

Check Your Ego at the Door - Part 2

Mark 9:33-50

Jesus often said things like: "... whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). Still, we can be slow to take Him at His word on this matter. We continue to crave applause. We rather enjoy being admired by others:

Willard Scott, formerly of *"The Today Show,"* cites his all-time favorite piece of fan-mail from his days in radio: "Dear Mr. Scott - I think you're the best disc jockey in Washington. You play the best music and have the nicest voice of anyone on the air. Please excuse the crayon - they won't let us have anything sharp in here."

No matter how clearly or often Jesus tried to persuade His closest disciples that His kingdom would be like none other the world had ever seen, they just were not getting it. Jesus spoke of service to others, humility, meekness and poverty of spirit as key principles for His reign in the hearts of men, but the disciples could not shake the great earthly empire of their imaginations. They continued to jockey for the top posts in the kingdom to come. They quarreled with one another about who would be the greatest. Today's message is a continuation of our study of a teaching encounter that Jesus initiated with His Twelve in direct response to one such quarrel.

I mentioned a week ago that we seldom picture Jesus in what we would call a formal academic setting. He drew lessons from nature. He crafted parables from images of everyday life. That is why when Jesus sat down and said to the Twelve, "Over here, fellas," they knew He meant business. This was a formal teaching posture of any rabbi for the disciples he chosen to train. After all, enough was enough, wasn't it? While Jesus was working hard overtime to teach the Twelve "the way of the cross," they could not stop fantasizing about "the way of the red carpet."

Jesus summoned the Twelve to school to formally teach them. "Position is what you're worried about? Determining which of you will be the greatest in the kingdom is what is important to you? If you guys ever even want to see My kingdom, you have to check those egos at the door!"

Last week, we considered how Jesus addressed ...

I. The Ambitiousness of the Unchecked Ego (35-37)

Jesus called the Twelve to class and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." It is our instinct, especially when thinking in terms of our place in some organizational line-chart, to imagine ourselves as being in charge, governing others and having them report to us. Jesus defines greatness according to the degree that we empty ourselves in behalf of others, any others, all others. And, God in the flesh set the tone when He "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Then, Jesus embraced a child, a representative of all those in this world who have no status. He said, "Here's the guy to whom you need to hitch your wagons if you want to be great in my kingdom. Inclusion of this little guy is, in fact, a gesture of warmth to Me and to My Father.

We also considered how Jesus addressed ...

II. The Apprehensiveness of the Unchecked Ego (38–41)

John recalled that he had seen a man casting out demons in Jesus' name. John felt that the demonic realm was too dangerous of turf to be tinkering in for anyone not in the clique. John told the man to cease and desist, but Jesus said, "Do not stop him." This had nothing to do with protecting the integrity of Jesus and everything to do with John's ego. Driving out demons, in John's thinking, was too important of a task for anyone not in Jesus' inner circle. Jesus taught the Twelve that any service rendered in His name, even just giving someone a cup of cold water, is important in His eyes. It's not how you're gifted that matters. It's how faithfully you serve others with that gift.

Now, let us continue our study of this need to check our egos at the kingdom gate ...

III. The Abusiveness of the Unchecked Ego (42)

⁴²And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck ...

A. Can Someone Else's Sin Come Back to Me?

Don't we have enough troubles these days with people failing to take responsibility for their own actions? Is not each person responsible for himself or herself? One simplistic answer is, "Yes! Anything you dream can come true if you just believe in yourself and work hard. Don't blame anyone else for your choices or failures." The other simplistic answer is, "No! People are the hapless victims of poverty, of their lack of opportunity, of environments and of their parents."

The biblical answer to this question seems to indicate that God is not as simplistic as the voices of our age and He does not expect His people to be simplistic when dealing with the plights of others in this world. Every person will one day give an account of himself or herself. There will be no one to whom we can shift the blame for what we have or have not done with our lives. But, on the other hand, we will each be held accountable for how we have responded to the daily opportunities that God gives to each of us to make life easier or more difficult for another person.

