

Series: Journey to Eternity, #5
Valley Community Baptist Church
Avon, CT

Texts: Mark 9:38-50; 10:13-16
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Glimpses of the Kingdom

Today, movie theater lobbies are basically plain but necessary entrances. Most of the space is taken up with the junk food booths trying to get more of your money. But back in the hard days of the Great Depression, the lobbies of theaters were a feast for the eyes! Check this out!

[Show Los Angeles Theater, 1931]

That's the Los Angeles Theater, 1931! Isn't that incredible? Of course, movies back then were quite different, as well. The most popular films had the intentions of lifting people's spirits and taking their minds off the challenges they were facing in the Depression. So, there were the musicals of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and the dramas of Frank Capra like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. And of course, there was the comedy of the Marx Brothers. Going to the movies was getting a glimpse of another world, a world that was brighter and more hopeful than the one they lived in.

I think, in a way, that is what Jesus is doing here in this section of the Gospel of Mark. He's giving us a glimpse of what His Kingdom, the Kingdom of God, will be like when it is here on earth in full force. It's not the whole palace, it's just the lobby, but as we walk out of our rather depressing world, if we're paying attention, we'll begin to anticipate the reality that one day things will be much better.

The first glimpse shows us that in Jesus' Kingdom...

I. Faith, Not Rank, Produces Power.

Now again, please notice the context, where we are in the real events of the disciples' journey with Jesus. They've just had this go-around with Jesus about "who is the greatest" among them. Remember that? And Jesus has just said that in the world, greatness is measured by "how many people are serving you." But in His Kingdom, greatness is measured by "how many people you serve." Remember that?

Okay, so immediately after that lesson John steps forward and says this:

Teacher... we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us. (Mark 9:38)

Now, if you have this passage called up on your smart phone or iPad or you're "old school" and actually have it in the form of a "book," look back at what happened before the "Who is the greatest?" discussion. Do you see it? What happened? The nine disciples failed to remove a demon from a man. Now, imagine this, the disciples told a man who was ABLE to remove demons to stop doing it because "HE WAS NOT ONE OF THEM." Do you see any incongruity here? And remember why Jesus said the disciples couldn't do it. He said they couldn't do it because they weren't "prayed up." They were not practicing one of the basic fundamentals of ministry, prayer, but they were criticizing a man who obviously WAS a man of prayer (proved by the fact that He was able to remove demons in Jesus' name), and they were criticizing him because he wasn't a card-carrying disciple. So, what does Jesus say about all this? He says:

Do not stop him... No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. (Mark 9:39, 40)

Now, please notice, Jesus did not say anyone who does a miracle is for us. One commentator I read said that this is proof that “there is more than one way to God.”ⁱ No, that is Scripture twisting or selective omission. In fact, Jesus is saying the opposite of that. He says that anyone who does a miracle “*in my name*,” THAT person is not against us but for us. And He qualifies it even further in the next verse where He says: (Mark 9:41)

I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

Jesus’ point is this: it’s not about what religious title or rank you carry or what religious group you represent that connects you to spiritual power. It’s all to do with whom you’ve placed your faith in. Jesus says faith in Me produces power and He points out over and over again that that power resides in the most unlikely and unexpected people. In essence, He says that His Kingdom is “upside-down” compared to the kingdom of this world. He points to a very poor woman who puts a couple of pennies into the offering and He says, “There! She gave more than anyone else.” Upside down. He stands a child in front of adults and says, “Unless you receive the kingdom like this child, you’ll never get in.” Upside down. He says, “*Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*” (Matt. 10:39) Upside down.

Have you found this to be true? I have. The people I’ve known who’ve had the greatest spiritual power are not pastors of mega-churches or presidents of seminaries or the authors of dozens of books. No, they’ve been invisible people like the two sisters at McLean Home who weekly prayed through the night for the ministries of this church. Or the day-laborer at Electric Boat who was an elder in Liz’s home church, who spent his weekends sharing Christ door-to-door at the sub base in Groton. Or the quiet owner of a printing company in rural Minnesota who anonymously gave a huge percentage of his company profits to support dozens of missionaries in foreign countries. Jesus is saying, “There! That’s where the power is! It’s not with those in the spotlight. Not with those whose names are a household word in evangelical circles. NO! The power, My power, is with those who are living by faith – faith in me!”

