



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Mark 9:33-50

"Who Is the Greatest"

Mark 9

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Thank you, Howard. Our text is Mark chapter 9. We'll look this morning at verses 33 through 50. You'll remember they have been in Caesarea Philippi in the far northern region of the land, and they're now on their way back to Galilee. And we read in verse 33:

They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Taking a child, He stood him in the midst of them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, "Whoever receives one child like this in my name is receiving me; and whoever receives me is not receiving me, but Him who sent Me." John said to Him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to hinder him because he was not following us."

But Jesus said, "Do not hinder him, for there is no one who shall perform a miracle in my name and be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For he who is not against us is for us. Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward. And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast

into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire."

Now, in verse 44 and in verse 46, some of your versions have what is recorded in verse 48, "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." New American Standard Bible does not include that, which I'm reading from, because the earlier texts, the better texts, do not have that. It was probably a later insertion by a scribe, so we won't read that here but we will when we come to it.

Verse 45: "And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, cast it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, 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 becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word and bless our time of study in it together. Let's bow now in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you that we have this time to come together, and we consider it a great privilege to gather together as the people of God, a people chosen by you from eternity past. Your elect people whom in time you redeemed for yourself through the shedding of the blood of your Son. And we confess that there's nothing in that cross that was performed for us due to any merit that you saw in us, but when you looked down through time and you saw mankind, you saw that there was none who was seeking after you.

There is none who seeks after you. There's none who does good. There's nothing that could be found in us that would commend us to yourself. That's your grace and your mercy alone, and we confess that and praise you for it and thank you for the mercy and the grace that have been extended to us. Help us to appreciate that more. Help us to

appreciate that as we come to our text this morning and consider the life of discipleship that is set forth, the requirements of it, the life that you call your people to, and help us to see that in light of all that you've done for us, and to remember your grace, that it extends not only to the moment of faith but all the way to the end.

That you begin a work and you complete the work, that we are your workmanship, created for good works, created in Christ Jesus to glorify you. We thank you for that work of grace, pray you bless our time as we study the Scriptures. Teach us because ultimately that is your work. You've given us a new heart, you've given us the capacity to understand truth that before, we were blind to. And you've given us a teacher in the Holy Spirit, and we pray that He would be present with us and teaching us this morning, giving us an understanding of your truth and giving us the desire to seek to do it and to please you.

Thank you that we can pray for one another, and there are so many that need our prayers. We pray for those who have gone to the hospital this week and have returned home. We thank you for the improvements in so many of them, and we pray for those that are recovering. We pray that you would give them a speedy recovery. We pray for those who are sick and pray that you would extend healing to them, pray for encouragement to those who are struggling spiritually, those who have family problems. We pray that you would bring blessing there and repair the damage that is done in those relationships and help individuals to look to you and find comfort in Christ, find comfort in the fact that you're working all things together for good.

We pray for our assembly, Lord. We pray that you'd bless us with a renewed interest in the Scriptures and a desire to study them and a desire to live according to them and a desire to be lights in this community. Bless us that we would be that and that we would be a people that serve you at all times, seeking to glorify the Savior. We pray for those who are traveling and pray that you'd bless them this week during spring break for many of the schools, and pray that you'd

bring them back safely. We pray for our nation, pray for our leaders. Give them wisdom. Give them a sense of their need of your wisdom.

We pray that many would turn to you and pray that you'd bless these men, even those that do not turn to you. We pray that you'd bless them with wisdom that will be a blessing to our nation and be a blessing to the church throughout this nation, that we might grow in times of peace and that we might have very significant influence in this country and in others as well. We pray for ourselves to that end, that you would prepare our hearts for the week to come, that we might serve you well. Prepare our hearts now with the final hymn that we sing, that you would make us ready to receive your truth. Help us to think clearly and to give attention to the things that our Lord spoke to His disciples. We pray these things in His name. Amen.

