

Before we look at the passage, please bow your heads with me as we pray for God to help us.

“Lord, please come tonight upon this gathering of your saints. We are eager to understand Your Word, hungry to grasp the truth as it is in Jesus. So we come to You confessing our propensity to twist Your truth to suit our tastes and ignore Your challenges to accommodate our secret sins. Have mercy upon us tonight we pray. Pour out the Spirit of Your Son in fresh power upon the reading and preaching of Holy Scripture that we might twist the truth no longer, nor avoid your challenge, but bend our knees, surrender our lives, and embrace Christ as He is offered to us in the gospel. For this we pray in His name, Amen.”

There are five foundational principles of the Christian life in this passage. The first of them, however, is really the most important of them all. Without **this** you simply cannot **be** a Christian in any real sense whatsoever. Jesus articulates that truth in verses 30-32.

After their failure to deliver the demon possessed child in verses 14-29, the disciples departed for Galilee with Jesus. And as they go, He taught them, predicting once again His coming sufferings and death, “The Son of Man is being delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day.” But, verse 32, “the disciples did not understand this saying and were afraid to ask.”

As Jesus turns increasingly towards the final climactic scene of His earthly ministry, and as the pace of Mark’s gospel begins to pick up as we get closer and closer to its conclusion, Jesus repeatedly points the disciples to the reason why He came. He points them to the Cross. The first time was back in chapter 8:31. In our passage this evening we have the second prediction, and in 10:32 we have the third and by Chapter 11 Jesus enters the gates of Jerusalem at the beginning of the final week of his life.

Jesus punctuates His instructions to His disciples with clear teaching about His coming death and resurrection, and He does so because the Cross is basic to all authentic discipleship, to all real Christianity, and it is vital that they understand that. Jesus is making certain that His disciples understand that the **foundation** of their

discipleship does not rest in *themselves* but in *Him*, and more particularly, *in His atoning work on the Cross*. Jesus is about to teach the disciples about four key attitudes that ought to mark them out as His followers, but they need to understand that more than their attitude, His work must be the defining feature of their lives.

Here at the Cross, sin is atoned for and the wrath of God appeased. Here the love of the Triune God embraces unlovely sinners at the horrific cost of the death of the Son of Man. Here, in our place, Jesus was condemned so that we might live. The Cross is the sole basis of our hope, the solitary ground of our confidence, the entire foundation of our faith.

The Cross of Jesus Christ is the only plea a Christian can enter when he or she stands before the bar of God's justice on the last great day. When the heavenly tribunal is called into session and you stand before God the Almighty Judge, the only answer to the proven charges of sin and guilt that condemn you forever that you can possibly make is not—I was good, I was humble, I was loving, I was generous—because you will never be good *enough*, humble *enough*, generous *enough*. The only plea you can make is this: “I am indeed guilty, but Your own Son has already paid my debts. The penalty for all my crimes has been met. Your Son, His blood, His cross is my only plea. There I rest my hope.” The only plea to receive final vindication is the Cross of Jesus Christ.

I wonder if yours is a cross-centered Christianity. If it isn't, it is no Christianity at all. Unless and until we have come to the end of our self reliance and come to bow at the foot of the Cross, relying wholly on His blood and righteousness, we will not make even the first step on the path of true Christian discipleship. You can't be Christ's follower before He has become your Savior. Have you gone to the cross, confessing and pleading for the forgiveness of your sin, and do you do so still, every day and without ceasing? That is perhaps the most important question we will ever hear. What is *your* answer?

So the prediction here in verses 30-32 is not incidental; it is a vital preface to everything that follows. Our Christian lives must be founded upon and centered around the Cross of Jesus Christ. But then in verses 33-50, Jesus articulates four attitudes that ought to flow from and result from and be shaped by a Cross-centered life.

The first is the attitude of humility. Look at verses 33-37. When Jesus and the disciples arrive at Capernaum, they enter a house and Jesus asks the disciples what they

had been bickering about on the journey, at which the disciples are shamefaced and silent because the subject of debate among them was who would be the greatest.

Now, clearly, Jesus knows what they had been arguing over, and so He gathered them around Him and began to teach them this first principle of Christian godliness. And I want you to notice in verse 35 the humility principle ***stated*** first of all: the path to true greatness in the light of the cross, says Jesus, will not be marked by self promotion and competition, but by humble service. If you want to be first, you must take last place. If you want to lead, be the servant. That's the principle.

That's the attitude Jesus calls us to, if we are to live in the light of His atoning work on the Cross: we must become humble servants of all. Having benefitted from Christ's humble service on the Cross, how can it be otherwise for us who believe in Him? Boasting, self promoting, competitive one-up-manship is utterly out of place in a life lived under the cross.

Secondly, notice the humility principle ***exemplified***. Look at verses 36 and 37. Jesus takes a little child—the words Mark uses indicate that this was a very small child, and that He took the child reassuringly in His arms—and places him down in the middle of the circle of disciples. I'm sure you can imagine how intimidating that must have been. The child doubtless displayed signs of embarrassment and anxiety. Perhaps his eyes scanned the room for his parents, ready to bolt to daddy's side, or hide behind mother's skirts, at any moment.

