

Literally

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Mark 9:42-50

Passages like our verses today from Mark force us to consider how to understand the Bible. Did Jesus really mean what he said? How literally should we take him? To find our answer we will follow a process of biblical interpretation. This set of steps was taught at my seminary and I have used it ever since. We start with asking, what sort of literature are we reading today? The Bible has poetry, allegories, an early variation of historical writing, personal letters and more. Mark, of course, is a Gospel. Neither biography nor history, Gospels are narratives about Jesus and the Good News Jesus taught and brought. They tell his story. Clearly all four authors of the New Testament Gospels took liberties with the order in which he did things. Clearly they, working from the memories of eye-witnesses probably decades after the resurrection, had to piece together what he had said. We say clearly because no two Gospels completely agree about any of these things.

But does this make the information in the narrative less reliable? To this reader the answer is no. What is remarkable about the Gospels is not that they disagree, but how much they **agree**. Matthew and Luke also contain today's words of Jesus. Both of their versions are quite a bit shorter than Mark's but both preserve the same intensity of them. Therefore we can confidently believe Jesus said something very like what we read. And so we come to step two of the interpretation process: When

reading accounts of what biblical figures say, how do we believe they meant to be heard? Such warnings of hell appear from Genesis to Revelation. Often they are meant literally—especially in the prophets. Often they are not meant literally. Since the early Christians did not put millstones around their necks throw each other into the sea, and since they kept a remarkably high percentage of their hands, feet and eyes, we can deduce they did not take Jesus' teaching here literally.

They—and we—must take this step seriously. One way to do this is to read the text in several translations. For example, the NRSV we use here pairs up well with the New International Version. When they use different words or phrases it can help us better understand what Jesus is saying. The footnotes in a study Bible often help. Which leads to step three in the interpretation process: reading commentators, scholars expert in the specific book or books of the Bible we are reading. William Lane produced the New International Commentary on the Gospel of Mark. Of our passage he wrote, “The radical demand that the hand or foot be hacked off or the eye plucked out...juxtaposes the relative value of this life with the absolute value of the...imperishable life which is bestowed by God alone.” In other words, Jesus made a radical statement to illustrate how ultimately precious eternal life is. It is **worth** making sacrifices to receive it.

Sources Close to Me said earlier this week, “Being a Christian is **hard**.” It means giving away time, energy and money that many people do not even pretend to give. It means trying to obey God's perfect law as very imperfect people. It means

caring about people for whom many do not care. It means making sacrifices. And yet we believe all these hard things are a price worth paying to avoid that place where, as Jesus said, “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” Actually, he is directly quoting this line from the prophet Isaiah. The “worm” refers to, ah, severe intestinal distress. The undying fires we already understand. The footnote in my study Bible tells us Isaiah refers to the endless punishment reserved for the wicked.

In a nutshell, Jesus is saying, “Look, I know following me is hard. But the consequences of not following me are harder.” Perhaps we Presbyterians do not speak enough of heaven and hell. Jesus certainly seemed to believe in them. Three times in today’s passage he references “enter(ing) into life.” That he refers to eternal life with God is proven in verse 47: “it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God...” As for hell, he speaks openly of that as well, in verse 43: “...than with two hands to go to hell.” The word he used for hell, the Aramaic *Gehenna*, was an actual place, the Valley of Hinnom. One of the lowest places on the face of the earth, it was also one of the driest and hottest. In Jewish thought, it stood as a fitting label for the place God would condemn the disobedient to inhabit forever. Yes, following Jesus is hard. Not following him is harder.

