

Mark: For or Against

Mark 9:38-42

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Turn with me to Mark's Gospel, over in the ninth chapter, and this evening we come to verses 38 through 42. Sometimes verse 42 is taken with the next section, but there are arguments in favor of keeping it with the section that we are going to be reading this evening.

I don't know whether you were listening carefully (I trust you were) to the wonderful and eloquent prayer of Brad's this evening, who seems to have spent the whole afternoon, I think, meditating on this passage, as he carefully took us to various ways in which this text can be applied. I'd like you to think back over that prayer just now, and make that a little exercise: try and remember some of the things that Brad gave thanks for—works of somewhat menial nature, but cups of cold water done for the service of Jesus Christ.

Now, before we read this passage together, let's come before God in prayer. Let's pray.

Gracious Lord, we bow as servants before You, our Master, but we also come as children before a heavenly Father. Holy Spirit, You caused this word to be written, and we pray now that as we read it together that we might be given grace to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest; and help us, we pray, not just to be hearers, but to be doers also, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's holy word:

John said to Him, [that is, to Jesus] 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to hinder him because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not hinder him, for there is no one who shall perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is for us. For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward. And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea.

Amen. And may God add His blessing to the reading of His holy and infallible word.

In these chapters in Mark's Gospel, especially chapters 8 and 9, and to some extent it will continue into the tenth chapter, Mark is dealing with true discipleship. What are the marks of a disciple of Jesus Christ? What does service in the kingdom of God look like?

Last week we were in Capernaum, possibly in Peter's house on the shores of the northern parts of the Sea of Galilee. The disciples have just returned from a journey up north that has taken them to Caesarea Philippi and back, and evidently along the way they had been discussing with one another something, and Jesus now asks them what is it that they have been talking about on the way. And their answer is shocking, because it is something that would never occur to us to ask. They had been discussing which one of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of God. It's unnerving, the honesty with which they had to confess this topic of consideration along the way to Capernaum.

I. What it means to be a servant.

You remember the words of Jesus: "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all, and servant of all." And you remember, He took a child, a little boy, and embraced the little child and said, "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me." Jesus wasn't, I think, saying that we had to become humble like this little child. Children are not humble! Rather, I think Jesus was saying, 'Be like Me, who embraces little children..., little children who probably won't thank you for doing it. That's service in the kingdom of God.'

Now, it isn't always clear whether what follows actually follows is in the same context. We're not told whether this is a conversation that is continued in the house at Capernaum, and probably it isn't. And Mark has perhaps inserted it here because he's continuing the same theme of service and discipleship.

This time it is John, the Apostle John, the author of the Gospel of John, the author of the Book of Revelation, the author of three letters named after him: I, II, III John...that John, whose brother was James, sons of Zebedee. And this time it is John...it's the only place in Mark's Gospel where he is mentioned without his brother James, or without the usual triumvirate of James and Peter.

John belonged to that inner circle of disciples; he wasn't just one of the twelve, he was one of the three. He was one that Jesus, you remember, had taken. He had taken James and John and Peter into Jairus' house, back in Mark 5—Jairus, whose son had died, and there's a commotion out in the streets, and Jesus goes into the house and closes the door and takes these three with Him—that John

was there.

John was on the mountain of transfiguration. He'd seen the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ, as His flesh had transfigured before him. Can you imagine John writing a best seller: *Secrets About Jesus from One Who was There?* John will be taken apart in Gethsemane, along with the other two, separated from the other eight disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane after Judas' incident; taken to a place where they could be with Jesus. That's all Mark says: that He took John and James and Peter in order that they might be with Him...as though their friendship, their companionship, their presence would be important to Jesus.

Intimacy like that has problems for John. It came at a tremendous cost for the Apostle John. In the next chapter, James and John, these two brothers, are going to be in a house and they're going to say to Jesus, 'Lord, we want a favor from You. Because we're special, and we know that we're special, and we want You to put us one on Your left hand and one on Your right hand in the coming kingdom.' Imagine!

John was so upset in a Samaritan village when they didn't give him, perhaps, the deference that was due him, and didn't respond to the overtures of the gospel as he preached it...do you remember what John said to Jesus? "Lord, shall we call fire down from heaven to consume this village?"

Here it's John alone who speaks, but it's in the plural in verse 38. It's "we", and probably a reference to his brother James, and possibly a reference to all of the other disciples, too. They've seen something, and it's disturbed John. He's upset by it. He'd seen a man, an unknown individual, not one whom they could recognize...and they'd seen him casting out demons in the name of Jesus Christ. And John had gone up to the man and had said to him, 'Stop this! You have no right to be doing this!'