And then Jesus said that if anyone receives one of these little children in my name, they are receiving Christ and, in Christ, God the Father. What does He mean? Well, it ***could*** be that Jesus was calling the disciples to show ***such*** humility as to care even for the least and most vulnerable, the culturally ignored and marginalized, those they might otherwise be inclined to consider beneath their attention. And all that would certainly be true. But it's much more likely that Jesus is pointing to this shy and nervous child as a ***model*** of humility for us to follow.

Jesus spoke Aramaic, remember. Mark's words are a translation of Jesus' sayings. And the Aramaic word for *little child*, and the word for *servant* are the same. The same holds true in the Greek of the passage where Mark calls the child a *paidion*, a little child, which can also mean a ***slave***. So when Jesus said in verse 35 that the disciples should be *servants* and then he took a *little child* in His arms to illustrate His message, the disciples would have gotten the point immediately. The ***nature*** of service,

they are being told, is marked by the retiring vulnerabilities of this little child, not the mighty power strokes of a self-made man.

Thirdly, note the *promise attached* to those who live out the humility principle. Look at verse 37 again. ““Whoever receives one of these little children *in My name* receives *Me*; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me, *but Him who sent Me.*”

Again, we need to understand that the *disciples* are not being asked to receive the little ones. The disciples are being asked to *be* the little ones, and they are being *encouraged* to live like this with the promise that anyone who receives *them* in Christ’s name will enter into fellowship, not just with the disciples, but with the Triune God.

Now that is a remarkable statement, isn’t it? Think of it! Jesus is saying that, just as anyone who receives *Christ* receives the *Father*, just as there is so close and intimate a connection between the Father and the Son in the bonds of the Trinity, that to receive the Son *is* to receive the Father, *in the same way*, He says, there is a *parallel connection between Christ and His disciples, these little ones.*

Jesus wants His disciples to so mirror and echo His own self-giving, childlike, humility that others will embrace them and their message. Of course, the welcome He has in mind is no mere formality. It’s much more than an act of general kindness towards the weak and humble. It is, He says, to “receive” them “*in my name,*” for Christ’s sake. It is to receive them because of the *gospel*. It is to embrace *both them and* their *message*. When anyone embraces us and our message as Christians, they enter into deep connection not *just* with *us*, but with *our Savior* whose humility we seek, imitate, and commend to them.

Let me recap for a moment. Jesus commends to us radical humility, serving others selflessly, choosing last place. That, He says, is gospel leadership and true gospel greatness. It is *exemplified* in the diffident weakness of a little child. And it *results* in others embracing both us and our message and receiving both us and our Savior. Humility, in other words, can result in tremendous evangelistic effectiveness.

Maybe you have wondered why that intimate friend to whom you’ve been witnessing for so long still rejects the gospel. We need to search our hearts in case one of the barriers to their salvation resides not just in *their* sin but in *ours*, not just in their lack of faith, but in *our lack of humility*.

Then there’s the second principle. This time it’s the *principle and attitude of unity.* Look please at verses 38-41.

John answers Jesus' comments in verse 38, saying, " 'Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side. For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.' "

The disciples had just failed to exorcise a demon earlier in the chapter. So it is a deep irony, therefore, that when they are confronted with someone who, through faith in Jesus Christ, is effectively casting out demons, the disciples try to shut him down.

John has been prompted by the high statement of verse 37 of union and communion between Jesus and His little ones to point out that there are others who are not among the band of disciples but who were using Jesus' name. But Jesus is not concerned about what this says about the stranger who cast out demons so much as He is about what it says about John and the disciples. John's statement demonstrates what happens when humility fails.

When humility fails, unity disappears. In church split after church split, beneath the accusations and denunciations of heresy that get thrown around, far too often lurks the real cause of division. Humility has been lost and pride has driven a wedge between this personality and that, this group and that until jealousy and wounded egos make reconciliation impossible. It is something of this order that is taking place here. This man isn't one of us. We're better than he.

Kent Hughes has a rhyme that gets at the spirit of John's words well,

"Believe as I believe, no more no less,
That I am right, and no one else confess.
Feel as I feel, think as I think,
Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink,
Look as I look, do always as I do,
Then and only then, I'll fellowship with you."
(R. Kent Hughes, *Mark Vol. II*, 33-34)

We need to guard against two extremes, don't we? On the one hand, we need to reject the kind of false unity that unthinkingly embraces everyone and anyone who calls themselves by the name Christian. Not all Israel is Israel. Not everyone who says to

Jesus “Lord, Lord” will see the kingdom of heaven. There are churches and denominations and individuals who claim to follow Jesus, but who reject His Word and deny His gospel. There is no unity possible with such people.

At the other extreme, we need to reject a false exclusivity. We are a Reformed and Presbyterian church. We believe the Bible teaches certain things about God and His church that makes us distinct. We will not surrender those distinctives to anyone because we are persuaded they are part of the revelation of God’s inerrant Word. But we do not dismiss from our fellowship, nor deny the warmth of Christian communion to any who love God’s Word, cling to Christ, and believe the gospel. We may legitimately disagree over matters of secondary importance, for example over baptism and church government, yet we must recognize that these are disputes that take place *inside* the true church. These are family disputes between brothers and sisters, and we must refuse to break fellowship over them.

