Mark Lesson 31 (2023)

**MARKS OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY**

Mark 9:38-50

Key Verse: 9:50

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

Before getting into today’s passage, we must review some of the points we’ve learned over the last few weeks. Toward the end of his Galilean ministry, Jesus announced his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection as the Messiah, which surprised and even erupted strong resistance from his disciples. Yet, Jesus didn’t back down. He told them they should also follow in his footsteps for the rest of their lives. He said to them, “Whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (8:34) Jesus’ disciples were reluctant to accept his teaching because they held on to their false assumption that Jesus would establish his messianic kingdom in Jerusalem with his power and authority. Their frequent arguments among them revealed that their primary concern was who would take the top position in his kingdom. Jesus told them that true greatness does not come from a higher position but from humility, saying, “Anyone who wants to be the first must be the last, and the servant of all.” (9:35)

In today’s passage, we see that Jesus’ disciples had conflicts not just among themselves but also with other groups of believers. They were exclusive to those who didn’t belong to their group. Taking the opportunity, Jesus instructed them to overcome exclusivism and grow spiritually mature. Jesus uses quite a strong expression, the hyperbole in today’s teaching, to highlight the importance of his teaching, particularly on self-discipline. Can you imagine if we remain spiritually immature, what could be the outcome of it? (Pic#1 & 2) We influence others badly and even hinder God’s kingdom work. That’s not what we want. This morning, let us consider some marks of our spiritual maturity and how we can obtain them.

Today’s event starts with John’s report. Look at verse 38. “‘Teacher,’ said John, ‘we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.’” This is one of the rare cases that the synoptic gospel writers mentioned John speaking out alone. The John we see in today’s passage was not what he would be. He was young and immature. I am sure John, along with other disciples, stopped the man from driving out demons in Jesus’ name. Ironically, the unknown man could successfully drive out demons in Jesus’ name while the chosen disciples had recently failed. (9:18) Probably, someone in the crowd said, *“Wow, he is awesome and even better than the Twelve.”* Feeling humiliated, the disciples immediately stopped him, saying, *“You are not supposed to use our master’s name. Who permitted you to do that? You don’t belong to us.”* The disciples had a sense of elitism, which could make them feel superior to others. *“We are special and better than you”* mentality in their unconsciousness.

We don’t know when this episode took place. Perhaps, it happened some time ago in Capernaum. Perhaps, after hearing Jesus’s saying in the previous passage, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me does not welcome me but the one who sent me,” John felt they should not have done what they did to the man. So, he reported it to Jesus to know how to deal with a case like this.

How did Jesus respond to John’s report? Look at verses 39-40. “‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said. ‘For 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.’” Unlike the disciples, who got upset with the man casting out demons, Jesus didn’t mind it at all. According to Jesus, the fact that the man cast out demons in Jesus’ name indicated his respect for Jesus. Jesus was sure that this man would not speak against him. Jesus’ point was that the disciples should not view the man as an enemy just because he was not part of their group. The man who drove out demons in Jesus’ name was on their side, as Jesus said in verse 40, “for whoever is not against us is for us.”

It indeed prepared the future ministry of the disciples. In the next ten, twenty, or thirty years, they should also learn how to work with other groups of believers to remain God’s faithful servants in the ministry of God’s kingdom. Of course, the twelve disciples were chosen by God and had a particular role in God’s kingdom work. Yet, it does not mean that they had a monopoly on Jesus’ power and ministry. In the 21st century, Jesus has many ministries and churches under his care worldwide. Some groups have different worship styles, music preferences, ministry methods, and specific emphases. Some ministry focuses on the community, campus, or people with special care and need. It’s incredibly diverse. However, all these ministries form the body of Christ and have the common goal of establishing the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Therefore, while focusing on our ministry, no matter how small or big it is, we should also never lose sight of the bigger picture of the body of Christ. While we hold on to the sound doctrine of the Christian gospel, we should not become exclusive.

Being surrounded by big corporations and mega-churches today, ignoring a small ministry is easy. We tend to think the greatness in terms of size. ***“The Bigger, the Better!”*** But that’s not true in God’s kingdom. The excellence in God’s kingdom is NOT measured by size. If some ministry is small, it does not mean it’s less important than big ones or inferior. Look at verse 41. “Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.” This verse shows that a small act of serving, like giving a cup of water to one of Jesus’ disciples, which is much less helpful than driving out demons, is significant in God’s sight. Small ministry does not mean inferior. Therefore, we should continue to serve others in the name of Jesus, no matter how small it is, like giving a cup of cold water.