This preacher does not like threatening people with the fires of hell. But in today’s Bible passage Jesus did exactly that. Yet while at first reading we may not hear it, at the end of this speech he turned away from the threat and toward a promise. He said, “For every one will be salted with fire...Have salt in yourselves, and be at

peace with one another.” I reckon I have researched for, and written, over 1,550 sermons. At times I get to feeling like the writer of Ecclesiastes, who sighed, “There is nothing new under the sun.” Other times, I learn something new. This week I did. According to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, in Jesus' day the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem threw handfuls of salt on every burnt offering they conducted. In a time and place lacking refrigeration, the only way to preserve meat for even a few hours was to salt it. Thus, throwing salt on the meat sacrifices symbolized purification. It was a way to try to make the sacrifice as pleasing to God as possible.

When Jesus said his followers would be salted with fire he may have referred to the sacrifices they would have to make. He may specifically have had in mind the persecutions they would soon face. Regardless, he definitely meant that following him would make them more pleasing to God. They needed to “have salt in yourselves.” They needed to do the hard work of following him and being transformed by the experience. Following Jesus *is* still hard. For one thing it takes up half of your Sunday. If you put a fish symbol on your car you have to drive nicely. And you have to think carefully about how much money to give his church. Over the years we have learned that people's motivations for giving to the church can vary. Some are loyal, committed members who, if the preacher and the elders ask for it, feel obligated to do the right thing. Others give to help meet the budget. Still others see specific needs and want to help meet them. (Building maintenance, staff salaries and support for community agencies the church supports are common examples of this one.)

Jesus probably was not thinking of money when he taught his followers about the seriousness of making sacrifices in order to enter life with him. Yet it does not stretch his point to say that when he told them to “have salt in yourselves” his words can motivate us to give. To give money, to give our gifts of all kinds. Giving does not buy us our tickets into heaven. But it does help reform us more nearly into the people he calls us to be. Developing the habit of giving, and giving generously, changes us. Mark came to church because his wife Dawn wanted him to. They had a son and a daughter. They wanted their children to go to church. He said he knew she was right to want their family to be in a church but honestly, his impression was that the churches just wanted their money. Still, he came.

A couple of years passed. The son and the daughter got involved in the youth group. Seeing she had the gifts to become an excellent youth leader, the preacher asked Dawn to help run the group. She agreed to try it. She would lead that group for the next 16 years. (I guess the moral of that story is to be careful when the preacher asks you to do something.) She became a kind of second mom to dozens of youth. Her own faith grew. Someday I may tell you about her experience of the visceral power and love of God after witnessing a fatal traffic accident. Their son went on his first mission trip as a sixth grader. He was so cute in his little tool belt, walking around and measuring everything with his brand new tape. By the time he became a senior in high school he heard the call to become a pastor. He now serves a church in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He serves it so well I once tried to hire him away to work with me.

The annual mission trip was the crown jewel of that youth program. Twenty-five or so youth plus five or so adults would go to a disaster area and do either demo work or rebuilding. We specialized in putting on shingle roofs. We did it after Hurricane Katrina (twice), the Joplin tornado, and other places around the country. The work was hard but good. About ten years ago Dawn asked Mark to be one of the adult mission trip sponsors. Reluctantly, he agreed. He never missed another one. Seeing how hard the teens worked inspired him. As he repeatedly said, he was in awe of their capacity to give of themselves for people they did not know for longer than one week in their lives. It caused a spiritual renewal in his heart, a belief in God he had not felt since his confirmation in a Roman Catholic Church some 40 years earlier.

Mark found other ways to give, including becoming the most generous financial supporter of that church. He also gave me his friendship, becoming a part of a group of guys that would go out to the brew pub to pray and catch up with each other, or go out on one of their boats just to revel in God's creation. Our last boating expedition before we came here is a bittersweet memory for me. We said things to each other that evening that in my experience guys normally do not say out loud.

We do not give to get into heaven. But when we give we begin to experience its reality. It changes us. Following Jesus is hard. But it is worth it. Have salt in yourself. Have that quality, that purity that puts us at peace with one another. Give what you can, and maybe a bit more. If you have not already experienced the soul salt, you will. We need not take Jesus' words literally, but we had better take them seriously.