

How Do Genuine Disciples Stand Out?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I have a confession to make this morning. I like salt. I like salt very much. And you know what? I don't feel bad about that. I know the doctors say you mustn't have too much salt. It's bad for you. I don't feel bad. Jesus said salt is good. He says that. It's in the Bible. Salt is good.

I mean, salt is great. It makes any food you put it on just taste better, doesn't it? And it's different to other seasonings. There's a reason you have salt on your table. There's a reason if you're having guests around, you always have salt. There's a reason restaurants always make sure they have salt on the table. It's not like they make sure they have cilantro on the table, because other herbs and seasoning won't work with everything. Salt works with everything. And it's not only different to all the other seasonings, but it's noticeable when it's missing.

And you can definitely notice when you put salt on food. It tastes better. Salt is good, Jesus says, and it's no mistake that he says that, and he uses salt as a great illustration to describe what Christians are like in the world, or what they should be like, at least. Often, Jesus is using, in many of the Gospels, this illustration of salt, like in today's passage, to describe Christians. He says, you are salt and light. You are the salt of the world. And the reason he uses salt to describe Christians is because he is saying how we are meant to be distinctive. We are meant to stand out. We are meant to be noticed in the world. But I want us to ask ourselves this morning, are we really?

Do we really stand out today? I think today it's often very difficult to tell between a Christian and a non-Christian unless you sit them down and have a deep conversation about what they believe. But on the surface, often Christians and non-Christians don't look very similar to each other. I mean, don't look different to each other at all. Interesting, it wasn't like that in the early church. In the first century church that we read about in the book of Acts, for example, the whole world, the society knew who the Christians were in a town and in a society. They knew who the Christians were. I don't think the same can be said today. I don't think often the world knows who the Christians are. And that's why the next section in Mark, this section here in Mark 9, is so important for us to read and meditate on and listen to. Because here Jesus is teaching his disciples who, so far, he's led to understand who he is. We've seen that great sort of moment, that watershed moment in Mark 8, where Peter says, you are the Christ, the Messiah, you are the one who is coming to fulfill all of God's promises and bring the kingdom. And they realize this now. But now, in this section of Mark, which is between that realization and Jesus going to Jerusalem to die on the cross and rise again, he is teaching his disciples what it means to follow him. And he's teaching them here in this chapter just what it is that's going to make them stand out from the rest of the world. What is it about them that will make them distinct from the world around them? And there's really two things I want us to see from this passage this morning, two categories of distinctiveness that should mark our genuine disciples. So let's have a look at them. The first is, Jesus tells us, disciples are distinct in how they treat other people. Disciples are distinct from the world in how they treat other people. So here, they're walking along the road and Jesus is teaching his disciples many things. The most important thing he's teaching them is how this kingdom that he's bringing is going to work differently to how they expect and how the world around them works. The first way it's going to work differently is he tells them he's going to defeat evil by being handed over to it. And they're very confused. But he's literally saying, I'm going to beat the enemies of God by letting them beat me.

Look at verse 31 to 32. He was teaching his disciples and telling them the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him. And after he is killed, he will rise three days later.

[4 : 2 0] But they did not understand the statement and they were afraid to ask him. It's just so confusing to them, this concept of winning through being defeated. And yet we know as Christians that's exactly what happened. Jesus defeated evil and the power of sin over his people by letting evil kill him.

But then he goes on very quickly to teach another radically different kingdom dynamic, another radically different way the kingdom is going to work to how the world works. And that is that the greatest ones in the kingdom of God will be those who make themselves the least in relation to others.

Let's have a look from verse 33. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, what were you arguing about on the way? But they were silent because on the way they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest. Who was the greatest. Now they were obviously getting excited about this idea that they knew who the Messiah was, right? Which meant that they knew the kingdom of God was coming and they were going to be part of the kingdom. So they're now starting to think about where they fit. And naturally they wanted to be in as good a position as they could with this king and the kingdom. And so they probably, you know, they're arguing about, well, you know, I'm hoping to be the chief of staff in the kingdom. The other ones, I want to be the minister of defense.

That's going to be awesome. And so they were, you know, having a discussion about where they fit in the kingdom. And they were doing what I think any of us would do. They were trying to find the best position they could for themselves. That's a normal human instinct that we do the best we can for ourselves in any given situation. Whether it's making money. If you make money, you want to make the most you can. Whether it's marks at school, when you're doing an exam, you want to do the best you can to get the best marks, to get in the best position for yourself. It's normal. We can't too heavily criticize these disciples. They were doing something that is fairly normal. When you get on a train, you don't look for the worst seat, do you? You look for the best seat. The one that will, you know, you'll enjoy the most. And they were doing the same when it comes to their place in the kingdom.

