

Mark - on Causing Others to Sin

by J. Glyn Owen

Jesus teaches that causing others to stumble into sin will bring sure divine retribution, and that we should be willing to cut off the occasion of sin to avoid harming others.

Duration: 1:38:19

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Mark 9:41-43, Mark 9:45, Mark 9:48, Mark 9:50

Topics: "Offences"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on a calendar he saw a few years ago that depicted three scenes with a common theme. The first scene shows a young boy coming out of a home at night, holding a torch in his hand. The speaker emphasizes the significance of understanding the message in the passage, rather than ignoring it. He also highlights the connection between the previous passage about a man casting out demons and the upcoming passage from verse 42. The main point is that even seemingly insignificant good deeds done in Christ's name will be rewarded.

Transcript

It's a joy to see you all again this morning. The Lord has given us a very wonderful winter thus far, and it's good to see such a turnout on a winter's morning early in January. May the Lord bless you all as we come together to listen to what his word has to say to us.

Now I come with unusual fear and trepidation this morning, because the passage before us is a very difficult and a very grim one, a very challenging one. We are going to look, as you will have recognized by this time, we are going to look at Mark chapter 9, verses 41 to 50. May I make one or two observations in coming to the heart of the passage that is going to occupy our attention.

First of all, a textual matter. In the best manuscripts now at our disposal, the words of verse 48 are not found in verses 44 and 46. These are manuscripts older than those that were available when the King James was printed, and in those manuscripts the statement is only found in this one verse, verse 48.

It's a very strong statement, of course, referring to the worm that does not die and the fire that is not quenched. It is found once, therefore, in this passage, but not three times. Then another thing I want to say, there are many difficulties of interpretation in this passage.

You might retort by saying there are difficulties of interpretation in every passage. Well, there may be, but certainly not comparable to what we have here, and there are parts of this passage that I cannot preach on because I don't quite know what they mean. And therefore, I am going to confine myself this morning to what is reasonably clear.

And if I'm leaving something out, I want you to understand that it is done deliberately. When we don't know or don't understand the meaning of a word or of a passage or of a statement, then the only sane and right thing to do is to say so and to leave it until God gives us further light concerning it. Of course, the difficulty doesn't really lie in an understanding of this passage.

There are difficulties of understanding, but as I have been meditating upon it during the course of the week and indeed before this week, the real difficulty that faces me here is not so much the difficulty of understanding what the passage says. I find the real difficulty at the point where the passage is all too clear. What frightens me, what stabs my complacency is not what I don't understand, but it's what I do understand.

It's what the passage says all too clearly and which I, and I'm sure you will acknowledge likewise, all too often tend to forget. The only other thing I want to say is that really there is a connection between what we find in verses 42 to the end of the chapter and what preceded in the passage referring to the man who was casting out demons and whom the disciples forbear. And so I want to take just one brief look this morning backwards at verse 41, and that is going to link us with the passage that we're going to be looking at particularly beginning with verse 42.

Our first point then is this backward link with the previous passage. Now I want to summarize the point to you in this way. Verse 41 seems to tell us that however apparently insignificant a good deed done in Christ's name may be, it will receive its reward.

Now you may think that's a very trivial point. I want to suggest to you it's a very important one. Listen to verse 41.

I tell you the truth, says Jesus, anyone who gives you a cup of cold water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward. Now you remember the context. The disciples came across this man who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus.

And they began to think among themselves, who on earth is this guy? Where has he come from? He's using the name of Jesus and he's casting out demons, but he's not one of us. And if he's not one of us, surely he can't be one of Jesus' disciples. That was their false logic.

Evidently, there were many in the countryside at that point in time who had responded in their hearts to the teaching of Jesus and were believing in him as Messiah, but they had not joined the twelve. They may in due time become integrated into the community of believers, but at that point they had not. And so the disciples said, look, stop man, you're doing the wrong thing.

You mustn't cast out these demons in the name of Jesus when you don't belong to us. Now, what our Lord goes on to say, having told them that they were wrong, having told them that they must desist from that kind of thing, what he goes on to say in verse 41 is this, 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. There's a principle here.

The least of my followers are related to me by covenant. And however insignificant and immature you may be as a follower of mine, if you really believe in me and you do something because you believe in me and for my sake, you may be sure of this, other people may not think very highly of you. You may not pass muster, but you will not lose your reward from me.

There is something very, very comforting here for the people of God. The main question is not what rank you occupy in the church. The main question is, what is your relationship to Jesus Christ? And if you are rightly related to Jesus Christ, then nothing you will do in his name and for his glory, nothing says Jesus, nothing will be unrewarded.

I think this is relevant to all that we've heard this morning. Greg and Anna pleading for hands and helpers to go out to seek the lost, the lost that are waiting to be guided to the savior. And I want to say to you from this text, there is nothing that a man or a woman of God will do in the name of a disciple and for the sake of Jesus and for the benefit of the least that he will call his own.

There is nothing that you will not be amply repaid for. Our Jesus is like that. He'll never be your debtor.

You see, we must acknowledge that the disciples were at a very low state spiritually at this point. In these chapters, you'll find that they really touch bottom. The graph describing the growth of the disciples doesn't just start here and go gradually upwards and upwards until it reaches the climax.

It doesn't. If you make a graph of their spiritual progress, you'll find that it comes up and up and then it goes down again. And you wonder what's happened.

And at this particular point in the gospels, if you read carefully, you will find that the downs are very shattering. The faults are glaring. Ever since our Lord Jesus had to turn to Simon after Caesarea Philippi and say, Get thee behind me, Satan, thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men.

They've done the most remarkable things. And here they were talking about their own high places in his kingdom. That's what they were talking about on the way to Capernaum.

That's what started this passage. To be at scotch cross purposes with their Lord ill befits men who want to occupy the chief positions in his cabinet. You see, what it amounts to is this.

They are treating people as if they didn't belong to the Savior when the Savior is pledged to honor the least deeds that those people will do. So there are cross purposes. Now that brings me to the main point this morning.

