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 St. Stephen's Church (Sewickley, PA)
 27 September 2009 – 16th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 21)
 Series: Hard Sayings of Jesus
 Title: "Alleged Messiah Charged With Malpractice"
 Readings: Mark 9:42-50; Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16; James 4:7-12; Psalm 19:7-12
 Galli Chapters: 8, 13 (Good Warnings, God's Impatience)

Mark 9:42-50 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. ⁴⁴ 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. ⁴⁶ 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."

1. Intro

a. You never want your favorite singer to make a big stylistic leap.

- i. People hated Bob Dylan when we went electric at Newport in 1965.
- ii. People freaked out when the Beatles got all experimental on the White Album.
- iii. Hipsters sneered when Indie Alt-rocker Liz Phair recorded a radio-friendly pop album.
- iv. And critics widely panned rapper Lil' Wayne's attempt at a rock album.
 1. And the worst is when actors try to sing or singers try to act.

a. Anyone own Eddie Murphy's albums?

b. Anyone see any of Britney Spears's movies?

b. But, occasionally, an artist can make the leap.

- i. Example: Derek Webb: I'm a big fan. An incredible singer and songwriter who just made the transition from folk-rock to synth pop, and actually made the leap quite well.
- ii. On his new album, *Stockholm Syndrome*, he has a great line:
 1. I don't want the Father, I want a vending machine; I don't want the Son, I want a jury of peers; I don't want the Spirit, I want the kickdrum.

2. This refers to our common human tendency to want a God of our own making, not the actual God revealed in Scripture.
 - a. Father/Vending Machine: We just want a God who gives us what we want
 - b. Son/Jury of Peers: We'd rather be judged by people like us, with lower standards, than the all righteous Son of God.
 - c. Spirit/Drum: Don't want the Holy Spirit actually in us to change us, we'd rather just have the emotional experience provided by a good strong beat.

2. Segue

- a. What this illustrates is that we don't want God as he is. Instead, we just want to be in Control and have God as our helper.
- b. So that's why Jesus, when he came to earth and spoke the words we read in Scripture, came out—metaphorically speaking—with guns blazing. He had all these “hard sayings,” which is what our sermon series has been about.
- c. And today we get a Doozie: **Mark 9:43-48**
 - i. 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. ⁴⁴ 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. ⁴⁶ 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.'
- d. Just full of Hard Sayings. I mean, look at what he points out here:
 - i. Sin
 1. It's really serious and we should want to get it out of our lives.
 2. You know this. You've probably seen its disastrous consequences in your lives and the lives of your children or family members.
 - ii. Judgment is coming.
 1. God is holy and just. He doesn't just wink at sin. Everyone always asks “How can there be so much evil if God is good?” And the answer is that God will judge! God loves justice and justice shall be done. But that's not really the answer we want. We don't want to hear about judgment.

- iii. Hell
 - 1. It is real.
 - 2. Those whose hearts love only themselves get to spend eternity with themselves—and without God, which is what hell is.
- iv. I've ruined brunch for many of you! This is serious stuff for a Sunday morning. We've left Oprah and now we're on Dr. Phil!

3. Main Point

- a. So Jesus talks about sin, judgment, and hell.
- b. But what do we do with it? What does this passage say to us?
- c. The passage operates at two levels:
 - i. The **standard interpretation** gets at the first level:
 - 1. Jesus is speaking hyperbolically—he doesn't really mean to cut off your hand—he just wants to illustrate a general principle. Namely, remove the causes of sin in your life.
 - a. Love to gossip? Limit the time you spend with your best sources.
 - b. Drinking problem? Pour the Scotch down the drain.
 - c. Enticed to lust by the premium cable channels or by your Internet access? Get rid of cable and toss your PC.
 - 2. This is good advice. There is some basic common sense here. And I have known many people with deep struggles with sin where actions like these have been helpful. This can be freeing—you have permission to throw out, break off, and let go of things that are pulling you down.
 - 3. But, bear with me here: somehow, this common interpretation doesn't seem all that radical, even though Jesus' words are really radical. This interpretation is all good and true, but nothing earth shattering.
 - 4. Furthermore, it doesn't deal with what Jesus said just 2 chapters back in Mark, a passage I preached on 3 weeks ago. Remember where Jesus says this:

