

## HEAVY

### Mark 8:31–9:50

**Dr. George O. Wood**

Our passage of Scripture this morning begins with Mark 8:31 and extends through the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. We have been going through the Gospel of Mark. This is perhaps the earliest of the Gospels to have been written.

I ran across an article in the *LA Times* yesterday which had merit of sharing with you. It's called "A Good Samaritan, still hard to find: Seminarians flunk test." An experiment, conducted by two Princeton researchers, indicate that seminarians are not necessarily good Samaritans. The researchers placed Princeton theological students in false situations to see how they would react when confronted with a modern version of a situation described in the biblical parable. They reacted badly. The researchers met with the seminarians individually under the guise of doing study on careers in the church. Each seminarian was instructed to walk to a nearby building and dictate an impromptu talk into a tape recorder. Some were told to talk on the Good Samaritan parable, others on their career concerns.

Unknown to the seminarians, the researchers had planted an actor along the pathway who, as the seminarian approached, groaned and slumped to the ground. *Human Behavior* magazine, a journal devoted to the social sciences—reported on the experiment in the March issue—described the response of tomorrow's clergy as follows, "How did the ministers react? Their record was less than inspirational. Sixty percent walked right on by. Some who were planning their dissertation on the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the slumped body as they hurried along. Interestingly, there were no significant differences in compassionate behavior between those who had the parable on their minds and those ready to speak on future careers."

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Incidents like that help put in context the statement in the Gospel of Mark, which Jesus makes on more than one occasion, because it needs to be said more than once, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:9, NIV).

It is so easy, I recognize, to sit in a service and to hear the gospel. But it is another thing to act on the gospel. It is one thing to hear the Word of God tell us what to do, and quite another thing to put it into action. The paraphrase of Corinthians, “Many are weak and sickly among us”—in terms of spiritual disciplines—points to the fact that the gospel has been heard without being heard. It has been listened to without being acted upon.

That concern motivates me, again this morning, as we come to this part of the Gospel of Mark. For again, the third week in a row, it’s as if the Lord has riveted my eyes on the subject of discipleship. So, as I’m continuing in my own personal study of Mark, I cannot help but see continually the applications from the life of the disciples to my own life as a Christian. I find refreshing, hopeful for me, that the Lord has the same sort of persons following Him in the first century as in this room today. And the same kinds of problems which hit them are the same sort of problems which hit us. We really watch our own lives unfold as we watch theirs. And we can learn lessons from them that we can avoid painfully learning ourselves in some situations.

As we consider Mark 8:31 through chapter 9, I find that there are three tendencies the disciples have in terms of things that we want that are in contrast to what the Lord wants.

#### **I. One thing that the Lord wanted, which was in contrast with what the disciples wanted to avoid: death.**

Jesus had been with them for nearly two and a half years. At Caesarea Philippi, He turns to them and says, “Who do you say that I am?” They respond, “Thou art the Messiah.” It is the first time, as we saw last week, that they came through to that fundamental understanding themselves and

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were willing to accept Him as what He reveals Himself as. He was able to give them new teaching, a teaching which He had not been able to give them until this moment. It's kind of a pattern that He wants to say to us but He withholds saying until we have arrived at a point where we can begin to appreciate and understand. Now He wants to lead His disciples into a new understanding of truth regarding Himself. He is going to teach them about His death. In the Gospels, He has said very little about His death and what He's said has been couched in terms of a veiled illusion. He has said, for example in Mark 2, that "The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away." Nobody had ever really connected that with a specific event which was coming, the cross. So it had passed by like many of the other comments of Jesus, not really lodging on to consciousness.