[Message] Our passage this morning in Mark 9 consists of a series of sayings by our Lord which combine to instruct us on the nature of discipleship, the nature of the life to which we've all been called as Christians. It begins with the subject of greatness, who is great or who is the greatest, and while it moves to other matters of importance, in the end I think it comes full circle and concludes on this subject of greatness, which is a subject that arouses a variety of images in our minds. For me, having grown up in the '60s, I confess that the image that invariably comes to mind is that of Muhammad Ali. I think some of you were anticipating that.

And I was a Joe Frazier fan, but Muhammad Ali captured the spotlight like few celebrities ever have. Even most of you ladies who might not know the difference between a left hook and a fastball and could care less know the name Muhammad Ali, if not because of his skill as a boxer, because of his famous boast, "I am the greatest." And for a long time, it was hard to dispute that. Before his first fight with Sonny Liston, he held up eight fingers and he said, "To prove I'm great, he'll go in eight," and that's how it happened. Liston couldn't get up for the eighth round, and Muhammad Ali became the heavyweight champion of the world.

Now, in 1964, I thought that was pretty great. He could float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. He was a great boxer, a great entertainer, and he was a great example of the world's idea of greatness. One who fights his way to the top, towers above everyone else in his field, whips every challenger to his crown, and has millions of admirers. Who wouldn't want a piece of that? Who wouldn't like to taste some of that glory?

Who of us doesn't have some desire to be the world champion of something? The greatest football player in the world, the most beautiful woman in the world, the most admired and the most powerful businessman in the community? That's the world's standard of greatness, and we can dismiss that piously – correctly – as the world's standard for greatness, but I think the truth is that we've all got a little niche in our heart for that standard and that desire.

There was a niche in the heart of the disciples for that. In fact, they got into a discussion on this very subject and argued over which of them was the greatest. It occurred as they were returning to Capernaum from Caesarea Philippi. It was a fairly long journey on foot, and so they had time and they filled their time with discussions on, no doubt, the significant things that had taken place up in the north, the transfiguration where the Lord had unveiled for some of the disciples His divine glory, and then the failure of some of those disciples to cast out the demon at the foot of the mountain, and then the Lord's second prediction of His death and resurrection.

Now, as you'll remember, they didn't understand everything that He had to say about His death and resurrection, but mention of the resurrection may have led them to think that the kingdom was about to come because if He's to die and then He's to rise again, then surely the kingdom is going to follow from that. And after all, didn't the Lord say earlier that some of them would not taste death until they saw the kingdom coming in power? So they began to think about that and discuss it among themselves and discuss the positions that they might occupy in that kingdom.

And as they discussed it, each one began to stake out his own claim of the most exalted position in the kingdom, and you can just imagine how the conversation might have gone and how it might have begun. John or Peter might have said, "Well, now, you need to remember that we were up on that mountain while you were down at the foot of the mountain failing to cast out that demon. We saw the glory of the Lord revealed. And not just us, Moses and Elijah were with us. We all had fellowship together up there on the mountain. And besides that, God spoke directly to us. He gave us some special instruction. Now, that has to count for something."

To which Andrew might have responded, "Listen, Peter, remember this: You're in this group because of me. I recognized Jesus as Messiah before you did. In fact, I brought you to Him." And the Matthew might have said, "Well, I don't want any of you to forget this: I gave up my job, my whole career, to follow Jesus Christ. I sacrificed a great deal and that has to count for something." And on it went, each one extolling his virtues, in one way or another saying, "I am the greatest," and all of this after the Lord predicted His sufferings and death. He has given them a glimpse of His glory, the glory that He set aside, the glory that He left for their sake.

He's told them of the cross that He would suffer for their sake, and all they were concerned about was their personal rank, their own exaltation. Shows how influenced they were by the spirit of their age, how the standards of the world had a place in their heart, and yet what a magnificent contrast that gives to the cross that the Lord has just announced because it was for such as these that He came to die. He didn't come to die for the righteous. Paul makes that very clear in Romans chapter 5. Came to die for sinners. He came to die for those who were helpless. He came to die for those who were His enemies.

He came to die for selfish, self-seeking men just like these disciples, just like you and me. It proves the love of God. You want to know what the love of God is, look to the cross because there we see that which is unconditional. It doesn't love like men love. We

love those who have earned our affection or have a close connection with us, but He doesn't do that. His love is not human love; His love is unconditional love, and we see that, I think, in that contrast at the very outset.

Now, none of this happened in the Lord's presence. He was evidently walking some distance away, perhaps walking in front of them, meditating, but he knew what was going on. He knew what they were talking about and says nothing about it until they arrive at Capernaum where He brought up the subject. When they entered a house, perhaps Peter's house, He asked them, "What were you discussing on the way? I heard some spirited conversation back there. What was that?" Well, they were obviously embarrassed by the question because verse 34 states they kept silent. Down deep, they knew they were wrong and they were ashamed that the Lord had discovered their ambition and their jealousy.

So the Lord sits down, we read in verse 35, the characteristic posture of a rabbi who is going to teach his students, and He gives them a lesson on greatness, on who is really great. True greatness, he explains, doesn't come by fighting your way to the top. It doesn't come by holding rank above others. It comes through service to others. If any one of you wants to be first, "he shall be last of all and servant of all." That's a complete reversal of the world's standard for greatness.

I have a friend who early in his business career was given some advice by a more experienced colleague, not much more experienced because he's about the same age, but he had a little more experience than my friend who was just starting out, and he gave him this advice: Eat or be eaten. Stuck in my mind like it did into his. Watch out for the others. Devour them or they'll devour you. If you're going to succeed, you've got to be very ambitious and you've got to look out for number one. That's the whole spirit of that statement and that's really, I think, what lies behind so much of what we consider to be great. And yet the Lord says just the opposite.

H. P. Sweet puts it this way in his commentary on Mark: The spirit of service is the passport to eminence in the kingdom of God. And that principle finds its supreme example in our Lord Himself, who would later take a towel in his hand, kneel down, and wash the dirty feet of His disciples, and then He would instruct them to wash one another's feet. In other words, serve one another. That's what you're to do. He was *the* servant whose whole life was an act of service, a whole life of stooping down and serving others. Paul develops that in Philippians chapter 2 – we've touched on that more than once in the past few weeks – where he writes that He, the eternal Son of God, emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant. Taking the form of a slave. That's what He came to do. And that's what He calls us to do.

And He demands nothing of us that He hasn't done Himself. This is the pattern of the Christian life. This is the pattern of the life of the disciple: selfless service, and the importance of it is seen in the fact that it's repeated. It's repeated later on in chapter 10. We'll come to it in a few weeks, we'll turn to this very subject, the road to greatness, and again we'll see that one becomes great in the eyes of God, which is to say truly great, by serving one another. It's through that spirit, through the spirit of humility, through the spirit of service, that jealousy is avoided, the very jealousy that we see going on here, and that peace is preserved.

Now, to illustrate His point, the Lord takes a little child who was playing near Him, maybe Peter's child, and puts him in the midst of the disciples. The sight of children around the Lord is not an uncommon sight as you read through the gospels. They felt safe near Him and this child was not afraid, even though the Lord put him among all these big men. But he was with the Lord and he felt safe there. And then with affection, a show of tenderness on the part of our Lord, He picks up the child in His arms and He said to the disciples – verse 37 – "Whoever receives one child like this in my

name is receiving me, and whoever receives me is not receiving me but Him who sent me."

It was an object lesson for these self-centered, self-seeking, self-interested disciples. This is what they were to be interested in. Not in themselves, not in exalting themselves over others. They were to be interested in children; that is, what children represented. A picture of you and me, a picture of the disciples of Jesus Christ. Now, what are children? Well, they are the weak of this world. They are helpless. They are dependent creatures that have nothing to offer. They can only take, they can't give. They have no influence that can advance our career or our prestige.