So Jesus explains that whoever is not against Him is on His side. Those are the only two options available to human beings. If you have no enmity for Jesus Christ, you must belong wholeheartedly to His cause, even if you do not belong to the same congregation or denomination. Apart from the saving work of God by His Spirit, there is only enmity between us and Christ. Many people think they have no enmity towards Jesus. They like Him well enough, they say. “We go to church. We’re moral.” But when they get a sense that Jesus claims *everything about them* from what happens in their bedrooms to their bank accounts, then the real enmity lurking in their hearts shows its ugly face. The only people who are not *opposed* to Christ in the deepest recesses of their souls are those who have been *won to faith in Christ*.

Jesus wants John and the others to see that, although this man wasn’t part of their group, he was their brother nonetheless, and it is only a failure of pride that makes them think otherwise.

When humility fails, so does unity. And to drive His point home, Jesus appeal’s yet again to the principle of humble service in verse 41, “Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.” That is the mark of a true disciple. They serve you lovingly in Christ’s name.

I wonder if some of us need to repent of our denominational pride. It is right to love the truth and reject error. It can be good to debate secondary matters with brothers and sisters with whom you disagree, until we grasp more clearly the teaching of God’s

Word. Perhaps some of us do more than that. We disparage and dismiss the piety and devotion of those with whom we disagree in secondary issues. Jesus calls us instead to humble service not to arrogant dismissal.

Then there's the third key attitude, the third principle of life in the light of the Cross. Humility, unity and now mortification. Look, please, at verses 42-48

Remember the little child is still in the room with the disciples. Jesus is still talking. So He points to the child and warns the disciples that if anyone causes a little one—a metaphor for a disciple remember—if anyone causes a little one to stumble, it would be better for them to be thrown into the ocean with a millstone round their necks than face the wrath of God. Under an early zealot named Judas the Galilean, there had been an insurrection. Those captured were punished by the Romans in exactly this way. They were tied to a weight and sent alive to the bottom of the sea. The fate of any who distort the truth and seek to lead disciples astray will be terrible indeed.

If causing others to stumble is to be feared, in much the same way, causing ourselves to stumble is a grave and dangerous matter. So in verses 43-48 radical holiness is contrasted with spiritual ruin. That is how high the stakes are. Holiness matters. Without it no one shall see the Lord. If you call to be a follower of Jesus, radical spiritual surgery is needed. Without it, whatever spiritual claims you make, hell's unquenchable fires await.

In the early church, Origen took these verses so seriously and literally that he emasculated himself to avoid sexual immorality. Poor Origen's problem was not that he was too radical. It was that he was not radical enough. Chopping off a hand or gouging out an eye will not free us from sin. If the hand is the cause, then it must be removed. But the hand or the foot or the eye is not the source of our sins. What is? Where ought we to direct our surgeon's scalpel? We must turn to our hearts. We must turn to the deep habits and attitudes of our inner selves. And we must take radical action. First, we must go to Christ for new hearts. Then we must take the knife to the old ones. We must cut out opportunity to sin. What are you watching on TV late at night? Why are you flirting with your co-worker? Which internet sites are you using, and why are you so reluctant to install protective software? Are you addicted to your credit card? Do you comfort eat? We may need to build accountability into our strategy. We may need to get rid of our TV's or remove the internet from our homes or install accountability software like Covenant Eyes.

“Cut it out” is more than a weary parent’s rebuke at a child’s petty annoyance: it is real spiritual guidance from the Lord Jesus Himself. Take the knife to your besetting sins. Get serious and get radical. What do you need to do to cut it out. The stakes are high. Radical action is called for. The Puritans called that *mortification*, the process of putting sin to death. *Kill* it. Show it no mercy. Take radical action.

And then finally and very briefly in verses 49-50, Jesus calls us to *sacrifice*. I wish I had time to linger over this strange little passage, as it talks about fire and salt. But simply note that salt was used throughout the Old Testament for ritual sacrifice in the Temple. Jesus says that everyone will be seasoned with fire and every sacrifice with salt. He has in mind a testing time, some moment of sacrificial suffering. The calling of a Christian is to suffer with and for Jesus Christ.

The challenge of verse 50 is simply to ask, is the sacrifice of your life seasoned with salt? That is to say, is the sacrifice of your life *ready*, are you prepared whenever the time comes for the sacrifice asked of you? One of our elders, Allan Brewer, has a saying: “Always be ready to preach, pray, or die at a moment’s notice.” He is right. That is the message here.

Christian, are you ready? Do you have salt in yourself? Is the sacrifice prepared? Is yours a *cross-centered* life? Is it *humble*? And does that humility lead to *unity*? Is there *holiness* and *mortification* of sin? That is how we prepare ourselves so that we are ready whenever the call comes to suffer or serve in Christ’s name.

Amen.