Remember back in verse 14 of this chapter, the disciples had been trying to exorcise a demon from a man's son, and they'd failed to do so. And you remember they'd taken Jesus aside afterwards privately and asked Him, 'Why could we not do this?' And I think that incident had troubled John. Perhaps that incident was still bothering him. After all, he wasn't just one of the disciples; he was one of the three. And after all, he was the 'disciple whom Jesus loved.' He would be the disciple who would lean on Jesus' breast. This was the disciple who could write a letter and say not just 'I know Jesus'; he can write a letter and say, 'I have seen Him, I've felt Him, I've touched Him...I've touched Him! Our hands have handled of the word of life.' But he couldn't cast out that demon. And this unknown pipsqueak, he was casting out demons in the name of Jesus, and John was indignant about it, and he said to him, 'Stop it! You have no right to be doing it!'

What is this? It's the spirit of exclusivism. Look at the words that John employs here; look at the words carefully, and they are depressingly revealing. John says to this man, 'You must stop this because....' — 'he was not following us.' John wasn't saying he wasn't following Jesus. He wasn't following "us." Do you see what's happening here? John has become the first one to...well, I don't know how to put it....denominationalize Christianity. You know, the "John church." That it's about what group you belong to, that's the important thing. How dare this man think that he can cast out demons, when there were times when he couldn't do it! This man hasn't spent any time with Jesus. He doesn't have the teaching and the knowledge and the inner secrets that John has, and he ought to stop doing whatever it was that he was doing, right there and then! "He wasn't following us....he wasn't following us." Imagine! John ...imagine!

This is John! You know, somewhere back in the nineteenth century a view developed that has gripped the church, that somehow you've got this hard, callous, mean-spirited Paul, and you've got this loving, embracing John. And actually, nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, it's the exact opposite. It's John who is the hard man. Do you remember the name Jesus gave to John? "Son of thunder. Boanerges. Son of thunder." This man had a fiery temperament! You don't cross this man! Grace transformed him. Grace transformed him into the apostle of love that he became; but this is not that John.

John is indignant because this man isn't giving him any due, any respect. How dare he go about doing this independently of the disciples, and not giving any glory, any respect to the disciples? This may come as a surprise to you, but this is John saying this. This is John saying this. Of course, this is an immature John. This is John before Pentecost. This is John who needs now to learn to examine himself. This is John, who is saying here to this man, 'Stop this!' And Jesus is saying to John, 'Do not stop that man from casting out demons.'

John's response to this man has been totally negative. John had had his commission, as all of the twelve had had their commission, from Jesus Himself. They were all 'called ones,' and trained ones, and on top of that, John had this special, loving relationship to Jesus, and John believed it was important to protect all of that. He was safeguarding the office of the apostles.

But Jesus is saying to him, 'Wait a minute, John. The issue is not whether this man belongs to our group. There are true disciples outside of this group.' At the end of Jesus' ministry there are going to be 500 people who are His disciples, many of whom have come to a knowledge of Jesus Christ apart, maybe, from the exact knowledge of the apostles, and they're outside of that group. John wants...I wonder...John wants to control the spread of the gospel? He sees his office, he sees his position as one of power, as one of control.

I think that feeling has bedeviled the church for centuries. I sometimes think about the discretions that we have about church office, that sometimes it's more

about control and it's more about power, and establishing boundaries, and setting rules and regulations than it is about kingdom work. What constraints were on this man?

And look at what Jesus says. It's so disarmingly simple. He couldn't deliver a child from a demon, and in the next moment be saying terrible things about Jesus. He couldn't deliver a demon from a child and then in the next breath say, 'Curse Jesus.' That would be theologically impossible. So let him be. 'Let him be,' Jesus seems to be saying. Here's an anonymous man. He's laboring in the name of Jesus Christ, as a true disciple. And he was succeeding where the apostles themselves had failed. He was delivering people from Satan. And the Lord is saying, 'Encourage him! Why don't you encourage him? Why don't you say, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant'?—because he's not going to be worshipping Satan tomorrow. He cannot in the very next moment be saying anything bad about Jesus.

You remember, in Rome...you remember, Paul was in prison, you find him there in prison in the Acts of the Apostles, and then later he's back in prison again, and things get really bad for him. And he's in chains, and he's heading for his death, and he writes a letter to the Philippians; and you remember, he says that some men in the Roman church, the church at Rome, had taken advantage of the lack of apostolic control on the church in Rome, and quite unauthorized by the Apostle Paul, went about preaching Jesus Christ. And Paul says, 'Their motives were horrible! They did it to spite me. They did it in the spirit of one-up-man-ship.' And what does Paul do? What does he say to the Philippians? Do you remember what Paul says as he writes to the Philippians? He says, 'Let them be.' You know, there might have been those who wanted to arrest these men and put them under church discipline because their motives were so bad, and Paul says, 'No. Let them be. whether they preach Christ out of a good motive or a bad motive, even if they're preaching out of envy, at least Jesus Christ is being preached.' That's what he says in Philippians, chapter one.

