



Priorities Overturned

Mark 9:30-50

Joe Jones January 12, 2020

Turn in your Bible to Mark 9. We'll be looking at verses 30-50 this morning. As you're turning there, listen to Luke 9:51: *"When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."* Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem.

Today is January 12, 2020—the start of a new year and the start of a new decade. I don't know exactly how you feel about the turning of a new year, resolutions and all that's included with that, but as we look back for a few minutes and think about this past year, consider your life.

Maybe your 2019 had some disappointments. Maybe you had made resolutions at the beginning of the year, but looking back, many of those fell by the wayside, maybe within a few days, a few weeks or a few months, and now they've been forgotten. As you look back, there may be a sense of failure. Or maybe 2019 was filled with hardships and sufferings, so you went through some really painful things. Maybe 2019 brought some of the most painful trials you've ever experienced and had to endure in your entire life. Maybe last year was very difficult for you.

Or perhaps for you, 2019 was overall one of the best years of your life. It was filled with joy, spiritual change, lots of good things and glad memories. But my guess is that for most of us, 2019 was a mixed bag—some good things, some highlights, some mountaintop moments, then also some valleys, some challenges, some difficulties, some pain and loss.

But as we turn our attention to this coming year—as we think ahead to February, March and throughout the year—I want us to consider this question: What's the measure of success for 2020? In 365 days, when we come to January 12, 2021, and we're looking back on 2020, what would our lives need to look like to say, "That was a successful year"?

Consider this. A successful 2020 looks like a year of narrowed focus—focus on the main things, the things that truly matter—and the rejection of whatever distracts from those main things. We're so easily distracted, aren't we? This little cell phone right here is a huge source of distraction, isn't it? From the internet to social media to apps to email to messaging—we could spend every day of 2020 sitting on our couches being distracted with this device alone.

In addition to this, there are thousands of other distractions that tend to keep us from being laser focused on the main things in 2020, the things that really matter, the things that are really going to make an impact in our lives and in the lives of those around us. So think about all these temptations toward distraction—that's us. Then there's Jesus, Who is described in Luke 9:51 as having His face set to go to Jerusalem. In other words, He had this flinty resolve, this iron will, to head to Jerusalem. He had one vision, one passion, one goal, one aim: to glorify God through the salvation of sinners. He lived for it, He died for it and His life counted for eternity.

Here in Mark 9, Jesus is with His disciples, urging them and pleading with them to follow in His footsteps, to not waste their lives on a thousand diversions, but to make their lives count by being focused on what really matters. He wants them to focus on the few main things that are central and make their lives count for eternity.

Today—January 12, 2020—Jesus is here with us, pleading with us to live in the very same way. Amidst all the temptations to distraction, Jesus is calling us to narrow our focus in this new year. Let's get clear today on what's really important and let's be willing to give our time and energy, our minds and bodies, our whole lives to those things.

The big question now that's pressed up against us is: what does it mean to be an undistracted disciple of Jesus in 2020? What are the things we should be laser focused on this year? Very simply, I see two things: humility and holiness. Humility means getting low before God; holiness means killing what will kill us. This is serious stuff. If we put off what distracts us and focus our lives on these two simple realities in 2020, we will not be disappointed and God's blessing of joy will be upon us. So let's read Mark 9:30-50 and be looking for these themes of humility and holiness:

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." ³² But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

³³ And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

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. 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. 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.”

Let’s pray together.

Father, please bless the reading and preaching of Your Word now. Let us receive it with soft and moldable hearts. I pray that in the end, we would worship You. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Focus #1: Humility

When I was in middle school and high school, I took up the sport of boxing. It’s kind of a unique thing, but my brother, who is four years older than me, took up the sport, bought some boxing gloves, a heavy bag, a speed bag and really got into it. I followed in his footsteps, boxing throughout high school. We would have friends over and we’d do some boxing together in our basement.

