

A Most Critical Lesson

Wayne Waibel – 09/29/2024

Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another. After the harsh imagery of cutting off hands and feet and plucking out eyes – it's comforting to wrap it up with an expression of peace.

We struggle with this passage in Mark, don't we? The stark reality of a severed limb is difficult to swallow, even if we attempt to dismiss this section of Mark as hyperbole. Let's try to appreciate the context and historical perspective to see if we can't boldly and peaceably come to terms with this lesson for today.

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It should come as no surprise to us that the disciples are yet again missing the point of discipleship. When John tries to marginalize a local exorcist for casting out demons in Christ's name simply because he is not a follower, Jesus has had enough. His disciples are not only lacking in understanding of what they are being groomed for – they are nurturing their own inflated opinions of themselves. They've been with Him long enough now to "get it."

Since everything He's tried to this point has failed – it's time to bring out the big guns. Clearly these fellows need the kind of illustration that leaves absolutely no doubt as to what the Master is attempting to teach. So, He uses hyperbole for effect certainly, but I don't think He's entirely over the top in His methods.

His point is that we are not to put stumbling blocks in the way of innocent-as-a-child type people from getting to Jesus. He will not have it. And if you do get in the way – it would be better for you to have had your life snuffed out.

Jesus hammers this point hard and repeatedly for two reasons. One – the disciples are having great difficulty getting to where Jesus is leading them. And two – this is a most critical lesson. The kingdom of God and entering life, are the exact same thing.

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When we examine our lives and intentions, honesty can become a casualty. It's hard to take a glance inward and not overlook or veer sideways or otherwise stray from a direct focus. As a result, we begin any self-analysis with a skewed lens.

Even so – we need to look within from time to time in order to re-direct and get back on the rails. I’m sure there’s an easier way to get through life, but ease is not a thing to aspire to. Jesus clarifies precisely what is expected of a disciple. And it has nothing to do with minimum effort.

It is no small thing to dislodge the self-serving wisdom of the world with the community-healing wisdom of God. This internal struggle rages despite our best efforts to overcome and subdue it. Eternal life is most wonderful, entirely exciting and accomplished only with the clean heart of a child of God. But you know that.

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So did the disciples, but they were getting bogged down with their own ideas of right and wrong, forgetting completely the lessons Jesus was trying to teach them. So, He put a child in front of them.

And a child is transparent, and enthusiastic; capable of great wonder and strongly attracted to what is good and righteous. And what Jesus was essentially saying to the disciples, and to us all was “Pay attention to the children – they give you access to the presence of God.”

It's a simple concept that is not necessarily all that simple. For one thing – you need a lot of perseverance and patience. For another – there is a certain level of depth required in order to see beyond the trees and into the forest. The good news is that Jesus is desperate for us to seek Him.

He puts down many helps along our path to both guide and instruct. Love is a vital component, but so too is attention to detail and the willingness to embrace the kingdom of God.

There is a certain elegance to this walk of life. It is entirely possible to face your own trials with joy and endurance. In fact, it is the only way to enter eternal life. "Enter into his gates with singing, and into His courts with praise. Know ye that the Lord, He is God. It is He who hath made us, and not we ourselves." And the righteousness of God must be taken seriously.

A remarkable thing – everlasting love. When you realize you have it – your world is transformed and brightened. Armed with the understanding that God holds His children in high regard, we should be that much more compliant with the ways of the Lord. But we err and stray and fail – sometimes miserably. It's called the human condition.

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How do you identify the grace in today's world when nothing can be taken at face value? Where are the great ones? They're under investigation, or under suspicion or under arrest. Most of our heroes have fallen in disgrace and no one is picking up the gauntlet and soldiering on.

At no time in history has it been more vital to embrace a goodness, a rightness, and a wholeness. As a people we have strayed so far from truth and justice that the mere words have lost all meaning.

It's time we revisit this idea of not becoming obstacles that get in the way of all children coming to God. We can achieve a unity without compromising our diversity. Dogs and Cats can live together – so too can Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants, Republicans and Democrats, Vikings and Packers.

I believe we can get back to a sense of community that operates under the law of love thy neighbor. When you truly live that law, you completely discard the "What's in it for me?" attitude. Serving the neighbor is not to gain reward but to live in response to the neighbor and serving out of love and in the name of Christ.

To focus too intently on the powers of evil is to grant them an ultimate power that they do not have. The world has already been saved. The die is cast. The heavy lifting has been done. All we need do is live life. We truly are meant to live out our days at peace with one another. Amen.