

## September 26, 2021 – Pentecost 18

**Mark 9:38-50**

**Numbers 11:4-6,10-16, 24-29**

**Psalms 104:27-35**

**James 5:(1-12) 13-20**

### **Worth Your Salt<sup>1</sup>**

**Introduction:** The Gospel for this Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost includes some of the most difficult verses in the entire Gospel of Mark. Those most difficult verses aren't when Jesus says, *"Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward"* (v41). The toughest verses aren't even Jesus' instruction, *"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off"* (v 43) - as difficult as that is for us to hear. No, among the toughest verses in Mark's Gospel are these words: *"Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you salt it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace among one another"* (vv 49 - 50). Just what does Jesus mean with that metaphor of "salt" and "salting"?

Let's look at salt, particularly as it was viewed in OT times and described in Nelson's Bible Dictionary: "SALT<sup>2</sup>

This mineral is sodium chloride, a white crystalline substance used mainly for seasoning and as a preservative (Job 6:6). Salt is not only one of the most important substances mentioned in the Bible, but it is a necessity of life. The

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<sup>2</sup> Nelson's Compact Bible Dictionary, 2004 Thomas Nelson Pub.

Hebrew people were well aware of the importance of salt to health (Job 6:6). High concentrations of salt exist in the Dead Sea, a body of water that is nine times saltier than the ocean and is sometimes called the Salt Sea (Gen. 14:3). The ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah may have been located near the south end of the Dead Sea. Here Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26).

An ancient method of extracting salt from sea water was to collect salt water in saltpits - holes dug in the sand; the water evaporated, leaving the salt behind (Zeph. 2:9). Salt pans were later used for this purpose.

Salt had a significant place in Hebrew worship. It was included in the grain offering (Lev. 2:13), the burnt offering (Ezek. 43:24), and the incense (Ex. 30:35). Part of the temple offering included salt (Ezra 6:9). It was also used to ratify covenants (Num. 18:19; 2 Chr. 13:5). Newborn babies were rubbed with salt in the belief that this promoted good health (Ezek. 16:4).

During times of war, the enemies' lands were sown with salt to render them barren (Judg. 9:45). In Roman times salt was an important item of trade and was even used for money. Roman soldiers received part of their salary in salt. Jesus described His disciples as the salt of the earth, urging them to imitate the usefulness of salt (Matt. 5:13; Col. 4:6).

Today, we simply take it from the kitchen counter and shake it where needed. We take it so much for granted that we only realize its value when some food is flat tasting and we decide "it needs salt." We use it for softening water. We use it for making our snowy, icy roadways safe. We, too, use such phrases as: "He is certainly worth his salt" as we recognize a person who provides a good day's work; and we say: "She is the salt of the earth" when describing a person who displays the qualities of being steady, steadfast, unpretentious, always ready to lend a hand to those in need, someone you can always count on.

Today's Gospel ends with Jesus' statement about salt. However, he prefaces them with some major observations on accepting "outsiders" and on "stumbling."

### **3. Those who are for you are for Christ himself (vv 38 - 41).**

a. The disciples are troubled to see a man casting out demons when he's not one of the Twelve.

(1) Compare the incident in today's Old Testament Reading when Joshua is troubled by Eldad and Medad prophesying back in the Israelite camp (Num 11:24 - 30).

(2) This is a matter of seeing some people as "insiders" (where we ourselves want to be counted!) and others as "outsiders."

(3) Like the Twelve, we may also be troubled when things done in our congregations don't seem quite according to Hoyle, especially when we see the person doing the questionable behavior as an "outsider."

b. However, Jesus tells the disciples not to forbid this man from exorcising, for "he who is not against us is on our side."

(1) We must allow God to "do his things." More specifically, we need to let God use the people he chooses to accomplish his will. Would we have rationally chosen a rabid persecutor of believers in Christ, such as the zealous Saul to bring his message of peace and forgiveness to the Gentiles?

(2) There is to be no "insider/ outsider" distinction among those who share in Christ's kingdom. He obliterates the walls between Christians that the world would impose. Black, white, brown, Europeans, Africans, Asians; all can be members of God's kingdom.

c. Though that might at first make us feel defensive, it actually demonstrates that we, who are followers of Christ, are especially important.

(1) Jesus says that the one who is kind to you (as in, giving you a cup of water) because you are "in the name of Christ" will not lose his reward.

