

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

OF SALT AND STUMBLING BLOCKS

Mark 9:38-50

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Analysis by Paige G. Evers

38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. 42 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, 48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. 49 "For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

DIAGNOSIS: Unquenchable Fire

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Tripping Up Others*

It was just an off-hand comment, an aside to a friend at church about how so-and-so made a fool of herself in the Sunday School meeting. She thought no one else was listening. She didn't realize that the target of her comment was around the corner hearing every word. He didn't intend to scare off the worship guests, the young couple who sat down timidly and fumbled with the bulletin. But they were in his seat. He glared at them through the entire service. In these and many other ways we put stumbling blocks before other believers (v. 42). We trip them up and create obstacles along their journey of faith.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Stumbling Ourselves*

Jesus condemns those who lead other believers astray, and he also warns against stumbling ourselves. He points to our own hands, feet, and eyes causing us to stumble (vv. 43, 45, 47). As the headlines, office gossip, and neighborhood rumors demonstrate, there are often other body parts involved as well. There is something deeper than the missteps of the hand, foot, and eye, though. Stumbling is a condition of the heart. It's trusting the desires of the things we touch and hold, the places we go, and the things we see more than trusting God and his will for us.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Thrown in the Fire*

Jesus is clear that trusting in and indulging the flesh, whether the hand, foot, eye, or another part of the body, only leads to one end: hell (vv. 43, 45, 57). When the desires of our bodies and our hearts are so strong, and the temptation to put a

stumbling block in a believer's path is so great, no one is exempt from the possibility of ending up in hell. We can't get rid of all our sin. We can't self-amputate and declare ourselves forgiven, even if we follow Jesus' command to cut off our hand or foot, or tear out our eye (vv. 43, 45, 47). Hell is the only outcome. Jesus doesn't hold back in how he describes hell. It's a place where "their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched" (v. 48). With our sin still holding us in its grip, we will have no chance of surviving that fire.

PROGNOSIS: Everlasting Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Help from Outside the Body*

Amid all of the warnings against stumbling and causing others to stumble, Jesus points out a promise, or as it he calls it here, "the reward" (v. 41). There is a way to be saved from the punishments of hell, but it cannot be accomplished by a stumble-free life. Because of human sin, there is no such thing. We receive the reward, we are saved from hell, and we are given the gift of life through Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus not only gave up a hand, or a foot, or an eye in our place, he gave up everything, even life itself, so we could have life. Despite their actions and the condition of their hearts, sinners who stumble are able to "enter life" (vv. 43 & 45) and "enter the kingdom of God" (v. 47) thanks to Christ alone.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Saltiness Restored*

When the heart trusts in God and what he has done through Jesus' cross, the heart no longer stumbles, tripped up by its own motives and desires. Instead, it soars. To use another image that Jesus uses in this text, the heart becomes "salty" (v. 50), since it has been transformed by God's work on the sinner's behalf. When one has salt in oneself (v. 50), others can't help

but notice. Instead of throwing up a stumbling block in someone else's path, your saltiness acts like an invitation. Your saltiness attracts them to the richness and depth of life that comes from trusting in Jesus and opening one's hands to receive his gift of salvation.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Extending Life to Others*

When one embraces "the reward" and "bears the name of Christ" (v. 41), then God is able to use the hand, foot, and eye for his purposes. Instead of wrecking relationships, the various parts of the body can be used for God's glory. From doing awe-inspiring "deeds of power" (v. 39), to giving fellow believers "a cup of water to drink" (v. 41) we can extend our hands, feet, and eyes in service so that others also may turn away from hell and turn toward the Lord of life.