

"When We See the Problem in the Mirror"

Text: Mark 9:38-50

May God grant to each of us a faith that will not waver, though the waves of persecution and ridicule beat against it daily, and may that same God also grant us the wisdom to avoid ever becoming our own worst enemies. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Whether we care to admit it or not, trends in Christianity affect us. On the one hand that might seem like an overly obvious statement. We are *Christians*, after all, so *of course* such trends connected with Christianity *affect* us. We face two separate difficulties here. The first is that we tend to lament the bad things that are happening even while we assume that we are immune from their effects – mostly because we are *aware of* what is going on. In other words, we tend to see society's slide into abject debauchery or immorality as something happening to others. We try to keep the world at arm's length, so we assume we are protected. The problem is that as the "heat" increases, "arm's length" isn't always far enough.

Here's an example. You get a phone call one day from a local official warning you that your aged next-door neighbor, a WW II veteran, was found to be in possession of a live hand grenade in his basement. "*Not to worry,*" they assure you, "*Just stay in your house, don't go near any windows, and you'll be fine.*" The next week you get a call from a public official informing you that your nutty neighbor on the other side of your house has constructed a small nuclear weapon in his basement – in which case remaining in your home is probably not a real good option.

The point here is that Christians tend to miss the fact that the farther society drifts into abject immorality, the greater the danger and therefore the more decisively we need to separate ourselves. Again, arm's length doesn't necessarily cut it today.

That's the first problem we need to understand – that this isn't your grandparents' society we are dealing with any more. The second problem is that whenever we see, for example, a growing trend toward persecution of Christians in our country, we naturally assume that as conservative, confessional Christians we are of course the *victims*. What never crosses our minds is the idea that in some respects we might actually be the ones doing the persecuting. What if the problem isn't "out there"? What if the problem is me? What if I actually see the problem in the mirror? This is one insight we gain from our text for this morning, found in the Ninth Chapter of Mark's Gospel.

^{ESV} **Mark 9:38-50** *John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." ³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. ⁴² ¶ "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' ⁴⁹ For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."*

So far the very words of our God. Truly these are perfect words, spoken long ago by the Savior himself. That is why we can never study or meditate on these inspired words too often or too carefully. This is the pure, life-giving Bread of Life. That God the Holy Spirit would work his goodness in our hearts through our study of these words we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your Truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!**" Amen.

Satan has had 6000 years to perfect his craft. He knows what works and what does not. Count on him to always return, in one form or another, to what works. In fact with each advancement of mankind comes a repackaged variation on an old theme from the great Destroyer. So what are some of the trends in our day?

Polls have long verified what most of us have learned from experience: the vast majority of new contacts for any Christian Church – somewhere in the mid 90 percentile – are a direct result of face-to-face, heartfelt invitations from trusted friends and family members. The devil's counter-plan? Destroy man's power to personally communicate by making him forget *how* to communicate in the most effective way. Fill his world with the impersonal – with whatever form of communication is most easily overlooked, ignored, deleted. Teach man to text, tweet, Facebook, and email. Again, make it as impersonal as possible and as easily dismissed as possible. Share everything and nothing – nothing, that is, of real, lasting, spiritual value.

Next problem for Satan: the availability of God's Word. Where once man yearned for the Word of God that he could not possess, now technology allows the gospel to be carried to nearly every corner of the world – instantly. The devil's solution to *that* problem? Destroy man's ability to concentrate in the absence of entertainment. Knowing that it takes a certain amount of work or human effort to actually listen to God's Word and to apply it personally, his solution was to deaden mankind to whatever is not exciting, new, energizing, and stimulating. His reasoning is disturbingly accurate: who would ever want to sit and listen to someone talk when he could be killing Nazi Zombies, or being wowed by the latest viral video, or being dazzled by a non-stop, action-packed, tear-jerking feature film.

