

“Seriously?”
Mark 9:38-50
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Mary Cunningham Gause

- 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;
- 44 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;
- 46 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 heaven 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.

Seriously. It is a word – or rather an adverb – that has a variety of meanings based on its context. It means to an alarmingly grave extent as in: She is seriously ill. If used with genuine and earnest intent it may sound like this: Seriously kids, we have to get home before it gets dark. However, in the past few years it’s use has permeated the trendier scene and it has become an adverb used to convey that something just doesn’t seem believable, that something is far-fetched or just flat out crazy. Examples are: Upon hearing about the bank robber who walked away with thousands of dollars only to realize he had left his wallet – complete with driver’s license; social security card, AND criminal registration card sitting on the tellers window – the robber, the police officers, and the teller all responded “Seriously?” Or perhaps it is what is said when one get an official looking piece of mail announcing the recipient has just won a million dollars; “Seriously?” Or maybe it is what one thinks upon reading today’s texts – what one says when Scripture tells us there may come a time when we need to throw ourselves into the sea wearing a special necklace or remove a body part that is causing problems for us. Yes, today’s text is one of those unbelievable texts that stops us as we are reading

and calls us to look again at those words to see if we really read what we thought we did...and then has us asking, “Seriously?”

Mark’s gospel has been the sermon text for several weeks now and prior to today’s text the disciples have been struggling with who they are what they are to do as Jesus’ disciples. Something they consistently tend to get wrong...and as we read, we realize today’s text is no exception.

The disciples are upset that others who are not a part of their group are running around healing in Jesus name. John, the group spokesperson, steps forward and in child-like fashion tells on those successful healers almost as if he is expecting praise from Jesus for calling out this group they (the disciples) think are tainting Jesus’ ministry. It is as if the disciples are afraid that if they are not the closest to Jesus, if they are not the #1 group that Jesus’ calls upon, they will lose out on some great reward. Instead of focusing on being servants of one another and others, they are wrapped up in trying to set themselves apart from and above others. They want so badly to be the teacher’s pet, the “in crowd”, that they completely forget what Jesus told them not 10 verses ago – “to be first, you must be last...and welcome all in my name.” Again, Jesus patiently reminds them of the call to ministry in his name that all are invited to be a part of - not just the twelve. He reminds them of the transforming power of those who call his name and that there are many followers and potential followers they have not even considered. For all that minister in his name will be rewarded regardless of how close they are to Jesus.

Jesus, in full on teacher mode, continues with some eye opening examples of what discipleship demands. He reiterates the call to be welcoming and supportive of all who follow him then calls for the disciples to rid themselves of behaviors that subvert the role of disciple. He says, “If you put a stumbling block before one of these 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 seaⁱ.” Household millstones were used by humans to grind grain – they were similar to the rolling pins of todayⁱⁱ. They were heavy enough to grind grain but easily moveable by humans. Great millstones were large and heavy and only able to be turned by a donkey. It is this GREAT millstone around one’s neck that Jesus uses as the alternative to putting a stumbling block in front of a little one. Then Jesus culminates this section with the simple instruction to the disciples to cut off their hand, a foot or gouge out their eye IF anything causes them to stumble in their discipleship.

It is here that I stop and ask, Seriously? Seriously? While I am not too shocked to hear something like this coming from some part of Scripture, I am completely surprised to hear it coming from Jesus...and more than surprised to hear it as instruction to the disciples. And what on earth can Jesus SERIOUSLY mean?

Thankfully we are not called to interpret this passage literally. Jesus, the master craftsman of linguistics, uses hyperbole here to make his point. Hyperbole is a form of extreme exaggeration – something so exaggerated that it shocks you when you hear it

alerting you that something important is being said. Jesus is not calling the disciples to seriously cut off limbs, and gauge out eyes...but he is making a serious point! Jesus is using the jarring nature of this text to tell the disciples they need to get rid of their bad habits that are harmful to others and to themselves. To stop the rivalry and adversity they have between each other and towards others. To stop thinking their closeness to Jesus gives them some hierarchical status. Jesus is warning them to stop acting in ways that run counter to God's ministry and to stop causing others to do the same. ⁱⁱⁱ