After the first service, one of the men came up to me, and his daughter had been sitting next to him, and as I said that, as I said children are helpless, she turned to him, said, "I'm not helpless." Well, this is a very young child, a toddler, and the older they get, the less helpless they get, but I thought about that. I laughed about it, too, and I thought but how much that is like us. We don't like to hear that. We're all children in the family of God. There are mature children and there are less mature children but we are all children in the sense that we're all helpless. We're all totally dependent on Him. We don't like to hear that. Perhaps we don't hear much of it because of that, but that's the case, and we're to be looking out for one another.

So the Lord's point here is that true greatness involves receiving children, receiving such as those into the church, into the fellowship of the Christian community and in so doing, caring for such. Even for the most insignificant, like children, with the care and the consideration that our Lord had, which I think He's demonstrating here in picking up this child and holding him in His arms. That takes humility. That takes selflessness because it's easy for us to serve the great. That's how we advance in our careers. We attach ourselves to the great and in attaching ourselves to them, we seem to be a bit great

ourselves, and we seek to serve them because to serve them is to gain some advantage for ourself.

But to serve the insignificant, those who have nothing to offer us, that takes humility and it gives no place to selfish ambition, but to do that, even though it's an act of humility to do that, is to receive Christ Himself, and not only Christ but the Father as well because all of Christ's people, all who are in His name, even the weakest among us, represent Him and represent the Father, and service to them is the way of greatness.

Now, this statement that they were to receive others in His name caused John to recall an earlier incident when he and the other disciples saw a man who wasn't part of their company casting out the demon in Christ's name, and they rebuked him. "We tried to hinder him," John says in verse 38, "because he was not following us." And that really annoyed them. Here was a man doing the Lord's work but not doing it with them, not doing it in their circle. He wasn't an ordained minister, he wasn't a true man of the cloth, and what was so disturbing about it was he was successful in what he was doing.

He was doing the very thing that earlier these disciples couldn't do because of their lack of faith. And yet here's a man who's not in their circle, not running with them, not ministering with them, and he's doing the very thing that they couldn't do, which suggests that he had faith where they didn't, that he had true faith. And so they tried to stop him, and now John's wondering, "Were we wrong in what we did?" And the Lord's reply to that shows that they were, they were too exclusive in their attitude toward him. Verse 39: But Jesus said, "Do not hinder him for there's no one who shall perform a miracle in my name and be able soon afterward to speak evil of me."

In other words, though he was not formally associated with them, his deeds showed that he was not against them. And if his works were in favor of the Lord, his words would be also. Now, it's kind of a change of order from what we're used to seeing. Words of faithfulness to the Lord are substantiated by deeds, but here it's deeds

that will be substantiated by the words, and the reason is because these are deeds of faith. This man is a genuine man of faith, he's truly trusted in the Lord. That's clear from his actions, and it's inevitable then that he will speak for the Lord because he is of the Lord.

He was not an enemy, in other words. He was on their side, he was fighting the same battle as they were, so they should be supportive. It's as wrong to oppose this man as it would be for an army that's fighting against an enemy to turn upon itself for reasons of jealousy or whatever.

The Lutheran commentator R. H. Lenski points out that the Lord was encouraging his disciples to be patient with this man and give his faith time to develop. It's not that the man was determined not to join the Lord and His band of disciples but his knowledge was limited, his faith was young, and so he was to be encouraged. He was like a child in the faith. His actions showed that he was not opposed to the Lord, however, and so the Lord adds in verse 40: For he who is not against us is for us. Stands to reason that those who are not against Him, those who are not actively undermining His ministry and His work, are for Him.

He then illustrates in verse 41 what it means to be for Him: For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward. Even the simplest act of kindness like offering a cup of water to a person because he or she belongs to Christ, because he or she is a Christian, is significant and illustrates how wide the range of Christian ministry really is. We think of Christian service as being great acts of sacrifice or being ministries like teaching or evangelism and, of course, that's part of Christian ministry. But all of the Christian life is an opportunity for ministry.

Even the most seemingly insignificant things are opportunities for ministry and we're not to dismiss anything as trivial. God doesn't. He is aware of even the smallest acts of kindness and considers them important because, as verse 37 indicates, to do them for a Christian is

to do them for Christ, and nothing pleases God more than service to His Son.

