

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

Scripture's Most Sobering Theme

(Mark 9:42-50)

Study #18

Introduction: Inquiring minds want to know...

As I've reported, the trip I took in August to serve a church in the small country of Uruguay, South America, was wonderful.

I already knew lots of the people there from previous trips that we have made and had lots of great visits with them along with lots of great meetings with groups.

On the one Sunday morning I was there the Lord blessed with rich music and testimony. I was given the opportunity to speak to the church, and they were most kind.

Well, at the end of the worship service people were mingling and some were speaking to me (who doesn't speak Spanish) in the time honored manner of those with a language barrier - slowly and loudly. No. That doesn't help much.

But one woman approached me with a question. She was actually quite fluent in English. She asked, "*What do you think of Rob Bell? What do you think of his book, Love Wins?*"

Now, I don't want you to feel badly if you don't know who Rob Bell is or if you haven't heard of his latest book.

But to have been approached by someone in a small church in an outlying suburb of Montevideo, Uruguay with these questions should assure us all that people are talking and that inquiring minds want to know.

Rob Bell has been a pastor of a very large church in Michigan since 1999.¹ His teaching ministry is well known (obviously, worldwide) and his most recent book is (the somewhat extravagantly titled), Love Wins - a book about Heaven, Hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived.

Today, the passage in Mark we are going to explore together leads us to the topic of life after this life, specifically to the theme of Hell.

This is not a message I have been eager to bring. While I am convinced that it is an important message, it has not been enjoyable to prepare.

I've read as widely as possible this week in preparation and have studied to bring you what I believe Jesus is teaching in the passage at hand AND to bring to light some of the Bible's larger lessons about life after this life for those who don't believe.

But there have been a few moments this week when my preparation has been less cerebral and more reflective, even emotional. More than a few times I've been sobered, realizing that any consideration of hell is, first and foremost, not a consideration of academic doctrine, but of the destinies of people.

So, today, we'll listen to some of what the Lord Jesus has to say about this theme, asking that He will allow us to have His mind and His heart as we think, consider, and wrestle with what I consider to be Scripture's most sobering theme.

Review... (Mark 9:30-40)

Last Sunday we listened as Jesus previewed His disciples, for a second time, to His own soon-to-come suffering and death.

¹ Bell will be leaving Mars Hill around the end of 2011 to pursue other ministry opportunities. Both Rob and the church are accepting this decision as God's leading into a new chapter in Rob's life, not as something negative.

And we noted that following *this* Jesus - a suffering, servant Messiah - informs the course that our own lives will take.

We are not to fight our way to the top, stepping on the heads of those below us in our striving to be great.

No. We are called to embrace lastness, not firstness; we are to rush to serve, not be served. And we are to be as inclusive as possible, not drawing thick lines separating “us” from “them.”

If people are doing what they are doing in the Name of Jesus, cheer them on. If they are committed to the idea, as we are, that faith alone in Christ alone is all that is needed for eternal salvation, join them.

Well, immediately following these words about true greatness in Jesus’ kingdom are words of warning. They concern the issue of stumbling.

First, a pastoral confession. One of my favorite TV shows is, and has been for a long time, America’s Funniest Home Videos. I guess the slapstick gene runs deep.

But as long as there is not obvious long-term injury involved, I think that watching somebody my age do something that you just know he shouldn’t be doing and getting creamed for it can be funny. Watching a teenager try a daring trick that doesn’t work out too well can be funny.

But sometimes, the show has a video of somebody tripping somebody else up. It could be a toddler or a young woman or an elderly person.

Frankly, I don’t think that’s funny. Tripping somebody else up isn’t funny. We don’t think it is and neither did Jesus.

Stumbling-Blocks (vv. 42-48)

“Stumbling” Others (v. 42)

Those who stumble

[42] “Whoever causes one of these little ones who BELIEVE...

Now, we don’t know if Jesus and His disciples are still in Peter’s home as we move to this warning passage. If so, we wonder if He is still holding the toddler in His arms He was holding when He talked about greatness as He now speaks of **“one of these little ones.”**²

But the Lord isn’t talking about children, generally. He is talking about those who believe in Him. He’s speaking about the children of God and the possibility that somebody has caused one of these **“little ones who believe”** to **“stumble.”**

And what does He mean when He mentions stumbling?