Then my freshman year in college was kind of the peak of my boxing career. I fought in an amateur statewide tournament called “Golden Gloves.” As I was training for that tournament, I was encouraged to watch tapes of other boxers who were a lot better than I was. One of those boxers I liked to watch was the great Muhammad Ali. It was Muhammad Ali who famously said, “I am the greatest.” Here’s more of what he said on a video I watched, talking in a very poetic way about his greatness: “Fifteen times I’ve told the clown what round he’s going down, and this

chump...”—Sonny Liston, who he’s about to tear up in the ring—“...ain’t no different. He’ll fall at eight to prove that I’m great, and if he keeps talking jive, I’ll cut it to five. I’m young, I’m handsome, I’m fast, I’m pretty. I can’t possibly be beaten.” You can just imagine him saying this, can’t you? “I can’t possibly be beaten. I am the king of the world. I’m pretty. I’m a bad man. I shook up the world. I shook up the world.” [That’s my best Ali impersonation.]

We hear that and think, “What extreme arrogance; what silliness,” for a mere fragile human being to say those grandiose words. But those four words—“I am the greatest”—get to a heart issue that’s buried deep down in each and every one of us. It’s pride—the first sin. You think, “Oh, I don’t struggle with that.” Yeah, you do. “Oh, I’m not much like Muhammad Ali.” Yeah, you are.

Pride is building a kingdom of self. It’s extreme aversion to truly getting low before God. The way the Lord made me, I hate the feel of velvet. For some reason, it makes me cringe. That’s how all of us are when we think about and consider truly getting low before God, truly being humble. We just cringe. We don’t like it.

So I want us to see here in Mark 9 what is perhaps the most ironic piece of this whole scene. Do you see it? Look in verse 33 where Jesus asks His disciples, “*What were you discussing on the way?*” Notice those three words, “on the way.” If we read through the whole Gospel of Mark right now, we’d see these three words are used quite frequently and they refer to the path Jesus is on, heading to Jerusalem. What’s going to happen in Jerusalem? Jesus tells them that in Jerusalem He will be delivered into the hands of men and killed, then to life rise again. Think about the irony here. Jesus is on this pathway.

Maybe you’ve been in a forest and there’s a single path through the trees that you’re walking down. Maybe the sun is starting to set and you can feel it getting darker almost by the minute. This is kind of what Jesus’ life is like. He’s on a pathway through Galilee and Capernaum, but He’s heading to Jerusalem. His face is set and it’s getting darker and darker for Him as He approaches the suffering of the cross.

Yet it’s on this very pathway that the disciples are saying, “No, I’m the greatest.” “No, I’m the greatest.” “No, I’m the greatest.” Do you see the irony of that? They’re distracted, right? In one sense, their pride is sinful. But in another sense, it’s just this silly distraction. They’re like little kids behind Jesus, arguing in hushed tones about who’s the greatest among them—and they’re doing it while Jesus is on His way to die.

Jesus wants them to get free of this distraction and get focused on the main things. I love this simple sign of Jesus’ care for His disciples. He sits down, getting on their level, having this close, intimate time of teaching. He wants to teach His disciples something very important. Look

at verse 35. Friends, these words are so central and so vital for our Christian lives. Jesus says, *“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”* Get low before God. Be a servant of all. Let’s pause, take a step back, hear these words and let them sink in: *“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”*

So what is undistracted Christian discipleship at its heart? It’s resolving to reject selfish ambition. It’s resolving to reject the “me first” mentality. It’s getting low before God. It’s deciding to be last of all and servant of all.

So what does that actually look like in practice? What will my life look like if I head in that direction? Here’s what it will look like. You’ll do small things for small people in Jesus’ name. By small things, I mean ordinary, everyday things. Jesus illustrates this in verses 36-37 where He receives a small child, as well as in verse 41, where He talks about giving a cup of water. These are very ordinary, mundane, small acts—giving a cup of water or receiving a child—but they’re big in God’s sight. We’re inclined to think God is impressed by the big stuff.

