

THE CHILD IN OUR MIDST

by Ray C. Stedman

In the section of Mark we are studying, we have been watching Jesus gently but very firmly leading his disciples to face up to the implications of the cross. This is very instructive to us, because, if you are like me, you do not like the cross in your life. We Christians often make much of the joy and love and the glory of Christianity. But usually we avoid the thought of suffering and persecution, of discipline, and of dying. Much of the church today is trying to avoid these implications of the cross. But Jesus makes clear to his disciples, and to us, that there is no glory without the cross -- no cross; no crown.

Following the events of the transfiguration and the healing of the demon-controlled boy, Mark tells us that Jesus passed through Galilee again on his way to Capernaum, and he stresses the teaching ministry of the Lord to his disciples, beginning at Chapter 9, Verse 30:

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he would not have any one know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him. {Mark 9:30-32 RSV}

It is evident from the account that our Lord deliberately avoided the crowds as they went back toward Capernaum. They took the back roads in order not to be seen, because he wanted to spend time with these disciples. All through the Gospels you see that his target was these twelve men. He was intent on conveying truth to them, above all else.

In this announcement of the cross, a new element is added which has not appeared before: "The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men." The word translated "delivered" really means "betrayed." It is the very word used later to describe the betrayal of Judas. Here is a strong hint to these disciples that the way the Lord would be turned over to his enemies would be by an act of betrayal. What this meant to Judas, we are not told. But Jesus clearly knew what would happen from the very beginning. Here he adds this note to the grim message of the cross that was awaiting them.

Mark records that the reaction of the disciples was evidently one of distaste. They did not like this. They did not understand the saying, and did not even ask him anything about it -- because they were afraid, Mark tells us. It is easy to read that as though they were afraid that if they asked him he might rebuke them. But the striking thing is that Jesus never once rebuked anybody for asking a question. He rebuked his disciples often for not having much faith, for remaining unbelieving in spite of all they had seen; but he never rebuked them for asking questions. Yet even though this puzzled them, and they did not understand what he meant, they did not ask him about it. So it is clear that what held them back was the fear of knowing more about it. When someone has brought up a subject that you did not like, have you ever said, "Well, let's not talk about it," or, if you were expected to ask questions, have you refused, because you did not want to know any more about it? That is what was gripping the hearts of these disciples. They did not want to know any more about this subject. We all tend to bury our heads in the sand at times, to think that if we do not look at something, it will go away. But Jesus confronts them continuously with this inescapable fact of the cross, even though they do not want to see it.

They did not want to look at it more closely because of the feeling which was already in their hearts, which Mark goes on to reveal to us:

And they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve; and he

said to them, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them; and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." {Mark 9:33-37 RSV}

Our Lord evidently knew what these disciples had been talking about. Even though he had not been close enough to them to hear, he sensed what was going on. So when they get into the house at Capernaum, he asks them, "What were you discussing on the way?" -- a simple, normal question -- but he is met by embarrassed silence because, as Mark tells us, they had been discussing who was the greatest among them. Somehow that did not sound right in the presence of Jesus. It would be wonderful if we always had this awareness that what we say and think is being done in his presence. It would make us feel differently about many things, I am sure.

We are not told how this argument came about. I rather suspect, because of the context, that it was occasioned by the events of the transfiguration. James, Peter, and John had been chosen to go up on the mountain with the Lord and to observe this marvelous sight. And Jesus had strictly charged them to tell no man what they had seen. I believe they kept this charge and did not say anything to the other disciples. But it is quite possible, you know, to keep a secret in such a way as to make everybody agog to find out more. When Peter, James, and John came back, the others probably asked, "Well, tell us, what happened up there?" And they said, "Oh, we're not permitted to say. One of these days perhaps we might be able to tell you, but you ordinary disciples are excluded from this for now." And then, of course, the argument readily arose as to who was greatest. They began to debate and argue with one another.

To answer this, Jesus gave them a marvelously revealing statement. He told them the truth about ambition, and it is a very helpful word. He called them to himself, and then he said, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Notice something very significant about that. He did not on this or on any other occasion rebuke them for wanting to be greatest. Never does he take them to task because of their desire. God has somehow built into every human heart the desire to succeed at whatever we do, in whatever terms we may conceive success to lie. He did not rebuke them, for this is part of our humanity -- to want to succeed, to be the greatest. What he did do was to tell them the true way to greatness. "It is not by seeking to be first," he said, "It is by a willingness to be last. It is not by getting people to serve you; it is by becoming a servant of all."

What he is really saying is that there are two kinds of greatness, two kinds of ambition. There is the ambition to be approved and applauded by men, and the ambition to be approved and applauded by God. These are as different as night and day. There are those who want to gain fame and attention and influence and power. The measurement of the ambition to be great before men is always: "How many serve me? How much power do I exercise over others? How wide is the extent of my influence? How far has knowledge about me traveled?" Who of us has not suffered many times this desire to be known, to be admired, to be considered important and great in the eyes of men?