This is the first glimpse Jesus gives us of what His Kingdom looks like.

The second glimpse is rather sobering. We can give it the title:

II. Suffering Will Lead to Glory

Mark 9:42-50 is a rather difficult passage to understand. It solicits a lot of questions. Is Jesus trying to scare us away from hell? And what’s all this talk about cutting off body parts? Is He encouraging self-mutilation? And what do salt and fire represent in verses 49 and 50?

Okay, let’s take these one at a time. First of all, Jesus’ warnings about hell. Former pastor, Rob Bell, wrote a book a few years ago entitled, *Love Wins*, where he basically states that hell is not a real place where people will go for eternity. In order to hold that position, you have to ignore a lot of Jesus’ teaching, because Jesus taught about hell A LOT!! His simple message in Mark 9 is that hell is real and you should

do whatever is necessary to avoid going there, because it isn't just a place of suffering but it will be eternal suffering! Jude 7, after mentioning Sodom and Gomorrah, states:

...They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. (Jude 7)

So, how can I say that this qualifies as a glimpse of Christ's kingdom? Well, first of all, it substantiates the incalculable value of the Kingdom of God. All this business about cutting off your hand if it causes you to sin, or plucking out your eye if it causes you to sin is simply to say that as extreme as that is, it would be worth it if doing that stopped you from sinning and turned you to put your trust in Jesus which is what will keep you out of hell and put you into heaven.

Secondly, this is a glimpse of Christ's Kingdom in that it warns us how serious a matter it is to be left out of His Kingdom. He's saying, "Don't mess with this! Don't make fun of it and most certainly don't do anything that would cause someone else, especially children, not to take the issue of heaven and hell seriously." Which makes me think of the recent Grammy Awards show which I did not watch but read the reviews of the next day. In one prime-time program you had the glorification of Sodom and Gomorrah, Baal Peor and a satanic ritual performed on national TV by Katy Perry. Friends, the performers at this year's Grammy's are who Jesus is talking to in verse 42. They are leading our young people to full-blown lust, the condoning of sinful expressions of marriage and even to think of the worship of Satan as not just something acceptable but something exciting. In the darkest days of Israel's Old Testament rebellion, it was not any worse than this. The Grammy's had 28.5 million viewers this year, which was a modern-day record. Several Christian artists walked out. That was probably the only good thing that happened that night. It's a serious matter to reject Christ but it is ten times more serious to lead others to do the same.

Thirdly, in this section of Scripture we find a very challenging verse, 9:49: **Everyone will be salted with fire.**

Jesus said it, but what does it mean? Well, imagine what it would be like to live without a refrigerator or a freezer. How would you store your food? Salt was the means of preserving and purifying things in Old-Testament times and in Jesus' day. In our day, we're constantly warned not to eat too much salt because it's bad for our health. In Jesus' day, it was seen as a miracle mineral. Probably because of its reputation for preserving and purifying things, it came to be used also to ratify formal agreements, covenants. God instructed the Israelites to "salt" their grain offerings as a symbolic way of "purifying" and "ratifying" their intentions for offering those sacrifices.

But after Jesus spoke about the danger of going to hell and how valuable it would be to go to heaven, what did He mean when He said, "Everyone will be salted with fire"? How can we be "preserved" or "purified" by fire? What does fire symbolize? There are several possibilities. Fire in the Old Testament was used for cooking, providing warmth, refining metals, destroying things (like idols) and in various acts of worship, such as, offering sacrifices. Now, what has Jesus just been talking about? He's been talking about remaining pure spiritually (*If your hand, foot,*

eye causes you to sin... cut it off! If anyone causes a child to sin... they should be cut off from society!) Also, in the verse just before verse 49, Jesus quotes Isaiah 66:24:

**...“their worm will not die,
nor will their fire be quenched...”**

What’s this talking about? It’s talking about judgment.

