and represent Jesus, that will push people away from the Lord. And God does not take that lightly. He sees it as one of the greatest sins.

In response to John's story about trying to shut down the other exorcist because he wasn't underneath the disciples' authority, Jesus is saying, "Listen, *that* kind of arrogant behavior leads to abuse and neglect of the lowly."⁹ And God does not overlook it. Remember: He is a God of *vengeance*. He takes these eternal matters more seriously than we could possibly imagine.

Jesus challenges His disciples to think both about how they invite others *and* how their conduct *influences* them, especially those who are young in the faith.

³ David Garland *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*

⁴ *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament*

⁵ William Lane *The Gospel Of Mark*

⁶ Craig Keener *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament (Second Edition)*

⁷ R.T. France *The Gospel Of Mark*

⁸ Robert Utley *The Gospel According To Peter: Mark And I & II Peter*

⁹ Douglas Mangum *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*

In verses 43 through 48, the Lord pivots. In verse 42 He warned that ungodliness has grievous eternal consequences in the lives of *others*. Now He warns us about watching out for our *own* lives.

He uses the same idea three times, so we're going to take these as a set.

Mark 9:43-48 - ⁴³ **"And if your hand causes you to fall away, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell, the unquenchable fire.** ⁴⁵ **And if your foot causes you to fall away, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.** ⁴⁷ **And if your eye causes you to fall away, gouge it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell,** ⁴⁸ **where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.**

If you have the New King James version, verse 48 was repeated two times earlier, in verses 44 and 46. There is manuscript disagreement. Some have those verses, some don't. Either way, the words are definitely in verse 48 in *all* the manuscripts, so no harm done.¹⁰

The point here is that you and I - even apostles - *could* be led astray into sin with disastrous consequences. Jesus is *not* saying that it would be good for us to mutilate ourselves, but that we should radically avoid sin. Jesus used hyperbole at times. This is one of those times.

The Lord wasn't telling us to be like Ammonius. I can say that with confidence for several reasons. First, self-mutilation was prohibited in the Law. Though we are not under the Law, Jesus fulfilled it. And Paul told Timothy to watch out for people who tell you you have to abstain from certain foods or forbid marriage.¹¹ He said God provides us richly with all things to enjoy.¹²

Second, when people came to Jesus with blind eyes, crippled feet, shriveled hands, He didn't say, "Actually, that's *better* for you so you won't sin." He healed them.

Third, let's be honest: Your *hand* doesn't *cause* you to sin. Neither does your foot. Neither does your eye. Those are members of your body controlled and directed by your heart and mind. A quadriplegic is still capable of sin despite their bodily limitations. A blind man can still lust.

Christ's point is the serious danger that sin poses in a life. We should not think of it as just bugs on the windshield. He wants us to think of sin like gangrene. If we find our lives infected with sin in some area, we should do what any surgeon would do if we brought to him a necrotic hand, whose infection was spreading up the arm.¹³ He would amputate.

¹⁰ James Brooks *The New American Commentary, Volume 23: Mark*

¹¹ 1 Timothy 4:1-5

¹² 1 Timothy 6:17

¹³ John Walvoord and Roy Zuck *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*

So in my life - the things I do, the places I go, the things I give my attention to, if those things are leading me into sin, I should die to myself and remove those elements for the sake of my spiritual life. I should sacrifice all of that because sin is not a paltry thing. It separates me from God.

Paul said it this way in Romans 8:

Romans 8:13 - ¹³ if you live according to the flesh, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

In the book of Job, Job talks about how he was determined to follow the way of the Lord.¹⁴ He talks about walking the path of righteousness and not going astray. And he references his hands, his feet, his eyes. Job said, "I'm going to walk the path of Godliness." Because he knew a life of sin is a life astray. And a life astray, *Jesus* says, ends in hell.

Culturally, it's easy to think there's just heaven and hell. But in the Bible you have heaven - the place God dwells. Then there's a place called Hades, or sometimes the Old Testament would use the term Sheol. It can be used in a generic sense as the place of the dead - the grave. But in the New Testament we see it is also a real location. It seems to have two areas: One called Abraham's Bosom, a place of comfort where Old Testament believers waited before being led to heaven. The other side of Hades is a place of conscious torment. We learn this in Luke 16.

Today, Abraham's Bosom is empty. The Lord Jesus led those believers to heaven where they await their glorified bodies, received at the resurrection. The *torment* side of Hades is still populated by unbelievers. *They* are awaiting the Great White Throne Judgment, at which point they will be cast forever and ever into the Lake of Fire, which is a *different* location, that we commonly call hell.