But Jesus points out that true greatness is never found there. The measure of true greatness is: "How many do I serve? How many am I willing to minister to? How many can I help? This is the mark of greatness in the eyes of God. This is enduring greatness. You can see how disparate these two views are, how widely they diverge. Christianity is a radical faith! It will completely revolutionize our thinking. It is exactly the opposite of the natural instincts of the heart. This is why, as we grow as Christians, we learn more and more to act not according to the way we feel, the natural inclination, but to act on a quite different basis. Our natural inclinations will simply get us deeper and deeper into trouble. Though we may achieve a form of greatness in the eyes of men, it will turn into cobwebs and ashes in our hands. It is nothing but a temporary, momentary achievement.

To drive this lesson home, in that wonderful way Jesus had, he called a child to him and, putting his arms around the lad, he said to the disciples,

"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." {Mark 9:37 RSV}

This is a beautiful scene. I can see it in my mind's eye, as I hope you can -- our Lord, with his arms about this boy. We are not told whose boy it was. But one thing is clear: it was not a child especially prepared for this occasion. It was not a Sunday School boy who had just been taught all the right answers to give; he was just an ordinary lad. He may have been Peter's son, because this probably took place in the house of Simon Peter, where Jesus made his headquarters in Capernaum. If so, he was doubtless full of the old man, and therefore a rascal. Jesus gathered this little rascal in his arms and, standing there with the boy, he said to his disciples, "Now, true greatness is modeled on this."

Then he went on to bring out, in three remarkable ways, what we could call "the lessons of a child," or to put it in other words -- the real marks of greatness -- what to be ambitious for in your life. It is right that you should be ambitious, but be ambitious for the right things. The first is found in these words: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." The important words there are "in my name." The motive for receiving such a person, such a small, unimportant child, is that it is done as unto the Lord -- done in his name. It is not done because something of great value may come to you because of the child; it is something you do regardless of whether you receive any benefit in doing it, because it is done in his name. I like William Barclay's comment on this, and would like to share it with you:

Now, a child has no influence at all. A child cannot advance a man's career, nor enhance a man's prestige. A child cannot give us things; it's the other way around. A child needs things. A child must have things done for him. And so Jesus is saying, "If a man welcomes the poor, ordinary people, the people who have no influence, and no wealth, and no power, the people who need things done for them, then he's welcoming me. And more than that, he's welcoming God."

Surely the first mark of greatness is that you learn increasingly to have no respect of persons, to welcome people simply because they are people, to take no consideration of whether they can do something for you or not, and not to be concerned whether knowing them enhances your own prestige, so you can drop their names where it will do you the most good, but simply to be interested in people because they are people, and because, potentially at least, they are sons and daughters of God himself. That is the first mark of the children of God.

This is illustrated in the next section by John, quite unwittingly. At this point, Mark says, John interrupted Jesus:

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is for us." {Mark 9:38-40 RSV}

It is difficult to tell exactly why what Jesus was saying brought this to John's mind. It was probably the mention of the phrase, "in my name." It suddenly recalled to John an incident which had taken place not long before, when he and some of the other disciples had seen a man casting out demons in the name of Jesus. John said, "Teacher, when we saw him, we told him to stop, because he didn't belong to our school; he wasn't following us." This is a typically human reaction, is it not? How many times do we instinctively react this way when we hear of someone who is achieving something? We say,

"Well, it can't be good, because he didn't go to our seminary," or "He doesn't belong to our denomination," or "I've never heard of him before." So we tend to reject him. I think John was troubled by the success of this individual. What appalled him was that this man was actually succeeding in casting out demons! It was not a phony ministry, he was no fake; he was doing it, and doing it in the name of Jesus! Yet John had never heard anything about the man before. It was his very success that troubled John.

So he asked Jesus, "Did we do the right thing?" Our Lord's answer is, "No, don't forbid him. For one who does a mighty work in my name will not be able soon after to speak evil of me." What does he mean by that? He is implying that if this man was actually casting out demons, then obviously there was some faith in his heart. God does not respond to anything but faith. And though no one knew much about him and what he believed -- and there may have been considerable error in what he taught -- nevertheless, the fact that God was answering him, and demons were being cast out in the name of Jesus, indicated that there was some reality

about his ministry, that some spark of truth had gotten home to this man. Though he may have been mixed up in many ways, he was right to some degree. Jesus says, "When you see that, don't quench that spark." Don't reject people because they don't know everything yet, because they're still on the way, still learning. Don't forbid them to act, because there is still something of reality about them. And if you encourage them, you can lead them along and train them further and teach them more.