Now, if the smallest kindness has its reward, what about the larger acts of kindness? If giving a cup of water to someone who's thirsty is pleasing to the Lord and it shows itself as Christian service, what about opposing Satan? Obviously, that's Christian service. The range of Christian service is wide enough, the Lord is saying, to include this unknown exorcist, even though he's not within our immediate circle, and so they were to be careful about this attitude of exclusivism and, of course, that applies to each of us as well. We're to be careful about that as well. It's a problem among the people of God. It's always been that way, I think.

You see that back in the Old Testament, see it with Joshua. He had a problem with his attitude. In Numbers 11:26-29, the story is recorded of an event in which Moses and the 70 elders, as well as Joshua and much of the camp of Israel, went outside the camp to the place where the tabernacle was set up, and there the Spirit of God came upon the 70 elders. The Spirit of God was there upon them, but there were two men who, for some reason, had not left the camp. They remained back at the camp. Their names were Eldad and Medad, and they began to prophesy, and it was genuine prophecy because we read that the Spirit rested upon them.

But they weren't prophesying in the place that one might expect them to be prophesying. They weren't out there at the tabernacle where the 70 elders and Moses and Joshua and men of importance were, they were back in the camp with other people, prophesying. And someone saw this and ran and told Joshua, and it upset Joshua. He was appalled by this, particularly upset that these men were prophesying and it's Moses that's the great prophet. He was disturbed that his mentor seemed to be not getting all the attention, and so he says to Moses, "Restrain them," but Moses said, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them."

Now, that's greatness. Moses was meek, meekest man in all the earth, and yet Moses was great because he didn't use his authority, he didn't use his position to subdue people, to bring them under him, to make them his servants, to lord it over them, so to speak. He used his authority, he used his influence, to be a blessing to them, to encourage them. "Would that everyone was doing the work of the Lord," he said, and God does His work in unexpected ways in people and places outside our circle, in churches that are not in line with us in every matter of theology and practice, and sometimes that's not easy to see.

But he blesses where there is faith and He blesses where the Word of God is taught and He blesses where the gospel is honored in the denominational churches and even, I must say, in Charismatic churches. Doesn't bless their error and doesn't excuse their error, but He blesses where there is faith and He blesses that faith, even if it's the size of a mustard seed, and He blesses the Word of God and the gospel where it's taught. We shouldn't be jealous of that. It's not our work; it's God's work and blessing wherever it occurs is reason for joy, the kind of joy that Moses had.

It's the work of the Lord, and because it's the work of the Lord, it's ultimately a blessing for all of the people of God, and so we should rejoice in that. Even those who are weak in faith and shallow in knowledge, a bit confused on theology, can serve the Lord and they should be encouraged and should be helped along in the faith like a parent helps a little child. That's where greatness is seen. That's what our Lord is saying. It's not seen in ambitious efforts to exalt self but in helping the weak and in selflessly serving the cause of Christ in small as well as large ways.

The Lord's children are precious to Him and He wants us to care for them with the same concern that He cares for them, and so perhaps with the little child still in His arms, He gives a warning in verse 42 against leading His children astray. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea."

Now, he's referring here to the world and its stumbling blocks. That's clear from Matthew 18:6-7 where the context is the world and its stumbling blocks, which he calls inevitable.

They're going to be there, and so the warning was necessary because every generation has those who prey upon the weak, who prey upon the young, who prey upon Christians that are not well established in the faith, and they're easy prey because of that, because they're young, because they lack knowledge and they lack experience and they lack wisdom. They need to be protected and guided by those who are more mature, and so to promote that and to discourage spiritual seduction and abuse, the Lord warns that such sin is so grave that a gruesome death would be better.