B. How Can God Blame Me for the Sin of Another?

- Let us count the ways. If I turn my back on a need that it is within my power to address, that need may never be met. What is more, that person may resort to some desperate, illegitimate and sinful course of action for meeting that need. Am I really innocent?
- Paul instructed parents not to exasperate those they are responsible for nurturing. If I hold a child to a standard of righteousness that I cannot and will not meet, will I really be guiltless when that child rebels against or even blasphemes his God?
- If I judge the sinner as harshly as I judge the sin, and that sinner embraces his sin all the more because the God he sees through me is loveless and graceless, will I get a pass?
- I may embolden another person to sin against his or her own conscience. I may say, "God doesn't forbid you from doing this or that in moderation." Will I be guiltless when my brother or sister becomes totally enslaved or addicted to that "harmless pleasure"?
- What if I impose my personal scruples in areas where the Bible does not speak? Will I be free from blame for the joy and the freedom that I rip from the life of someone else?

C. Lead Others with Extreme Caution!

According to Jesus, if I lovelessly do damage to the capacity of someone else to bear fruit to the kingdom of God, I do not get that free pass I think I deserve. Jesus makes His point forcefully, describing the ancient equivalent to organized crime's "cement overcoat." This "millstone" about the neck was not the little millstone a woman used for hand-grinding. The word refers to the big commercial millstone that had to be turned by a donkey or an ox. Judgment Day will not be pleasant for any man who, in his blind self-righteousness, causes others to sin.

Jesus said this with a view to the pattern of spiritual leadership exhibited by the Pharisees and with an intent that His Apostles steer clear of their example. Anytime we find that we have made following Christ harder than He intended for it to be, we must repent deeply and quickly.

IV. The Aversiveness of the Unchecked Ego (43-48)

Aversiveness is the tendency to avoid some noxious or punishing stimulus.

... ⁴³If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck 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, ⁴⁸where

" ~their worm does not die,
and the fire is not quenched.'

A. Willful Pride Finds Self-Denial Noxious

Jesus is speaking in exaggerated terms. Self-mutilation would be a valuable thing if indeed it could get us to Heaven and spare us from Hell. But, lopping off a hand or poking out an eye would never reap the moral effect that God has in mind. We would still have that other hand and that other eye, and, even if those were gone, we would still have our fallen imaginations. Jesus simply means that no sacrifice is too great a sacrifice if it secures life and righteousness of God's kingdom.

Statistical studies abound that demonstrate that a profession of Christ in our day does not always translate into a conspicuously transformed life. Adultery abounds even among professed believers. Business practices often do not differ between believers and nonbelievers. Divorce rates are essentially indistinguishable. What's not to love about a Gospel that breathes hope into troubled lives, promises God's forgiveness and a home in heaven? Still, the true Gospel calls a man to be converted. Transformation is not optional. So, any man who simply loves his sin too much to resist it is heading for a fall, no matter the label by which he identifies himself.

B. Lazy Pride Finds Self Examination Punishing

Some professed believers rather like their sin. Others are simply too morally lazy or indifferent to do the work of identifying the things that must go. If a man settles into a pattern of sin, he will eventually become comfortable in it. Escaping the trap may demand that he confess his sins to others. It is not easy to become transparent or accountable to someone. Reflecting on why, when tempted, he simply flies through the warning signals that scream, STOP!" is never as much fun as frittering away countless hours in some frivolous amusement by which he distracts himself.

In the physical realm, amputation is never pretty or pleasant, but at times, it is necessary to save a life. Contemplating a radical shift in one's routine so as to avoid temptation does not seem one bit more desirable. Change is always hard. Still, Jesus tells us to seek the righteousness of the kingdom of God more than we seek anything else in this world. No price is too high to pay for living in righteousness.

C. Arrogant Pride Has an Aversion to Christ's Own Depiction of Hell

In many respects, the idea of Hell, even for many in churches that profess to be mainline, Bible-believing fellowships, has become somewhat of a relic of a bygone and less sophisticated era.

The story is told of a street evangelist who was desperately trying to get the attention of passersby. He was urging them to flee from the coming wrath. "I warn you," he roared, "there will be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth!"

One condescending woman in the crowd shouted snidely: "Sir, I have no teeth!"

"Lady," the evangelist retorted, "teeth will be provided!"

Today's culture has an aversion to any notion of Hell as a horrible place of punishment for those who reject Christ. "Hell is out of vogue. It's not cool. It's too negative. Sometimes, I want to scream, "Of course, it's negative! It's Hell for crying out loud!" John's declaration, "God is love," has become a mantra for those who mischaracterize God's love as His toothless indifference to His own declarations about sin. In their thinking, God's love eliminates any possibility of Hell. In like fashion, Jesus would never send anyone to Hell. What they ignore is that the most graphically awful things in the Bible about Hell are not things uttered by some cranky Old Testament prophet. They are things that Jesus said about what awaits those who spurn His salvation. Here, the rejection of Christ that merits Hell is not a verbal, "No, thank you." It is a false pretense of godliness that hampers others in their pursuit of God and that merits a place where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." Even if you have no idea what that means, it sounds unpleasant?