However, apparently insignificant a disciple of Christ may be to cause him or her to stumble into sin will bring sure divine retribution. Now you notice these are two sides really of the same truth. The one to which we've very hastily referred is this.

Jesus is sure to reward the least thing that anybody does in his name and with the intention of pleasing him. The other side of the coin is this. The same Lord Jesus is sure to bring retribution to bear upon anyone who causes the least of his little ones to stumble.

Little things and little people may not count with us. We've really been caught in the vortex of carnality. And unless a thing is big, we think nothing of it.

Bigness, not character and quality, attracts us. As far as our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned, he's talking about the littlest. He's talking about the least.

He's talking about the weakest and the most insignificant deed that the weakest can do. And he says, look, I don't miss that. And I won't.

Now then we're turning the page and we're coming to this very, very challenging passage. If you want to walk out, you do so. Our Lord is envisioning here that some of us by our own sin do not only bring damage to ourselves, but we damage the least of his people and the best of his people, the most mature of his people, of course.

But the case that he makes out is not the case of our bringing damage to the mature, but of our, of our causing the little ones to stumble. So the action envisaged by our Lord, the offending action is this. If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin or to stumble, you know, the word, the word to sin or to stumble, it can be translated either.

It's a Greek word, from which we derive our English word scandal, but it originally meant a bait and then setting the bait. I don't know whether I've ever said this, but I remember as a young fellow, going back to stay with some of my people on the farm that I had left. When I took my first job, went back for the weekend and going out for a walk and jumping over the hedge and finding right in front of me, a most heart-rending picture of a, of a rabbit caught in a snare.

Now I've seen this maybe when I was a boy, I don't know many times, but here was this little rabbit caught in a snare and the little thing couldn't, couldn't get out. And there she was with a big marble black eyes looking up at me as it were crying for pity. Her two feet were able to move, her hind feet were able to move a little and scratch a little, but she could hardly move her head, just look up at me and wonder what I was going to do.

Do you know, I didn't know quite what was the best thing to do. I thought if I let her go, the thing would be named for life. If I hit her on the head and kill her, well, what? She had been caught in a snare.

But since that day, I have learned that there is a far more tragic portrait than that. I remember looking around at that picture and seeing that rabbit, and I don't know whether I, my imagination runs amok with me, but I, in meditating upon it afterwards, I thought that that little one would want to say to me, what on earth has happened here? Because I recognize that she had a little pathway that way. She had been eating the grass and she'd made a little path for herself.

She must have walked there many times and got away with it and enjoyed it. But this night, she didn't. She got caught.

And the tragedy that I have seen, which is greater than that, is the tragedy of young men and older men and women who have been caught in the snare of Satan, but sometimes have been led along the path the first time or the second time or the third time by a man or a woman of God. They were introduced to that pathway by someone who bears the name of Jesus. You know, generally speaking, we Christians have an abysmally limited and oftentimes superficial view of the consequences of sin, whether upon ourselves or upon others.

Oh, we rejoice so greatly in the fact that there is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains and blessed truth it is. But we rejoice so

much in that that we don't really take time to see the seriousness of our sin and especially of our causing one of Christ's little ones to stumble. So there are very few Christians today who are afraid of sin.

As there are very few Christians who are afraid of God. So we play with sin today. The question is, how near can I get? How involved can I get without getting into danger? It's the entire antithesis to the attitude of the Puritan movement and of the leaders of the Reformation.

Let's keep away from the thing that it doesn't touch us, they said. We say, how near can we sophisticated 20th century come before it impinges upon our minds and imaginations and spoils us. Let's try and get as near as we can.

We are clever. You see, are we look around. Come into my study for seven days and I'll tell you whether we can cope or not.

So scant concern for those for whom Christ died is not consistent with his spirit, his word or his example. And this is what we forget when we downplay, you see, the importance of humility and allow seeds of bigotry to blossom in our hearts, for example, and we ride rough shot. We go on and we say, well, I want it.

I can have it. I have a liberty in Christ. I can do just as I please.

Now that's what Jesus is talking about. If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, to fall into sin. Now he goes further.

He envisages the agents employed to do this. Oh my, our Lord knew us. Did he not? And he knew his own age.

I'm sure they were the same as we are, but he wants to get this across. You see, he's not just trying to get a fine sermon. He wants to get the points across.

How do you cause other people to stumble? How do you cause a young fellow or a young girl to stumble? Well, now Jesus give us, gives us three examples in this or illustrations and they're quite enough. He says, you can do it with your hand, but you can do it with your foot. You can do it with your eye.

If your hand causes you to sin and the sin envisaged here is either is doing it yourself with a view to causing somebody else to stumble. Now, I hadn't thought of saying this until I arrived on the premises this morning, but that came back to my mind, something that humbled me very much at the time and frightened me. I had become a Christian and it was a part of my work that I had to get involved in, in all kinds of things, some of which I didn't like, wouldn't have chosen before I was a Christian.

I never had been fond of ballroom dancing, for example, never had been fond of it, but I had to get involved from time to time in the course of my work. And I was beginning to enjoy it. I remember being in the cloak room this night.

I was a young Christian, remember, and I wasn't sure about some things. And I heard a group of fellows talking how to use their hands in order to be assured that a girl's resistance would collapse. The use of the hand, a touch of the hand can set your passion ablaze that you cannot react wisely.

And men and women and fellows and girls, I think it is necessary that you and I take that kind of thing into consideration. A touch of the hand can set a man or a woman's passion ablaze if that is psychologically

performed. Your hand.

And I say to you, Jesus is saying here, you can cause someone to move on the road to hell by the touch of your hand. Watch your hand. Then he goes on, if your foot causes you to sin.

It's a few years ago when I saw a calendar, it was the new turn of the year, and I believe it was either four pages or three large pages with three months or four months on each. I don't quite remember, but I remember three scenes depicted and they were all part of a theme. On the front one, the theme depicted a young boy coming out from a home at night.

We saw one candle light in a window. He came out and he had a torch in his hand and he was well dressed up because it was a very cold, bitter night. The snow was on the ground.

