

Peace and Salt  
Mark 9:30-50

This is one of those passages that can just give a preacher fits. Each part of the message seems clear – even obvious. But how do the different parts fit together?

And fit together they should, for this entire passage is part of one conversation that took place in one house in Capernaum. And all of Jesus' teaching in this passage seems to be responding to a common problem: the problem of division among his followers – either divisions among the disciples themselves, or divisions between the disciples and others who called on the name of the Lord.

And it's easy to see how a large part of Jesus' teaching applies to these divisions, for whether we practice it or not, we all know that the answer to most conflicts is humility. The disciples had no business arguing among themselves about which of them was the greatest because the way to greatness in the Christian life is to demonstrate true humility – Jesus clearly says that the first shall be last of all, and servant of all.

But in order to drive this point home, Jesus uses a child as an object lesson. Now, in our culture, we tend to put children up on a pedestal, and let our lives revolve around theirs. But people in the ancient world looked at children as the least important members of society because they were the least productive members of society. So when Jesus said that His disciples should receive little children in the same way that they should receive Jesus Himself, He was calling them to a radical restructuring of their priorities. He was calling them to consider those of least consequence as more important than they were. That's the sort of humility that should be the hallmark of the Christian community.

And so Jesus' response to John in verse 39 just makes sense, doesn't it? If we Christians are truly humble, thinking of others as more important than ourselves, how could we possibly look down on other followers of Jesus? How could we think less of those who might prefer a different worship style, or who submit to the authority of bishops instead of presbyteries, or who have a different understanding of the mode or the recipients of baptism?

No, what really matters isn't our church organization or our structures – or even our Book of Order. Where it comes to Christians, what really matters is our common relationship to Jesus Christ. All Christians are on the same side, Jesus says, because there are only two groups of people that matter – those who belong to Christ and those who belong to the world. Therefore, anyone who isn't against Christ has to be for Him.

And so, it's no wonder that Jesus concludes this passage in verse 50 with a call to Christians to be at peace with one another. After all, at the beginning of this passage, He reminded the disciples that He had come into the world, not to reign on a throne, but be killed by

His enemies. If He could thus humble Himself in such a way, shouldn't we humble ourselves before each other? If He has died to purchase a people for Himself, what business do we Christians looking down on those for whom Christ died?

Yes, all that is clear from this passage. And the application of this important lesson in humility is right here for us as well. For doesn't verse 41 call us in humility to give aid and succor to other Christians as they carry out their ministries? And if even a cup of cold water will receive its reward, how much more greatly will we be blessed as we support missionaries who welcome and comfort those fleeing from the devastation of radical Islam in Syria, or as we support evangelists who are proclaiming the gospel to the lost in San Antonio or Austin? And as we support Christian ministries outside our denomination, from Hands of Hope in West Virginia to Show Mercy International in Uganda, as we trust the intentions and the judgment of the wider church, aren't we demonstrating our unity in Christ? Aren't we showing the peace of Christ to the world?

So much is true, and so much is clear. And this is where many people in the wider church want us to stop. For they wonder why we Presbyterians do so much fussin', engaging in so many debates about scripture and the Confession and marriage and who knows what else. Our non-denominational brethren urge us not to get bogged down in what to so many are simply abstract theological disputes. Why not just focus on helping the needy and especially the children? Why not just get busy about the real mission of the church?

But Jesus just won't let us settle for part of the truth. Because there's that other part of this passage, the part that we don't like, the part that Jesus rubs our noses in by repeating the same quote from Isaiah in verses 44, 46, and 48. What does this hell-fire and brimstone stuff have to do with being humble before one another? What does it have to do with helping the needy?

Well, before we try to figure out the connection with the rest of the passage, let's first try to understand what Jesus is saying here. Verses 43-48, for all their repetition, are really just making one main point – no matter how close or familiar something is to you, get rid of it if it causes you to sin. Even if it is as precious to you as part of your own body, throw it away if it comes between you and Jesus.

And why do we need to do that? Because of the sobering reminder of verse 49. Everyone, sooner or later, will be put through the fire. Those who are in a saving relationship with Jesus Christ in this life should expect the fire of the Holy Spirit to enter our lives, burning away everything within us that is out of accord with God's will. But it is also true that those who do not bow the knee to Christ will experience the fires of hell in the next life, the torment of eternal and complete separation from God, and therefore from light and truth and love. So much is clear,

and as Jesus demonstrates by quoting from the prophet Isaiah, the reality of Hell is taught throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Now, we Presbyterians may not be used to hell-fire and brimstone sermons. On the contrary, our focus on salvation by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone sometimes leads us to minimize how serious sin is. But again, Jesus will not allow us to embrace only part of the truth.