I work for a Christian publishing company and we publish books by these authors who sometimes sell thousands of copies. That means thousands of people are reading their content about the Lord and the Word of God. The Lord is blessing these authors’ ministries and they’re doing good things. But we think, “Wow, the Lord must really be impressed by what they’re doing. They’re reaching thousands of people with their writing.”

I recently watched an excellent documentary about Billy Graham. Man, that guy was amazing! Uniquely gifted, yet his preaching was so simple. He preached the simple gospel and literally millions of people were being saved. I didn’t realize how global his ministry was. On almost every continent of the globe, Billy Graham went to preach the gospel to crowds of thousands and thousands of people.

We can say, “Wow, if I could do that…” Or, “If I could share the gospel with my whole neighborhood and see all these people converted, then God would really be pleased with me and impressed with my life.” But actually, God’s eye is often caught by the things no one else sees—the little things done from a pure heart for Jesus.

Things like speaking a kind word to a discouraged friend, or taking someone aside, putting your arm them and praying for them. Or going to a prison and caring for an inmate. Or meeting with a new Christian one on one to help them in their walk with Christ. Or changing a diaper, washing dishes, doing your job with diligence, bringing a meal to a friend in need, writing a note, even sending a text message.

My wife Rachel had surgery this past week, so we’ve felt the impact and encouragement of those little things. When you’re in a moment like that, these aren’t little, are they? The Lord uses

these little things in big ways in the economy of His Kingdom. He's very pleased when we do small things for small people in Jesus' name.

A man by the name of Brother Lawrence was a monk in the 17th century. He was profoundly converted and entered into monastic life. His duties as a monk focused on two things: washing dishes and repairing his brothers' sandals. You might say these were very humble and mundane tasks that he performed throughout his life and ministry. But what he said about it was this: "We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, Who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed."

That's good, isn't it? "We ought not to be weary..." Don't be weary, Christian, of doing little things "...for the love of God, Who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed." Don't you love that we have a God Who's like that? So, do small things for small people in Jesus' name. And by "small people," I mean those who are small in stature and small in importance in the world's eyes.

If we read through the whole Gospel of Mark, over and over again we see Jesus' affection for children. But we learn from this passage that when Jesus talks about children, about "little ones," He's not just referring to those who are small in stature, but also to those who are small in importance in the world's eyes. It's those on the outside, those who are lonely, those who are struggling, those who are despised, those who are well-known as sinners, those who are unaccepted and unacceptable. These are the small people whom Jesus calls us to love.

I want you to imagine you're one of the 12 disciples. Jesus gets down on your level and He's teaching you. Then He brings a small child, puts that child in the midst of you and the other disciples, then He takes this child into His arms. Can you imagine Jesus holding this small, forgotten child? It's a clear picture of His whole life, especially what He does on the cross. The heart of Jesus is caring for children, for the least, the broken, the despised.

So if that's you today, you're in a really good spot, because Jesus has a special heart for the least—and really, that's all of us, if we know ourselves well. This is the beauty of Jesus: there are no little people. The act of receiving a small person is hugely important in the eyes of Christ and massively valuable in the economy of His Kingdom. Jesus says, "Receiving a child equals receiving Me; receiving Me is equivalent to receiving God the Father." In other words, receiving a child opens up an intimate access to the very presence and heart of God.

So if that's you, Christian—if you're the person who, on Sunday mornings, is looking for the person who doesn't have anyone else to talk to, the person who's so discouraged they barely made it to church, the person who's rejected by the world—if you're the person who's looking out for that

person, you share God's very heart. I want to encourage you to keep on doing that. Keep living that way.

If your life is devoted to loving the least, that is a life well lived. If your year ahead is devoted to that, that is a year well lived. So be focused there. Do small things for small people in Jesus' name. A lot of people do nice things in unnoticed ways, but to humbly do good for someone for Jesus' sake requires a supernatural work of God's Spirit in our hearts. It means saying, "I'm going to get low before God and serve other people so that Jesus gets the glory, so that Jesus gets famous, so that people know more about Jesus." That is the ultimate aim we're striving for.