They were preaching Christ. They weren't preaching a false gospel. Paul would have no truck with that. They weren't ritualists. They weren't sacerdotalists, they weren't circumcisers, they were preaching Christ of the New Testament. They weren't Gnostics; they were glorifying and honoring Jesus Christ. And Paul says, 'Let them be. Let them preach. I rejoice that Christ is being preached and proclaimed.'

And that's the spirit that Jesus is saying here to John. Don't misunderstand this. Jesus isn't remotely suggesting that if this man were teaching something heretical and unorthodox that you should just leave him alone. Jesus isn't even remotely suggesting that. If someone preaches salvation by works, or salvation by respectability, or salvation by joining a church...if someone says 'no' to the requirement of a new birth, we don't welcome that. We don't condone that. We cannot be associated with that. The doctrine is wrong. This isn't Jesus saying,

'Look, it doesn't matter what this man believes or what this man is saying, just leave him alone.' That is not what Jesus is saying! This man wasn't a part of their group, and that's the issue that Jesus is dealing with.

Oh, it's so contemporary, isn't it? I'm a Calvinist, and a Presbyterian, and a paedobaptist...but none of those things, none of those things rule out someone from doing work in the kingdom of God.

Ligon and I have a Baptist friend whom we love dearly, and we tease him mercilessly about his view of baptism, as we did yesterday—or was it the day before? We do so in a way that doesn't threaten our relationship one bit. These are not issues that will qualify or disqualify entry into the kingdom of heaven.

So Jesus says, "He who is not against us is for us." Now, elsewhere He says something that almost sounds opposite of that. In Matthew 12:30 Jesus says, "He who is not with Me is against Me." But here He is saying, "He who is not against us is for us." When it comes to a person's relationship to Jesus, there can be no neutrality. If this man wasn't a disciple of Jesus, if he was casting out demons in the name of Beelzebub, that would be an entirely different thing; but this man was a disciple. He may have been an immature disciple, he may not have known as much as John knew. There were things about the kingdom of God that he needed to learn and be instructed in, but he was teaching the name of Jesus Christ. And Jesus says, 'Look, he who is not against us is for us.'

So John has a wrong idea about service. For John it was measured in terms of that which was done for him, with his permission, under his control. Do you see? John is esteeming himself as more important than he actually is, and that's what Jesus is dealing with here.

II. But there's a second thing. Not only was John guilty of a wrong opinion about his own place in the kingdom of God, he had equally a wrong opinion about the measurement of service in the kingdom of God.

There's a suspicion, I think, in what John is saying that says, 'The only ones, the only ones who do really great and significant things are people like me.' That's what John is saying. That's why he's so indignant about this man, because this man can't possibly be doing anything important and worthy of the attention of Jesus, because he's not one of us.

We measure greatness that way, don't we? I mean, who are the great Christians of all time? Well, list them! Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Huss, Whitefield, Wesley, Spurgeon...what am I doing? I'm listing ministers! Preachers! Professional theologians! And we think those are the great Christians of all time. And Jesus is saying, 'No, that's not how you measure greatness in the kingdom of God.' He says, 'Let Me tell you, let Me tell you what greatness is like. Whoever gives a cup

of water to drink, whoever gives a cup of water to drink because he belongs to Christ will by no means lose his reward.' A cup of cold water!

There was no water flowing in the faucets of Palestine. There were only wells, and travelers could very easily get dehydrated as they walked through the heat of the Middle East. You had precious water, but you had to bring it home with considerable effort, and these travelers were parched. A cup of cold water. What Grant so lovingly did for me this evening! ...brought me a cup of cold water. And Jesus sees that, Grant, and there's a reward in heaven for that.

Jesus sees the widow's mite. Imagine! In the temple, with all of the mayhem in the temple during the time of sacrifice, of people milling about everywhere, and He hears the sound of a widow's mite falling into those brass containers, those thirteen brass containers in the temple. She'd given all that she had. Her mite, she'd given it to the Lord, and Jesus heard that. It's done in the name of Jesus, the kind of things that Brad was mentioning in the prayer this evening. Who buffs the floors? Who picks up the bulletins as you leave them in a mess here on a Sunday evening? Who makes sure the place is heated and cooled, that the doors are locked? Who is it that ensures that you walk across the road here in safety on a Sunday evening? Don! It's a cup of cold water.