"He then [meaning He had not before] began to teach them" Mark says in 8:31 (NIV). That is, to say it more than once, to keep on saying it, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected...[and] be killed." Mark, so as not to leave us in doubt of the clearness of the teaching says, "He spoke plainly" (verse 32, NIV). And the disciples' reaction is just as clear as Peter's rebuke to the Lord. He took him and rebuked him. Peter, like the other disciples, did not want Jesus going in that direction. The way of voluntary death is the way which Jesus Himself pursued. The thing which we fight against is the road to death but it is what the gospel of Jesus Christ is really all about.

We naturally fight physical death. A horrible disaster occurred this morning outside the airport of Paris, France, as three hundred and forty-five persons lost their lives in the greatest single air disaster. I'm sure that if, for a moment, we could have placed ourselves within the room of that airplane, all of us in those final moments would have had a wave of thoughts come over us which would have desired that we would want to live at all cost. Physical life is that way.

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Yet Jesus, through the Gospels, is pointing out the fact that we cannot live indefinitely and that, if we are to have eternal physical life, then on the spiritual level there are some things we must begin to die to. In fact, we must accomplish spiritual death if we are to know what it is to die.

Jesus, at this point in the disciples' journey, is pointing Himself—and He will point them—to the way of death, just as He points us.

It's amazing when you consider, here in this story in the Gospel of Mark, what geographic position Jesus occupies on the occasion. Caesarea Philippi, a town some 50 miles north of the northern end of the lake of Galilee; He's in Gentile territory. He is much closer to the towns of Tyre and Sidon and Caesarea and Joppa than He is to the town where He will lay down His life, Jerusalem. It would have been easy for Him to have walked away from His responsibility as the suffering servant which Isaiah spoke of. It would have been much easier for Him to have walked away to one of those seaport towns and caught a ship going somewhere. He could have disappeared into anonymity in Alexandria or in Rome or in Thessalonica or Athens or Corinth. All He had to do to escape the cross was walk away at any given time. He did not have to go to Jerusalem. But He embraces the way of death.

And the rebuke which Peter gives is really the rebuke of Satan coming through Him. In the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus had been told to turn stones into bread. He had refused to do it and that pattern continued throughout His ministry where, even on the cross, He refused to call the angels to come down and save Him. So Jesus recognizes that the words of Satan are coming again through a friend, that if Satan could, he would slip up on the blindside. Jesus had refused to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, for He would not call men to faith in Him on the basis of sight. He refused to bow down to Satan, because His kingdom was spiritual rather than physical. The disciples want Him to avoid the way of death just because they know if He avoids the way

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of death, if He doesn't die, then they won't have to die; that if He doesn't have to suffer, then they won't have to suffer. But if He suffers and if He dies and if He lays down His life, then that means that is the pattern. It is fundamental in understanding Jesus...this aspect of His death. So He says to the disciples in verses 34–38 that there are conditions attached to discipleship which derive from His example. The conditions are these, "If anyone would come after me..." (NIV). The condition of the will; you must want to.

Someone has said, "You don't lead soldiers into battle by pushing a string." You get nowhere pushing a string anywhere. You have to pull it. His example pulls us in the direction in which He is going, and if within our lives there is not the will to follow Christ, and there is not the will to work out whatever problems we are having in life, then it is impossible for the Lord to work. His working is conditioned upon our will. If we desire to remain in our sickness, if we desire to remain in spiritual sickness, if there is no will to work to heal us within a marriage, to heal us in an interpersonal relationship with a problem we're having, if there is no will for Him to work, He cannot work. There must be the will on our part, and that will is accompanied by a very stark reality of life, self-denial. "Let him deny himself".

That may be different than the kinds of denial we see at Lent, although some of the denials people take on at Lent are helpful in their spiritual life. For example, abstaining from certain foods for a period of time. So with no criticism meant toward Lent, however, it should be pointed out that at Lent people give up something for a period of time which is kind of peripheral and which can be resumed when Lent is over. But the kind of denial Jesus is talking about is radical denial of self, where whenever the will of God conflicts with our own will or whenever even someone else's best interest spiritually conflicts with our own, we go the way of denial of self. For some, denial of self is to leave all and follow Jesus. And for some, denial is like the person

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who wanted to follow Jesus in Mark 5, but Jesus said, “You can’t follow Me. Go home and tell your friends what the Lord has done.” Denial of self.