Now, this isn't something that the Lord dreamed up, this gruesome picture of death, this is something that evidently actually occurred because Josephus records an incident in which it occurred in that region. Some Galileans a generation earlier had revolted against Herod the Great and they took some of those men who were loyal to Herod and they drowned them in the sea. There's a case in which the Romans did the same thing to an earlier zealot, a man named Judas the Galilean. They drowned him in the Sea of Galilee. So with the Sea of Galilee before them, the Lord's words wouldn't have been lost on His disciples. Very graphic picture. Better to die that kind of death than be a stumbling block to His people.

Then verses 43 through 47, the Lord moves from warning the world against causing his disciples to stumble to warning His disciples against causing their own stumbling, and in doing so, He underscores the radical demands of Christian discipleship. That's very clear from the almost shocking words and statements that we read here. "And if your hand" – verse 43 – "causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell. And if your eye causes you to

stumble, cast it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell."

As valuable as our hands and feet and eyes are, it's better to miss them than miss the kingdom and perish eternally. Now, of course, the Lord doesn't intend for us to take His meaning literally here. The source of sin is not in the physical members. After all, if you cut your hand off, you'd still covet. It doesn't change that because the sin is in the heart, and the Lord knows that. He's putting the abstract principle of sin in concrete terms, which is characteristic of Oriental thought and expression. It's very pictorial in its way of expressing itself. And sin is seen in action. We know sin, not because we see a person's thoughts and what's going on in the inner man, we know it from the actions that take place, what the hand does, what the foot does, and so He describes it in terms of the members which carry out the sin.

The point is sin is so serious, sin is so harmful with such far-reaching consequences that whatever tempts a person to be unfaithful to the Lord should be put away immediately, put away decisively, even as a surgeon amputates a hand or leg to save a life. That may mean putting certain books and magazines out of our house, it may mean turning off certain programs on the television, it may mean terminating a certain relationship that you have in your life. We can look at the bad things like that but there's also things that are legitimate that can also be detrimental, and if there is anything, even if it's legitimate, that frustrates our devotion to Christ, then we're to cut it off.

The Lord is not describing the super Christian here. He's not describing an elite group of Christians that really excel and sort of leave everybody else behind. He's saying this is the Christian life. Every Christian is a disciple. This is the life of the disciple and it involves commitment. We live in a day and age that is committed to casual Christianity, I think. I think we're all guilty of that. I think we'd all have to confess that's true. This is quite a standard to meet,

and yet the true child of God will seek to meet that. They will respond to it with the help of the Holy Spirit because that is really the only way we can do it, only in His power.

Only by means of His work within us gives us the insight into the application for ourselves. How it touches our life and the desire to do it, that comes from the Holy Spirit. We can't do it in our own strength but the Spirit of God uses warnings and admonitions such as this to move us to do that, to move us to respond, and as I said, the true child of God will respond to that. The seriousness of the matter is brought out by that word "hell." This is a word that we don't hear much of anymore. Church historian Martin Marty observed in *Newsweek* a few years ago, "Hell disappeared and no one noticed."

Well, it didn't disappear from our Lord's vocabulary. He spoke quite frequently about hell, or literally Gehenna, as the word is in our text, which refers to the Valley of Hinnom on the southern side of Jerusalem and came to represent hell in the thinking of the people of that day and is very prevalent in the writing of the rabbis of that day because of the fires associated with its infamous history. It was there in the days of Ahaz and Manasseh that children were burned to death as sacrifices to the god Molech. It was said that they made their sons pass through the fire. Good King Josiah declared it an unclean place and Jeremiah pronounced threats over the Valley of Hinnom.

By our Lord's day, it had become the garbage dump of Jerusalem where the refuse of the city was burned. Day and night you could see the fires in the Valley of Hinnom, and so it came to symbolize a place of divine punishment. That's how our Lord uses it here and defines it in terms of unquenchable fire, otherworldly fire in a place of endless punishment, and that's supported in verse 48 with a quote of Isaiah 66:24: "Where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." That's the last verse of the book of Isaiah, which is interesting because the second book of Isaiah, beginning with chapter 40, begins with words of encouragement. "Comfort, O comfort my people," the Lord says.

