

Mark 9:42-50  
October 21, 2018

Sometimes, many times, truth is stranger than fiction. That was a theme that G.K. Chesterton.

Chesterton was a writer from the early part of the last century. He had a biting wit and pithy tone. Chesterton was most famously known for writing things that make people think, like truth is stranger than fiction.

Chesterton says truth is stranger than fiction—why? One writer summarizes Chesterton's words—

"Chesterton explains why truth is stranger than fiction: because we have made fiction to suit ourselves. We have not made the truth...Truth comes with a surprise. It is the opposite of what we expect. Why? Because we have things backwards. Why?.." He lets Chesterton answer in his own words.

"The primary paradox of Christianity the ordinary condition of man is not his sane or sensible position. That the normal itself is an abnormality."

In other words, what we take for normal is not how things should be.

“We are fallen. We are sinful. We are confused. And we have everything mixed up.”

Jesus shows us today how fallen, sinful, confused and mixed up the human race is. Even more, he shows us how followers can be confused and mixed up as well.

I’m going to read Mark 9:42-50 and as I read the words of Jesus and you will think truth is stranger than fiction. If this is true, it is much stranger than fiction.

Sin is more deadly than we think and being faithful is more important than we think.

We don’t naturally think that way but Jesus wants us this morning to change the way we think. You want to hear a truth that is stranger than fiction?

Sin is more deadly than we think and faithfulness is more important than we think.

Truth is stranger than fiction.

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. [43] And if your hand causes you

to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. [45] And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. [47] And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, [48] 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' [49] For everyone will be salted with fire. [50] Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Mark 9:42–50

## PRAY

Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction—here is today's installment: Sin is more deadly than we think and being faithful is more important than we think.

We will see that in three ways—

Other Christians are more important than you think.  
Your own sin is more deadly than you think.  
Persevering is more important than you think.

***1. Other Christians are more important than you think (Mark 9:42)***

Verse 42,

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

Wow. Sometimes we can have something bad happen to us and say, it could be worse:

- At least all the money wasn't lost.
- At least the car wasn't totaled.
- At least she eventually calmed down.
- At least he came to his senses.

Jesus is saying—cause one of the little ones—read there all Christians, any Christians, not just Children—it can't be worse.

Causing another Christian to sin is WORSE than having a 'great millstone' hung around your neck and throwing you into the sea.

A millstone was a rock chiseled into a circle with a hole in it. Like a rock donut. A mule would pull the millstone around and around in circles to grind raw wheat into flour.

Here is a picture of a millstone—



Jesus says it is better that a rock like that be tied around your neck and you thrown overboard—for doing what?

- Murder?
- Serial Killer?
- Genocide?

No. It is better that you be tied to a rock and thrown into the sea than you lead another Christian into sin.

Truth is stranger than fiction.

Sin is more serious than we think.

Other believers are more precious than we think.

This is a message from Jesus to his followers. This is a directive not giving to the Roman political elite or the Jewish religious leaders but to the church. There are many professing people who call themselves Christians and yet they lead others into sin.

“it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

Jesus is speaking to me and Jesus is speaking to you. I am keenly aware of my potential—as a preacher—to lead people into sin. It is not for no reason that James says,

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” James 3:1

A preacher can sound winsome and inspiring all the while leading people the wrong way. Leading people into sin. This goes for false teachers who peddle heresy and immorality BUT ALSO—

Those who preach salvation by hard work.

“it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

Or those who preach a message of, *'if you had enough faith you would be healed of all your diseases.'*

For them, “it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

Or those who preach a message of, *'if you have hardship you must be in sin. You must have done something wrong.'*

For them, Jesus says, “it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

Or those who preach a message of, *'God means for all of his followers happy, healthy and wealthy and if you aren't, there is something wrong with you.'*

For them, Jesus says, “it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

Or those who preach a message of, 'Above all, you must be true to yourself, true to what you feel no matter what.'

For them, Jesus says, "it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea."

Preachers and teachers are not the only ones who need to be careful.

What are some ways we can cause others to stumble into sin?

1. When we provoke others to anger consistently by offering harsh responses.
2. When we minimize something clearly sinful by saying, 'it isn't that bad.'
3. When we invite others into our sin by saying—its fun! Don't be so literal and legalistic.
4. When we speak badly of someone else to another.
5. When we exasperate our kids by constantly harping on them rather than communicating our love.

Jesus says we must be so very careful.



You must understand that we all stumble in one way or another and have been hypocrites in one way or another. There is forgiveness—but to the one who perseveres in leading others to sin. Jesus has a message—

“it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

Here is the first truth stranger than fiction—'Other Christians are more important than you think.'