For how does this passage begin? With a reminder of the death of Christ. And if Jesus' death on the cross proves our need to model His humility – His putting others first – His death also shows us the seriousness of our sin. Our sin was bad enough to require the perfect, spotless Son of God to die. How then can we go on tolerating sin in our lives?

No, the pursuit of personal purity is simply not optional for us Christians. Even though we are not saved by any of our own efforts, a genuine effort toward holiness is an essential and necessary response for all who have been saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

But what is the connection between the two main themes of this passage? What does the pursuit of personal holiness have to do with our need to humble ourselves before others?

In a very real sense, this question encapsulates the division we find in the broader church these days. Some who claim the name of Christ nevertheless say that God doesn't really have an absolute standard of personal purity, especially where it comes to marital choices – what really counts in their eyes is deeds of love and mercy done to help the least of these. Others say that personal purity can't be compromised under any circumstances, and that if we have to spend some time and energy defending the unborn or the institution of Christian marriage, even if it means less time volunteering at the soup kitchen, then so be it. And as we know all too well, these disagreements have led denominations to divide.

And so the peace of the Church, a peace for which Christ calls in verse 50, is fractured. And there doesn't seem to be any middle way, any room for compromise in this conflict – the Church will either go along with the recent push to redefine marriage, or it won't. It will either consider the peace of the Church or the purity of the Church as most important.

So, who's right? Is there a way toward peace and purity in the Church? Is there a way for us to find unity across denominational lines in the midst of our differences?

Maybe we can find a way to bind the Church together. And maybe the place to start is discovering what binds this passage together. For what, after all, is the connection between personal holiness and humbly helping the needy?

Look at verse 42: "whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea." It is

only after this verse that Jesus begins to talk about our need for purity, our need to root sin out of our lives in a radical way. It seems, therefore, that one of the key reasons we should pursue personal purity is so we might not cause offense to the little ones. In other words, our pursuit of personal purity must be focused not on ourselves, but on the needs of others.

Does that make sense? Does what we do in our personal lives concerning our personal holiness really make a difference in the lives of others? Ask the child of an alcoholic father – the child who no longer has someone to look up to, to trust, to rely on. Ask the child of a parent who has broken his marriage vows – the child who is deprived of a stable home, and as a result who is so often thrust into poverty. To such children, the need for their parents' personal purity is not abstract at all – it is urgent, even desperate.

And of course our wider culture is now facing an even more basic issue of personal holiness: whether or not we should approve of marital relationships between two men or two women. But again, this is not just an abstract issue for politicians to debate – before the PCUSA agreed to broaden its definition of marriage, at the General Assembly I heard impassioned young men and women speaking of profound sexual confusion in their own lives, pleading with the church to stand firm on this issue for their sake and for the sake of their friends.

This is why we can't just forget about our theological differences and get on with helping the children. For in our increasingly confused, conflicted and divided culture, taking a firm stand for the truth is one of the best ways we can help the children. If we don't speak truth and bring light into the lies and the darkness of this culture, we will be condemning so many little ones to profound confusion, and perhaps to unspeakable sins that will shatter their bodies and harden their hearts. And if we don't seek at the same time to model in our own lives the need for faithfulness and purity that we preach with our lips, well, it might be better for the little ones if we were to put on that millstone and take a long walk off a short pier.

What this rotten world needs is salt, salt to preserve what can be saved. What this tasteless world needs is salt, zesty salt that can show how healthy pleasure is supposed to taste, how a life filled with commitment and faithfulness and love and trust and truth is supposed to taste. If the Church stops being salty, if the Church simply embraces the sin and the confusion and tastelessness of the world, what hope will any of these little ones have?

No, at the end of the day, there's really no distance between our need to pursue personal holiness and our need to humble ourselves before the little ones. For that's exactly what the little ones need today – for us Christians to be at peace with one another, united in our struggle for purity. They need to see us putting sin to death every day in our own lives, even as we also work to root it out of the world around us. They need to see the Church not just telling of the truth of

Christ, but showing the love of Christ by living the life of Christ through the power of the Spirit of Christ.

Will we give them what they need? Will we follow our Lord and our King to the cross? Will we die to our own pleasures, to our own agendas, to our own selves? Will we live instead for His Glory and for the good of the little ones, setting an example for them of what true life, faithful life, honest life is all about?