If you’ve grown up in America, you’ve known very little persecution or judgment. Oh, we may have been teased or experienced some form of prejudice in school or a job, but very few of us have been put in jail for being a Christian. But friends, 55 million babies have been murdered by abortion since 1973 and now 28.5 million people endorsed primetime Satan worship by watching it. How long do you think God will let this go on? And if judgment begins, Jesus has a message for us.

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first... Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. (John 15:18, 20a)

And Peter wrote:

...though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:6, 7)

Is this not the same message as “Everyone will be salted with fire”? Here’s what I believe Jesus is saying:

As you journey with Me toward the full realization of My kingdom, know this, you will be tested, you will be purified by the fires of persecution, sacrifice and temptation. But don’t be afraid! I’ve gone through it. I know the way. Follow Me.”

This, of course, was true for each of the disciples. Church tradition says that all the disciples but John died violent deaths. And John became a political prisoner who was exiled for decades to a life of isolation. So, on what grounds should we think that we won’t be “salted with fire”?

Now, some of you are saying, “Pastor, come on! You’re starting to freak me out! How am I supposed to deal with that? Am I supposed to go live in a cave?”

No. Listen. Much of the New Testament was written while the clouds of severe persecution were forming on the horizon. By 68 AD extreme persecution broke out in Rome under the Emperor Nero, who burned Christians at the stake in his garden as a source of light. Peter died in Rome at this time and he wrote his epistles from there. In both those letters, Peter sees the persecution coming and speaks openly about it to believers all over the Roman Empire. In his first letter, he writes: (1 Peter 4: 7, 12-14)

The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray...

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Peter is saying, “Yes, persecution is coming but don’t run. Stand your ground! We were put here to strike a blow against evil and to open a door for all who are willing to walk through and receive eternal life in Christ’s eternal Kingdom.” This is an eternal principle from Christ to Christians of every age: suffering for His name always, always leads to glory. The last glimpse of His Kingdom that Christ gives us is that...

III. It Is Received, Not Earned.

This glimpse is the one I don’t want you to miss because this glimpse shows you how to get in. This is like when you were a kid and your parents drove you by some great amusement park. You looked in and saw hundreds of kids riding the rides and eating the food and having a blast and all you could think of was, “How do I get in there? Where’s the gate? What’s it gonna cost?” Remember thinking that? Well, in Mark 10:15, Jesus tells us how we get into His remarkable Kingdom.

People were bringing their children to Jesus. Luke says that they were even bringing infants for Jesus to touch and bless. And the disciples made the executive decision that this was a waste of Jesus’ time, so they turned the kids away. When Jesus saw what they were doing, it says “he was indignant” and said to them:

...Let the little children come to me... for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. (Mark 10:14, 15)

What’s the trait in children that Jesus is pointing to as critical for entering His Kingdom? We talked about this a few weeks ago. It’s not their innocence (frankly, they aren’t all that innocent!) It’s not their clearer view of the truth. They DON’T have a clearer view of the truth. What is it? It’s their willingness to receive! A three-year-old doesn’t come to you in the morning and say, “What do I have to do in order to earn breakfast?” No. They ask for pancakes and are thrilled, jumping-out-of-their-skin excited, to receive them!

How do we “get into” this paradise of the kingdom of God? Where do we buy our tickets? Or how can we earn up enough points to win a ticket? You can’t get in that way. Tickets aren’t for sale and there’s nothing you can do to earn your entry. This is what Paul said to his relatives, the Jews: (Romans 9:31, 32)

...Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.

You can’t get into the kingdom of God the “adult way,” by proving that you “deserve” to be in. No, you can only get in through the children’s entrance – by receiving an invitation.

Just eleven verses later in Romans 10, Paul spells it out:

...If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom. 10:9)

In other words, if you confess that Jesus is the only real adult, the One who knows how to make the pancakes – and you believe that He has the power to forgive you for all the times you messed things up – you confess and believe – that’s how you can receive! And receiving His invitation is the only way into His kingdom. Have you done that? If not, then that’s your first order of business. Let’s do it right now...

Let’s pray...

ⁱ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 226