He moves from that truth to another truth that seems even stranger than fiction. Not only is causing another to sin more serious than you think but also,

## **2. Your sin is more serious than you think (Mark 9:43-48)**

Jesus seems to take a complete leave of his senses by saying:

- If your hand causes you to sin—hack it off.
- If your foot causes you to sin—slash it off.
- If your eye causes you to sin—pull it out.

Wow. Why? He gives the same answer three times—better that you be relieved of your hand, foot or eye than what?

Enter the unquenchable fire.

- It is better to live this life with one hand than enter hell with two hands.
- It is better to maim yourself and lose a foot than enter the unquenchable fire with both feet.
- It is better to poke out your eye than have both and enter into hell.

That nearly sounds like the rantings of the insane. But as we've seen, truth is stranger than fiction.

What is Jesus saying? Better that you decisively with your sin than suffer the unquenchable, unending fires of eternal death.

You cannot be too radical in your fight against sin. Notice that Jesus is not inviting us to look at someone else and suggest their amputations—but he says—look at yourself.

What radical step do you take today so you don't jeopardize eternity?

Jesus mentions hands, feet, and eyes—that is another way of speaking of the whole person.

- Hands are what we do.
- Feet are where we go.
- Eyes are what we see.

In other words, are your hands doing things that can land you in hell? Are your feet taking you places that can lead you to hell? Are your eyes watching things that lead to hell?

Jesus is talking about patterns—not instances of sin—hear me. Patterns not instances of sin. All of us sin—but here is what he is saying—have we decided that that sin is part of who we are?

If so wake up. Patterns.

Have you convinced yourself that it is okay—not that big of a deal to sleep with your boyfriend or girlfriend because—after all you love each other. And God wouldn't want you to not be true to yourself.

You can live like that, but it would be better if you cut off your hand.

Have you convinced yourself that it is okay to wine and dine your customers or business associates at the strip club?

You could live like that, but it would be better if you cut off your foot.

Have you convinced yourself that it is okay watch all manner of immorality on the internet—because it is a victimless crime. No one gets hurt.

You could live that way, but it would be better if you gouged out your eye.

I want to be careful here. These words of Jesus are hard and radical. Truth is stranger than fiction. I want to be precise.

Jesus is not saying that his followers will not struggle against sin. With all manner of sins. He expects that. We are going to fight against remaining sin for the rest of our lives.

But, if you become complacent and say—what's the use—it doesn't matter, I'll give in. Then you are in trouble.

Keep fighting and take drastic action if you have to.

What causes you to sin?

- Your job? Maybe you need to cut yourself away from that job.
- Your phone? Maybe you need to cut the phone out of your hand.
- Your computer? Maybe you need to cut internet service.
- Your drinking? The one drink that becomes 10? Maybe you need to cut off all alcohol.
- Your friends? They tempt you beyond what you can handle maybe you need to cut yourself away from them.

What do you need to cut yourself off from?

Jesus is not telling us what to do or not to do. He is not saying where to go or where to stay away from. He is not telling us what to look at and what to turn from.

He IS saying—whatever does cause you to sin—cut it off from your life. And that thing is going to be different for all of us.

Better that he take radical measures than continue to sow division and dissension and plow over other people.

We all must determine with the help of other mature Christians what we need to cut ourselves off from—

Why?

Vs. 48,

Jesus describes what eternal death is like when he says it is a place,

[48] 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'

Where is the place with worms and a constantly stocked fire?

On the outskirts of Jerusalem there was a place where unfaithful Hebrews (like traitors) were disposed of after they were executed. Their bodies were not buried. Instead, their corpses would be discarded in one of two ways.

They would either be left to bake under the bright sun and slowly decompose. That is where the worms come in. We would call them maggots.

The other way to dispose of the bodies was by burning. The stench of burning flesh filled the air and made everyone cover their nose and mouth.

People passing by would take in the putrefying and burning flesh and recoil in disgust. Jesus is saying—you know that horrendous place—there is another worse than you can imagine.

A place of constant destruction forever. A place where the maggots are always gorging and the fire is never quenched.

It is a place of constant destruction and no peace ever. No rest ever. Constant destruction and torment. Forever. Our text calls that place hell.

Truth is stranger than fiction

Don't think that for a second you can play the 'get out of hell free card' because you prayed a prayer asking Jesus into your heart a while back. If Jesus is really in your heart, your life will look differently.

If not. Beware.

Not only is causing another to sin more serious than you think but also, Your sin is more serious than you think.

But also,

### 3. Persevering is more important than you think. (Mark 9:49-50)

Verse 49 is—without a doubt the strangest verse in all of Mark.

[49] For everyone will be salted with fire. [50] Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

What?

We go from the unquenchable fires of hell to this ambiguous statement—everyone will be salted with fire.

Huh.