It was frosty. The reason we know that is that you could see his foot marks in the snow and more. I'll tell you in a moment, but evidently, according to his foot marks, he had been running around the house and the caption was looking for dad.

And he hadn't found his dad. He had a torch in his hand and here he was looking and shouting. It would seem as if he was shouting.

And then in the second picture painting, we saw that he had found his father's foot marks. And with his torch, he seems to be saying to himself, these are dad's foot marks. Now this is my imagination reading into it, but he seemed to have found them and you could see him about to place his own feet in his father's foot marks.

And then we were left. The third that I remember was this. He has ultimately arrived at a den of ice.

Nevermind. Be careful where you go. Our feet may be the occasion for others to stumble or follow us.

Mothers worry about their children and it's too late. They've made the path. And short of the miraculous intervention of God, the thing that's going to happen is that the youngsters are going to walk in dad and mom's footsteps.

Now brothers and sisters, life is a serious business. And that's why we should intercede far more than we do. If your eye causes you to sin, a hand, the foot, the eye.

Sin entered Eden's paradise via the eye. Sin morally crippled Israel's greatest King came in via the eye. You know, he watched a woman bathing.

A God-fearing couple in an American city had invited a young Christian to stay with them for a weekend. And they were traveling through Philadelphia. The guest was sitting in the back of the car.

And as they were going down a main street, the girl said, the wife said, Frank, look left. And the chap sitting in the back thought, what on earth is going on here? So he looked left too. And when they'd gone down the road half a mile, she said, James, she said, you may have thought that terribly strange that I should tell Frank to look left.

I'll explain to you. Five years ago, we entered into a covenant one with the other, that if one of us saw something offensive and degrading on the roadside, we would immediately without comment, tell the other one, look the other way. We want to be pure and we want to help to keep one another pure.

What about your eyes? Do you know that an eye can seduce? Now our Lord in the light of all this encourages an attitude which cuts right across the grain of our ease and of our culture. In days when the cult of softness and moral flabbiness have overtaken us, we may be well shocked and you may not want to hear anything from Knox pulpit after I've asked you seriously to look at this. Well, all right.

Listen to what Jesus, the son of God says. Oh, that we took him seriously. Listen.

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Now, did you hear that before? You Bible readers, you people who say you've read the Bible once a year, you who so often are talking about your knowledge of doctrine and your knowledge of the Bible, and you understand if anybody's one piccadillo out of place, I want to ask you a question. Did you ever read this before? Do you obey it? Do you walk by this principle? If your right hand in one of the gospels causes you to sin, cut it off.

Jesus says so. Verse 45, if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. Verse 47, if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.

The Muslim mode of punishing theft, of course, is still to cut off the hand of the thief. If you were in a Muslim country this morning and you were robbing your employer or anybody else, that's the way you'd be dealt with. Rather than involve ourselves in sin that can also entrap one of the least of God's children, we should enter into a total warfare against the whole movement of iniquity.

And we should refuse to allow the sin of our hearts to have expression via the hand or the foot or the eye or the lip or any way, any other way. That's what Jesus is saying. If we have not yet learned to make war on a deeper level, then we should be prepared to dismember any limb in order to rob sin of its instrument to harm God's child, because the Lord will judge those who harm his children.

Oh, let me repeat this. What Jesus is saying is that if we would avoid sin, we must cut off the occasion of it, if that's necessary. If we haven't learned to deal with it at the deeper level we have at the end of the chapter, when he says, have salt within yourselves, be pure within yourselves, in your hearts.

If we haven't come to that level, then we've got to deal so drastically with the occasion of sin or the means of sin or enticing other people. But Jesus says we'd be wise to be dismembered, and we'd enter heaven ourselves maimed. But we can't go there otherwise.

If what the eyes see and the hands handle suck one into the vortex of sin, it is no more to be indulged at any expense. We should pluck things out and cast them from us as if they were venomous, poisonous things and be rid of them. Now, our Lord does not end there.

The appraisal that he gives, which is a background showing us how he judges things, how he assesses things, the appraisal accompanying. We will not be easily persuaded, you see, into such drastic action. I'm quite sure that many of us here, if not most of us this morning, react almost violently against this.

We don't like this. And even if we like to hear it, we certainly don't like to practice it. It's contrary to the grain.

Our natures are fallen. We live in a fallen world. There is a prince of the power of the world that we have to counter with.

We don't like this. We want to let go. We want to do what we please.

We want to have our desires satisfied and hope for the best that we don't hurt anybody in the bargain. But I want my passions, I want my passions relieved. That's the language of the human heart.

We love ourselves too dearly to pay the price of sanctification for ourselves and salvation for other men and women. It's no wonder, therefore, that the Savior gave his own appraisal and evaluation of things in order to goad us to wise and determined action. Listen to this.

Verse 42. 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, meaning that he never gets out of there. Now, lest you think that I'm using my imagination, let me explain that.

There are different words used in the New Testament for millstones. Some of them were stones that you could carry with your hand. Others were not.

This was not. Literally, in the Greek, it's the stone of a mule or the stone of an ass, which means it's a stone that is so big that no human can normally move it. You need an ass to shift it.

And what Jesus said is this. If anyone causes one of these least ones who believe in me to sin, it were better for him to be thrown into the sea with such a large millstone tied around his neck that he can't move it. In other words, that he dies.

It would be better for him. The late Dr. A. B. Bruce, you don't need me to tell you where he came from, do you? In his epochal work on the training of the Twelve, succinctly comments on that passage, it were better for him. It suits him.

It is what he deserves. And it is implied, though not expressed, that it is what he gets when divine vengeance at length overtakes him. The millstone is no idle figure of speech, but an appropriate emblem of the ultimate doom of the proud.

He who will mount to the highest place, regardless of the injuries he may inflict on little ones, will be cast down, not to the earth merely, but to the very lowest depths of the ocean, to the very abyss of hell, with a heavy weight of curses suspended on his neck to sink him down and keep him down so that he shall rise no more. Solemn words, you say. Solemn facts, these.

And Jesus proceeds, and he hasn't said it all, and I have to hurry. The terms used by our Lord are as grim as grim can be, and all the more so in an age that has lost the vision of a God who is moral and just. Let me just read to you these three verses.

