

Mark 9:38-50 (42-48)

Do you suppose that the health care reform bill will cover those people who take these words literally? People who are rushed to the hospital because they were cutting off hands, and feet, and tearing out their eyes? In some countries they do this, you know. In ancient China anyone who robbed a traveler had his nose cut off. And today in some places if you steal something with your hand, as punishment your hand is cut off. I suppose that if you come across someone with no hands, you're looking at a thief who didn't learn his lesson the first time.

Now Jesus is not suggesting that we cut off parts of our body as punishment for our sins. And to be quite honest, I imagine that we would rather that He hadn't spoken these words at all. They make us a little uncomfortable, all this talk about cutting and tearing, and before that about drowning in the sea with a millstone hanging around our neck. That sounds like something the mafia would do if you threatened to tell their secrets to the police.

So why would Jesus use such gruesome language? Perhaps to get our attention. If a kid is really hungry, he doesn't tell his mother, "I'm hungry." He exaggerates, "I'm starving!" Whatever it takes to turn her attention toward his hungry tummy. That's what this is--hyperbole or exaggeration. Jesus doesn't want us taking His words literally. If we did we would have to break the Fifth Commandment. We are not to hurt or harm not only our neighbor's body, but our own.

And drawing these words out to their logical conclusion, not many of us would have tongues--they would be cut out because we have used them to gossip, tell lies, and take God's name in vain. We wouldn't have ears because even listening to gossip is a sin. God forbid that we should commit adultery, and heaven help us if we think a sinful thought in our head! Jesus doesn't say, "Cut it off too," but that's the conclusion we're left with if we take His words literally.

So why is Jesus drawing our attention to this with such exaggeration? Maybe it's because we tend to exaggerate in the opposite way. Jesus says, "Cut off your hand if it causes you to sin," but we say, "Ah, it's no big deal. Everybody sins. God doesn't care." Jesus maximizes sin here in our text because we have the tendency to minimize it. We can easily spot the sinfulness in our neighbor, and yet our own sinful thoughts, words, and deeds don't really bother us much at all.

We also tend to minimize the suffering of hell. I've heard people say that hell won't be so bad because all their drinking buddies will be there with them. But Jesus does not exaggerate when He says that in hell "the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." He doesn't exaggerate but He makes a comparison of the suffering there to rotting in the smoldering, stinking garbage dump outside Jerusalem where the fires never went out and the parasitic worms never stopped eating.

Now if we were good lawyers we could find in Jesus' words an escape clause--a way out of this uncomfortable text, because Jesus begins every phrase with the word "if." "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off..." "If your foot causes you to sin..." "If your eye causes you to sin..." But sin never originates in the hand, or in the foot, or in the eye; it originates in the heart. Our hands do not cause us to sin. It's the other way around. Our heart causes our hands to do evil. When Eve reached for the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, it wasn't her hand that was the problem; it was her heart. Sin conceived in her heart, caused her hand to reach, and her mouth to eat. In Psalm 51 David did not say, "Create in me clean hands, feet, and eyes O God," he cried, "Create in me a clean heart O God!" And Jesus says in Matthew 15, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witnesses, slanders."

So ancient China and all these Muslim countries today have it wrong. Rather than cutting off noses, and hands, and other body parts, they should cut out the heart of the criminal. And isn't that the point Jesus is really making with His exaggerations? Even if a sinner cuts off all of his limbs, tears out his eyes, and removes his ears and tongue, he will still be a sinner before God because sin dwells in his heart.

Forget about entering heaven with one hand, leg, or eye intact; we won't even enter heaven at all if our heart is not first cleansed of sin. All of us deserve, as Jesus tells it, for that millstone to hang around our neck and to be tossed not into the ocean, but into the depths of hell because all of us, having sinful hearts, have used our hands, feet, and eyes to cause others to sin--whether they were children or adults who are weak in the faith and thus "little ones" in this way--we've all earned a place in the depths of that rotting, stinking, smoldering, worm-infested garbage dump called hell.

And if this doesn't shake you up, then nothing will. If anyone can hear the accusing and condemning Law with one ear, and let it go out the other and say smugly, "I'm not all that bad; others are worse than me; I don't need to repent of any sin; I've lived a pretty good life and deserve a place in heaven..." then there is no hope for that one. God is being shut out of that person's heart.

But if you see your sin, then let me show you your Savior. If your heart condemns you, do not fear, God is greater than your heart. Let me tell you what Jesus did for you. He was cut off from the land of the living. They took His hands and feet and they maliciously cut them with nails driving them into a wooden cross. As He hung there, blood from the thorns in His head ran down His face into His eyes. He smelled the awful odor of that stinking garbage dump called hell because He was forsaken by God. He was thrown into the depths of that rotting, smoldering, worm-infested place, and He did it for you so that you will never know that agony and sorrow. Your sins, the sins your hands have done, and your feet, and your eyes, the sin within your heart--Jesus carried for you in His own body. God punished Him for every evil thought of yours. He punished Him for all of your sinful words and actions.

Have you and I caused others to sin--those little ones in the faith? Yes, time and time again. God is not angry at you. He took out His anger on Jesus in your place. Christ Jesus, God's Son, is your Substitute. No matter who you are; no matter how sinful your life has been, He died for you...you are forgiven. Instead of throwing you into the depths of hell with a millstone around your neck, in mercy God threw you into the saving waters of baptism. There God gave you a new heart. There your heart, and life, and hands, and feet, and eyes, and tongue, and ears, and every part of you within and without was, and is, and remains cleansed of all sin. You cannot outsin God's grace. The more you sin, the more He forgives.

Do we want to live in sin? No. We want to present our hands, and feet, and all parts of our body to Him, daily, as members dedicated in service to Him in love. But as His Christians; as His baptized forgiven ones, we fail daily. God does not reject you for it. He does not threaten to cut you off from Him and from eternal life in heaven. Jesus died for you. He forgives you.

Rejoice dear forgiven sinners. A place is reserved for you not down in the depths, but with God in heaven--where you will enjoy all eternity with two hands, two feet, two eyes, and a heart, mind, and life forever free from sin. And it's all because of Jesus your Savior. Amen.