They were looking to get the best place they could in the coming kingdom. But then Jesus stops them and corrects them and says, guys, that's not actually how the kingdom works. In fact, it works the opposite.

[6 : 55] It works upside down. Look at verse 35 to 37, what he says to them. Sitting down, he called the twelve and said to them, if anyone wants to be first, he must be last and a servant of all. He took a child, had him stand among them and taking him in his arms, he said to them, whoever welcomes one little child such as this in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but him who sent me. So he's saying that those in his kingdom who actually don't seek their own status, those who make themselves last and the servant of all are actually the most effective and become the greatest in his kingdom. Of course, he's the great example of this, isn't it?

By making himself lowest, he became the greatest. So the kingdom works in this upside down way. The lower you make yourself, the more you're elevated in the kingdom. When Jesus comes and the whole thing is flipped on its head and the kingdom is shown to be what it truly is, those who made themselves the lowest and served and didn't seek status for themselves are the ones who will turn out to be the most effective and greatest in the kingdom. That's what Jesus is teaching. But also, not just those who don't seek their own status, he goes on to say those who go out of their way to give status to those who don't have it. Do you notice that? He uses the example of a little child, which in that culture was literally the thing that had the least status in society. We don't really appreciate that now in a society that panders to children, I think more than it should. But back in that day, children were disposable pretty much. In the Greco-Roman world, if you had a child you didn't like, you could leave him on the street. No problem, just make a new one. It was really horrific, actually, how children were often treated. There was no orphanages, there was no child welfare.

That's all come about through

Christianization of culture for the last 2,000 years, but nothing like that then. And so Jesus takes one of these members of society that are the lowest of the low, and he says, kingdom people take those who have no status and they give them status. They elevate them. They welcome them.

They give value to people who don't have it. That's what the kingdom is about, Jesus says. Do you see so far how drastically different this kingdom dynamic is from how the world around us is wired? Because doesn't society work in exactly the opposite way to what Jesus says his kingdom is going to work? Don't we naturally do the opposite to what Jesus says disciples should do? Don't we, be honest, don't we give attention more to those who will benefit us the most? Whether it's make us feel good, make us feel loved, or give us opportunities. We tend to give our attention more to those people who benefit us in some way than we do to those who don't bring anything to the table. We

want people to think well of us. We naturally will seek our own name. We've seen that already last month.

That's what we naturally do. We want to elevate ourselves. We want to give ourselves status in the eyes of others. That is our instinct. That is how we operate. But I want to ask you, what if Jesus had done that? What if Jesus had lived his life on earth the same way we instinctively live ours? And he sought his own status? And he only spent time with those who could benefit him?

[10:57] Well, then he would have never sought out and saved the lost, those who don't deserve it. And he would have never gone to the cross and made himself nothing, made himself like a common criminal to take on the burden of sin that we couldn't bear, to die for his people and save them. He would have never done any of that if he just lived the way we all instinctively live.

So he says, real disciples, they turn away from that way of living, the worldly way of living, and they follow his new kingdom way of living, which he gave the perfect example of when he walked this world.

Real disciples follow that. They don't just say, thank you, Jesus, and carry on living the way of the world. They say, thank you, Jesus, and then they turn around and follow him. That's what it means to repent, to turn around. And so these are the ways that disciples are different. And Jesus goes on now to say how disciples are different to the world around him. And he says, another way that genuine disciples will treat people differently is they won't be unnecessarily divisive when it comes to other people. Look at what happens next from verse 38. John said to him, teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he wasn't following us. Don't stop him, Jesus said. Because there is no one who will perform a miracle in my name who can soon afterwards speak evil of me. For whoever is not against us is for us. And whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in my name because you belong to Christ, truly I tell you, he will never lose his reward.

Now it's interesting, Jesus' disciples, they wanted to stop this man, this unknown man who was doing powerful works in the name of Jesus. They obviously were still feeling bad from what happened earlier in chapter 9 where they tried to drive out a demon and they couldn't and Jesus had to rebuke them for their lack of faith and their lack of relying on him. And now, to add insult to injury, they hear news of another guy who they've never met successfully driving out demons and tapping into kingdom power through the name of Jesus. And they want to stop him. But notice why they want to stop him. Not because he was necessarily doing something bad or harming the reputation of Jesus or the kingdom. But they say why they want to stop him at the end of verse 38. Look at this.

