

Cut it off

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[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church. And it's my joy to bring God's word to you today. A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community.

And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced there's no one so good. They don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in his word. We're continuing our series in the gospel of Mark. You'll remember that the gospels tell the story of Jesus in his life, in his death, in his resurrection. And as we began the gospel in chapters one through eight, we were asking these two questions, who is Jesus and how do we respond to him? Peter gives the definitive answer to that in the middle of chapter eight, where he finally confesses Jesus as the Christ, the one who fulfills all the promises of the Old Testament. And so now in this second half of Mark, in Mark chapters nine through 16, we're instead looking at this question of what it means to follow after Jesus. And what we've seen over the last few weeks is the great sacrifice that's involved. We're going to continue that theme this morning as Jesus outlines for us how serious our battle against sin is, that we need to do no matter what to put it to death. And so with that, I'm going to invite you to turn with me to Mark chapter nine. By the way, as we begin, let me make one note. You'll notice that there are two verses missing. There's no listing for verse 44 and no listing for verse 46. This is not some sort of conspiracy.

If you have an English standard version Bible, you'll see a note that says this, some manuscripts add verses 44 and 46, which are identical with verse 48. So if you want to know what those two verses said, just read verse 48. The translators of the ESV removed those, assuming that it was, I believe, a scribal error, most likely. So probably some other explanations as well. With that, I invite you to turn with me to Mark chapter nine, starting at verse 42. You can turn in your worship guide. You can turn in your Bible. You can turn on your phone. No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's word. God tells us that his word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, which means that he has not left us to stumble alone in the dark, but instead he's given us his word to show us the way to go. And so that's why we read now starting at verse 43.

It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell.

Verse 48, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched, for everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again?

[3 : 41] Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we thank you again that you feed us day by day and week by week with your word. You don't leave us to wonder or guess how we're supposed to live, but instead you show us the right path. You show us the way to go. Most of all, you show us your grace in Jesus Christ that when we falter and stumble and fail in sin, your grace is there to meet us.

We ask that you would show us both of those things this morning, that you would show us the path that you have for us and the grace that you offer us in Jesus Christ. We ask all of these things in his name. Amen.

In his autobiography, *About Faith*, the great army legend, Colonel David Hackworth, tells about his time in the military through several wars. And if you're familiar with David Hackworth, you know he's famous most of all for publicly opposing the Vietnam War on television.

His career was not always that exciting, though. At one point, he was stationed at a U.S. Army hotel in Nuremberg, and he was losing his mind out of boredom, believing his gifts were not being used

as much as they could be. But he makes some friends during this time, and one of his friends, who he's especially close to, one day makes an interesting request of him. He says, I really want you to help me out by getting me an army hat so that I can give that hat to my nephew. It would just mean the world to this nephew if he could have an army hat. Hackworth immediately forgets about the hat and does not get it. And so this friend comes back again and reminds him, remember I told you about the hat that I wanted. By the way, you know what my nephew would also love, he would love an army jacket. If you could get him a hat and a jacket, it would mean the world to him. What does Hackworth do at this point? He immediately reports this man to the counterintelligence corps and becomes his handler. And so for the next few months, he's spending tons of time with this man, traveling with him, trying to find out as much information as he can. At one point, he turns up the thermostat in his house to an unbearable level to force this man to take his jacket off so he can grab his passport. So they don't know for sure that this man is a spy, but they do their best to find out. And the requests actually continue to increase. So next, he asks [6 : 26] Hackworth for a gas mask because he just wants to see what the new army gas masks look like. And then he wants books on atomic warfare. And so the counterintelligence continue to feed him these items so that he can give them to this man. Their suspicions eventually confirmed. He's arrested for buying secret documents at a train station. He's found guilty of spying on behalf of East Germany.