Without that ingredient in our Christian experience, we become spiritually paralyzed and unable to rise to the task of God’s people. An aside for a moment: The theme of denial has been very large in my own thinking the last few weeks. Things we have been praying for in this body of Christians, this church, are that God would allow us to have a heterogeneous church—a simple, fancy name—that we all be as different from one another as all get-out! There’s absolutely no reason why any group should be worshipping together that except we have one thing in common: the Lord Jesus. Our politics are different in many cases. Our church backgrounds are different. Occasions for spiritual worship are different. Our educational backgrounds are different. Our cultural backgrounds are different. All of this provides an opportunity for us as Christians to really operate in the realm of denial. How beautiful it is to see the Lord answer prayer and give us opportunities to develop qualities in our life that we would not have had, had we not had the experience of differences.

One of the things which several in the group have shared with me recently and which I have learned to appreciate is that I need your differences as a Christian. And you need my differences. Because, without my differences, how would you ever learn to be patient? What would you have to be patient about? Without my differences, how would God ever develop that quality in your life and how would you ever develop self-control? Let us glory in our uniqueness as individuals in the Lord and in the fact that we willingly submit, as Paul instructs in Romans 15:2, that the strong ought to bear with the weaknesses of the weak. This becomes a tremendous ingredient of Christian community and fellowship: denial.

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Jesus says with that, “The way to death is the taking up of the cross, the willingness to voluntarily take it up for the sake of Christ and not to run from our problems or run from the situations that life would bring against us.” Instead, to gladly and willingly take the reproach of the cross for the sake of Christ, to bear the difficult circumstance. There is always the cross with Christian experience. The cross may be somebody you’re living with. The cross may be a situation. The cross may be a requirement that God is placing upon your life which you, at this point, don’t want to fulfill. Jesus says, “There is a condition. Don’t take the route to avoid death—embrace it and follow Me.”

There is something about the Christian experience. It is only when we embrace the way of death and denial that we see God at work in triumph. It is after He has suffered and been killed that the resurrection is possible. It is when the disciples are able to see, in Mark 9:1, the kingdom of God come with power. The spiritual sense comes only to individuals who know what it is to suffer, to be thwarted, and to have disciplines imposed upon their life.

This verse—Mark 9:1—is a rather strange one, and it sometimes makes us nervous about what Jesus is saying here. He says, “Some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power” (NIV). We get nervous and say, “Jesus is talking about His second coming.... But He hasn’t come back”. Let’s go on to verse 2. What is Jesus really describing here? In the Gospel of Mark, there is only one way, up to this point, that He has even talked about the kingdom. That way is described in Mark 4, the parable of the Sower and the seed. The kingdom is the activity of God which is currently going on in our lives. It is His reign, individually. He has not yet talked about His kingdom in the dimensions of the Second Coming. He has talked about the kingdom in the present-tense dimension. He’s saying, “Some of you standing here will not taste death until you see that kingdom come with power.”

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In the Book of Acts, He says, “You will receive power.” It’s the same word that’s used here in Mark 9:1... You shall receive power. And indeed, these men who were called to see the kingdom of God come with fantastic dimensions of power—in the events that are associated with the resurrection and ascension of our Lord, the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the growth of the church and the working of signs and wonders and thousands of persons coming to believe—lived to see the kingdom come with power. But they only lived to see that day because they were willing to go to the cross and willing to deny themselves.

There is a beautiful thing that happens in the act of denial, for when situations break against us we deem unfavorable, we must understand that they are always the pangs of birth and not death. God is using experiences in our life to only work from them a miracle of resurrection, that God placed in my life so that things might be developed in my experience which never could be there for God to use unless that event had happened.

