

## A Matter of Character

<sup>38</sup>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." <sup>39</sup>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. <sup>40</sup>Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup>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.

<sup>42</sup>"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.

<sup>43</sup>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.

<sup>45</sup>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. <sup>47</sup>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, <sup>48</sup>where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

<sup>49</sup>"For everyone will be salted with fire. <sup>50</sup>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."

The gospel passage contains what one might call an embarrassment of riches; there's so much in here that it's hard to narrow it down to just one sermon topic. How do you choose among the options? We have the part about the anonymous exorcist, we have the part about the millstone, we have the part about various things that may cause us to stumble, and then we have these three sentences about salt. I could probably go an hour on any one of them, or four hours on all of them together, but I like you too much to do that, so I won't.

Still, it's probably an important thing to realize that there's a common thread running through all these different options, and if we choose to follow that thread, we might be able to see just what holds all these competing ideas together.

The disciples seek a restraining order against a fellow who, while not a dues-paying member of the Disciples of Jesus, Incorporated, nonetheless is using the registered trademark, the name of Jesus, to perform exorcisms using the Disciples Official Exorcism process, patent applied for. Concerned about the unauthorized use of logos,

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trademarks and other intellectual properties, the Disciples, Inc., are seeking executive permission to file suit for copyright infringement and violation of trademark statutes.

In other words, the disciples are upset because right after they were embarrassed in front of Jesus by not being able to cast the demons out of a boy, they saw this other guy doing what they weren't able to do. So they tell him he has to stop. People are being helped, Jesus is getting the credit and nobody is being hurt, so naturally the program has to come to a halt. This could be a sermon on the evils of bureaucracy.

Jesus calls attention to their behavior; they need not forbid the man to do what he's doing. There's too much at stake to be worried about who's getting the credit. What people do in Jesus' name, if they're doing the right thing, can only reflect positively on the gospel. Jesus tells them, "Even if somebody merely gives you a cup of cold water in my name, that person won't lose his reward." There is no benefit in trying to put a lid on the people who are really helping you.

There's also a caution about what not to do: "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." Remember that in the previous passage, Jesus had taken a small child in his arms. Disciples have a responsibility, not just to do what's right, but to try not to do what's harmful. I daresay we have more trouble with doing no harm than we do with doing what's right; sometimes we even do good things to try to make up for what we've done that isn't so good. Jesus seems to be saying that it would be better not to do harm in the first place.

Jesus continues in the same vein: in what might be the most gruesome of Jesus' teachings, the disciples are urged to remove from their lives whatever leads them off the path. I think we're all clear that this is a figure of speech and not an invitation to do the unthinkable, but the message behind it is inescapable: we may find that we have to get rid of some things in order to live in the kingdom of God.

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Finally, we have these three sayings about salt. “Everyone will be salted with fire” must mean that those who follow Jesus can expect to find the going difficult; taken with the paragraph right before it, it seems to be saying that making those choices between things we like and the kingdom of God will be troublesome. The idea of salt losing its saltiness is a chemical impossibility if we’re talking about pure salt, but it helps to know that the salt found near the Dead Sea isn’t pure salt; in fact, the salt is mixed with minerals, and when the salt is leached out over time, only the minerals are left. To the average person, it would look exactly like salt, but it wouldn’t be salty. In this instance, salt seems to mean passion for the gospel, or zeal, or enthusiasm. If that’s the case, then the last sentence makes perfect sense: if the disciples have salt in themselves, they won’t be worrying about silly things like who’s the greatest, or whether someone else casting out demons in Jesus’ name.

All of these seemingly unrelated ideas share a common thread: all of them deal with some aspect of Christian discipleship. There’s a lot in here that seems negative: “don’t” is the operative word. Don’t forbid him, don’t cause a little one to stumble, don’t hang on to your eye or your foot if it causes you to sin, don’t lose your saltiness. The net effect, though, is positive: do follow Jesus. Do strive to become one who helps, one who encourages, one who brings a cup of cold water, one who has right priorities, one who endures difficulty without wavering, one who has such passion for the gospel that you don’t have time or energy for prejudice and pettiness.

The portrait Mark paints in this passage is one of a complete disciple, someone who isn’t susceptible to all the distractions and weaknesses that you and I seem to struggle through all the time. I’ll just go ahead and let you know that I haven’t come anywhere close to this ideal. I see it, though, and I’d like to be more like this picture.

The disciple Jesus calls us to be has a kind of character that rises above the difficulties. It isn’t just about what one does, nor is it just about who one is; it’s about

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the place where those things come together. It's about what one does because of who one is, and who one becomes because of what one does. And it's about what God can do when we show that kind of character.

Dr. Myron Augsburg, longtime president of Eastern Mennonite College (now University) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, tells this story about a Russian Mennonite named Aaron Riemple.

He lived in Gnadenfeldt, Russia. He had a large estate, was a very wealthy Mennonite farmer. He was so well known that the Czar of Russia would come and go hunting on his estate. In the early teens of this century, when the Red and White Armies were battling, they raged back and forth across Gnadenfeldt. One evening Herman Riemple was coming home from the market where he had gotten some things for his wife, and he came by a railroad siding and here was a box car full of people to be shipped off to Siberia, and a man called out and said, "Sir, we're so hungry. We've been in here all day with nothing to eat. Can you help us?"

And Herman Riemple, out of the goodness of his own spirit and heart, went over and shoved his bolognas and his bread and cheese through the slats and the man said, "Thank you."

And Herman Riemple said, "God bless you." And he went on home.

Sometime later the Red Army overran the whole territory. They took a lot of these Mennonite farmers and put them in box cars and shipped them off to Siberia. Now Herman Riemple had lost his estate. He went from wealth to poverty, but he still had his own ingenuity and he was quite an entrepreneur, and in Siberia he began getting tea imported from China, and he was selling tea. But this was contrary to the pattern of the new regime, and he was accused of a kind of capitalism in the midst of the new Marxist pattern of life, and he was brought to trial.

In the trial, of course, the witness was given against him and he was guilty of this capitalism. The Commissar asked him to step forward to be sentenced, and Aaron Riemple stepped forward, expecting this to mean his death. The Commissar looked at him and said, "I believe we have met before."

Mr. Riemple said, "Your Honor, I think not."

"Yes," he said, "I think we have. Have you been in Gnadenfeldt?"

"Yes," he said, "I lived in Gnadenfeldt."

The Commissar asked him, "Do you remember one evening when a man called you from a box car and said, 'Sir, we've been in here all day with nothing to eat. Would you help us?'"

"Ah, yes," he said, "I remember."

"And what did you do?"

"Why I went over and shoved my bolognas and bread and cheese through the slats."

"And what did you say?"

I said, "God bless you."

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The Commissar said, "We have met before. I was that man." He said, "I'm not going to sentence you. If you would like, I will sign papers and you and your family can emigrate."

And Riemple said, "Sir, if you will sign those papers for all Riemples, I've got brothers here with their families." And this whole family immigrated to California. Now little did Aaron Riemple know when he shoved that cheese, bread and bologna through the slats, what would happen in the future, but he did it out of the character of his being, and so I challenge us today to be God's people in truth, to put into practice the quality of the Christian life, to overcome evil by good.

This is what the disciples needed to learn, and it's what we can work on today: this is what it means to have salt in ourselves.