All of this makes it clear that Christians need to ask their God for divine *wisdom*. Daily. It needs to be a staple of our *daily* prayer-life if we are ever to have a chance at recognizing and counteracting the demonic threats that imperil our very souls on a daily basis. Our Savior in our text communicated to us in unforgettable words just how radical our separation from sin needs to be: **"And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'"**

What exactly is Jesus advocating here – that you gouge out an eye if you glance lustfully at someone who is not your spouse? He is rather teaching us that separation from sin is almost never a simple, painless process. Most Christians are aware of just how seductive and addictive sinful pleasures can be – from loving to gossip to sexual immorality. Sin generally feel good, feels right. You will also therefore understand how cutting such things from your life can feel almost like cutting away a part of yourself, so painful or difficult is the separation. Stated from a little different perspective, the problem is no longer sin – since Christ has broken the death-grip or slavery of sin. The problem is us, and whether or not we invite sin into our lives as a permanent, welcome houseguest. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, but sin has the terrible power to erode and eventually destroy that saving faith.

Our text also deals with another very real problem, and once again the problem isn't "out there"; the problem is me. We pick up in our text with the disciples approaching Jesus in a bit of a righteous dither. Apparently someone in the area had been using Jesus' name to cast out demons. The nerve. Wasn't that a *good* thing? Why would any follower of Jesus be upset when someone was using Jesus' name to do good, to resist the devil and weaken his power over human beings? The disciples evidently believed that Jesus'

name had a sort of copyright that protected it from being used by those outside of their intimate circle of followers. You can see here a bit of the petty jealousy that crops up in the disciples from time to time. They seemed to have lost sight of the object (defeating Satan and winning souls for Christ) because they were too preoccupied with the rules and regulations of the game.

As a conservative Lutheran Church body, we face exactly the same threat. We lose sight of the souls and the goals, and we quarrel about rules, procedures, and mannerisms. In effect, we forget the trees because we claim to be interested in the forest. We also expend a tremendous amount of energy warring against our allies.

So we ask again: *"Is there persecution against Christians today?"* Of course, but again we have to also ask the thematic question of our sermon for this morning: *"Are we/am I ever part of the problem?"*

Don't underestimate either the importance or the difficulty of the problem that we face as conservative, confessional Christians living as we do in an increasingly Godless society. The disciples in our text wanted to make the problem go away by over-simplifying it: *If anyone is not a part of our little group, they are enemies.* In our text Jesus lets them (and us) know that it's not that simple, yet what he teaches here is often hard for confessional Christians to hear. It makes our job infinitely more complex. We cannot fellowship with those who teach falsely, but we are not supposed to prevent or hinder the work they do in Christ's name.

Note however the perfect balance struck by our perfect Savior in our text. Three separate truths provide that balance. Remove any one, and the balance is destroyed. On the one hand, Jesus told his disciples not to hinder the man from doing what he was doing. **"For the one who is not against us is for us."** That's the first truth, and it should actually be most comforting to acknowledge and bear that in mind. God accomplishes his good pleasure in a number of different ways. Yet there would have been no balance had Jesus left it at that. Satan would have been given too great a beachhead from which to mount attacks of all kinds against the Church. So Jesus provides perfect balance by establishing two other pillars or truths. The first is that while we are not to try to hinder the kingdom work of others, we are not supposed to join them. Separate from those who teach something **"contrary to the doctrine which you have learned,"** but it's not our job to try to prevent the Lord's work from being carried out through them. But what about the error? Condemn it and separate yourselves from it. It's not our job to fix another church's errors.

We tend to have a problem with that, don't we? We tend to see ourselves as the Super Heroes that are called to correct all injustices we encounter in life. We need to also therefore learn when to leave such things to God.

So also in our text he provides that third point of balance: ***"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea."***

Do you see the problem if Jesus had not added this last? How easy for the devil to promote unionism, doctrinal laxity, and indifference. How easy for him to play down the importance of every single doctrine of Holy Scripture. Suppose Jesus had only given the command not to hinder another Christian's ministry. Wouldn't he have thereby been giving some sort of stamp of approval – not only on what other Christians were *doing*, but also on what they were *preaching and teaching*? Jesus erased any such nonsense with the dramatic words of verse 42, ***"Whoever offends one of these little ones..."*** To ***"offend"*** means to cause someone to stumble in his faith. It is a very strong word with its roots in the image of a death trap or deadfall set to crush the life out of an unsuspecting target. Jesus was not going to prevent those who were not part of his core group, but he offered all such the strongest of warnings concerning the effects of false doctrine and practice on precious souls bought with his blood.