**II. Another thing that the disciples would want to have that Jesus doesn’t want them to have is: to stay on the mountain—like us.**

Here, they are on the Mount of Transfiguration, possibly Mount Hermon, which is about 9,300 feet into the air. They are seeing Him in new dimensions. They have never seen Him metamorphize, that’s the real meaning of the word “transfiguration.” His being was changed.

They had seen His physical features in terms of His humanness. But now, His physical features are seen in the dimension of their divineness. They look on Him and they’re amazed. And they see Moses and Elijah talking with Him on the mountain. The first time Moses had ever been in the Promised Land. And a rebuttal to the view of reincarnation: John the Baptist was not Elijah come back in the flesh. He only came in the spirit of Elijah. There was Elijah, on the mountain. Moses and Elijah, representative of the Law and the Prophets, talking with Jesus.

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I would have given anything to be there and watch the introductions: “Moses and Elijah, I would like you to meet Peter, James and John.” Leaders of the old age and leaders of the new... enough to blow anybody’s mind. Because of an experience like that, one would like to stay there. Peter says, in verse 5, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters” (NIV). Notice Peter’s humility on the occasion—not six overnight shelters but three—“Me, James and John, we’ll sleep outside. The booths are for the Lord, Moses and Elijah, and will let You continue this wonderful experience, while we sleep on the ground in the luminous glow of Your presence. We’ll stay here.”

There are experiences we need; experiences in our lives which open us up to new realities of the Lord. We need those great moments when we have come in contact with the reality of Jesus Christ in a unique and wonderful way. The Mount of Transfiguration, for many of us, has been the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

A. The temptation of the mountaintop experience is to not realize there is a journey to be undertaken after that, and that nothing will ever happen spiritually if we simply stay on the mountain. We must go down. We must go down, because there are questions to be faced for which we do not have all the answers. Isn’t it fascinating when we’re having a tremendous spiritual experience? All the questions which we have as we bask in the worship of the Lord...But the minute we start going down the mountain, then the troublesome questions come back. With the disciples it was, “Lord, why do the theologians say ‘Elijah must come first.’ We haven’t seen Elijah and, therefore, He can’t be the Messiah, and therefore, your identification of Him is wrong.” These troublesome questions come back. Jesus answers the troublesome questions.

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The one thing that strikes me so beautifully in the Gospels is that Jesus doesn't mind people asking Him questions at all. He has an answer for those questions. To the disciples, He indicated that John the Baptist was the Elijah prophet.

**B.** Also, by staying on the mountain, one can avoid meeting needs. The minute the disciples and Jesus returned to the valley, there was a desperate situation unfolding. The father of a boy who was a demonic, who pitches and convulses and is dashed to the ground, expresses his need. The other nine who had remained at the foot of the mountain are there. The three disciples and Jesus come down. If they had stayed on the mountain, they would never had had to cope with that particular need. Spiritual experiences are really designed in our lives to put power in us to cope with difficult situations like this. Jesus says to the disciples on the occasion, "This kind can come out only by prayer" (Mark 9:29, NIV). In Mark 6, He had given them authority over unclean spirits and sent them out. They evidently had begun to think that that authority was automatic. Jesus, in this situation, is teaching us that a gift which is given us is never automatic, that it comes in its expression only as we continue to have a relationship with the Lord, the Father. I realize that in the King James it says, "prayer and fasting". In the better Greek texts, it only includes the word "prayer" and this perhaps would be more consistent with chapter 2, where Jesus says that the disciples had not yet come upon the day of fasting: The Bridegroom is still with them. The thing which they lacked was a communication with the Lord. Any situation which we face needs prayer if it's to be coped with. It cannot be coped with without a relationship with the Lord. Demon possession is only the tip of the iceberg of the devil's working. Below the water, he has all kinds of ways in which he seeks to destroy us. You will never resolve the conflicts which you're having now in your life if you try to resolve them without prayer.