While it may be a relief to realize Jesus isn't seriously asking the disciples to remove parts of their bodies...Jesus message must be taken seriously. It is not just for the disciples of Jesus' time but for us today...for these sayings challenge us to examine our discipleship, as well. ^{iv}

What stops us from being obedient to God? What stops me from being obedient to God? What stops you from being obedient to God? Perhaps it is success and a desire to be the top performer in your company; maybe its materialism and the understanding that you need fancy cars, expensive clothes and lots of toys for you can fit in; could be time and control and the desire to manage every second of the day; maybe its a fear of those who are different, a desire to be perfect, an obsessive need to control, a lack of interest in anything...the possibilities are certainly many. I think the key is to look at what keeps you from living the gospel: Is there something that makes you ignore the man sitting on the park bench crying rather than stopping to see if he needs help? Do your thoughts of personal inadequacy stop you from answering the call to be an elder or deacon...or do your thoughts of your importance anger you when you are not called to serve in that capacity? Does your fear of saying things that will be hard for people to hear and may make them angry stop you from saying what you truly think God is calling you to say? Is the company you work for treating employees fairly? Is your love of beautiful things putting you and your family further into debt? Does your love of sports control your schedule or your temper? Out of fear of being ostracized by friends are you failing to speak up for those who are being hurt by their words or actions? Does your obsession with cleanliness take priority over spending time with the ones you love?

In this passage, I think the key for us is in realizing Jesus doesn't call for the removal of minor appendages in this example. He isn't asking for the disciples to cut off a finger or toe. He uses MAJOR body parts that we use every day - our hands, our feet and our eyes – MAJOR body parts that radically change how we function in life if they are gone. Think about how your life would change – or for some of us has changed – with the removal of a hand, or a foot or an eye. It would or maybe already has – radically changed everything you do in your life. That is the type of “change” Jesus is calling for. Seriously.

Theologian William Barclay says, “this text is meant to be taken very personally. It means that it may be necessary to excise some habit, to abandon some pleasure, to give up some friendship, to cut out some thing which has become very dear to us, in order to be fully obedient to the will of God. This is not a matter with which anyone can

deal with for anyone else. It is solely a matter of a persons' individual conscience and it means that, if there is anything in our lives which is coming between us and obedience to the will of God, however much habit and custom may have made it a part of our lives, it must be rooted out. The rooting out may be as painful as a surgical operation, it may seem like cutting our part of our own body, but if we are to know real life, real happiness, and real peace, it must go. This may sound bleak and stern, but in reality it is only facing the facts of discipleship!"^v

Jesus' teaching challenges us to look deep within ourselves and reflect upon what it means to be a disciple. He calls us to remove anything that is an impediment to making Jesus a priority in our lives and in others lives. A priority that is reflected in loving service others – service rooted in and driven by the unconditional love God shows for each and every one of God's children...including you and me.

Alyce McKenzie, a theologian who writes on Mark sums this passage up in these words. ...”A case could be made that the image of the cup of water (best symbolizes) the text of today. You don't think to offer a cup of water if you're arguing about your superiority to those around you; it's tough to offer a cup of water if you have no hands, feet and eyes. But offering the cup of water is the point. Being avenues for the healing presence and power of Christ is the point. And anything that impedes that gift (has got to go.)^{vi}

Seriously you may ask? And, of course, the answer is “Seriously!”

In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ The Interpreter's Bible: New Revised Standard Version.

ⁱⁱ Nguyen, van Thanh, Exegesis: Proper Twenty-One (September 27, 2009); pg 27.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Baker-Fletcher, Karen, Theological Themes: Proper Twenty-One (September 27, 2009) pg. 28.

^{iv} The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary: Mark Abingdon Press, Nashville, pg. 641.

^v Barclay, William. The Gospel of Mark: The Daily Study Bible Series. Westminster Press, Louisville; 1975. pp. 232-3.

^{vi} McKenzie, Alyce M. Preaching the Lesson: Proper Twenty-One (September 27, 2009); pg 31.

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