“Stumbling”

[42] “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to STUMBLE...

The image is of someone on a walk. A believer in Jesus is walking with Jesus. He is enjoying fellowship with His Lord. She is walking toward Jesus, pursuing Him, eager to follow Him.

Then, somebody causes her to stumble. Somebody sticks out a foot to trip him up or ties a piano wire to two trees across a footpath and he goes sprawling.

And this is not a physical stumbling. It is a spiritual stumbling. After the stumbling, the believer is no longer walking with or toward Jesus. The stumbling has effectively derailed this **“little one who believes”** from following Jesus.

Some versions of the Bible give a slightly different sense to this comment. The New International Version, for instance, has **“causes one of these little ones to sin.”** But I don’t believe that is a strong enough or broad enough understanding of what is going on.

² We don’t know the setting of these words. Many commentators believe that these words of warning (and the ones that follow) are taken from various talks Jesus gave and have no necessary tie-in with what has just happened in Peter’s home.

Better would be *“causes one of these little ones to lose faith in Me.”* or *“causes one of these little ones to stop following Me.”*

Jesus is not specific about how this “stumbling” might take place. He focuses on the result rather than the means of the stumbling. Nor is He specific about what will happen to the one who causes the stumbling.

But His vagueness makes the punishment, whatever it might be, seem more ominous. Listen.

Punishment

[42] “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.

Causing someone else to stumble will result in a terrible punishment. It is a punishment so terrible that, having experienced it, the guilty will wish that a three hundred pound weight had been tied to his neck and he’d been thrown into the deepest part of the sea.³

The *“little ones who believe”* matter so much to Jesus that to trip one of them up is more than a capital offense. A quick drowning would be much preferred to the punishment that will actually be handed out.

The forcefulness of these words may shock you. They may not be what you would have expected from Jesus. Of course, this is Jesus speaking about how much He cares for the children of God - and that’s not surprising. But it is also Jesus speaking in terms of punishment.

It’s one thing to hear Him speak of reward. It’s another to hear Him speak threateningly, ominously, of judgment.

But His words here assure us that actions bring consequences. We have already seen that God will richly reward those who embrace service and lastness (9:33-41). Now He makes clear that God will severely punish those who cause others to stumble.

As the passage continues, Jesus turns His attention to His immediate audience and warns them of the danger of stumbling, personally.

The focus shifts from that of harming others to harming self, from tripping somebody else up who is walking with Jesus to being guilty of derailing ourselves from following Jesus.

The warnings are just as dire and much more explicit.

“Stumbling” Yourself (vv. 43-48)

[43] “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire. [45] “If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell. [47] “If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, [48] where *THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.*”⁴

The person who stumbles - hmmm...

Let’s ask the same question here that we asked of verse 42: To whom was Jesus speaking? That is, what kind of a person? A believing person or an unbelieving person?

Well, similar words are found in a couple of other places in the Gospels. One place we find them is in Matthew 18, where He spoke nearly identical words. It appears in that setting that Jesus was speaking directly to the twelve apostles.

⁴ Verses 44 and 46 were almost certainly not in Mark’s original gospel, as they are missing from the oldest manuscripts we have of Mark. It is likely that a scribe simply carried the thought from verse 48 (dealing with the eye) backward and applied it to the foot and hand. This does not mean, of course, that the truth of Mark’s Gospel is in question, only that there is some question as to the original form of the book that Mark wrote.

³ The mill stone was a very heavy stone, the stone pulled around by donkey power.

But He also said the exact same thing in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:29-30), which was a message addressed to both the disciples (5:1) AND to a larger crowd of hangers-on (7:28-29).

I believe that here in Mark 9, Jesus is addressing Everyman. What He is saying applies, in some way, to each one of us.

And the essential message is, *“Don’t stumble as you walk toward Me or as you walk with Me!”*

“Stumbling”

Jesus mentions stumbling by the hand, foot, and eye.

He says that by what we do, by the actions we take, we might dull a fiery passion to follow Jesus. By the places we go, the locations we frequent, we might derail ourselves from a walk by faith. By what we allow ourselves to look at, what we let our eyes focus on we might stumble and fall and a vibrant pursuit of Jesus would be stopped in its tracks.

And to allow ourselves to “stumble” in any of these ways would be disastrous. And this time He is much more explicit in defining the disaster.