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I'm ever more conscious of the fact that, as I grow a little bit older—the ripe old age of thirty-two and a half—that life's a lot more complex than the younger years when I saw fewer problems. I see, as I walk through life, persons who are staggering under loads of problems. I know fundamentally that those loads can only be lifted through a relationship with God. I have come to a very simplistic view. I really believe that perhaps 99.44 percent of the problems we have as human beings are really ultimately traceable to a spiritual problem. If we make things right with God, we are able to come to grips with making things right with someone else.

**III. The disciples also had a third pull which is in a different direction than the Lord wants to go. That's to be the greatest.**

Jesus comes to Capernaum in verse 33. When he comes into the house, He says to them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” (NIV). Oh, the embarrassment of having Jesus listen to our conversations, walking in in a moment when we did not expect Him. Can you imagine the apostles, all wonderful men of the Spirit, sitting around, boasting with one another about their exploits and who was going to occupy the greatest place in the kingdom? Each of them was bragging about the preaching and the works of miracles they had done. It's good to see human nature and it's good to be delivered from that kind of thing!

There are Peter, James, and John with real smiles on their faces. They've seen the Transfiguration. But the Lord has said, “You can't tell what happened to you.” They were told they couldn't say anything...but they would like to say something. So what they do is say, “We would like to tell you something that happened to us on the mountain, but we can't tell you.”

I'm convinced that, as a general law of the spiritual life, there are some experiences the Lord gives us as individuals we are not to immediately turn and pass on to somebody else, because somebody could actually be discouraged by listening to our testimony. They can be discouraged

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if they feel they have not had a similar experience and that maybe something is wrong with them.

A general testimony is helpful.

Paul had a thing happen to him where he was caught up into the third heaven in the presence of God but he didn't tell anybody about it. These disciples are instigating this whole question, standing on their pride. And Jesus comes in and, as He always has to correct us, He says, "The greatest person is the one who is servant" (see Mark 9:35). Jesus does not condemn the desire to be great, that should be noted. Jesus wants us to press toward perfection. But He's concerned about the methods we use to go about it. He's concerned that, if we desire to excel as His disciples, we desire to excel in such a way that we are not stomping over others but rather serving others and putting their best interest ahead of our own.

And also, Jesus is concerned on this occasion when the disciples think that they're the first and the only ones, so John—in verse 38—says, "Teacher...we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us" (NIV). He recognizes in that statement that he shouldn't have done that and his conscience is somewhat stricken by the event. Jesus agrees and says to the effect, "No, you should not have done that. This person who is doing this will no longer, after following Me."

We should recognize the Gospel presents two kinds of views on persons who are exorcising demons. In Matthew 7 it is indicated that there are some who in the name of Christ do works of miracles who are not part of Christ at all and who will never be a part of Him. But there are others like this individual who is in the company of the disciples but who has not yet had all the truths and come to all the perceptions that the disciples have. So toleration is urged. It requires discernment on the part of the disciples, to understand who really is in the kingdom and coming along to faith in Jesus Christ and who is not.

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The disciples, through John here, exercise a tendency to be judgmental of others. In fact, that judgmental aspect of course is rooted in pride.

Then Jesus, in Mark 9, indicates a summary of this whole event by saying—of His teaching on this occasion in verse 49, “Everyone will be salted with fire” (NIV). Kind of an unusual statement...we scratch our heads as to what the meaning might be. Another reading, “...sacrifices salted with salt.” Which is a way of saying that salt was the mark of the covenant of God and was necessary for sacrifices. But what does this aspect mean, a person will be salted with fire?