When Jesus references hell in these verses, He doesn't use the term Hades, He uses the term Gehenna. That term is used 12 times in the New Testament and 11 of those times are by Jesus.

Gehenna is Jesus' term for the lake of fire and it has a *Biblical* and a *geographical* reference point to help us understand. The Biblical reference used by Jesus here is Isaiah 66:24. There we see those who rebel against the Lord burning forever and ever. And here, Jesus says, "If you live a life of sin, you'll end up there." Revelation calls it the Lake of Fire. Here, Jesus calls it Gehenna.

Gehenna was *also* the name of a literal place south of Jerusalem. It had once been the site where God's people burned their children alive in sacrifice to Molech. But Josiah put a stop to that and defiled the valley. From that point, and in the time of Jesus, Gehenna was a garbage dump. A place they brought refuse and sewage and animal carcasses to burn. And the fires burned continually.¹⁵

To give us a tiny glimpse into hell, Jesus pointed to literal Gehenna. And He referenced how those suffering in the Lake of Fire will not be rewarded with crowns, but with *worms*. They face both

¹⁴ Job 31

¹⁵ Morna Hooker *The Gospel According To Saint Mark*

gnawing, internal torment and burning external torment.¹⁶ It is truly horrible, but altogether real. Hell is as much a Biblical reality as heaven.¹⁷ A person should do *everything* necessary to avoid it. The good news of the Gospel is that God has *freely given* you everything you need for life and Godliness. But God's way demands you take up a cross, die to self, and live as a sacrifice to Him.

Mark 9:49 - 49 For everyone will be salted with fire.

Wait, what? Do all of us have to take a dip in the lake of fire? Scholars admit this is one of the most difficult verses in the entire book.¹⁸ There are at least 15 explanations of what Jesus meant.¹⁹

Here's what I find helpful: Jesus is talking about the binary choice: Heaven or hell. Life or death. *Either way, you're choosing fire. Either the fires of hell or the fire of a life lived on the altar.* Romans 12 tells us, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." John the Baptist said that Jesus came to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire.²⁰

So, I can willingly submit to His *cleansing* fire, or if I choose to reject Him and go my own way, and then have the unquenchable fires of hell. Which reward do I want? Which eternity do I want?

Mark 9:50 - 50 Salt is good, but if the salt should lose its flavor, how can you season it? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

The salt of that time was often sourced from the Dead Sea region, but they would also collect deposits of minerals that *looked* like salt but weren't salt at all.²¹ And so, Jesus encourages us to evaluate our spiritual lives. Are we Christians? Are we part of the salty crew? It's one thing to look the part, it's another to *be* serving the Christian function of salting the earth with Godly flavor, preservative, purifying the world around us by the power of God working through our lives.

"Have salt *among* yourselves." So again, He brings us back to our interaction with others. That we concern ourselves with our internal lives, but also with our interactions and influence on others. That *together* in the church we're serving one another, salting one another, which leads to peace and growth *and* God's glory. *These* are the things we should be focused on, not which of us is the *greatest*. Not exclusivity or jockeying for position. Saltiness, not self-aggrandizement.

Now listen: Jesus is not saying a genuine Christian can lose their salvation. The focus of His words here is that sin is a big, big deal to God. And a life of sin ends in Gehenna. And, remember: there was a *counterfeit* believer among the 12! Judas *looked* like salt, but he didn't taste like salt.

¹⁶ BKC

¹⁷ Robert Utley *The Gospel According To Peter: Mark And I & II Peter*

¹⁸ Walter Wessel *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*

¹⁹ BKC

²⁰ Luke 3:16

²¹ Hooker

Meanwhile, *all* disciples should set our own notions and concerns aside and allow the Lord to shape our perspective. That's what He was trying to do with the disciples here, who had totally off-base ideas about the Kingdom and spiritual greatness and how they should conduct themselves.

The mental road they were on would lead to *seriously* bad consequences. And so Jesus took the time to help them recalculate the route. And He used the extreme and severe words so they could understand how serious He was about it.

The Lord isn't telling us to scissor our ears off. He *is* telling us to radically avoid sin. And to choose carefully the lives we're living. To consider what it really means to be a Christian - to go the way of the cross. It demands we embrace the fire of the altar. But if we do that, the result is a salted life. When a person *doesn't*, the result is the unquenchable fire of eternal death.

And so, as we seek to follow the Lord and go His way, we'll remind ourselves of another verse from Isaiah:

Isaiah 30:20-21 - Your eyes will see your Teacher,²¹ and whenever you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear this command behind you: "This is the way. Walk in it."