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed with two hands than to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. I didn't say those.

Don't you attribute those words to me? They're not part of the Knox tradition or any other Presbyterian or Baptist or Pentecostal or any other tradition. These are in the scriptures. Or verse 45, 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. You can have your feet intact. You can go do what you like.

But remember, says Jesus, you can't have it both ways. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. If your eye causes you to sin, verses 47 and 48, pluck it out.

It is better for you. You see, here is the assessment. It is better for you.

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. The word used for hell is Gehenna, and it is the Greece-sized form of the Hebrew Hinnom, referring originally to the valley of Hinnom, to the southeast of Jerusalem. There you may remember that one of Israel's ungodly kings, Ahaz, caused children to be sacrificed to Moloch, sacrificed through the fire to Moloch.

An equally ungodly king, Manasseh, followed suit. But when one of the better kings of Israel came onto the throne, Josiah, and you remember there was a reformation, things changed a little. And then in due course, when this was forbidden, of course, the valley of Hinnom became a place of refuge.

And all the people of Jerusalem used to take their offal, take their offscourings, and take their garbage down there and set it on fire. And day and night, like a massive incinerator, the valley of Hinnom would be burning and smelling. I do not know what the significance of it is.

But, oh, my good friend, surely this means something terrible. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not use this metaphorical language to exaggerate, but to explain. And if he's explaining anything here, he is saying to us, it's a terrible thing to go to hell.

I ask you then, in the name of my Lord, be careful how you treat the least of your Lord's disciples. The least. No question about the greatest.

You and I are made of that kind. We like to hobnob with the greatest. If we can shake hands with them and be known to talk to them and be on level terms with them, all that's all right.

But the least, the least. You see, they had asked the question, who, which of us is the greatest? Well, says the Lord Jesus, he that wants to be the greatest, he's got to become the least and the last. Now, we've dealt with that.

He's got to come down and serve the least as a servant. And he's got to be willing to be the last in the queue. But now he assures them, you see, that the man who becomes the least and serves as the last will not go unrewarded.

Jesus the Christ, our Lord, will reward the least of our deeds as the least of his people and who are prepared to be known as such. Our humility alone can take us to the throne. The way up is down.

The way to the throne is via the cross. On the other hand, if we deal with one of the least of God's people, in a manner that we bring dishonor to them intellectually by teaching them the wrong things, morally by setting the wrong standard, influencing them in the wrong way, the Lord will surely judge us as he'll judge anybody. And the impact of this passage is this, that there is no place in the kingdom of God and in life and in heaven for anybody who is of the spirit that will do that.

Now, this is part of the challenge of the passage. And it raises problems, and I don't have all the answers to them. But I would be wrong if I didn't raise that particular problem here this morning.

A man who is a member of the kingdom of God, who has divine life in him, ought to be a person who cares for God's children as he cares for himself. For the two great commandments are, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy mind and all thy soul and all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself.

Love one another, love one another.

This is the teaching of the New Testament. Now I've taken the time, I just want to say a sentence about what I deem to be the climax. I think that the critic here this morning, the legitimate critic of every sermon or dissertation, will say, now all that is really a little bit negative in a sense.

And he would say much else. But I want you to notice where Jesus ends. He ends here.

The first part, I'm not sure what it means. The last part, I'm quite sure. Salt is good, verse 50.

But if it loses its saltiness, how then shall, how can you make it salty again? Or how can it be salted? Now, it's this latter part I want you to notice. Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with others. What is Jesus saying? This.

Really, he says to the disciples, the thing to do and the real ultimate answer is not lopping off your hands or your ears or your feet or anything like that. The real answer is to have purity in your hearts, to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, to know holiness of life, to be weaned from sin and Satan, and to dedicate yourselves to the Lord, to be the Lord utterly and wholly and completely, so that his spirit lives in you and empowers you and ennobles you. And your heart is like the garden of the Spirit, bringing forth the fruit of heaven right there.

And what did he say? And of course, he's right. And this is the beautiful capstone to the whole passage. Have salt in yourself.

Why does he use the word salt? Well, you see, because purity has this saline property. Purity, real holiness, is separation. But more than that, it has a pungency to purify.

It keeps the impurities at bay. And then, because you have salt, because you have purity, you can be at peace. In other words, you can then walk the kind of life in which there is nothing wrong, nothing between you and God, nothing between you and man.

You can bring praise to God. You can bring blessing to your fellows. You can help the little ones and the others of my fold.

You can be a blessing to them. You can bring all to them that is involved in the Hebrew shalom or the Greek Irene. Now, brothers and sisters in Christ, I thank you for listening to me.

I've perspired an awful lot over this. And you know the reason why. I know the reason why.

We're not living like this. And it may be that there are some here this morning, and the thing that haunts you is the fact that you have not only sinned yourself, but you've led others that way. And as you look at your hands, they're red with blood.

You're guilty of soiling the lives of other people. And as you look at the way you've lived, and perhaps do live now under cover of darkness, though you're in church on a Sunday morning, you know that you not only sin yourself, but you're leading others that way. And your children have got an eye on you.

And if not your own, somebody else's. And if Jesus is the Son of God, and this word is reliable, then you and I have got to do something about it. And we've got to do it.

And therefore, in his name, I ask you in these closing moments, this morning, I ask you to do what the Spirit of God in your heart bids you do. You know what that is. You only know what that is.

And he himself. Now let's spend a moment or two quietly, please. I'm not going to pray for a moment, but I'm going to ask you that you please hear the word of the Lord, and heed the word of the Savior, and relate it to your lives as the Spirit of God is quickening your conscience so to do, in order that you may know life yourself, and know his blessing, and his kingship, and his sweet enabling grace.

Will you do that now and confess your sins? Lord, our God, we pray that you will graciously hear the cry of every soul before you this morning in Knox. Enable us out of an honesty of heart to acknowledge what is true. Not to imagine what is false, but to acknowledge what is true.