Jesus is pointing us again back to the theme of death. He’s saying that all, in one way or another, undergo an experience of fire which stands for judgment or pressure or refining. For some, what a person is salted with will be voluntary. He will voluntarily take the experience of discipline in his life. For those who do not voluntarily take the discipline of the Lord, there is ultimately the imposed discipline of Gehenna. The voluntary discipline is seen in the fact that we are called to, if our hand causes us to sin, cut it off. If our eye causes us to sin, to pluck it out, etc. Jesus didn’t mean for us to actually go around, and physically cut off our hands or pluck out our eyes. The disciples never did, or the Early Church would have had a very poor witness on the day of Pentecost if all of them would have gotten up with plucked-out eyes and cut-off feet! It’s a hyperbole, an overstatement of effect.

But He’s saying that discipline is like a key ingredient of fire working in our life; the fire of discipline, which is purging out the sin. If the disciples at Capernaum had really been salted with fire and discipline, they would not have gotten in their big conversations about who is the greatest. They would not have been giving others who were less mature than they an occasion for offense, as Jesus notes in verse 42.

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But the time of death, Jesus tragically notes, comes to all who do not go the way of the cross.

The time of death is noted in the word “Gehenna” or “hell”. There are several words the Scriptures uses for hell, the most drastic is the combination of two words “Ge” which means “Valley” and “henna” or “Valley of Hinnom.” In the Old Testament, this was a defiled place, for it was where Ahaz and Manasseh worshipped the god Moloch and committed acts of sexual sacrilege. When Josiah the king took office, he instituted a reform on the Valley of Hinnom. From then on, it was to be used as the town garbage dump for Jerusalem. Fires continually burned in Gehenna.

Jesus uses that town garbage dump as a symbol for hell, to indicate that life without God, life without the discipline of the cross, ultimately means our life being dumped for eternity on a rubbish heap. Where the problems which we have refused to surrender to God in this life become the very problems which will haunt us for eternity. Where the sin sicknesses we have not confessed now will be the sin sicknesses for all eternity which will grow like cancer throughout the ages. Where the lack of confession we needed to make to one another will haunt us until the end of time.

Jesus points men to the road of destiny through the fire of discipline or the fire of hell. To the fire of discipline which involves the way of the cross. Passing through and meeting persons in the valley of need and to the discipline of becoming servants. Let us, with ears to hear, hear the Word from the Lord.

**Closing Prayer**

Our Father, again we’ve looked at the Scriptures today to understand the persons we ought to be, having heard these things. At the beginning, we remember the seminarians who flunked the test of being a good Samaritan. Lord, we would not want our lives to be dominated by not acting

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upon what we have heard. We wouldn't want our lives to be dominated by callousness when healing is always now. There may be, here today, individuals, Lord, who carry deep things in their heart which have not undergone the fire of Your burning, the fire of Your discipline. That fire can only enter in as we voluntarily determine to accept it and to follow You. And independent of the worthwhileness of me, this messenger who speaks, may that word from Your Scripture be spoken to our hearts: that the word of self-discipline is not the word of men, not the word of preachers, but is Your word from on high which has been delivered to us in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has told us to deal very radically and drastically with the sins in our life and with the desire to be better than others. Cause, Lord, from this day, a new humility and brokenness and a new understanding of who we are in You to take place. That we'd all, with one accord, gather to be a house and temple erected before You, beautiful in the sight of men. That's being called for in our experience today. We respond to the call of the cross. We are told to meet needs. Cause us to hear the call. Maybe today, Lord, You're even inviting some here to come up to the mountain and have the experience. Let there be joy and release. We think, Lord, as You went to the cross, that You, for joy, endured. That we would think, Lord, of our obligations as Christians not from any standpoint of sheer reluctance and duty; that we would not go around, Lord, with hurt hearts and long faces, but lift up our eyes unto the hills from whence come our help. That we would renew our hearts in the truth today of the resurrection, of victory and of glory, be set free to honor You and to magnify You and confess You in all your beauty, worship You in the beauty of holiness. That we would follow You wheresoever You bid us go. Thank You, Lord, that You are speaking. And in these moments of tenderness before Your throne, You're making Your Word very plain to our hearts. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, we give thanks. Amen.