And we have in that section of Isaiah the great Messianic promises of the one who would come and save His people, and yet it ends on that terrible warning, which is to warn the people to look to that Redeemer and not to look away, not to trust in themselves, and not become the enemy of the Lord because the point is the enemies of the Lord will be destroyed. They will, as it were, have their corpses thrown into the Valley of Hinnom to be burned by fire and to be consumed by maggots, and that's the picture that he gives. That's the way that great prophecy ends, with a terrible warning.

It is that, it's a terrible thought, that people will suffer the eternal torment of hell. In fact, the thought is so terrible that some evangelicals have abandoned the doctrine of eternal punishment altogether for a doctrine called conditional immortality. That men will be punished for their sin, and their punishment will be commensurate with their sin, but it won't be eternal. They'll go into hell and the worst of them, the most guilty of them, will suffer the most of the bunch. They'll suffer the longest. But eventually, all of that will come to an end and all will be annihilated so that it is not an eternal punishment.

John Stott, one of the leading evangelicals today, is one of those who has accepted this view, and I know you're familiar with that. You know that because you've heard it more than once from this pulpit. He's written on the subject in a book entitled, *Evangelical Essentials*, and in that section on eschatology, he comments on Isaiah 66:24 and the Lord's use of it. He argues that neither Isaiah nor the Lord say anything about everlasting pain, only that the worm will not die and the fire will not be quenched, nor will they, he adds, until presumably their work of destruction is done.

But there's no suggestion from the text that their work of destruction will ever be done. That's an assumption that one brings to the text, and the apostle John writes in Revelation 20:10 that those thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone will be tormented day and night forever and ever. And while it's true the expression "everlasting

pain" is not used, surely that's the implication of the worm and the fire, the source of the pain, the source of the torment never dying, never being quenched. It's certainly the meaning of Matthew 25:46 where the same word, "eternal," is used of both punishment and life. "These will go away into eternal punishment," the Lord says, "but the righteous into eternal life."

The text says it's eternal. But if punishment is not eternal, if we're going to limit that, how can we conclude that the promised life in kingdom will be eternal? They're in parallel with one another. If the one is not eternal, then we can't conclude that the other is eternal, but if the one is eternal, if the kingdom and the life is eternal, then we'd have to assume that it's antithesis, punishment, is eternal as well. That's what the text says. That's the plain reading of it. And that's suggested also by the very nature of God. What justice could be divine justice other than that in eternal punishment? All sin is ultimately sin against God, who is a holy God, and because God is infinite and God is eternal, such sin carries the weight of infinite eternal guilt, and so it follows that the punishment must be eternal.

I think Dr. Stott, who is a great, great man, he's written a number of books that have been very helpful to me and I haven't read nearly all of his material, but what I've read I've profited greatly from and have gone back and used it as a source of my instruction often. But I think he has perhaps tipped his hand when he wrote regarding eternal conscious punishment: "Emotionally, I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain." Well, it is a terrible doctrine, to be sure. We can't conceive how terrible it is.

But emotions must be ruled by Scripture and not Scripture by emotion, and the Bible teaches, I think clearly, endless conscious punishment in which the hopes and joys and riches of men perish and they are tormented by their guilt forever. That's why the author of Hebrews says it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. If it's God's truth, then we must adjust to it and know that it's

right and proclaim it. Warn men of hell and warn men of falling into it. And the good news is there is a way of escape because the Lord also speaks of life and He speaks of entering the kingdom of God.

That's the future for all who look to Christ, for all who believe in Him and trust in Him as Savior. It's the inheritance of His disciples, life that unfolds and progresses unhindered forever with joy unexpressable and full of glory. Now, that's our experience even today as Christians to a great extent. Not fully, of course, but we experience that. Through Christ, we have the forgiveness of our sins and so we are at peace with God and in that relationship with Him, we have joy and we are to have even more joy. We're to increase and abound in joy. That doesn't mean, of course, that all is easy for the Christian and for the disciple. The life of the disciple involves taking up a cross, as we've seen earlier. And in verse 49, the Lord develops that when He moves from the fire of punishment to the fire of purification.