Again we see the strength in Christian balance. There is nothing weak here, nothing non-committal or lukewarm. Christianity calls for drastic, decisive action – which should not surprise us. Christianity itself, from first to last, was born of drastic, decisive action. Already in the Garden of Eden the tone was set. After man had sinned, God cursed the ground and decisively and mercifully drove mankind from the Garden so that they would not eat of the Tree of Life and live forever in sin. When God saw that the world was too evil to survive, he sent the Flood and began over with Noah and his sons. When God saw that there was no nation suitable to bear the Promised Savior, he called Abram to take drastic action - leave father and mother, house and home, move to an unknown land, and begin a new race. Down through the ages men of God were called upon to take drastic actions, leading finally to the most drastic action of all: God was made man in the person of Jesus Christ, who then offered his life in the death on the cross - all in an effort to save man from his own sins.

There is nothing whatsoever that is indecisive or halfhearted about any of this. ***"God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son..."*** Think about that for a moment. There is nothing soft or non-committal in what God has done for us in his Son, Jesus Christ. He sentenced his own Son to pay for our sins with his very life. Because of that, you and I stand holy and righteous in God's sight. Your sins are forgiven – by grace through faith. The act that won that forgiveness was both dramatic and drastic.

God has therefore provided not only the solution to our sin problem by sending his Son to pay for our sins, he has also given us perfect direction for how we are to share that message of forgiveness with the world. The problem,

all along, was me – not someone else. It was my sin that caused Jesus such torment, and it is still my own sin that causes such trouble in my life. All of which causes us to treasure our Savior and his perfect plan all the more. God grant us balance and wisdom in all that we say and do – separating from all that is evil while never attempting to prevent that which God will use to accomplish his good pleasure. *"Always and in every way, dear Savior, make me part not of the problem but of your divine solution.* Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Numbers 11:16-17, 24-29** Then the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. ¹⁷ And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone. ²⁴ ¶ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it. ²⁶ ¶ Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." ²⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, "My lord Moses, stop them." ²⁹ But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"

^{ESV} **James 5:13-20** Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. ¹⁹ ¶ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

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The 18th Sunday after Pentecost – September 27, 2015

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 28 (Verses 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Now Let All Loudly Sing Praise"

The Order of Service – Hymnal page 15ff. (Red Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Numbers 11:16-17,24-29) Conservative Christians face many unique challenges, one of which is the temptation to disparage or even attempt to hinder the work of other Christians. God is certainly not pleased with false doctrine in any form, yet it does not lie within our power to know how God will use the work or witness of others to accomplish his divine will. This same thought is expressed by Moses in our first reading.

The New Testament Lesson: (James 5:13-20) Kingdom work is always supposed to be shared by all of God's children. Note also in our second reading how it is not just the Apostles who are called to carry out the various functions of the church but all members. James also reminds us that, at the very least, we can and should all continually pray for believer and unbeliever alike.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 22. (Red Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 535 (Verses 1-4, 8-9) (Red Hymnal)

"Rejoice My Heart, Be Glad and Sing"

The Sermon – Text: Mark 9:38-50 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"When We See the Problem in the Mirror"

The Offertory – (Hymnal page 22)

The Offering followed by the Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 311 (Verses 1-2, 4) (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus Christ Our Blessed Savior"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Red Hymnal page 24ff)

The Distribution -Hymn 315 (Red Hymnal)

The Nunc Dimittis (Red Hymnal page 30)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 28 (Verse 5) (Red Hymnal)

"Now Let All Loudly Sing Praise"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (32) Average (51)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
	-11:30 a.m.	– Quarterly Voters' Meeting
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service (Mission Festival)
	-11:30 a.m.	– Fellowship meal

CLC News – Both a one-page summary and a full report of the recent CLC Board meetings are available.

Voters' Meeting – The Voters' Assembly is scheduled to meet this morning. Several important topics will be addressed.

Application for Voting Membership – Travis Hill has applied for voting membership at St. Paul.

2016 Mission Helper Trip – The annual Mission Helper Trip for 2016 is being planned for India. Apply at: <http://mht.lutheranmissions.org/2016-india>

Mission Festival and Fellowship Meal – Next Sunday is our annual Mission Festival. Pastor Del Maas of Mapleton is scheduled to be our guest speaker. A fellowship meal is also planned following the service.

Organ Donation – Our 40-something year old organ is failing and in need of replacement. Discussion of this need is on the agenda for today's meeting.

Poinsettia Order – Please see the Christmas flower order sheet on the mailbox table. See Eileen McEnroe if you have questions.