And in such acknowledgment, to seek your mercy, crave your forgiveness, and walk in the light of your word, that we may be the salt of the earth, and the lover of our brethren, and our sisters in Christ. Now unto him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before his throne with exceeding glory. To the only wise God and our Savior Jesus Christ be honor, glory, and dominion, world without end.

Amen. Now I come with unusual fear and trepidation this morning, because the passage before us is a very difficult and a very grim one, a very challenging one. We are going to look, as you will have recognized by this time, we are going to look at Mark chapter 9 verses 41 to 50.

May I make one or two observations in coming to the heart of the passage that is going to occupy our attention. First of all, a textual matter, in the best manuscripts now at our disposal, the words of verse 48 are not found in verses 44 and 46. These are manuscripts older than those that were available when the King James was printed, and in those manuscripts the statement is only found in this one verse, verse 48.

It's a very strong statement, of course, referring to the worm that does not die, and the fire that is not quenched. It is found once, therefore, in this passage, but not three times. Then, another thing I want to say, there are many difficulties of interpretation in this passage.

You might retort by saying, there are difficulties of interpretation in every passage. Well, there may be, but certainly not comparable to what we have here, and there are parts of this passage that I cannot preach on, because I don't quite know what they mean. And, therefore, I'm going to confine myself this morning to what is reasonably clear.

And, if I'm leaving something out, I want you to understand that it is done deliberately. When we don't know or don't understand the meaning of a word, or of a passage, or of a statement, then the only sane and right thing to do is to say so, and to leave it until God gives us further light concerning it. Of course, the difficulty doesn't really lie in an understanding of this passage.

There are difficulties of understanding. But, as I have been meditating upon it during the course of the week, and indeed before this week, the real difficulty that faces me here is not so much the difficulty of understanding what the passage says. I find the real difficulty at the point where the passage is all too clear.

What frightens me, what stabs my complacency, is not what I don't understand, but it's what I do understand. It's what the passage says all too clearly, and which I, and I'm sure you will acknowledge likewise, all too often tend to forget. The only other thing I want to say is that really there is a connection

between what we find in verses 42 to the end of the chapter, and what preceded in the passage referring to the man who was casting out demons, and whom the disciples forbear.

And so, I want to take just one brief look this morning backwards at verse 41, and that is going to link us with the passage that we're going to be looking at, particularly beginning with verse 42. Our first point then is this backward link with the previous passage. Now, I want to summarize the point to you in this way.

Verse 41 seems to tell us that however apparently insignificant a good deed done in Christ's name may be, it will receive its reward. Now, you may think that's a very trivial point. I want to suggest to you it's a very important one.

Listen to verse 41. I tell you the truth, says Jesus, anyone who gives you a cup of cold water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward. Now, you remember the context.

The disciples came across this man who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus, and they began to think among themselves, who on earth is this guy? Where has he come from? He's using the name of Jesus, and he's casting out demons, but he's not one of us, and if he's not one of us, surely he can't be one of Jesus' disciples. That was their false logic. Evidently, there were many in the countryside at that point in time who had responded in their hearts to the teaching of Jesus and were believing in him as Messiah, but they had not joined the twelve.

They may in due time become integrated into the community of believers, but at that point they had not. And so the disciples said, look, stop man, you're doing the wrong thing. You mustn't cast out these demons in the name of Jesus when you don't belong to us.

Now, what our Lord goes on to say, having told them that they were wrong, having told them that they must desist from that kind of thing, what he goes on to say in verse 41 is this, 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. There's a principle here. The least of my followers are related to me by covenant, and however insignificant and immature you may be as a follower of mine, if you really believe in me and you do something because you believe in me and for my sake, you may be sure of this.

Other people may not think very highly of you. You may not pass muster, but you will not lose your reward from me. There is something very, very comforting here for the people of God.

The main question is not what rank you occupy in the church. The main question is what is your relationship to Jesus Christ? And if you are rightly related to Jesus Christ, then nothing you will do in his name and for his glory, nothing, says Jesus, nothing will be unrewarded. I think this is relevant to all that we've heard this morning.

Greg and Anna pleading for hands and helpers to go out to seek the lost, the lost that waiting to be guided to the Savior. And I want to say to you from this text, there is nothing that a man or a woman of God will do in the name of a disciple and for the sake of Jesus and for the benefit of the least that he will call his own. There is nothing that you will not be amply repaid for.

Our Jesus is like that. He'll never be your debtor. You see, we must acknowledge that the disciples were at a very low state spiritually at this point.

In these chapters, you'll find that they really touch bottom. The graph describing the growth of the disciples doesn't just, doesn't just start here and go gradually upwards and upwards until it reaches the climax, doesn't. If you make a graph of their spiritual progress, you'll find that it comes up and up and then it goes down again.

And you wonder what's happened. And at this particular point in the Gospels, if you read carefully, you will find that the downs are very shattering. The faults are glaring.

Ever since our Lord Jesus had to turn to Simon after Caesarea Philippi and say, get thee behind me Satan, thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men, they've done the most remarkable things. And here they were talking about their own high places in His kingdom. That's what they were talking about on the way to Capernaum.

That's what started this passage. To be at scotch cross purposes with their Lord ill befits men who want to occupy the chief positions in His cabinet. You see, what it amounts to is this.

They are treating people as if they didn't belong to the Savior when the Savior is pledged to honor the least deeds that those people will do. So they're at cross purposes. Now that brings me to the main point this morning.

However apparently insignificant a disciple of Christ may be, to cause him or her to stumble into sin will bring sure divine retribution. Now you notice these are two sides really of the same truth. The one to which we've very hastily referred is this.

Jesus is sure to reward the least thing that anybody does in His name and with the intention of pleasing Him. The other side of the coin is this. The same Lord Jesus is sure to bring retribution to bear upon anyone who causes the least of His little ones to stumble.

Little things and little people may not count with us. We've really been caught in the vortex of carnality. And unless a thing is big, we think nothing of it.

Bigness, not character and quality, attracts us. As far as our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned, He's talking about the littlest. He's talking about the least.

