

Text: Mark 9:42-50

Theme: One of these days I'll get serious

Date: October 15, 2006 (Pentecost 19B)

In the Name of Jesus , Dear Christian Friends,

I want to begin today with a little straw poll. How many of you are Packer fans? For those of you who are Packer fans, how many of you are just as big a fan today as you were in 1996, the year the Packers were super bowl champions? If you've lost some of your enthusiasm it might be because of the disappointing record last year of 4-12 and the dismal start to this year (1-4). But isn't that just the way our human nature is? When things are going well, and our professional sports teams are winning, then it's easy to jump on band wagon and cheer for the home team. But when things go south, our human nature tends to be so very fickle, and we prove to be only fair-weather fans. If our team is winning, we rally behind them. If they are not, we seem to abandon them.

Unfortunately, we often treat our God the way we treat our local sports teams. When things are going well, it's easy to thank and praise God for all his blessings, but when things turn sour, how quickly we ask, "*Where are you when I need you, God? Why are you letting this happen to me?*" Or perhaps it's exactly the opposite: When things are going poorly in our life, when we're afflicted with all kinds of trials, then we cry out to the Lord in distress and he delivers us. But when he hands us prosperity on a silver platter, and everything is going very well, then how often we forget about the true God and make our material success and earthly wealth our god. My friends, we don't want to treat our God in heaven above with the same fickle approach that we treat other things in our life. God wants us to take our relationship with him serious. Today we see the intensity with which Jesus teaches us to regard our relationship with God as we study Mark chapter 9 under the theme, "**One of these days I'll get serious.**" We need to 1) know that God is serious about sin but more importantly we need to 2) trust that God is even more serious about grace and forgiveness.

1. Know that God is serious about sin

In the words of our text we hear just how serious God is about sin. Jesus says: 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. The millstone here is that large flat stone that would take one or more donkey or oxen to move it in a circular motion. The round flat millstone is laid on another hard surface and its turning weight would easily crush the grain on the floor into fine flour. With this picture of a heavy millstone in the mind's eye of his hearers, Jesus emphatically makes the point that it would be better for a person to be drowned in the depths of the sea than to cause someone to fall into sin. That's how seriously Jesus regards our relationship with God above.

Have you ever caused someone else to sin, especially someone who was a little child or young or new in their faith? That's a very serious question. So how do we cause others to sin? The Greek word for "cause to sin" really pictures a stick or twig that holds up a trap that when tripped will kill its prey. God wants us to know that our words and actions actually become the "bait and trap" for someone else to fall into and be spiritually destroyed. Such a spiritual trap could be tempting a classmate to sin by saying, "Here are the answers to the test tomorrow. Memorize them and you'll pass without even studying." Or maybe we are more subtle in our baiting and trapping of others. What message do we give our children when we worship, sing hymns and pray together in church but home life is littered with four letter words, or what about when we allow our children to view inappropriate TV shows, or what about when mom and dad are always gossiping about a relative, or what about the fact that the name of Jesus is never mentioned until next week's worship service?

All of us, at one time or another, to some degree or another, have been guilty of what Jesus here is talking about, causing someone to sin. And that's a serious matter. It's serious for us and for the one we may be tempting. It's serious because when some one continues in a life of sin they will be caught in the kind of eternal trap that no one can get out of. It will lead to the torments of hell, the place Jesus describes very graphically as a place where **THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.** In other words, the punishment, the agony of hell goes on forever – a punishment made all the worse by the realization that if we had only taken sin seriously while we were alive, we wouldn't have to deal with its consequences once we were dead.

Jesus' words continue to teach the seriousness of sin when he says: 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. 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. AND IF YOUR EYE CAUSES YOU TO SIN, PLUCK IT OUT.

Is it really the parts of our body which leads us to sin? Is it our hand that says, "*Okay, commit that sin!*" Not at all, such a notion is absurd. Earlier in his ministry Jesus had taught his disciples that the cause of the sins we commit on the outside is something down deep on the inside. He said, "**For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from the inside and make a man 'unclean'**" (Mark 7:20). When it comes to sin Jesus wants us to get at the heart of matter. When a surgeon discovers a life-threatening infection in the limb of a patient, he will recommend amputation to save the whole body. When God's law discovers or reveals the life-threatening sin in any aspect of our life, God would have us cut it off to save the soul. God's spiritual amputation is sometimes a

radical surgery. It may mean canceling the pay per view cable channels because their content is family inappropriate, or it may mean changing the people we socialize with because their form of entertainment causes our eyes and hearts to sin against our marriage and our spouse, or it may mean changing our jobs because our employer is cheating customers and the government. If cutting off, breaking away, or changing habits sounds terrible, consider the alternative. Jesus says: **IT IS BETTER FOR YOU TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD WITH ONE EYE THAN TO HAVE TWO EYES AND BE THROWN INTO HELL.** When the eternal consequences are considered, the goal of maintaining one's faith and encouraging the faith of others is greater than any other goal in life. When the eternal consequences are considered God is serious about sin, **but** he is even more serious about his grace and forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