And so it becomes clear that this man was a spy for the communists. The question is this, what tipped David Hackworth off? How did he know this man was a communist spy? Well, the reason he knew he was a communist spy is he remembered his training, the basic tactics of espionage. If you are trying to recruit an asset, what you do is you start with a small, seemingly harmless request. Technically against the regulations for David to give him this army cap, but who is it going to hurt, right? And then you move on from the army cap and you move to the field jacket. And after you've acquired that, you then ask for the gas mask. And the goal is to get this point, this person to the point where they are so compromised, they cannot get out. Their hands are tied at this point. You start with a small, minor infraction and you grow. You move towards greater, larger infractions until you can get them to the point of no return. Brothers and sisters, Satan, our enemy, is the master of espionage and asset recruitment. He has been doing it longer than anyone else. John chapter 8 tells us that the devil is a liar and the father of lies. The point is this, small compromises lead to great compromises. It is tempting to play around with sin. Satan knows it's easier to get you to do something small than to do something large. And yet the problem is that sin has this trajectory to it. It has an escalation to it that while it might start tiny, it never stays there. And so this passage is telling us this morning the importance of making no compromises with sin. It is critical to kill sin now before it is too late. And so that's why we see the repetition twice of this phrase in verses 43 and 45 to cut it off. Verse 47, to tear it out. In other words, deal with sin at the very root. Do whatever you need to do, no matter how radical and sacrificial, to make sure sin does not gain this foothold in your life.

Now, I want to say at this point, I hope that it is obvious for all of us that Jesus is speaking in hyperbole. My application today is not to go home and rip out your eye. In fact, even if you did that, it would not solve your problem. Remember what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, that sin is a matter of the heart. And so actually getting rid of these objects is not going to solve your problem.

Your problem is greater and larger and more difficult than that. The point is that Jesus is telling people to completely eliminate the cause, the enabler, the temptation to sin. There is a painful, a decisive cutting out of whatever would cause us to walk away from God and towards sin.

[10 : 06] Now, commentators have pointed out the reason that Jesus focuses on the foot here is that that's the thing that can take us to a place where we can sin. And yet in today's culture, we don't have to leave our house to be presented with all kinds of temptations to sin. There's all sorts of options and opportunities. And so for us, cutting out sin at the root could involve a variety of things.

I had a friend at one point, because of this verse, he decided he was no longer going to have internet access at his house. He had no cable internet. The only way he could access the internet was to go to a library or a public place. Now think about all the sacrifices you would have to make at that point. You wouldn't be able to watch any of your streaming shows. You wouldn't be able to look up something quickly that you had a question about. And putting sin to death was more valuable than all of those things. Cutting out your eye might look like throwing away your smartphone and

replacing it with a dumb phone, regardless of all the awkward conversations you might have afterwards.

It might mean you completely stop watching a particular show that confronts you with temptations over and over again. Can you not stop posting foolish comments on Facebook?

Cutting off your hand might mean deleting your account. Having a friend change your password so you can never access it again. Of course, not all the challenges to sin that we face in this life are related to technology.

You find yourself drawn and attracted and maybe even flirting with someone you are not married to. And you also have a spouse.

[12 : 05] Cutting off your hand might mean you don't go where they go anymore. You stop going to that coffee shop or that club even though it's your favorite spot.

It might mean you eventually have to quit that job and find another or move on to another team. Whatever it takes to eliminate that temptation from your life, no matter how challenging and difficult it is.

If your finances are out of control, you may have to finally listen to the immortal words of Dave Ramsey and cut up your credit card and figure out how are you going to survive in this world without it.

Jesus is calling here for radical and decisive action. To do whatever it takes to be done with sin. Maybe you had a couple drinks and you shared information that was not yours to share.

Cutting out sin might be realizing you have to take a break from alcohol because you don't want to violate one of your friends like that again.

[13 : 21] The wise person does not say, I can handle this temptation. It's okay. The wise person stays away entirely.

The wise person does not lie to himself and say, you know what, it's not a big deal. I can deal with it. I can handle it. No, he finds a way to be removed from that temptation. Now, why is it that we need to be so dramatic, so decisive in our war with sin?

Well, Jesus tells us here that the severity of the solution reveals the seriousness of the problem.

The severity of this solution reveals the seriousness of this problem.

And we see that seriousness in verse 43. What is going to happen if you don't do this? Well, you could go with two hands to hell to the unquenchable fire.

Different words are used in verses 46 and 47. Twice we hear about being thrown into hell. Sin often appears cute and harmless until the day it kills you.