Fire is destructive, and He's built upon that fact already, but it can also be beneficial as when it purges metals of their impurities. And here, under the imagery of fire, the Lord speaks of the beneficial influences that inevitable trials for the Christian life will have. For everyone, He says, will be salted with fire. Now, that's an unusual expression, salted with fire, and may be an allusion to Leviticus 2:13 where it's stated that sacrifices were to be seasoned with salt. In the ancient world, salt was used both for its preservative influence – kept food pure, clean – and for its seasoning effect, and so it was added to the sacrifice to signify purity, and that's what the fire of trials produce in the Christian life.

Our lives are to be a sacrifice to God. Romans 12:1: Present your body as a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to God, and trials produce that in us. They have a purifying influence upon us. We mature through difficulties, we learn patience and humility through them, they correct us in our behavior, and through it all we become more like Christ, we become even more dependent upon the Lord.

So Christ's disciples, Christians, are salted for purity, but salt also has a savor, and in verse 50, the Lord moves from the altar to the household with the idea of salt as a seasoning and a preservative. "Salt is good, but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Our lives are to be like seasoning. We're to give flavor to life, joy to life, and only we can do that because only we have the gospel, only we have the truth of God and the wisdom of God that gives correction, that gives preservation from the fire to come. So people should see joy in our lives. Shouldn't see us as glum, gloomy people.

We have every reason to rejoice. Paul commands us to rejoice. We should be a people who are rejoicing and they should see it, the world should see it in our lives and they should hear it in our words. We should be a people that have that characteristic of salt about us. But if we lose that characteristic by losing our spirit of devotion and sacrifice to our Lord, we will be of no value to the world. We will be of no value to the people of God. In fact, that kind of person, the worldly, fleshly person connected to a church, can wreak havoc upon a church, be very destructive. And so the Lord concludes, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

That was the problem that occasioned this lesson in the first place. The disciples weren't at peace with one another. They were arguing over which of them was the greatest. They had lost their savor. They'd lost their salt, their devotion to the Lord, and were absorbed in selfish ambition. That's the world's path to greatness but not the Lord's. Shakespeare said some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. Well, Christians aren't born great; they're born sinners. But they've been reborn to be great, to be servants, and the greatest of the great is the servant of all, the person who uses his or her gifts and time to strengthen the church, even the weakest elements of the church and to tell a lost world of the Savior of the world.

Do you know Him as Savior? There's no greater question that can be asked. That's the greatest question to settle because it's a matter of heaven or hell, a matter of the kingdom of God or the unquenchable fire. People may not think much about hell today, but it hasn't disappeared. Fortunately, there is a way of escape and that's through Jesus Christ. He's the door through which we enter into life eternal. He took hell in our place. He took it in the place of sinners so that all who believe in Him might not perish but have everlasting life. If you've not believed in Christ, don't delay. Believe in Him and be saved and then be a servant to those around you. May God help us all to do that. Shall we stand now for the benediction?

[Prayer] Gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the exhortations that our Lord gave to His disciples, those that surrounded Him in that house and those down through the ages who identify with Him, who identify with His name. We are reminded that we fall short and we are very inclined to live casual lives and not lives of full commitment to you, and yet that's what you call us to. Not to halfway measures but to be completely devoted to you, and yet we cannot do that in our strength.

We call upon you, Lord, to bless us with a desire to live lives that are pleasing to you, lives that are lived in complete dependence upon you like children, receiving from you and walking in a way that's pleasing to you. Thank you for your Son whom you sent in to the world to die for selfish, self-centered individuals like those disciples, like each and every one of us. Thank you for the life we have in Him and help us now, we pray, Father, to live that life in a way that's honoring to you.

And if there be any in attendance who do not know Christ as Savior, who are still in their sins, unforgiven and under your terrible judgment, which is just and holy, we pray that you would move upon their heart, give them an awareness of their sin and their need of a Savior, and turn them to Him, whom to know is life eternal. We pray these things in our Savior's name. Amen.