In the original, "hell" is *Gehenna*. This was a valley just beyond Jerusalem's south wall where, in darker days, the Jews sacrificed their children to the pagan god, Molech. When Jerusalem was restored to her senses, the valley was considered so irretrievably unclean that it became the city dump. Garbage burned there constantly. Dead animals were incinerated there. Victims of Roman crucifixion were unceremoniously discarded there. The fire never went out and the worms that fed on the decaying flesh abounded. In Hell, one's own worm that never stops never stops feeding will also be provided. How literally such terms describe Hell is disputable. In other contexts, Jesus uses different horrible images. His point to His disciples is unmistakable: "Whatever it takes, fellas, seek the kingdom of God."

V. The Antidote for the Unchecked Ego (49, 50)

A. God Will Salt Us verse 49

⁴⁹Everyone will be salted with fire.

Jesus' disciples would immediately recognize this to be some kind of a reference to sacrifice. All grain offerings prescribed in the Law of Moses were to be accompanied by salt. Most likely, salt here refers to trials and even persecution, which have the effect of purifying or testing the authenticity of faith. This would resonate to the recipients of this gospel, believers in Rome who were beginning to feel the heat of empirical wrath. And, if Peter was, in fact, Mark's source of information for this gospel, Jesus' assertion that "Everyone will be salted with fire" makes sense of words that Peter would later write to Jewish Christians scattered throughout the known world:

¹²Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. - 1 Peter 4:12

We will be salted with fire. I believe this means that God will lead His people through precisely what He knows they need to endure in order for their faith to be tested and refined. Still, we can also trust that He shelters us from ever enduring more than He knows that our faith can stand. A perfect and sovereign Priest can only use the perfect amount of salt. But, the He adds ...

B. We Must Keep Ourselves Salty verse 50

⁵⁰"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

Jesus adjusts His metaphor. Here, salt refers to the character of the kingdom in the sense that Jesus' disciples are "the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13). We are called to have an impact that purifies the world, that preserves the culture and that enhances the flavor of life. If we do not protect the distinctive attractiveness of Jesus within us, how will we live as the salt of the earth?

The salt in Jesus' part of the world was taken from marshes, not the sea. It was of a different chemical composition than our modern table salt, which never becomes unsalty. Such salt was used to treat the hard pathways that cut through the grain fields of Palestine, because insipid salt kept anything from growing on those paths. Insipid salt destroys fertility. It causes things *NOT* to grow. This is something that those who sever Christian belief from Christian behavior would do well to bear in mind. This is what Jesus meant when He said it was good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled under foot.

The eminent acting teacher was telling his students about the worst actress he had ever seen. She couldn't find work until she married a rich producer who included her in all of his shows. One of his plays was a stage adaptation of "*The Diary of Anne Frank*." Her portrayal of Anne was so wretched that when the Gestapo came to take her away, the few people left in the audience stood up as one and shouted, "She's in the attic!"

How convincing is your portrayal of Jesus on this world's stage?

- "Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness."
- "Pursue the likeness of Jesus."
- "Have salt in yourselves."

Essentially, these are the same admonition to be like Jesus, which is to display the character of a citizen of the kingdom of God. How? By living as a servant just as Jesus did not come to be served but to serve - by working and supporting others who labor in God's kingdom - by making the walk of others with God easier rather than harder - and, of course, by pursuing holiness at all costs.

Finally, Jesus brings it all back around to what caused Him to sit the Twelve down in the first place: "... be at peace with one another." This whole episode occurred because Jesus already knew what they were too embarrassed to admit; He knew they had been quarreling on the walk to Capernaum about which one of them would be the greatest in His kingdom. They were still pursuing their own prideful aspirations. Nothing sounds the death knell to kingdom work and unity of spirit more than unchecked human egos in unholy competition with one another.

The Apostle Paul would echo His Lord when he challenged all believers: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). That's some salty advice, for only the spirit of the Servant-King of God's kingdom is attractive enough to draw sinners to the Father. Only the character of the Servant-King Jesus reproduced in His people, can build His kingdom.