On the other hand, we should not be like a small frog in a small pond who thinks he is the center of the world. (Pic#3) We must acknowledge that we belong to God’s kingdom, which is much bigger than our small ministry. Christian disciples should not remain shallow but embrace the bigger picture of God’s kingdom. That’s a part of our spiritual maturity and greatness. I like the quotation which states, ***“The bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world. Who would be born must first destroy a world. The bird flies to God.”***

In the following verses, 42-50, Jesus teaches his disciples another aspect of maturity. Look at verse 42. “If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.” Jesus’ statement in this verse shows how he deeply cares for his disciples and that anyone who discourages any of his disciples from following him faithfully could expect severe treatment from God. Due to our spiritual immaturity, we make mistakes, discouraging and hurting other believers. Jesus also said in Luke 17:1, “Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come.” We should be cautious not to cause anyone to stumble.

What can we do about it? Apostle Paul shares an essential point in this matter. 1 Timothy 4:16 states, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.” We should first pay attention to ourselves, our words, and our behaviors rather than pointing fingers at others. We, as parents and spiritual leaders, should lead others not just by words but by our deeds. It’s difficult, so Paul said, **“Persevere in them!”** Why? It’s because it’s tough to do so. It reminds us of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which states, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eyes and pay no attention to the plank in your own eyes?” (Mt. 7:3)

In verses 43-48, Jesus elaborates his point in an extreme manner. The content in these verses is unique in Mark’s account. Look at verses 43-48. “If your hand causes you to stumble, 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. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, 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, where ‘the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.’” The expression he uses in these verses is hyperbole. Jesus intentionally exaggerated to emphasize his point of teaching. Yet, it was not meant to follow literally. For example, what will happen to us if we keep cutting off our limbs one by one whenever we sin? Not even one part of our body would remain. The real problem is not the hands, feet, or eyes but the sinful desires.

Galatians 5:19-21 states, “The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

If Jesus didn’t mean to cut off our limbs or eyes, what did he want us to do? He wants us to judge ourselves before God judges us. Jesus had already told them in 8:34, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” When Jesus said we should cut off the limbs that cause us to sin, the actual meaning is performing spiritual surgery on ourselves through self-discipline and self-judging. This is a painful process. God loves sinners, but he hates sin. He would not tolerate sins. Therefore, we should take our sins seriously enough to perform spiritual surgery on ourselves. Mark sure that we don’t do self-mutilation literally.

Apostle Paul shares an essential point for this matter in 1 Corinthians 11:30-32: “That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.”

Apostle Paul highlights his point in Galatians 6:22-25 concerning this matter, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong o Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

These verses teach us that to live by or walk with the Holy Spirit; we should have spiritual self-discipline, which includes self-examination, repentance, and faith in God’s love and grace for the forgiveness of our sins. Through the process of self-discipline, we can bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit in us, such as love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Pic#5) These fruits are the signs of our spiritual maturity. There is no limit to bearing good spiritual fruits. We surely need to meditate on God’s words. That’s what Psalm 1:2-3, “But whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither- whatever they do prosper.”

Look at verses 49-50. “Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.” Jesus concludes his teaching by saying that everyone would be salted with fire. What did he mean by that? He meant that everyone, believers and non-believers, is subject to fiery trials through which they can be purified and refined. Whether we like it or not, divine testing is an inevitable part of life. Therefore, we should never ignore God’s discipline and thus lose our chance to restore saltiness by remaining stubborn, not humbling ourselves, and repenting.

People who work very hard tend to have entitlement and thus become bitter toward others, sometimes toward God. We should humble ourselves before God and live harmoniously with others. No matter what happens in the world, one thing is for sure: God’s work is in progress in us as long as we live.

We become better people, being transformed and bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit in us. As a result, our life becomes fuller and happier than ever. However, such beautiful work of God is not automatic. We should follow the principle of life day by day, denying ourselves and taking up the cross.

Jesus stated that not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven. He said in Matthew 7:16, “By their fruit, you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?” We will be able to identify false prophets by their fruits. (Mt. 7:16) Which tree are you, good tree or bad tree? (pic#4) What kind of spiritual fruit are we bearing in our life? We cannot mock God. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh, will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit, will reap eternal life. (Gal. 6:7-8) Let us not remain stubborn and lose our chance to restore our saltiness. May we follow the principle of life by performing spiritual surgery on ourselves and bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit.