

Mark 9:33-50 ~ Scripture Verses

Who Is the Greatest?

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” ³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

³⁶ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Recognize Your Allies

³⁸ “Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

³⁹ “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰ for whoever is not against us is for us. 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.

Warnings From Jesus About Sin and Hell

⁴² “And 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. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.[a] ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where

“‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’[b]

⁴⁹ Everyone will be salted with fire.[c]

⁵⁰ “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

Footnotes:

a. Mark 9:45 – Some manuscripts add verse 46, ‘where the maggots [or worms] never die and the fire never goes out.’

b. Mark 9:48 – Isaiah 66:24

c. Mark 9:49 – Some manuscripts: “For everyone will be tested with fire and every sacrifice will be salted with salt.”

Mark 9:33-50 ~ Discussion Questions

1. What does the disciples' argument tell you about their understanding of who Jesus was and why he had come? As a disciple, how would you feel when Jesus asked about the argument you were having? (9:33-34)
2. How did Jesus explain what it means to be great? (9:35) What does it really mean to be a servant of all? [Some translations say, "*slave* of all."] How can you become a "servant of all" in your everyday activities?
3. Do you think most government and business leaders today behave or inspire others in the way Jesus said a leader should be? How about church leaders?
4. When Jesus gave the example about little children (9:36-37), do you think he was speaking only about children? Who else might be included?
5. What issue concerned the disciples in 9:38? What did they try to do about it?
6. As believers today, what issues do we tend to be divided about? How do you think God views the various denominations the Christian church has divided into?
7. In Verses 9:39-41, what principles was Jesus trying to teach the disciples? Specifically, consider verse 9:41: who was to be helped, what help was to be given, and what was the reward? How does this apply to *you* today?
8. Some writers think Jesus was referring to all new believers in 9:42. What does the Bible say about causing others to stumble? (See Matthew 18:6, 10, 14, Romans 14:13, Romans 15:1, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, 1 Timothy 2:9-10, 2 Timothy 2:15)
9. How do you think a Christian can cause others to sin? In what ways is causing another person to sin worse than sinning yourself?
10. Why did Jesus use an extreme example in this context? (9:43-47)
11. What's the meaning of Verse 9:49? [Some translations say, "For everyone will be tested with fire and every sacrifice will be salted with salt."]
12. What does the "salt" in Verses 9:49-50 represent?
13. How does Jesus' admonition to be at peace with each other relate to 9:42-49?

Mark 9:33-50 ~ Leader's Guide

1. What does the disciples' argument tell you about their understanding of who Jesus was and why he had come? As a disciple, how would you feel when Jesus asked about the argument you were having? (9:33-34)

Think today of why you argue with friends and why the disciples might argue.

Questions of rank and status are normal and played an important and played an important role in the life of Jewish groups at this time, but they had no place in Jesus' value system. The life of discipleship is to be characterized by humble and loving service. It seems that the disciples didn't understand this yet.

The disciples were embarrassed that Jesus called them out on this discussion or argument so they kept quiet and didn't answer him. Have you ever had a private conversation overheard that embarrassed you? Of course. Did it make you think twice the next time? Maybe but probably not.

2. How did Jesus explain what it means to be great? (9:35) What does it really mean to be a servant of all? [Some translations say, "slave of all."] How can you become a "servant of all" in your everyday activities?

By being last, does that mean you should always go to the end of the line (and risk the chance of not getting whatever you're on line for)? Possibly, but there are two meanings that fit better. First, you become great in God's sight as you sincerely and unpretentiously look away from yourself to revere God. Second, you become great by making sure that everyone else (children, disabled, elderly, those unable to fend for themselves) are served before taking your share. This can be on a literal, actual line or figuratively making sure everyone gets his/her share.

3. Do you think most government and business leaders today behave or inspire others in the way Jesus said a leader should be? How about church leaders?

Hardly. With so many leaders today, "It's all about me."

4. When Jesus gave the example about little children (9:36-37), do you think he was speaking only about children? Who else might be included?

Jesus could have talking about actual children, or people who were new and immature in their faith, or anyone in need. Children in Biblical times were not valued as they are today in contemporary Western society; they were of low status and had little value. Thus they were an example of the *object* of the disciples (and our) service (the lowly and least esteemed). Also, during times of persecution, hospitality was especially important and could be dangerous. So Jesus says that those who provide it and show kindness to God's people will receive a reward.

5. What issue concerned the disciples in 9:38? What did they try to do about it?

The man who was driving out demons was clearly a believer. By this time in his ministry, Jesus had preached to large groups (feeding the 5,000 and 4,000 indicated groups as large as 15,000 had heard him) and even if only 1% of those who heard him became sincere followers, there could already be a significant number of believers in this area around the Sea of Galilee. The Christian church had not yet formed, so although it is possible that some of these believers met together in small groups, they were not members of any organized church nor were they one of the exclusive 12 apostles. Nevertheless, some of them, including this man, were acting in Jesus' name with real results.

The disciples felt that they were the chosen 12 (they were) and exclusive 12 (they weren't). Jesus' view of discipleship was far more inclusive than the narrow view held by the twelve. Jesus is saying here that what matters is allegiance to Jesus, not membership in a group (or church or sect).