That doesn't seem to make much sense.

Jesus is clearly switching his metaphors without much notice. We go from worms and fire to fire and salt.

What is Jesus getting at?

Jesus is referring to the OT practice dictated by Leviticus of how to offer grain offerings. We know about animal sacrifices but there were also many



occasions for grain sacrifices. Here is the direction for those.

“As an offering of firstfruits you may bring them to the LORD, but they shall not be offered on the altar for a pleasing aroma. [13] You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.” Leviticus 2:12–13

The burning grain seasoned with salt makes for a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

With that grain offering as a background, we can see a bit more clearly what Jesus is getting at in verse 49.

Back to verse 49,

**[49] For everyone will be salted with fire.”**

Do we Christians offer grain offerings anymore? No. What do WE followers of Jesus offer?

Ourselves.

This idea is fleshed out just a little bit more in verse 50,

[50] Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Here is what we must know about salt for our current conversation, salt preserves and does not burn even in the fiercest of conflagrations. So what is the right kind of salt?

Maybe we can say it this way given our context. There are people who have salt that has lost its saltiness—who are they?

Those that lead other Christians into sin. Also, those who constantly and unrepentantly use their hands, feet and eyes as instruments not for service to Jesus but rush off to sin.

That is the kind of salt that has lost its saltiness.

What about the good salt?

The opposite. The good salt is just another way of saying someone is a genuine follower of Jesus. You will be able to tell by how they live.

They will not (as a pattern) cause others to sin by their words or actions. When they do, they will ask forgiveness of their Lord and others.

They will not (as a pattern) use their hands, feet and eyes as instruments of sin. When they do, they will ask forgiveness of their Lord.

Those with the right kind of salt are those who are not flawless and are not removed from the fires of the troubles of life but they are ones that persevere.

Because we will all be salted with fire.

Trouble comes upon us all. But note this—your perseverance—your basic desire to keep following Jesus pleases God more than you think.

You might think you need to be some kind of super-Christian to be noticed by God. NO! Wrong. Persevering—or fighting to keep following Jesus today pleases him more than you think.

People with the right kind of salt follow Jesus and don't stop even if sometimes they fall. They get up and keep going.

Faithfulness is more pleasing to God than you think. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you must be a great person with mighty gifts to please God. NO!

You put one foot in front of the other even as you are being salted by fire. In this life we will face the flames of all kinds of different troubles. But as we continue to fight to put one foot in front of the other even when we walk through flames of sickness, poverty, loneliness, through the fires of old age, young age or any age.

As we continue to fight to be faithful even when we are salted by the fires of—

- Children that have wandered from God.
- Cancer that has invaded your body.
- Accusers that line up against you.
- Disappointment that your life isn't what you want.
- When people sin grievously against you.

As you fight to remain faithful through the fires of hardship and disappointment you are pleasing the Lord more than you think.

Faithfulness is more important than you think.

Isn't that what we all want—just to be faithful to Jesus all the days of our lives?

Here is the reality of all of our lives—there are times when the testimony of our lives does cause others to

stumble. We don't take our sin nearly as seriously as we should.

But we are free to be faithful and not perfect because Jesus was perfect and not just faithful. Here is what I mean.

Jesus NEVER—not once—led even one little one away off into sin. He came running for the little ones.

To protect us.

To save us.

To die for us.

Also, he never sinned with what he did, where he went or what he saw.

Yet. His father cut him off saying—in essence—It would have been better that you have a millstone fastened around your neck. He was cut off from his father as decisively as if he was guilty for our sins. He was cut off so we could be welcomed in.

He was cut off from the land of the living but came back to give his little ones new life and make us like him.

Truth is stranger than fiction.

We might say it like this—

Sin is more serious than you think.  
Faithfulness more important than you think.  
Jesus more precious than you think.

Truth is stranger than fiction.

A question or two to consider—

Have you made peace with your sin but are at war  
with a Christian brother or sister?

Go to them and make it right. If all of the pattern  
of all your life is always one of war with others—  
you might have the wrong kind of salt. You might  
not be a true follower of Jesus.

Go to him—go to Jesus—precious Jesus and will  
make it right.

Have you made peace with your but are at war with a  
Christian brother or sister?

Is there a pattern of sin that you have begun to  
tolerate and think (maybe not say), "This is part of  
who I am." No.

Cut it off.

Have you downplayed the importance of simple faithfulness?

Don't.

I realize there are many in this room who are facing situations that you didn't expect and you wonder what to do.

Just keep following Jesus. Keep your eyes on him by his strength be faithful. Its more important than you think.

Today, truth is stranger than fiction. But it won't always be that way. One day—a day is coming when fiction fade and truth will cease to be strange.

PRAY

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all. 2  
Thessalonians 3:16