He's talking about the weakest and the most insignificant deed that the weakest can do. And He says, look, I don't miss that, and I won't. Now then, we're turning the page and we're coming to this very, very challenging passage.

If you want to walk out, you do so. Our Lord is envisioning here that some of us by our own sin do not only bring damage to ourselves, but we damage the least of His people and the best of His people, the most mature of His people. But the case that He makes out is not the case of our bringing damage to the mature, but of our causing the little ones to stumble.

So the action envisaged by our Lord, the offending action, is this. If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin or to stumble--you know, the word to sin or to stumble, it can be translated either. It's the Greek word skandalizo, from which we derive our English word scandal.

But it originally meant a bait, and then setting the bait. I don't know whether I've ever said this, but I remember as a young fellow going back to stay with some of my people on the farm that I had left when I

took my first job, going back for the weekend and going out for a walk, and jumping over the hedge and finding right in front of me a most heart-rending picture of a rabbit caught in a snare. Now I've seen this maybe when I was a boy, I don't know many times, but here was this little rabbit caught in a snare, and the little thing couldn't get out.

And there she was with her big marble black eyes looking up at me, as it were, crying for pity. Her two feet were able to--her hind feet were able to move a little and scrunch a little, but she could hardly move her head, just look up at me and wonder what I was going to do. You know, I didn't know quite what was the best thing to do.

I thought if I let her go, the thing will be maimed for life. If I hit her on the head and kill her, well, what? She had been caught in a snare. But since that day, I have learned that there is a far more tragic portrait than that.

I remember looking around at that picture and seeing that rabbit, and I don't know whether my imagination runs amok with me, but in meditating upon it afterwards, I thought that that little one would want to say to me, what on earth has happened here? Because I recognized that she had a little pathway that way. She had been eating the grass and she'd made a little path for herself. She must have walked there many times and got away with it and enjoyed it.

But this night, she didn't. She got caught. And the tragedy that I have seen which is greater than that is the tragedy of young men and older men and women who have been caught in the snare of Satan, but sometimes have been led along the path the first time or the second time or the third time by a man or a woman of God.

They were introduced to that pathway by someone who bears the name of Jesus. You know, generally speaking, we Christians have an abysmally limited and oftentimes superficial view of the consequences of sin, whether upon ourselves or upon others. Oh, we rejoice so greatly in the fact that there is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains, and blessed truth it is, but we rejoice so much in that that we don't really take time to see the seriousness of our sin and especially of our causing one of Christ's little ones to stumble.

So there are very few Christians today who are afraid of sin, as there are very few Christians who are afraid of God. So we play with sin today. The question is, how near can I get, how involved can I get without getting into danger? It's the entire antithesis to the attitude of the Puritan movement and of the leaders of the Reformation.

Let's keep away from the thing that it doesn't touch us, they said. We say, how near can we sophisticate a twentieth century come before it impinges upon our minds and imaginations and spoils us? Let's try and get as near as we can. We are clever, you see.

Are we? Look around. Come into my study for seven days and I'll tell you whether we can cope or not. Such scant concern for those for whom Christ died is not consistent with his spirit, his word, or his example.

And this is what we forget when we downplay, you see, the importance of humility. And allow seeds of bigotry to blossom in our hearts, for example, and we ride roughshod. We go on and we say, well, I want it, I can have it.

I have a liberty in Christ, I can do just as I please. Ban. Now that's what Jesus is talking about.

If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, to fall into sin, now he goes further. He envisages the agents employed to do this. Oh my, our Lord knew us, did he not? And he knew his own age.

I'm sure they were the same as we are. But he wants to get this across, you see. He's not just trying to get a fine sermon.

He wants to get the points across. How do you cause other people to stumble? How do you cause a young fellow or a young girl to stumble? Well, now Jesus gives us three examples or illustrations, and they're quite enough. He says you can do it with your hand, or you can do it with your foot, or you can do it with your eye.

If your hand causes you to sin, and the sin envisaged here is doing it yourself with a view to causing somebody else to stumble. Now I hadn't thought of saying this until I arrived on the premises this morning. But there came back to my mind something that humbled me very much at the time and frightened me.

I had become a Christian, and it was a part of my work that I had to get involved in, in all kinds of things, some of which I didn't like, wouldn't have chosen before I was a Christian. I never had been fond of ballroom dancing, for example, never had been fond of it. But I had to get involved from time to time in the course of my work, and I was beginning to enjoy it.

I remember being in the cloakroom this night. I was a young Christian, remember, and I wasn't sure about some things, and I heard a group of fellows talking how to use their hands in order to be assured that a girl's resistance would collapse. The use of the hand, a touch of the hand, can set your passion ablaze that you cannot react wisely.

And men and women and fellows and girls, I think it is necessary that you and I take that kind of thing into consideration. A touch of the hand can set a man or a woman's passion ablaze if that is psychologically performed. Your hand.

And I say to you, Jesus is saying here, you can cause someone to move on the road to hell by the touch of your hand. Watch your hand. Then he goes on, if your foot causes you to sin.

It's a few years ago when I saw a calendar. It was the new turn of the year, and I believe it was either four pages or three large pages with three months or four months on each. I don't quite remember, but I remember three scenes depicted, and they were all part of a theme.

On the front one, the theme was, it depicted a young boy coming out from a home at night. We saw one candle light in a window. He came out, and he had a torch in his hand, and he was well dressed up because it was a very cold, bitter night.

The snow was on the ground. It was frosty, and the reason we know that is that you could see his footmarks in the snow, and more, I'll tell you in a moment. But evidently, according to his footmarks, he had been running around the house, and the caption was, looking for dad, and he hadn't found his dad.

He had a torch in his hand, and here he was looking and shouting. It would seem as if he was shouting, and then in the second picture, painting, we saw that he had found his father's footmarks, and with his

torch, he seems to be saying to himself, these are dad's footmarks. Now, this is my imagination reading into it, but he seemed to have found them, and you could see him about to place his own feet in his father's footmarks, and then we were left.

The third that I remember was this. He has ultimately arrived at a den of ice, never mind what it was. It's immaterial, but the whole point of the Christian calendar and caption and message was this, that the boy was led to a den of ice by following in daddy's footmarks.