6. As believers today, what issues do we tend to be divided about? How do you think God views the various denominations the Christian church has divided into?

The division of the Christian church started early on in the first century with the orthodox Christians and the more liberal Christians (later the western Catholic Church, and still later Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Protestants, etc.)

[Give an example of exclusive missions trips. Also about churches reinventing themselves every few decades—or years—like consumer product rebranding.]

7. In Verses 9:39-41, what principles was Jesus trying to teach the disciples? Specifically, consider verse 9:41: who was to be helped, what help was to be given, and what was the reward? How does this apply to *you* today?

In 9:41, "...gives you a cup of water..." refers to small acts of kindness that will be remembered by God. Note that in this case Jesus is *not* speaking of acts of kindness in general but specifically acts of kindness to believers because they are believers. This is very different from giving it from a mere motive of common kindness. This is a rather unusual verse and there is very little commentary on it. Perhaps it is simply a continuation of the thought that we should accept all believers, even those not in our church or group, and we should be kind to them.

It also suggests that any positive service, however small and insignificant, will be rewarded. Plaudits are not reserved for an in-group of privileged church members.

8. Some writers think Jesus was referring to all new believers in 9:42. What does the Bible say about causing others to stumble? (See Matthew 18:6, 10, 14, Romans 14:13, Romans 15:1, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, 1 Timothy 2:9-10, 2 Timothy 2:15)

Verse 9:42 is one of the very rare occasions in the Gospels and the only instance in Mark where Jesus is the object of faith. Typically, Jesus points away from himself and toward God as the important object of faith. The judgment in this verse is directed at Christian disciples and believers, not at persecutors of the Christian movement.

Matthew 18:10 – “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

Matthew 18:14 – In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Romans 14:13 – Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.

Romans 15:1 – We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 – [Selected verses] ⁴ So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. ⁷ But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁹ Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

1 Timothy 2:9-10 – ⁹ I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

2 Timothy 2:15 – Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

9. How do you think a Christian can cause others to sin? In what ways is causing another person to sin worse than sinning yourself?

To cause a believer to sin is bad, bad, bad and will bring serious judgment. This is essentially rebellion against God (the unforgivable sin) and Isaiah focuses on the punishment for such rebellion in 66:24 and quoted by Jesus later in Mark 9:48. As the final words in the book of Isaiah, this passage was familiar as a picture of

endless destruction for sinners: the worms (or maggots) that were always present in the garbage dump and the fire that could never be put out.

10. Why did Jesus use an extreme example in this context? (9:43-47)

Was Jesus really saying to pluck out your eye or cut off your hand if it caused you to sin? Probably not, but it sure was a way to get people's attention. It's a lot punchier than saying, "you have to get control of the part of your brain that causes you to sin by giving into temptation." Interestingly, Jesus didn't say anything along the lines of "the Devil made me do it," but rather he puts the blame for sinning right where it belongs—at your feet.

11. What's the meaning of Verse 9:49? [Some translations say, "For everyone will be tested with fire and every sacrifice will be salted with salt."]

12. What does the "salt" in Verses 9:49-50 represent?

Salt is often used in the Bible figuratively. Jesus told his disciples: "You are the salt of the earth," a preserving influence on others, preventing spiritual putrefaction and moral decay. The good news they carried would preserve life. However, he went on to say to them: "But if the salt loses its strength, how will its saltiness be restored? It is no longer usable for anything but to be thrown outside to be trampled on by men." (Matt 5:13; Mark 9:50)

Jesus said: "For everyone will be salted with fire." The context here points to a salting with the fire of Gehenna (a destination of the wicked – originally where followers of various Baals and Caananite gods, including Moloch, sacrificed their children by fire) in the case of all who stumble into a life of sin or who are responsible for making others stumble. In other words, everyone who enters hell will suffer its fire. (Mark 9:42-49).

If we assume that the statement is not connected with the preceding verses and starts a new thought, it might possibly mean that every Christian in the life can expect to undergo the fire of suffering and purification.

In 9:50, using the term salt to convey a different sense, Jesus then said: "Have salt in yourselves, and keep peace between one another." Paul used it in a similar way, saying: "Let your utterance be always full of grace (or graciousness), seasoned with salt, so as to know how you ought to give an answer to each one." (Colossians 4:6) One's conduct and speech should always be in good taste, considerate, wholesome, and tend toward preserving the lives of others.

Mark 9:33-50 ~ Additional Discussion Questions

1. How did Jesus explain what it means to be great? (9:35)
2. How did Jesus illustrate his point? (9:36) Why do you think he used a child to illustrate his point?
3. What sorts of issues cause ill will among Christians today?
4. What people are of “lower status” today? How should we treat them?
5. What attitudes did the disciples have toward the man who was driving out demons? (9:38) Why?
6. How does Christ want us to respond to others who minister in his name, even if they come from a different group or background than us?
7. What can churches do to support those who are not against them? Be specific!
8. What can you do to support someone who does good and is not against you? Be specific!
9. What was and is Jesus’ attitude toward sin? (9:43-47)
10. How can a hand, foot, or eye cause you to sin? What do they represent?
11. How did Jesus describe hell? (9:48-49, also 9:46 in some translations)
12. Why is “saltiness” necessary in a Christian’s life?
13. How can this passage motivate you to share your faith with unbelievers?