2. Trust that God is even more serious about grace and forgiveness

So serious is God about our salvation that he gave his only Son for us. In eternity, long before the creation of the world, long before the first sin, God planned our salvation. God has always been serious about saving sinners. It has been his top priority from eternity. Such a dedication to our salvation is revealed to us in the pages of Holy Scripture for the prophet Isaiah writes 700 years before Jesus' birth, *"The virgin will with child and will give birth to a Son and they will call him Immanuel – which means –God with us"* (Isaiah 7:14). The Apostle Paul writes of God's continuing commitment and ongoing dedication to bringing about the perfect and only possible plan of saving sinners. *"When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law to redeem those under law"* (Gal. 4:4). So serious is God about our salvation that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. So serious is God about our salvation that Jesus Christ, true God and true man lived in our place, fully kept the law that we have not kept, and sacrificed himself as the payment for our sins on the cross of Calvary. Jesus never took lightly his purpose for coming. *"For the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:45). So seriously does God regard our need for a Savior that he gave his own Son into death that we might have our sins removed and live forever with him. Even though you and I have earned a million lifetimes in the fire of hell, God has been merciful to us. We are the recipients of the greatest welfare package ever conceived, in which we have not only received "something for nothing," but in which we have literally received *everything* for nothing. That's what *grace* is all about—the undeserved love of God for you and me, wretched sinners, by which God has given us the free gift of eternal life. Dear friends, the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting have been won for you by the sinless Son of God!

Unfortunately, we don't always regard sin and salvation as seriously as God does, and instead we approach life often with an attitude that says, *"One of these days I'll get serious."* Sadly, when that is our approach to our life with Christ, *"one of these days"* always seems to be pushed off until tomorrow. *"One of these days I'll get serious. Maybe when I'm out of high school and done chasing and carousing, getting drunk and dabbling with drugs and rebelling against my parents, then I'll get serious about my relationship with God.."* Or, *"One of these days when I'm married, when I have kids, then I'll settle down and get the kids baptized, and I'll have to come to church to hear them sing, anyway, so then I'll get serious."* Or, *"One of these days when I'm done saving up for the kids' education. Then I won't have to work all that overtime, and I'll have time for a lot more things, including my religion."* Or, *"One of these days when I retire, then I'll drive around the country in my RV, and I'll have the Synod directory with me, and I can stop at a WELS church every Sunday wherever I'm at."* Tragically, when that's our approach, the day when we get serious about sin and our relationship with Christ, somehow never comes. Contrast that with the word of God which says, *"I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation"* (2 Cor. 6:2).

Now, perhaps you're listening to this and thinking, *"But wait a minute! I'm very serious about my faith and relationship with God, thank you very much! Who are you to tell me, 'Get serious'?"* Really? Are you really that serious about Jesus? So serious that you would rather be drowned or cut off a member of your body rather than sin in any way? It's not easy to be honest about our selfish attitudes, is it? It's not easy to look inside our hearts and admit that even though we might be very upstanding, religious people on the outside, still we struggle with pet sins on the inside. We say and believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven, but we're reluctant to speak to a son or daughter or some other family member about how far they have strayed from Jesus. We say we want the little lambs of our congregation, the children, to know Jesus, but when we're asked to teach Sunday school or VBS we find ourselves too busy for Jesus. We lay claim to words like, "faith" and "trust" and "confidence," but as we look inside ourselves we find that our hearts are full of doubts and worries and fears. We say that all we have and all we are is a gift from God, and that everything from the food on our tables to the clothes on our backs to the money in our bank accounts is all God's, anyway, and we're just managing it—but our offerings tell a very different story, one that reflects that we really believe it's ours to do with as we please.

Dear Christians, Jesus wants us to dispense with all this noise about *"One of these days I'll get serious,"* and to reflect on the grace of God which has loved us from eternity, and which has been revealed in Christ. Isn't it a beautiful thing that while you and I have wandered with fickle and double-minded hearts, our Savior Jesus never once wavered from his single-minded focus on the mission that was before him? Jesus never once said concerning our salvation, *"One of these days I'll get serious about saving the world."* May the love and commitment of our God encourage us to remove the spiritual traps we've set for ourselves and others and may it encourage us to be just as serious as God is about cutting away the sinful temptations in our life and clinging to the life-change power of God's love for us in Christ Jesus. *Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. Amen*