[14 : 35] Sin often appears cute and harmless until the moment it kills you. And Jesus here is telling us what we already know from Romans chapter 6, that the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This passage gives us a picture of what hell looks like in verse 48, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. This is a picture that comes from Isaiah chapter 66, which Scott read earlier this morning, and it's a picture of the ultimate end of people who reject God.

It is unending. The fire goes on forever. It is a place of death and decay and destruction. That's why worms are there.

Worms show up where things are nasty and decomposing. And so we're coming up face to face this morning with one of the most challenging and offensive teachings of the Bible is that when you are a person in this world, there are two and only two destinations for you.

You can either, verses 43 and 45, enter life. Verse 47, enter the kingdom of God. Or you can be thrown into hell.

[15 : 51] Those are the only options. And so the severity of the solution reveals the seriousness of the problem.

Why is it that we need to be so decisive in dealing with sin? Because no matter what, we want to enter the kingdom of God. Nothing is more worthwhile and precious.

There is nothing that is worth holding on to outside of that kingdom. And so we do whatever it takes.

This passage is reminding us that we can play with sin for a time. We cannot play with it forever.

The book Death in Yellowstone chronicles all the different ways that people have died in one of our favorite national parks.

And there's a whole chapter dedicated to death by bears. And in this chapter, we hear the story of a woman in the 1930s who made friends with a bear in the park.

[17 : 02] And she was warned repeatedly by the rangers to stop feeding the bears. Now, she had great success feeding the bears. And so she flouted the park regulations.

And one day, she was showing off to new visitors in the park the trick that she had. She would feed this bear candy. And they had a special relationship with one another. Except this time, things ended a bit differently for her.

She eventually became tired of feeding candy to the bear. And so she told the bear, you know, this session is over. It's time for you to go away. Well, that bear was up on his hind legs.

And so we're told this. As the bear dropped down on all fours, he put out his front feet toward her, much as he would to a tree or any other convenient object to ease his descent.

The woman screamed as his paws touched her shoulders. His claws, sharp as knives, seeking support, ripped through her clothing and skin.

[18 : 05] They tore deep cuts a foot long across her breasts, and blood spurted from them. The woman fainted. The bear backed away and disappeared in the pandemonium that ensued.

Feeding bears. Feeding bears. Feeding bears. Feeding bears. Feeding bears. Playing around with sin is all fun and games until the day you die.

Turn back now before it's too late. Cut it off now while you still have time.

You can play with sin for a time. You cannot play with sin forever. Jesus gives a severe warning here.

And so one question we might have is, where is the grace? Where is the gospel in the midst of all of this? Well, the grace in this shows up not once, not twice, but three times.

[19 : 25] We see this word in verses 43, 45, and 47, the word if. If your eye, your hand, your foot causes you to sin.

In other words, Jesus is talking about what to do after you've fallen into sin. The assumption here is that you have already failed. You have already rebelled against God.

And he offers this, saying, run away now from sin. In other words, there is an opportunity to escape the punishment for sin.

If you look back on your life and you see the ways in which you've fallen short, there is still hope.

The good news of the gospel is that while you live and breathe in this life, no matter what you have done in the past, there is still hope.

There is still a future for you. You may have gotten so far in your sin in this life that you cannot escape earthly consequences.

[20 : 30] You have not gotten so far in your sin in this life that you have gotten so far in this life that you cannot escape eternal consequences. You may serve a prison sentence.

And while you live and breathe, God's grace is still offered to you. There is always a chance and an opportunity to run away from sin.

And no one knows the day or the hour of her own death. Turn away now.

There is serious judgment in this passage. There is also serious grace. God doesn't leave us without power or motivation.

The power in this passage is the vision and picture of the future. That God tells us the reward that waits for us. That we run away from sin because we know we're running to heaven.

[21 : 35] We run away from sin because we know we're running away from heaven. Jesus then gives another picture in verse 49.

We have this interesting phrase about salt and fire, which is a strange combination. The place where we see those combined is with the sacrifices of the Old Testament. In the books of Leviticus and Ezra and Ezekiel, salt and fire are things that both happen to something that's sacrificed to God.