Sadly, as we continue to look in Mark 9, it becomes clear that the disciples are kind of like me when I touch velvet—they cringe. They don't like this. They don't like this talk of humility. They don't like this talk of doing small things for small people in Jesus' name. They want to do great things, right? So they want to get away from this teaching, but Jesus kind of has them cornered.

So what does John do? Look at verse 38: "*John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.'*" Let me interpret what John is doing here. Maybe you already know. The question seems to come out of the blue. Where is this question coming from, John? Who is this other guy? I think what John is essentially saying is, "Yeah, we've got a lot of issues, but what about that guy?"

I think he's distracting the conversation, so he doesn't have to face his own heart, his own issues. This is a skilled diversion from addressing the main theme, helping him and the other disciples feel better about themselves. After all, they're part of the in group. They're the 12 closest disciples of Jesus—and that other guy, whatever he's doing over there, he's not part of us.

We do this, don't we? Oh, we do this. We compare ourselves to other people to feel better about ourselves. We do this because we know that deep down we've got a whole bunch of brokenness that we have to deal with and it's so hard and scary to face that. So we distract ourselves with the faults of others.

Ask yourself if you ever distract yourself with the faults, failings, issues and differences of others? We sometimes even do this with churches. Maybe you say, "Oh, look at how that other church does things. Don't they have it all wrong?" Or, "Look at that seeker sensitive church. It's purely evangelistic and their theology is all jacked up. Aren't they misguided?" Or, "Look at how that other Christian is trying to do things (or not do things) for Christ, but they're just getting it all wrong. They're not part of our in crowd."

We distract ourselves with what others are doing or not doing, comparing ourselves so we can feel better about where we are. Yet all the while we have sin in our hearts that we're struggling

with which is far and away more urgent for us to deal with. But we neglect those areas, pointing the spotlight on how other people are.

Sometimes my kids will come to me and say, “Noah is being so annoying.” Or, “Lucy is doing this and it’s bugging me so badly.” Here’s what I sometimes say: “You just focus on you; there’s enough there to keep you busy.” And that’s what Jesus says to me this morning. “You focus on you; there’s plenty there to keep you busy.”

This is exactly where Jesus goes in this text. I love how Jesus handles this. Watch the beauty and graciousness of Jesus in this passage. First, He’s super optimistic about this guy who’s casting out demons. He says, “Yeah, this guy might just be using My name to do mighty works, but he’ll come around to me. His heart will change.”

Then He turns to the disciples and says, “Now, how about instead of talking about that guy, we turn back to you guys and talk about you for a while.” He then gets really intense with them. We’re going to follow Jesus and get really intense now too. These are some of the most intense verses in Scripture, I think. Let’s go there by talking about holiness.

Focus #2: Holiness

What should we focus on in 2020? Humility and holiness—they’re killing what will kill us. It was John Owen, the English Puritan from the 17th century, who said, “Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.” He got this from the Bible, particularly from the words of Jesus in Mark 9 here and the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:13. There the Holy Paul says this to us Spirit through: *“For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”*

This is where we need to be giving our attention in 2020—killing sin. I know that’s intense. I know that’s countercultural. I know that if you read a modern psychology or self-help book, they will not advise that. But it’s the demand of Jesus on each and every one of our lives for our spiritual health and eternal joy. Think of it this way. Each and every one of us has to experience hell. Every one of us.

Jesus says it like this in Mark 9:49: *“Everyone will be salted with fire.”* What does He mean by that? He means either you’ll go through hell now in this life, or after you die you will go to hell forever.

By the way, this is one of the passages in Scripture that clearly teaches that hell is a place of eternal, conscious suffering for those who reject Christ. This is a hard doctrine, but God is good. This should make us weep that this is a reality.