This principle has been amply demonstrated in many ways in our day. Many churches, at the height of the "Jesus movement," turned their backs upon the young people who came to them because they dressed strangely, had bare feet, wore beads, and had weird looking hairstyles. Many church people said, "We don't want this kind among us," failing to note the signs of true faith among these young people. Thus they missed out on the blessing of opening their lives to them.

I was involved in an incident this past week which illustrates this principle. I saw in the newspaper an announcement of a meeting of the Gay People's Union, at Stanford University. Two prominent speakers were featured one a woman homosexual, a professor at San Francisco State University, the other a young man, also a homosexual, who had been ordained to the ministry in the United Church of Christ. They were speaking on the subject, "Homosexuality in the Church." One of our interns and I went over to the meeting. We found about a hundred young people, with a few older ones here and there, fairly evenly divided between men and women. We listened an hour or so to these two speakers. The woman was very vitriolic. She denounced the church in almost every form, in every way. She said that it had to be destroyed, that it was the enemy of human liberty and freedom.

The young man was milder in his approach. He told of his own desire to find a place within the church, but, of how, nevertheless, he found himself struggling because of the homosexuality he endorsed, and of how he had been mistreated on occasion because of misunderstanding on the part of others. I could agree with a great many things he said about the church and its weaknesses. And I noticed one thing in particular as he spoke. He referred several times to Jesus and his ministry with people. And it was true, exactly as our Lord said here, that no one who uses his name will soon after be able to speak evil of him. Whenever this young man spoke of Jesus, it was with great respect and obvious admiration of his ministry.

After an hour or so of this, I felt that it was time to say something for the other side. So I identified myself, spoke up, and said, "I can agree with much that has been said about the church, but I don't think you have come to grips with the real issue -- the stance of Christianity toward homosexuality. The nearest you came was when this young man spoke of Jesus and the woman at the well." He had brought out that Jesus had not castigated her or denounced her, had not scorned her and turned his back on her. I said, "Nevertheless he did speak to her about her condition -- having lived with five husbands, and now living with a man who was not her husband. He then offered her release, relief." I said, "I think this is the true Christian position. Homosexuality is very injurious; it destroys people. Jesus understands that, but he doesn't want to denounce people or drive them away; he wants to offer to them a way out."

As I looked at that roomful of young people, I did not see a room full of lesbians and faggots, though they were calling themselves those names. I saw some hungry, mixed-up, stunted, fragmented, and hurting young people -- wanting somehow to find the secret of life, thinking they had found it -- but on a wrong track, and destroying themselves in the process. Over and over, Paul's words in Romans about homosexuals kept coming into my mind: "They receive in their own persons the due penalty of their error," {cf, Rom 1:27b RSV}. The stance of the church toward those who are involved in wrongful and evil things is never to be one of denunciation. It is never to be one of stigmatizing and of rejecting. It is to be one of open-armed acceptance, but with an honest evaluation of what is going on, and the offer of the way of release.

This is what Jesus is saying to his disciples. The mark of greatness is that you look not at a person's outward appearance, nor at the outward characteristics they manifest, nor even at the things they stand for, but that you see a human being who is groping after truth and life. And if the name of Jesus is respected in any way at all, do not quench that spark but feed it.

The second mark of greatness follows immediately:

"For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward. [Do not stop there, for the sentence goes right on in the original language. "And...] 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 round his neck and he were thrown into the sea." {Mark 9:40-41 RSV}

Remember that Jesus speaks these words with his arms still around the little child. What he is saying is that the mark of true greatness in his kingdom is that someone takes humanity seriously, and longs to see it develop rightly. The slightest ministry to a young believer is rewarded by God. Even a cup of cold water given in the name of Christ will never lose its reward. Every opportunity taken to help someone develop into fullness of health spiritually, as well as in soul and body, is to be rewarded by God. But on the other hand, any damage, any spiritual injury to a young Christian, is more serious than murder or physical injury: "Better for him that a great millstone be hung round his neck and he be cast into the depths of the sea, than to cause one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble."

I remember a number of years ago reading a short story by O. Henry, in which he told of a little girl whose mother had died. When the father would come home from work, he would fix their meal, then he would sit down with his paper and pipe, put his feet up on the mantle, and read. The little girl would come and say, "Father, would you play with me?" And he would say, "No, I'm too tired, I'm too busy. Go out in the street and play." This went on for so long that finally the little girl grew up on the streets, and became what we would call a "streetwalker," a prostitute. Eventually she died, and when, in the story, her soul appeared at the gates of heaven, Peter said to Jesus, "Here's this prostitute. Shall we send her to hell?" Jesus said, "No, no; let her in. But go find the man who refused to play with his little girl, and send him to hell."

Here in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is saying that neglect is sometimes the greatest injury done to children, and to young believers, and that we must recognize this as a serious matter.