Punishment

Jesus describes a punishment consisting of being thrown into [47] ***“...hell, [48] where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.***

What is Jesus talking about here? Pretty clearly, He is talking about Hell. By these words, Jesus says that Hell is a reality.

Hell

The sobering nature of any discussion of Hell.

Hell is on our minds

Hell is on our minds. It’s on the minds of people in Montevideo, Uruguay and it is on the minds of people in San Antonio, Texas.

We want to know if it is true that there is a Hell and if there is a Hell we want to know what is true about Hell.

Hell has certainly been on my mind over the past week. I’ve read Rob Bell’s book, Love Wins and I’ve read Francis Chan’s book, Erasing Hell. They are both bestsellers. I’ve spoken with people about Hell and I’ve read encyclopedia articles and book reviews.

But then, Hell has always been on my mind.

As a young teenager, I reflected on Hell a lot. And I have always believed that it was the kindness of God that He sensitized me to the danger I faced of the wrath of God in judgment.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus said that among the Holy Spirit’s many ministries is that He will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. (see John 16) The Holy Spirit mercifully convicted me of judgment to come and it was a dread of Hell that was among the factors that drove me to place my faith in Christ.

Now, would it surprise you to hear me say that God wants Hell to be on our minds? I think it is true.

Jesus spoke about Hell on a number of occasions. In fact, He explicitly mentions Hell more often than anyone else in the Bible. So, people who disparage “Hell-fire preaching” must face the awkward fact that Jesus talked about Hell, here and elsewhere.

The Apostle Peter spoke about God’s judgment (especially in 2 Peter) and the little book of Jude does, too.

Read through the letters of the Apostle Paul and you will find that he never tired of reminding his Christian audience that they had been rescued from the wrath of God, from destruction, from judgment.⁵

In the one message we have of Paul speaking to a completely Gentile audience - Acts 17 where he spoke to the philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens - what was his theme? Judgment!

⁵ While Paul doesn’t use the term “hell” in his writings, the concept is prominent.

And yet, it is tempting to ignore the topic of judgment and Hell, sweep it under the carpet. It is just as tempting to temper what the Bible says about it, teaching what I believe is the doctrine of “heck.”

“Hell” or “heck”?

In some of my reading this week, I have run across an understanding of Hell that runs counter to what we read in the Bible.

It is an understanding that Hell is real, but temporary. Sure, people will go to Hell, but there will be an eternity to turn to God after this life is over. Hell is real, but escapable.

It is a rare thing for me to name names from the pulpit, but I’m going to do so today because the stakes are so high.

Rob Bell teaches in his book, Love Wins, that after this life is over, those who have been sent to hell, having never placed their faith in Jesus, will still have an eternity to do so.⁶

Well, if Rob is correct, then we can all breathe a sigh of relief. We can relax a bit. While it would be better to believe in Jesus now (and Rob would say that it would be much, much better!), there is no ultimate urgency to evangelism. There will be chances later.

But what if Rob is wrong?

If what he is teaching in Love Wins is wrong, and there is no “second chance”, what of those who were counting on a second chance? THAT will be the ultimate tragedy.

What if we believe that hell, while not as good as heaven, is not that bad or is temporary - and we are wrong?

What if we believe that and so put off dealing with Jesus, ourselves? What if we believe that and use that understanding as a reason for not bothering someone else about Jesus?

What if Hell is what the Bible says it is and that it never ends?

Look closely with me at the verses before us today. First, you will notice that we find the actual word “Hell” here.

What is “Gehenna”?

The garbage dump (?)

Jesus’ word for “hell” in Mark 9 is the Greek word, “gehenna.” Gehenna refers to a valley (the Valley of Hinnom) located just outside and to the southwest of Jerusalem.

It is understood by some that the Valley of Hinnom was used as a garbage dump for Jerusalem. It burned with a noxious smell and was a nasty place.

Rob Bell teaches this and says that when Jesus said “gehenna” His audience would have thought “garbage dump.” Bell goes on to say that the “hells” we experience in this life (war, murder, rape, hatred, racism) were what Jesus was talking about when He talked about Hell. Garbage dump living.

No, it’s worse than that.