That's what Jesus has got in mind. You can cause the little ones to stumble by your feet. Be careful where you go.

Our feet may be the occasion for others to stumble or follow us. There are many fathers and mothers who worry about their children, and it's too late. They've made the path.

And short of the miraculous intervention of God, the thing that's going to happen is that the youngsters are going to walk in dad and mom's footsteps. Now, brothers and sisters, life is a serious business, and that's why we should intercede far more than we do. If your eye causes you to sin, the hand, the foot, the eye.

Sin entered Eden's paradise via the eye. Sin morally crippled Israel's greatest king came in via the eye. You know, he watched a woman bathing.

A God-fearing couple in an American city had invited a young Christian to stay with them for a weekend. They were traveling through Philadelphia. The guest was sitting in the back of the car, and as they were going down a main street, a girl said, the wife said, Frank, look left.

And the chap sitting in the back thought, what on earth is going on here? So he looked left, too. And when they'd gone down the road half a mile, she said, James, she said, you may have thought that terribly strange that I should tell Frank to look left. I'll explain to you.

Five years ago, we entered into a covenant, one with the other, that if one of us saw something offensive and degrading on the roadside, we would immediately, without comment, tell the other one, look the other way. We want to be pure, and we want to help to keep one another pure. What about your eye? Do you know that an eye can seduce? Now, our Lord, in the light of all this, encourages an attitude which cuts right across the grain of our ease and of our culture.

In days when the cult of softness and moral flabbiness have overtaken us, we may be well shocked, and you may not want to hear anything from Knox Pulpit after I've asked you seriously to look at this. Well, all right. Listen to what Jesus, the Son of God, says.

Oh, that we took him seriously. Listen. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.

Now, did you hear that before? You Bible readers, you people who say you've read the Bible once a year, you who so often are talking about your knowledge of doctrine and your knowledge of the Bible, and you understand if anybody's one piccadillo out of place, I want to ask you a question. Did you ever read this before? You obey it? Do you walk by this principle? If your right hand in one of the Gospels causes you to sin, cut it off. Jesus says so.

Verse 45, if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. Verse 47, if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. The Muslim mode of punishing theft, of course, is still to cut off the hand of the thief.

If you were in a Muslim country this morning and you were robbing your employer or anybody else, that's the way you'd be dealt with. Rather than involve ourselves in sin that can also entrap one of the least of God's children, we should enter into a total warfare against the whole movement of iniquity. And we should refuse to allow the sin of our hearts to have expression via the hand, or the foot, or the eye, or the lip, or any way, any other way.

That's what Jesus is saying. If we have not yet learned to make war on a deeper level, then we should be prepared to dismember any limb in order to rob sin of its instrument to harm God's child, because the Lord will judge those who harm his children. Oh, let me repeat this.

What Jesus is saying is that if we would avoid sin, we must cut off the occasion of it, if that's necessary. If we haven't learned to deal with it at the deeper level we have at the end of the chapter, when he says, have salt within yourselves, be pure within yourselves, in your hearts. If we haven't come to that level, then we've got to deal so drastically with the occasion of sin, or the means of sin, or enticing other people.

Jesus says we'd be wise to be dismembered, and we'd enter heaven ourselves maimed. But we can't go there otherwise. If what the eyes see and the hands handle suck one into the vortex of sin, it is no more to be indulged at any expense.

We should pluck things out and cast them off from us as if they were venomous, poisonous things, and be rid of them. Now, our Lord does not end there. The appraisal that he gives, which is a background showing us how he judges things, how he assesses things, the appraisal accompanying, we will not be easily persuaded, you see, into such drastic action.

I'm quite sure that many of us here, if not most of us this morning, react almost violently against this. We don't like this. And even if we like to hear it, we certainly don't like to practice it.

It's contrary to the grain. Our natures are fallen. We live in a fallen world.

There is a prince of the power of the world that we have to counter with. We don't like this. We want to let go.

We want to do what we please. We want to have our desires satisfied and hope for the best that we don't hurt anybody in the bargain. But I want my passions.

I want my passions relieved. That's the language of the human heart. We love ourselves too dearly to pay the price of sanctification for ourselves and salvation for other men and women.

It's no wonder, therefore, that the Savior gave his own appraisal and evaluation of things in order to goad us to wise and determined action. Listen to this. Verse 42, 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, meaning that he never gets out of there.

Now, lest you think that I'm using my imagination, let me explain that. There are different words used in the New Testament for millstones. Some of them were stones that you could carry with your hand.

Others were not. This was not. Literally, in the Greek, it's the stone of a mule or the stone of an ass, which means it's a stone that is so big that no human can normally move it.

You need an ass to shift it. And what Jesus said is this. If anyone causes one of these least ones who believe in me to sin, it were better for him to be thrown into the sea with such a large millstone tied around his neck that he can't move it.

In other words, that he dies. Be better for him. The late Dr. A.B. Bruce of course.

You don't need me to tell you where he came from, do you? In his epochal work on the training of the Twelve, Suck simply comments on that passage, it were better for him. It suits him. It is what he deserves.

And it is implied, though not expressed, that it is what he gets when divine vengeance at length overtakes him. The millstone is no idle figure of speech, but an appropriate emblem of the ultimate doom of the proud. He who will mount to the highest place, regardless of the injuries he may inflict on little ones, will be cast down, not to the earth merely, but to the very lowest depths of the ocean, to the very abyss of hell.

With a heavy weight of curses suspended on his neck, to sink him down and keep him down so that he shall rise no more. Solemn words you say, solemn facts these. Jesus proceeds and he hasn't said it all, and I have to hurry.

The terms used by our Lord are as grim as grim can be. And all the more so in an age that has lost the vision of a God who is moral and just. Let me just read to you these three verses.

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed with two hands than to go into hell where the fire never goes out. I didn't say those.

Don't you attribute those words to me. They're not part of the Knox tradition or any other Presbyterian or Baptist or Pentecostal or any other tradition. These are in the scriptures.

Or verse 45. 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.