The third characteristic follows immediately:

"And 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 to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 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. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck 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, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. For every one will be salted with fire." {Mark 9:43-40 RSV}

The third mark of greatness, as we can learn from thinking of children, is that the one who takes young people seriously must learn to start judging with himself. Remember, this is uttered with his arms still around the child. He is saying that the mark of one who takes seriously the importance of spiritual growth is that he begins to judge with himself, deals drastically with himself. These words about cutting off the hand and foot and eye are but an intensified and dramatic way of saying what Jesus said on another occasion: "First remove the beam that is in your own eye, and then you will see clearly how to help another," {cf, Matt 7:3-4}. The analogy he draws is very clear, and is taken from life itself. If you have an infected arm that develops gangrene, and it is threatening your very life, and the doctors cannot do any more for you, there is only one thing left to do: cut it off, amputate it. Your life is at stake. Jesus uses that very dramatic analogy to tell us how serious it is when we are involved in wrongful and hurtful attitudes and actions, and what we must do about it. We must deal drastically with these things; otherwise they involve us in hell.

The word used here for "hell" is *gehenna*. Gehenna ["Ge-hinnom"] was the name of a valley outside Jerusalem. It was the place where some of the kings of Israel had offered their children to the god Moloch, to be burned with fire. It was a defiled place, and it became the garbage dump of Jerusalem. Fires smoldered there continuously; repulsive and ugly worms ate at the garbage. That becomes the symbol of the eternal waste of life. When we read these words of Jesus about hell (By the way, he spoke more of hell than any other person in the New Testament.), we must understand that when they are applied to an unbeliever, i.e., one who resists and rejects the good news of Jesus and dies an unbeliever, it means his whole life is like that -- wasted, a total loss. There is nothing salvageable about it. He may have won the approval of men, may have lived very

comfortably, but at the end his life is a wipe-out, a total loss, good only to be thrown on the garbage heap for eternity. When these words apply to believers, as they do here, he is speaking of partial loss. Some of our life is wasted, squandered, lost; it is misused.

The way we avoid that loss and wasting of life is, as Jesus said, to salt ourselves with fire, i.e., to judge ourselves. The fire represents judgment in our life. He tells us to deal drastically with ourselves in this way, and, in this very helpful analogy he gives, he starts with the hand. To "cut off the hand," of course refers to eliminating the actual act that is wrong, the evil deed. If you have a dirty mind, a filthy mouth, stop thinking evil thoughts, stop using obscene terms. Deal with the hand, cut it off. If you are engaged in sexual wrong, stop it. If your attitude toward another is bitter and resentful, stop thinking that way. Stop saying the things you say about them. Deal with the act, cut it off. Otherwise you waste your life.

And then, if that is not enough, the foot has to be cut off. The foot is the symbol of the path that leads to evil, the approach to temptation, the circumstances that lead you there. You may have to change where you go and what you spend your time doing, because you are confronted with temptation too strong for you to handle. Cut it off. It may be that you will have to limit the time you spend watching television, or stop watching certain programs, or not attend certain movies, or not read certain books, because these expose you to pressures which are too much for you to handle. Cut them off; otherwise you will waste your life.

Or it may be that the eye -- the symbol of the inner vision, the pictures we see in our imaginations, the fantasies, the memories and dreams of the past which light the flame of temptation -- must be plucked out. Jesus is saying that you must deal drastically with these things. They not only waste you, but they affect others. They must be dealt with. He concludes with these words:

"Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." {Mark 9:50 RSV}

Salt, the salt of self-judgment, the salt of the chemical fire which purifies and cleanses, is good. Judge yourself, look at yourself and evaluate what you are doing and learn to control yourself. But remember, it must be real; it cannot be phony. Salt which has lost its saltiness is worth nothing. It must be real, genuine salt. And so, have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

Remember how this account opens. A group of disciples are arguing as to who is going to be greatest, fighting, competing, rivaling one another. Jesus says that the remedy is to have salt in yourselves, to begin with yourself, to deal with your own weakness and not another's, to cleanse your own life and not another's. Start dealing drastically with the things which are wrong in your own life. For the marks of greatness in the kingdom of God are these: to learn to treat everyone the same, without respect of persons; to take life and humanity seriously, and be concerned to profit others, to build into their lives and strengthen them, and not harm them or injure them; and to begin to judge with yourself and to deal drastically with the things in your own heart which are wrong. Such a person rises in stature and greatness in the eyes of God, and will be honored before the whole watching world.

Prayer:

Teach us, Lord Jesus, the meaning of these words in the depths of our hearts. Help us to respond to them and to be faithful men and women. Help us to strive for that greatness which will shine throughout eternity, to be great as you are great, Lord Jesus, in the same Spirit and by the same power. We pray in your name, Amen.

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