The place of judgment

For one thing, the first reference we have to the Valley of Hinnom being used as a dump for Jerusalem’s garbage is from the 11th century AD!⁷

⁶ While Rob doesn’t exactly teach universalism (the idea that everyone will eventually be saved), he does teach that everyone will have all the chances he/she needs throughout eternity to turn to God.

⁷ Rabbi David Kimhi (writing from Europe about 1200 AD) was the first person to reference the Valley of Hinnom as a garbage dump. Despite this, there is no archaeological evidence that the Valley of Hinnom was ever used as Jerusalem’s garbage dump.

Jesus' audience would have thought something entirely different than "trash heap" when they heard Him mention "gehenna."

In Old Testament times, the Valley of Hinnom was the place where, in a period of great apostasy, some of the Jews sacrificed their children by burning them as they worshipped the false gods Molech and Baal (see 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; Ezekiel 16:20-21).

The prophet Jeremiah referred to this valley, metaphorically, as the place where the wicked would be judged by God.

So, when Jesus' audience heard Him speak of gehenna they would have known that He was referring to a place of God's judgment on people because of their sin.⁸

But what about eternity? Is it true that the Bible teaches that Hell is forever? Again, to the Bible we turn.

Eternity is a long time

In today's passage, Jesus speaks of an "**unquenchable** (Greek - *asbeston*) **fire**" and a "**worm that does not die**."

Fire is a common image for judgment. In the ancient world, so were worms. And I am open to the idea that the fire and the worms are figurative uses of language to describe in terms we will understand something that words cannot describe.

What I do not believe is figurative is the reference to eternity, to the never-endingness of Hell.

On a number of occasions, Jesus talks about "everlasting fire" (Matthew 18:8) and everlasting punishment (Matthew 25). That is also the sense we get when we read Revelation 20 and a description of the final judgment.

Toward a biblical understanding of Hell

Jesus wants us to know that Hell is real, that it is a place where the judgment of God is poured out on people who don't believe, and that it does not end.⁹

You might think that I'm overlooking passages that speak about people getting a second chance after death to turn to God and be saved. I'm not. I've looked. They aren't there.

In fact, Scripture flatly prohibits the thought of a post-mortem chance at eternal life in Hebrews 9, where we read, [27]...***inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.***

As Francis Chan points out in his book, there is not one passage in the Bible that gives us freedom to think that anyone will get another chance at eternal life after they die. Not one. And our understanding about heaven and Hell and God and salvation and a host of other themes are, of necessity, based on what the Bible says. We can't figure these things out. They must be revealed.

You may be tempted at some point this morning to think, "*Well, if that is the way God is, then I don't want to have anything to do with Him!*"

And to the one who doesn't want to have anything to do with God, God says, "*That is what Hell is for.*"

Hell is the ultimate and logical eternal outcome for those who refuse to come to God on His terms in this life.

Coming to God on His terms involves coming to Jesus, putting faith in Jesus, depending on God's mercy, not our merit.

In one of his books, C.S. Lewis wrote, "To those who refuse to say to God, 'Thy will be done, O Lord', He will, in the end, say, 'Your will be done, O man.'"

⁸ See Jeremiah 7:29-32; 32:35

⁹ This is exactly the sense that we get as we read all of Jesus' comments about Hell in the four Gospels. It is also completely consistent with what we read in the rest of the New Testament.

Hell is, essentially, the place where God makes it possible for those who rejected Him in this life to not have to worship and serve Him for all eternity, and will also not have those things that arise from His character for all eternity - things like grace, love, beauty, and community.

Jesus is saying to us this morning that this life counts! In this life we are preparing for eternity.

If we are having trouble with the concept of Hell, let's admit that it is because God has a more developed sense of justice than we do, not the other way around.

He sees sin for the wretched evil it is. He knew that to deal with sin would require the death of His Son. We may think of sin as sort of bad and deserving of "heck." God knows sin's utter sinfulness and deems it worthy of Hell.¹⁰

So, if this is the understanding of Hell that we should bring to this passage, what do Jesus' words of warning say to us this morning?

Jesus' Message

To all

First, I think we can and should take the warnings as Jesus simply "telling it like it is." I have Rick Clayworth to thank for this insight, but it is true that it would be better to be a blind, quadriplegic, multiple amputee in Heaven than a fit Olympian in Hell.