Jesus is urging His disciples to choose to go through the fire now rather than enduring it forever later. He's loving us. He's working for our joy here. Jesus says that as His disciples, we must have the salt that is the pain of self-denial in our lives. It's the fruit of true faith. It's not what gets us into the Kingdom. We don't have to kill sin in order to be made right with God. Jesus purchased that for us by grace at the cross. We are made right with God based on sheer, pure grace and mercy.

Yet if you have truly trusted in Christ and are united with Him, there will be a battle in your life against sin. So Jesus says, *"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off... If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off... If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out."* Yes, that's as gory and violent as it sounds. Jesus' reasoning for saying this is very simple. He's saying, "It's better for you." He's loving you. He's thinking about what's best for the disciples. It's better for you to enter life lame, crippled or blind than to go to hell with all your body parts. Wow! This is some serious stuff!

Now, Jesus isn't instructing us to literally cut off a hand or foot, nor tear out an eye. We could do that, but we would be blind and have no hands and no feet and still have sin inside. What Jesus is telling them, in a very serious way, is that our sin will kill us. It has the power and potential to kill us by leading us away from God. Although it's going to be very painful, we must do whatever it takes to kill our sin. That's nice on paper—and these aren't my words. This is what Jesus says.

So how do your hands lead you to sin? What do you do with your hands that dishonors God rather than glorifying Him?

Where do your feet cause you to sin? Where do your feet take you that you shouldn't go?

Where do your eyes and mind cause you to sin? What do you look at that is dark and unclean and contrary to Christ?

These sins and habits must be strangled and starved with the intent of killing them. We must take radical action against our sin. We must do whatever is necessary to make war against sins of desire, thought, word and deed.

See, there aren't two kinds of Christians: those who fight against sin and those who have made a truce with it. Biblically, there's one kind of Christian: those who are fighting their sin. Deep down, they're at war with it. I'm not talking about sinless perfection. I'm talking about a lifelong battle.

In my sophomore year at Taylor University, God saved me. Soon after I was saved, I called my dad on the phone and said, "My life has totally changed." My dad said, "The battle begins now." You know, a few weeks before I called him, there was no battle. I was doing what I wanted. The moment I was saved that battle started.

Don't you feel it, Christian? Isn't that real? So Jesus is saying, "Stay in the battle. Keep going." In a world where the word "sin" is rarely ever used except maybe in church, in a world where sin is taken so lightly, we need this reminder that sin is serious. It's so serious, in fact, that God Himself became a man to die a brutal death on a cross to take that sin away. He did this so that the penalty and power of sin can be taken away. Jesus died so that we can be forgiven of all our sin.

So, Christian, today—right now this morning—if you've trusted in Christ your sins are totally washed clean. They're gone. You should rejoice in that. But Jesus also died to take away the power of sin, so that power could be broken and we could fight a successful battle against sin in our lives. That's why Jesus died. We have a Savior Who is now ready and willing and happy to help us in this fight.

As we close, I want to end with this. One day we're going to inherit a new creation and live with God forever. Jesus is coming back. He came the first time about 2,000 years ago. He's coming again soon. This is real. When He comes, He's going to make all things new. He's going to re-create this whole world, this whole universe. He's also going to re-create our bodies so that we have indestructible bodies that never die. We will live in a new creation with God—that's the main thing—in ever-increasing joy forever.

If you think about the hope you have, Christian, it's breathtaking. The reason I'm bringing this up is if we have to go through the fire of self-denial now, of the idea of cutting off hand and foot and plucking out an eye, we're going to look back on that pain of self-denial one day ten million years from now and say, "It was so worth it." So Christian, as 2020 approaches and our lives are going by so quickly, let's be undistracted disciples of Jesus.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for this profound word from Jesus in Mark 9:30-50. We thank You for how it challenges us and convicts us. Lord, we so resonate with the disciples' experience of being distracted by so many things, yet at the same time You call us to focus on the main things. So help us focus on humility and holiness as we enter into this new year. We pray in the power of Jesus' name. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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