The little thank-you notes that you write to one another; the ministry that you have that Ligon was mentioning this morning, that the women have—the food ministry, in times of crisis—the way you come in times of grief and stress, and almost take over a home and provide food for those who are in bereavement, and you do it without any fuss. It's not published in *The First Epistle*. My name is in *The First Epistle*, Ligon's name is in *The First Epistle*, Brad's name is in *The First Epistle*. But that is not what Jesus sees. That's not the important thing. It's the cup of cold water that He sees.

Do you see what John is saying? Do you see the effect of what he is saying? If John is saying the only important work, the only really significant work in the kingdom of God is that which people like me do, then that poor, one-talent Christian who only has one talent, because that talent has been given to him or her by God, and they're trying to use that one talent, but John is saying that one talent is insignificant! And you should stop using it! Because the really significant things are the things that are done with show and pomp.

And Jesus is saying it's not like that at all. He sees the little things that you do. He sees them. It's in the name of Christ, and it's done with modesty, and often secretly so that the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing, and you do it for eternal rewards, that's all. Oh, and then there's somebody who says, "I don't do it for rewards," they say in a pious tone. Well, be careful. That's all very good, but Jesus says here there is a reward. Jesus says here there is a reward. Heaven will be a place of vindication. Isn't that a beautiful thing? Heaven will be a place of vindication. You may not get justice here, but you'll get it in

heaven...setting the record straight. Those who have been passed over in this world will be greatly honored and rewarded in heaven. "Come, you blessed of My Father...I was thirsty and you gave Me a cup of water." Jesus will say to you, 'Let me introduce you to My Father, the One Whom you've been speaking to all these years in your prayers, and you've been saying, 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name...' and let Me introduce you now to My Father, because you gave a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus, as a Christian, as somebody who trusted in Me and in Me alone.' And do you see what Jesus says? Look at the text in verse 42. Look at it! "If anyone causes one of these little ones [the one-talent Christian, the one like this one who was casting out demons who doesn't know a whole lot, certainly doesn't know as much as John]...if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck."

You can give so much plaudits to those who are under the lights that some poor Christian who only has a cup of cold water to give, to think 'I'm so unimportant, I'm so unimportant and worthless in the kingdom of God' —listen! Many of you said to me this morning, as I'm sure you said to Ligon, in this exhausting week that both of us have had, "I've been praying for you." You know what I did, and forgive me, what Ligon did, doesn't measure up to what you're doing. You know the two most dear people to me in all the world are Madge and Anna Spears. You don't know them...Rosemary knows them, both of them. They're in heaven now. They were spinsters. They were sisters. They lived together. There were three of them originally. I only knew two of them; and they were the kind ...and there are some in this church, and you know who they are, and they live for the church. If there's a meeting, they're at it. If there's a prayer meeting, no matter what time of day it is, they're at it. They were always praying for me... always praying for me. And Madge Spears died last year at the age of 101, and she's in glory now, and I say to you tonight with all sincerity, that's a great Christian. That's the measure of greatness. She never had the limelight. Her name was never up in lights. She never stood before thousands of people to speak. In her own closet, she would pray every single day for me. For me! And Jesus is saying, 'That cup of cold water....'

You know, some of you are saying—and maybe it's not some of you, maybe it's some of you who are not here who may be listening to this on a tape—and some of you are saying, 'You know, what I do is more important than praying. I'm a businessman! You know, I make deals in thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of dollars every day. That's important.' And Jesus is saying, 'No, it's not. That cup of cold water...I see that. I see that,' Jesus is saying.

If you cause one of those one-talent Christians to stumble by your pride, by spiritual arrogance (because that's what it is), it were better for you, Jesus says, and listen to Him: "It were better for you that a millstone..." Do you know what a millstone looks like? Huge chunk of rock that it would take a mule to pull around

in a circle to grind the wheat! Imagine this thing: you're in the back of a boat, and this millstone has been lifted into the boat by several people and it's chained to your neck, and the boat is taken out to the sea, and then that millstone is lifted, and its hoisted over the edge of the boat and dropped into the ocean, and you're pulled over, and down you go! For what? What have you done? Child molester, rapist? A serial killer? No. You just caused a weak, trembling, one-talent Christian to stumble by your spiritual pride and arrogance.

Ah! This cuts those of us who are in office in the church, like John, it cuts us to the very quick! And may God humble us as ministers, as elders, as deacons, to hear the words of Jesus here, because it is the way the Master went. Shall not the servant tread it still?

Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, every time we read Your word and study Your word, You cut us into shreds. You puncture that balloon of pride and arrogance, and we pray for that Jesus-like spirit, Who thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation. Grant us such humility, we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand, receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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