(2) Jesus' focus here isn't on the one giving the drink. His focus is on the one receiving the drink - emphasizing how precious the recipient is to God.

(3) How so? Because a kindness to a Christian is in fact a kindness done to Christ himself. (Mt 25:40.)

(4) You're worth so much to God that someone who cares for you is rewarded as caring for Jesus himself !

## **2. God wants no one - especially yourself! - to cause you to stumble, to be lost (vv 42 - 48).**

a. Now comes the section of the text that we all hear right away as difficult - the part about stumbling, where you' re told to cut off your hand or foot or pluck out your eye or be drowned with a giant millstone tied around your neck.

(1) Are we really supposed to do that? Almost certainly not. Self-mutilation is not a way to rid ourselves of sin. Jesus is using hyperbole, extreme exaggeration, to emphasize the seriousness of stumbling into sin.

(2) Jesus is clearly teaching the seriousness of stumbling - of being bound to one's old ways of trusting in self and thus turning away from Christ. Drowning or mutilation really would be better than to go to eternal fire in hell.

(3) And Jesus may also be pushing us to consider the deeper question at hand. Is it really a matter of hands or feet or eyes that might cause us to be lost? No! It's from the heart that sins come (Mk 7:20 - 23). Jesus reminds us that this, too, is a matter of the heart.

b. Yet this difficult section, too, shows us how much we Christians are worth to God.

(1) Jesus talks of stumbling because he doesn't want it to happen to anyone - including you!

(2) Woe to the person who causes you to lose your faith in Christ! It really would be preferable to God if the person never lived long enough to do that.

(3) God doesn't even want you to cause you to stumble. Remember that evil

heart of yours! The real threat to being a follower of Christ lies in oneself!

(4) You're worth so much to God that Jesus will speak in the greatest extremes to warn you against falling away! He doesn't want anyone especially you yourself - to cause you to be lost.

### **1. To God, then, you're worth every grain of salt you have (vv49 - 50).**

a. Here are indeed some of the most difficult verses in all of Mark's Gospel! To begin, these verses are difficult because the metaphor could refer to any of the ancient uses of salt:

(1) Seasoning for food.

(2) A purifier or preservative of things to prevent contamination or rot.

(3) A medium for destroying the fertility of land.

(4) An addition to offerings or incense.

b. "Everyone will be salted with fire."

(1) To which of the uses of salt is Jesus referring? Probably the purgative or purifying function of salt.

(2) Being "salted with fire" may also be a reference to the bestowing of the Holy Spirit as on the disciples in Acts 2:1-4, wherein tongues as of fire appeared and rested on them. Fire in the OT often indicates the presence of God, especially in his burning holiness and purity, consuming everything that is impure.<sup>3</sup>

(3) On the Last Day, we know, fire will purge away all that is not in accord with God's kingdom. But this will be a good thing for God's people, for when all that is unhelpful is purged, salted, burned away, we will be blessed with full participation in the reign and rule of Christ.

c. "Salt is good, but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you salt it?"

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<sup>3</sup> Footnote to Acts 2:3, ESV Study Bible.

(1) This time Jesus is talking about a different kind of salt. This salt is you! Jesus says, you are good - because you are in him. You are the ones who work against the evil of the world.

(3) But what a stern warning: You're good only in Christ, so without him, nothing can make you good. Do not become unsalty!

d. "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace among one another."

(1) Multiple possibilities of meaning once more. But consider this: Since we are in Christ, we are invited into fellowship with all others who share the faith.

(2) And Jesus doesn't seem to be telling us to get salt that leads to this sweet fellowship. Rather, he's saying that we have it.

(3) We have the salt that leads to fellowship since we are in Christ, who came to us, died and rose for us, and brought us to be baptized into him and his death and resurrection so that we could be in him.

**Conclusion:** So then, what do we have ... with Jesus' discussion of salt, and with this entire passage for the bigger picture of our life as people who are in Christ? Well, you have this:

- You are worth so much to God that he sees those who care for you as caring for Christ himself.
- You are worth so much to God that he doesn't want anything or anyone, including your own sinful heart, to cause you to stumble away from him.
- You are worth so much to God that he deems you worth every grain of salt you that you are.

IN CHRIST, YOU ARE WORTH YOUR SALT.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.