We tried to stop him because he wasn't following us. Notice that? Not he wasn't following you, Jesus. No, he wasn't following us. He wasn't part of us. He wasn't one of us. And so we tried to stop him.

[13:54] You see the problem here? The problem is that they're judging this fellow, obviously, believer by how close he was to them, not how close he was to Jesus. And I think that highlights a big problem in the church today. Amongst Christians today, amongst all of us, I think we're all guilty of the same thing to a greater or lesser degree. We evaluate the validity of other Christians and other ministries, not necessarily by how close they are to Jesus, but by how close they are to us.

But Jesus is warning against that here. He's saying that is dangerous and unnecessarily divisive. And Jesus said, stop it. That's one of the reasons that we so often look no different to the world around us, because we're all divided within the church amongst Christians. Many of the occasions of that division is just because Christians are unnecessarily drawing distinctives and shutting themselves off from other genuine believers because we're not the same or we don't hold to exactly the same doctrinal technicalities. A lot of Christians actually hop around. I've experienced this a lot. Hop around from church to church and they'll come and spend a few weeks in one church and then go to another church and then go to another church. And because they're looking for Christians who are just like them. They're looking for pastors who teach them exactly what they already believe. And they spend time condemning Christians who aren't exactly like them. And that is what Jesus is criticizing here.

This unnecessary divisiveness. True disciples don't do that. True disciples don't choose your church based on what's closest to you or holds exactly the same doctrines as you. You don't choose who you fellowship with based on who's exactly like you. No, you choose a church and you seek out believers who are close to Jesus even if they're not like you. And if you do that, you'll be

fine.

And you'll probably be a much nicer person as well. I think this is a rebuke, this unnecessary divisiveness which we all need to hear, especially in the age of social media where it's so much easier to be divided than it is to be united. But now that doesn't compromise the importance of truth.

[16 : 26] And that is the next thing we see. Because that is not the only way disciples are distinctive from the world around us in how they treat other people with humility and putting themselves last and not causing unnecessary division. But secondly, disciples are distinctive in their moral purity.

disciples are distinctive in their moral purity. We believe, because the Bible teaches, the gospel of grace. And it is unique amongst all religions that God saves people not according to what they've done or what they've earned, but according to what Jesus has done on their behalf. The doctrines of grace are central to the gospel. And without them, we would not be able to be saved. We're not saved through our works, but through faith in Christ. But one of the greatest misunderstandings about the doctrines of grace that many Christians tend to think is that, well, it doesn't matter so much if we sin then, does it? Because we're saved by grace. And we can just say sorry. And God will be ready to forgive us.

And no, I don't like sinning, but it's not a huge problem if I sin, because there's always the safety net of grace. Well, that is a terrible false teaching. And Jesus totally destroys it in what he says next.

He uses the most serious language to say that sin is totally unacceptable for true disciples.

Ongoing, undealt with sin is just not part of what a true disciple is.

First, the seriousness of causing other disciples to sin. Have a look at verse 42. He says, whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to fall away, it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

[18 : 38] Jesus doesn't mince his words. Jesus says that a quick death is better than facing a God whose child you have caused to sin. Remember that the next time you provoke another Christian to anger.

Or the next time you condone worldly behavior, making other Christians who maybe are new Christians think that it's okay to do things that it's not because you say so. Or like many Christian leaders in our society do, who are greatly honored, as we've seen recently, and yet they tell people explicitly that it's okay to do things that God explicitly says it's not okay to do. And because they're church leaders, people think, okay, well, it must be fine. And off they go and do the things that God doesn't want them to do. Jesus is talking about those people here.

And he says a quick death is better for them than facing a God whose child they have caused to sin without knowing it. But so that's the first thing. We've got to be very careful, not just with our own sin, but making sure we help other disciples prevent sinning. Jesus is serious about that. But then he goes on to talk about the importance of doing whatever is necessary to stop ourselves from sinning. Look at verse 43, how he says it. He says, if your hand causes you to sin or fall away, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell, the unquenchable fire. And he goes on and says the same with your foot. Your foot causes you to fall away.

Cut it off. If your eye causes you to fall away, gouge it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. You know what he's talking about here is actually right at the end of Isaiah, you can look it up when you go home, the very last paragraph, a few verses of Isaiah.

It's the judgment of the enemies of God. And it's talking about the valley that's outside Jerusalem where all the rubbish was thrown and all the things that didn't belong in the holy city was thrown.

[21 : 06] And it was a constant pit of burning and worms. It was disgusting. People knew about it. It was called Benhinom. And the word Jesus uses here is referring to that valley. And that's what he says will happen if for people who don't take sin seriously, they will not be part of the holy city, of Zion, of God's new creation, of his kingdom. They will be thrown out. There's no place for them there.