- a. **Mark 7:21-23** ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."
 - b. So the problem with sin, Jesus says, is that it's deep down in your heart.
 - c. If we get that, and then we extend Jesus' logic about cutting of your hand and foot and eye, the implication is to cut out your heart.
- ii. **So what in the world is Jesus saying?** I mean, If he was a Christian counselor, he'd be sued for this kind of talk. This is not the kind of advice a professional gives. Imagine if you went to see your therapist and told her that you had this problem where you always speak very sharply to your spouse and children. And she said to cut off your tongue. Or you went to see your pastor and confided that you always had this raging anger inside you, and his response was that you should look into a lobotomy.
1. For someone in the helping profession to say this would be unethical if not illegal. That's why this sermon is called "Alleged Messiah Charged With Malpractice," since if Jesus said this kind of stuff today, that's what would be in the local paper.
 2. So for Jesus to say something this radical and, really, crazy, he's saying something more than just remove the temptations in your life. This gets at the next level of meaning here. And what is it? What does this teaching mean?
- iii. **The Deeper Level:** Jesus is saying the problem is not the temptations in your life. The problem is you.
1. In other words, the first (more typical) interpretation seems to make us think the problem is outside of us. Get rid of the TV, get rid of the booze.
 2. But Jesus says that the problem is located in you: he says to get rid of sin, cut off your hand or foot, or pluck out your eye. Good steps though they are, throwing away the remote control, or the magazines, or the Vicodin is not radical enough. Changing the computer password or changing your cell phone number doesn't go far enough. Apparently, your very flesh is in itself deeply opposed to God. And the sin is so deep,

has such a stranglehold on you, that to get rid of it, you actually have to cut off parts of your body if you want to stop sinning.

3. So the problem is you—in your very body itself.
 - a. And if you're paying attention at all to your own life, you know this is true.

d. Why is Jesus saying this? And what do we do about it?

i. Why

1. The thing to always remember in the Bible when you come across Jesus teaching is to always look not only at what he's saying, but also at what he's doing.
2. And what he's doing here is he's going to Jerusalem. He's on a journey.
3. Begins around Galilee, in the north. Begins heading south to Judea. Then to Jericho, right outside Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem.
4. And why is he going to Jerusalem? To die. And it's not a surprise to him. He knows exactly why he's going there. And as he's traveling, headed to his execution, he begins to talk about his impending death.
 - a. Mark 8:31
 - b. Mark 9:31
 - c. Mark 10:34
5. But his followers don't want him to die. The disciples don't get it. They want a great powerful strong God to solve their problems and fix the world. Not a weak, pathetic crucified Alleged Messiah.
 - a. If you want good illustration of how offensive Jesus' death is, read Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi*. A young Hindu boy is simply scandalized when he learns about Jesus' life and death. "What kind of God is that?", he asks.
 - b. We don't want someone to take the heat for us, take God's judgment for us. If offends our pride. Because we think we're pretty good people. And all we want is to be even better. We want to be winners, achievers. So we want Jesus to give us advice.

- c. But look at why Jesus came: **Mark 10:45** ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came ... to give his life as a ransom for many."
 - d. A ransom. To give up his life to set you free and to release you from the judgment that you have earned. Because he loves you that much.
6. But that's a downer. We don't want to hear that God doesn't need our good works. We don't want to hear that God sees our subtle sins and our dark hearts.
 7. So Jesus throughout his ministry has to get people to a place where they stop believing the lie that they just need a little advice, and they begin to see that they need a God whose love is so great that he takes the full brunt of God's judgment and dies for them. (why do you think he says things like "be perfect" and "It is easier for a camel...")
 8. And that's what this passage in Mark 9 is about. The demand of God's Law is so great that if it's up to you, you better surgically remove your hand, and foot, and eye. In fact, you better give up your whole body. Because the problem is not just your hand, foot, and eye. It's your back that you turn on your friends, your tongue that you use to insult, your brain that you use to judge others, your heart that loves yourself and rejects God. So you better give up your whole body.
 9. But remember, as Jesus says these words, he is on his way to give up his body. He's going to fulfill all the Law's demands for you as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

ii. **What do we do?**

1. Please know I am not excusing sin. If you have a real problem with an addiction or a sin that is getting out of hand, you may need to take some practical steps to remove that temptation while you seek help for the underlying causes.
2. What I am saying is that Jesus' main concern is that we see here the demand of God's law and the inability of humans to fulfill it.
3. And the call of God to each of us, through the lips of Jesus Christ, is to receive this gift of God's grace—the forgiveness and mercy shown in the death and resurrection of Christ.

4. To hear the message that the Law is too heavy for you, and that Christ carries it for you. And it looks like a great wooden cross, carried on the bloody shoulders and a crushed and broken man walking the streets of Jerusalem early on a Friday morning 2000 years ago.
5. He carries it to a hill. Where he dies for you, showing you a love the likes of which you will find nowhere else.

4. Final Word

- a. **This message this morning gets rehearsed every time we have communion and hear about Christ's death for us. But sometimes you can hear it a hundred times and never understand it. That was me, growing up in church.**
- b. **My prayer is that you would hear it fresh this morning, in my words, and at the Lord's Table.**
- c. **If this is connecting with you this morning, know that today is the day of the Lord's salvation.**
- d. **As I pray, see yourself at that cross, your sins on Christ's shoulders, and receive the grace that is not cheap, but it is totally free, for sinners like you and me.**

5. Conclusion: PRAY