¹⁰ From the Evangelical Free Church of America Statement of Faith (adopted 2008), Article 10. "We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace." The old Statement of Faith (and our current one) Article 12. "We believe in the bodily resurrection of the dead; of the believer to everlasting blessedness and joy with the Lord, of the unbeliever to judgment and everlasting conscious punishment."

Of course, He was not advising masochism or self-mutilation,¹¹ but He is saying that we should, at all costs, avoid Hell. Eternity and life with God are more important than even very important parts of our bodies.

Now, specifically, what would He be saying to us, today? What is Jesus saying to those of us who have placed our faith in Him for salvation?

Here's what I think He is saying.

To believers

Sin - which is the kind of trouble that hands, feet, and eyes can get us into - is exactly what Jesus saved us from and is exactly why He died on the cross. Sin, therefore, is exactly the kind of activity from which we should flee!

AND, since what we do and where we might go and what we might see are exactly the kinds of things that will derail us (stumble us) from following Jesus, these are exactly the kinds of things that we should avoid.

If you have put your faith in Jesus, you will not go to hell for your sins. Believing in Jesus saves us from our sin.

But, if you have placed your faith in Jesus, why in the world would you commit the kinds of acts, allow your feet to take you places, and view the kinds of things that lead to the sins that prompts God to send people to hell or that made it necessary for Jesus to die on the cross in the first place?!

If you are a believer in Jesus today and you are engaging in behavior that is keeping you from following Him, or that is tempting you to stop following Him, realize that it was for these things that Jesus suffered and died. Turn away from these soul-killing ways and pursue the life-giving holiness for which you were saved.¹²

¹¹ Throughout history, some have taken His words this way. Notably, the church father, Origen, who castrated himself, at least in part because of Jesus' words here.

¹² I do not believe that Jesus is saying that someone who believes in Jesus and has become a child of God is in danger of spending an eternity in Hell. Too many other

And to those who have never put their trust in Jesus, what is He saying here?

To unbelievers

He is saying that Hell is real. And He is saying that what will send anyone to Hell is, simply, sin. It is sin - of whatever variety - that brings the wrath of God.

The difference between someone who is going to heaven when they die and someone who is going to hell when they die is not whether they have sinned or not. All have sinned!¹³

The difference is whether someone has been forgiven of their sin. And forgiveness of sin comes only by placing faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross.

God has made a way of escape by sending His Son, Jesus, to die for you on the cross.

By placing your trust in Jesus you receive the free gift of eternal life. You pass from death to life. You will be Heaven bound, taking a 180 degree turn from destination Hell.

So, recognize that whatever is keeping you from trusting Jesus Christ is keeping you from life and is keeping you on a track to experience Hell.

Let it go! Release your grip on whatever you are depending for life and trust Jesus for eternal life!

Conclusion:

Wow. You and I have covered a lot of ground today. Of course, there's a lot that we have NOT dealt with in our consideration of Hell.¹⁴ But we've wrestled together with Scripture's most sobering theme and have seen some of what God's Word has to say about Hell.

Now we come to the end and it is time to wrap up. Likewise, Jesus has come to the end of His talk in Mark 9. How will He conclude?

I don't know how you would have concluded after talking about Hell, but Jesus talks to His audience about salt.

[49] "For everyone will be salted with fire."¹⁵ [50] "Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

In light of the danger of Hell, be salty. Given the knowledge that people might stumble and fall away from following Jesus, be salty.

Among the many functions of table salt is its ability to create thirst.

Jesus tells us who have believed in Him to live in such a way that we create a thirst for Him in the hearts of those we know and love.

- Lead a holy life, one that brings glory to God.
- Let others see your servant's heart.
- Let your loved ones see you race for the last place.
- Let people witness your self-sacrificing love.

Strive to live in such a way that people will see your life and thirst for your Jesus. The stakes are eternal.

¹⁴ Many passages not explored; themes like the fate of those who have never heard, etc...

¹⁵ To be "salted with fire" seems to evoke the imagery of temple sacrifice. See Leviticus 2:13, where we find the requirement that grain offerings (which were burned) must be accompanied by salt, together with the more sweeping generalization, ***"With all your offerings you shall offer salt."***., Here, those who are salted are us, the worshipers.

places in Scripture make it abundantly clear that if you have become a child of God, you will never be anything but a child of God.

¹³ See Romans 3:23; 6:23