

Mark 9:38-50

“Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward. “And 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. If 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. And 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. 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 than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where “ ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ Everyone will be salted with fire. “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.”

Everyone dies, but not every man really lives. William Wallace said that in the movie *Braveheart*. That quote challenges me every time I see it down in Mr. Kruse’s classroom. It’s a challenge for each of us to find meaning while we’re here – to really live. Most human lives are spent chasing shortsighted goals and following disjointed little paths to find that the path wasn’t something that would fulfill them. Honestly, there are few things more tragic than a human life that wasn’t worth living. Everyone dies, but not every man really lives.

There’s where ambition can help us. Ambition can help us see a goal for our lives off in the distance; stick to the path to reach it; and finally enjoy the blessing of reaching that goal. The key though is for ambition’s end to be a good one. If you follow ambition to its end only to find that it had deceived you all along – that it had promised glory and happiness only to end with sadness and emptiness, then the long years you chased it are hollow and your end is destruction. But – on the other hand – if you follow ambition to its end and you find that its promise is true, then your years chasing it are worth every ounce of suffering, patience, and energy you spent getting there for the peace and happiness that you now enjoy. That’s what Jesus helps us sort through today as we take a second look at ambition. Jesus’ encouragement is this:

Let the End of Your Ambition Be Life!

- 1. Life for others**
- 2. Life for you**

I said it the positive way. Jesus stresses the negative side of that coin. "Don't take others off the path to life." **"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."** (v. 42) Remember these guys had just gotten done with an unholy argument that went like this, "I'm the greatest because Jesus took me up on the Mount of Transfiguration. He didn't take you." "No, actually I am because I became a disciple before you did." And that's kind of how it went. And it's these guys who were about to be the guys going out and about spreading Jesus' message. I can see it now, "Come listen to Peter preach. He's so much better than John." "Get behind James. He's a stronger leader than fill-in-the-blank." Meanwhile the believers following them would say, "These disciples of Jesus are nuts. I don't want to have anything to do with them." Jesus saw that future. And he stopped it in its tracks. "Don't let it happen guys. A future where you put a giant millstone around your neck that will drag you down into the depths of the sea (where no one will ever have to see your personal ambition again) is preferable to letting you confuse, hurt, or cause my little people to sin."

For many years I was a lifeguard. Every summer, I had to go back and take the lifeguard test. Part of that test was swimming to the bottom of the deep end; retrieving a 10 lb. rubber brick; and holding it above the water for a minute. It was actually pretty tiring. That's why I'm pretty confident about what would happen if you put a millstone (that only a donkey is strong enough to turn) around your neck while you're out in deep water. Do you see what Jesus is saying? He's saying, "I want you to sink far and fast if you've made it your ambition to serve yourself and in doing so you end up harming someone who believes in me." The flipside of that is also true. "I want you to do everything possible to aid, help, and strengthen people who believe in me."

Drowning by millstone. A watery tomb. Strong picture. If that's not a stop sign in life from Jesus, I don't know what is. Parenting is where this often comes into play for us. I heard an interesting report on the radio about nail biting. The lady giving the report was the one who struggled with the habit. She said, "There are five generations now of nail biters in my family." She went on to say, "I watched my mom put on her professional clothes, brush her hair beautifully, and then bite her nails before work. I thought it was such a grown-up thing to do." So she started to bite her nails and she's never been able to quit. 'Til now. She has a three-year-old daughter now. She wanted to break the chain. Too late. Her daughter already has the habit. God's lambs are little sponges whether they're your kids, your grandkids, or your niece or nephew. Ask yourself: What are they absorbing spiritually from me? Cruddy church attendance? A foul mouth? Disrespect for women? Sleeping with your boyfriend? Too much drinking? Death by millstone would be preferable. Make it your ambition that your little people absorb Jesus' teaching from you!

The only way that you'll be able to do that is if your life is on the straight and narrow. It can't be, "Do what I say. Not what I do." It must be, "Do as I say, and do as I do." Check out Jesus' stunning teaching, **"If 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. And 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. 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 than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" (v. 43-48)

Ambition's goal must be life. Did you hear Jesus say that? He said very clearly and emphatically, "It's better for you to enter life. It's better for you to enter the kingdom of God." Eternal life has to be the singular focus of ambition. It has to be. If there is anything else (and Jesus does mean anything else!) dump it yesterday! How serious is Jesus about that? Just listen to him.