You can have your feet intact. You can go where you please, do what you like. But remember, says Jesus, you can't have it both ways.

Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. If your eye causes you to sin, verses 47 and 48, block it out. It is better for you.

Here's the, you see, here is the assessment. It is better for you. 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.

The word used for hell is Gehenna, and it is the Greece-sized form of the Hebrew Hinnom, referring originally to the Valley of Hinnom, to the southeast of Jerusalem. There you may remember that one of Israel's ungodly kings, Ahaz, caused children to be sacrificed to Moloch, sacrificed through the fire to Moloch. An equally ungodly king, Manasseh, followed suit.

But when one of the better kings of Israel came onto the throne, Josiah, and you remember there was a reformation, things changed a little. And then in due course, when this was forbidden, of course, the Valley of Hinnom became a place of refuge. And all the people of Jerusalem used to take their offal, take their offscourings, and take their garbage down there and set it on fire.

And day and night, like a massive incinerator, the Valley of Hinnom would be burning and smelling. I don't know what the significance of it is. But, oh, my good friend, surely this means something terrible.

Our Lord Jesus Christ did not use this metaphorical language to exaggerate, but to explain. And if he's explaining anything here, he is saying to us, it's a terrible thing to go to hell. I ask you, then, in the name of my Lord, be careful how you treat the least of your Lord's disciples, the least.

No question about the greatest. You and I are made of that kind. We like to hub-nub with the greatest.

If we can shake hands with them and be known to talk to them and be on level terms with them, all that's all right. But the least, the least. You see, they had asked the question, who, which of us is the greatest? Well, says the Lord Jesus, he that wants to be the greatest, he's got to become the least and the last.

Now, we've dealt with that. He's got to come down and serve the least as a servant, and he's got to be willing to be the last in the queue. Now, he assures them, you see, that the man who becomes the least and serves as the last will not go unrewarded.

Jesus the Christ, our Lord, will reward the least of our deeds as the least of his people. You are prepared to be known as such. Our humility alone can take us to the throne.

The way up is down. The way to the throne is by other cross. On the other hand, if we deal with one of the least of God's people in a manner that we bring dishonor to them intellectually by teaching them the wrong things, morally by setting the wrong standard, influencing them in the wrong way, the Lord will assuredly judge us as He would judge anybody.

And the impact of this passage is this, that there is no place in the kingdom of God and in life and in heaven for anybody who is of the spirit that will do that. Now, this is part of the challenge of the passage, and it raises problems, and I don't have all the answers to them, but I would be wrong if I didn't raise that particular problem here this morning. A man who is a member of the kingdom of God, who has divine life in him, ought to be a person who cares for God's children as he cares for himself.

For the two great commandments are, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy mind, and all thy soul, and all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself. Love one another, love one another. This is the teaching of the New Testament.

Now I've taken the time, I just want to say a sentence about what I deem to be the climax. I think that the critic here this morning, the legitimate critic of every sermon or dissertation, will say, now all that is really a little bit negative in a sense, and he would say much else. But I want you to notice where Jesus ends.

He ends here. The first part, I'm not sure what it means. The last part, I'm quite sure.

Salt is good, verse 50, but if it loses its saltiness, how then shall, how can you make it salty again? Or how can it be salted? Now, it's this latter part I want you to notice. Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with others. What is Jesus saying? This.

Really, he says to the disciples, the thing to do, and the real ultimate answer is not lopping off your hands, or your ears, or your feet, or anything like that. The real answer is to have purity in your hearts, to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, to know holiness of life, to be weaned from sin and Satan, and to dedicate yourselves to the Lord, to be the Lord utterly and wholly and completely, so that your spirit lives

in you, and empowers you, and ennobles you, and your heart is like the garden of the Spirit, bringing forth the fruit of heaven right there. And isn't he saying? And of course, he's right.

And this is the beautiful capstone to the whole passage. Have salt in yourself. Why does he use the word salt? Well, you see, because purity has this saline property.

Purity, real holiness, is separation. But more than that, it has a pungency to purify. It keeps the impurities at bay.

And then, because you have salt, because you have purity, you can be at peace. In other words, you can then walk the kind of life in which there is nothing wrong, nothing between you and God, nothing between you and man. You can bring praise to God.

You can bring blessing to your fellow. You can help the little ones and the others of my fold. You can be a blessing to them.

You can bring all to them that is involved in the Hebrew shalom, or the Greek hyrene. Now, brothers and sisters in Christ, I thank you for listening to me. I've perspired an awful lot over this.

And you know the reason why. I know the reason why. We're not living like this.

And it may be that there are some here this morning, and the thing that haunts you is the fact that you have not only sinned yourself, but you've led others that way. And as you look at your hands, they're red with blood. You're guilty of soiling the lives of other people.

And as you look at the way you've lived, and perhaps do live now under cover of darkness, though you're in church on a Sunday morning, you know that you not only sinned yourself, but you're leading others that way. And your children have got an eye on you. And if not your own, somebody else's.

And if Jesus is the Son of God, and this word is reliable, then you and I have got to do something about it. And we've got to do it. And therefore, in His name, I ask you in these closing moments this morning, I ask you to do what the Spirit of God in your heart bids you do.

You know what that is. You only know what that is. And He Himself.

Now let's spend a moment or two quietly, please. I'm not going to pray for a moment, but I'm going to ask you that you please hear the Word of the Lord, and heed the Word of the Savior, and relate it to your lives as the Spirit of God is quickening your conscience so to do, in order that you may know life yourself, and know His blessing, and His kingship, and His sweet enabling grace. Will you do that now, and confess your sin? Lord, our God, we pray that you will graciously hear the cry of every soul before you this morning and now.

Enable us out of an honesty of heart to acknowledge what is true. Not to imagine what is false, but to acknowledge what is true. And in such acknowledgment, to seek your mercy, crave your forgiveness, and walk in the light of your Word, that we may be the salt of the earth, and the lover of our brethren.

And our sisters in Christ, now unto Him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before His throne with exceeding glory, to the only wise God, and our Savior Jesus Christ be honor, glory, and dominion, world without end. Amen.

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