And so Jesus here is saying, look, life following me is going to be life offered as a sacrifice. Life following me is going to be life offered as a sacrifice.

It's going to be life that involves fire and suffering. Cutting temptation out of your life is part of that suffering now. In other words, Jesus is saying, you can burn now or you can burn later.

You choose. Choose suffering now, choose suffering later. You can't escape suffering. You just choose whether it's going to be the suffering from cutting off your hand or it's going to be the suffering from burning in hell.

[22 : 50] Let your life instead be offered as a sacrifice to God. Experience the suffering that comes from putting sin to death in this life so that you can have life with God eternally.

Finally, Jesus here adds one other reason for our obedience. It is not just to avoid eternal destruction. Jesus tells us in this very last verse, in verse 50, that as we put sin to death, we're actually acting as a preservative in the world.

He says, 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. And Jesus is drawing on the same imagery that he used in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5, that Christians serve as a preserving power in society, that they're like salt on meat.

A little bit will keep something from going bad. Just a little bit will hold back the world from being what it could be. In other words, you are burned, you're changed, you're a sacrifice so that you can change.

Why is it that hot dog buns never mold? Because they're filled with preservatives. Why is this world not as wicked and far gone as it could be?

[24 : 20] Because the church is holding back that chaos. God is using the holiness of his people as salt to preserve this world.

We cut off sin to protect and save ourselves. We cut off sin to preserve and hold this world together. On the back of your worship guide, you'll see a few quotes. And one of them talks about the preserving influence of just a small number of people.

The second quote, we're told this, When Christians live a life that's pleasing to God, have a palpable effect on the way life is lived, when their numbers reach at least 5 to 10 percent, and when the members are active in public life.

I have heard it said that when the number of prison inmates following Christ reaches 10 percent, the very culture and corporate life of the prison changes. When Christians live a life that's pleasing to God, even as they're a minority in the world around them, the very culture and corporate life of our society changes.

[25 : 37] So Jesus is saying, preserve yourself and preserve this world. Preserve yourself and preserve this world.

Near the end of chapter 8 in the Gospel of Mark, I told you a story about a woman named Zane Asher, who's currently a news anchor with CNN National.

She had written her autobiography, which came out this year, called *Where the Children Take Us*. And you may remember that it tells this unlikely story of her being raised by her mom, who was also a widow, an immigrant from Nigeria in South London.

And against all odds, Zane goes to attend Oxford and then will work for CNN, much of it because of her mom's vision that she would attend that school. So last time I told you the story of how whenever she would misbehave, her mom would take her to tour Oxford so she could remember her vision for the future, and that would be what motivated her in the present.

Now, that wasn't necessarily always enough for Zane to stay on the straight and narrow path. And so her mother, realizing the hard work that it would take to get into Oxford, the effort that it would require from Zane, told her, you can't watch any more TV until your Oxford acceptance letter is in your hands.

[27 : 08] No more TV. Now, Zane didn't have a problem with this because her mother, as a single mother, was often out working. And so Zane just figured out she would watch TV around her mom's work schedule.

As her mom's car returned from work, she would quickly turn it off and go back to her studying. Until one day, she became so engrossed in the television show that she did not hear her mom coming in, and she was finally busted.

Her mom, very stern, said, this won't be happening again. The next day, Zane's mom left again for work, and Zane did what she always did.

She went back to go and turn on the TV. The only problem was, for some reason, the TV would not work for her. She tried multiple times to get it on until she investigated and found the power cord lying behind it, cut into two pieces.

And she says this, Brothers and sisters, Christians operate under a different code.

[28 : 32] The code of God's people in which long-term success, even survival, often requires serious short-term pain. It is time to cut the cord on sin.

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, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not

quenched.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you that you're not afraid to speak hard words to us, but like a loving Father, you discipline us and you teach us.

We ask that you would drive this warning deep into our hearts, that we would embrace your grace, that we would run away from sin, and we would run towards you. We confess this morning that we don't have the power or the ability to do that by ourselves, and so we ask that you would send your spirit to be at work in our hearts, softening them towards you, growing our love for what is right and true more and more.

We thank you that we don't have to worry about whether we've earned or deserve these things, but instead we ask them in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I invite you to stand for our closing hymn.