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Bodily mutilation. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. Now you may say, "Jesus, that is so over-the-top, sensationalistic language. What's gotten into you?" And yes, it's true those are grotesque, violent images. There's no getting around it. And it's on purpose. Seriously, it's on purpose. Imagine Jesus had said it another way. Maybe something like this, "Stop sinning because sin is bad." You know what would happen? We'd forget Jesus had ever said anything about sin in about 20 minutes. Not with this language. This is imagery that causes an emotional reaction in us, "Boy, that is really nasty stuff. I need to do everything possible to stay away from sin." Let me be clear here. Jesus is not suggesting amputation or bodily mutilation. He is suggesting in the strongest possible language, "Make it your end, goal, and ambition to enter life. That means you must do whatever it takes to get sin out of your heart and life."

I got an e-mail earlier this week about a pastor who lost his ministry. Sad stuff. He's still a Christian (thank the Lord!), but a sin got into his life that he struggled with for years. The e-mail didn't say what the sin was. Frankly, it's not important. The lesson is there. If you find your hand stealing from someone, metaphorically cut it off. If you find your eye stuck staring at porn, then metaphorically pluck it out. If you find your feet carrying you away from God's house regularly, metaphorically cut one off so you continue to hear the Word. That's Jesus' point.

Why? Because if your ambition is some sin then know this: that ambition has a horrible end point. Its end and goal is the eternal trash heap. That's quite literally what Jesus said here. The word translated, "hell," here is the word, Gehenna. Everyone knew about Gehenna. It was at the bottom of Jerusalem's hill. You took your garbage there to burn. Fires burned there and, no doubt, it wreaked something awful if you caught a whiff of it. That Gehenna taught of a Gehenna much worse. A place where the fire never ever went out. Did you notice that Jesus made that point twice in these verses? The last verse of the section gives a very complete description of what we call hell. It's a place where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." Jesus is pointing out that hell has internal torture and external torture. In Gehenna, human bodies have worms inside of them that are indestructible and on

the outside are licked by flames that never die out. Sounds absolutely horrifying.

Nobody should misunderstand Jesus. Jesus was and is all about grace. Truly, he is. Because he is all about grace, doesn't it make sense that he more so than anyone else is going to do everything he possibly can to make sure that he doesn't lose anyone to hell? Doesn't that make sense? If that's true, then do you see how he's doing that here? He's talking in clear, unmistakable, scary terms about an eternity of torture so that we say this, "That is so unbelievably horrible to me that I will do everything to avoid that fate personally and to help others do the same."

I have a fear today. My fear is that a lot of what I'm about to say will be lost. The thought of hell is so overwhelming that it's easy for the brain and heart to get stuck right there. That's what I'm afraid of. So please listen carefully as I go on. I have no reason to believe that anyone here is on his or her way to hell. I have every reason to believe that you believe in Jesus and that you reject buddying up with sin. Jesus' point right here – and it is powerful! – is this: let's keep it that way. One of the church fathers when he was dealing personally with the thought of hell said this (I'm going to paraphrase.): We don't need to spend a lot of time thinking about what hell will or will not feel like. The point here is that we never personally find out. See? That's Jesus' point. The point is that we make our life's ambition simple and clear cut. We want to enter life. We want to be a part of God's eternal kingdom – and not get left out in the heat.

That's why I owe it to you to bring you back to last week. If we don't remember how Mark began Jesus' sermon, then this sermon won't have enough grace. So let me remind you of something that's very, very key for you to take home as you think about your life's ambition. Jesus' secured your eternal future. He could not stop talking about it. He wouldn't let it drop. He talked about it at Caesarea Philippi. He talked about it at the Mount of Transfiguration. He talked about it right here. This is what he said, "I'm going to be betrayed. I'm going to be killed. I'm going to rise on the third day." Jesus gave us life. Jesus made it his ambition to pay for our unholy, messed up ambitions. You're on the way to eternal life on a path laid down by Jesus leading to a future secured by Jesus. That's the honest to goodness truth. Keep it that way. Make it your unwavering ambition to keep it that way! Why? Because the end and goal of that ambition is life – the eternal kind. Amen.