But he uses obviously exaggeration here when he says, you know, chop off your arm, gouge out your eye. I don't expect everyone to go home and start to dismember themselves. And Jesus doesn't either. He's using exaggeration to make a point. And the point he's making, very important, is that you can't just be sorry for your sin if you don't make any efforts to stop it at the source.

I was once sitting in a movie theater a number of years ago when it was acceptable to go to a closed indoor environment with a whole lot of strangers sitting right next to you.

And we watched a movie. I forget which one it was. I think it was one of the James Bonds earlier on. But I remember that there was a guy a few rows forward who was talking. There was just constant talking. I looked down and he was talking on his phone. During the movie he was having a conversation on his cell phone. And eventually people started to get quite irritated with him. And you would hear shh, shh. So he would be shh. And eventually he would realize. And he turned around and he would go, sorry, sorry, sorry. And then he would go back to his cell phone call. He would just carry on having his conversation. He didn't hang up. And so he said sorry, but he didn't change the thing that was causing the problem. But don't we often say sorry to God like that? Think about it. It's very easy for us to sin and then say sorry, sorry God and feel bad about it and repent of it and trust in the grace of God, but then not do anything to prevent us from sinning again. And that's not really being sorry, is it? Jesus says here, true disciples are those who deal with sin at the source. If your eye causes you to sin, eyes, the gate of temptation based on the things we see and the things we allow into our mind, we've got to control sin where it starts at temptation. We've got to be careful what we watch on the internet and on TV. If your feet cause, if you bring yourselves into situations where you are led to sin, then don't let your feet bring you into those situations. Avoid those situations. Cut off the opportunities that you have to sin. If your hands cause you to sin, control your body, whether it's your hands or as we prayed earlier, any of the other parts of our body which causes us to sin, learn to control those things. Control your habits. Part of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. Not just controlling our minds, but controlling our hands and our feet and our bodies and what we do with our bodies. It matters what disciples do with their bodies. Because, and this is how Jesus goes on to to conclude here, because if we're not taking sin seriously, if we're just going through the motions and not actually living distinct from the world around us in this way, then Jesus says there is no guarantee that we are safe from the judgment when it comes. And it's a serious warning. And it's a warning that is issued to God's people throughout Scripture. Turn with me to Isaiah 33 quickly. Keep your finger in Mark. Go to Isaiah 53. It's kind of smack bang in the middle of your Bibles around there. Because here's another example of God warning his people, like Jesus is doing. And I wouldn't be surprised if Jesus has this passage in the back of his mind as he's saying these things. And you'll see the similarity. Isaiah 33, from verse 10, God is talking in this section of Isaiah not just about the judgment he's going to bring down on the Jews who have gone astray and the Assyrians and the Babylonians who have come to take over Jerusalem. But the focus in this part of Isaiah moves back and it looks at what God is going to do to all the nations who have ignored him and turned from him. And it's quite shocking. And it's quite scary words.

[26 : 03] Isaiah 33, from verse 10, Now I will rise up, says the Lord. Now I will lift myself up. Now I will be exalted. You will conceive chaff.

You will give birth to stubble. Your breath is fire that will consume you. The peoples will be burned to ashes. The thorns cut down and burned in a fire. You who are far off, hear what I have done. You who are near, know my strength. The sinners in Zion are afraid. Trembling seizes the ungodly. Who among us can dwell with a consuming fire?

Who among us can dwell with ever-burning flames? It's a good question. If God's presence is a consuming fire that will destroy anything that is impure, the question is who on earth can dwell with that consuming fire?

The next verse gives us the answer. Verse 15, The one who lives righteously and speaks rightly. Who refuses profit from extortion. Whose hand never takes a bribe.

[27 : 09] Who stops his ears from listening to murderous plots. And shuts his eyes against evil schemes. He will dwell on the heights.

His refuge will be the rocky fortresses. His food provided. His water assured. Those who escape the judgment of God will be those who are distinct from the world around them.

Those who have controlled their eyes, their hands, their ears, their feet to cut themselves off from the values and the thought patterns of the world around them.

Jesus is saying exactly the same thing here in Mark 9. Those who actively put off sin are those who are the true disciples. those who are the true citizens of the kingdom.

And because of what Jesus has done in his death and resurrection and ascension and the sending of his spirit, we can put off sin in our lives.

[28 : 09] We really can. I've seen it. I've experienced it. And it's an ongoing journey. It'll take all of life and we won't reach perfection, this side of the return of Christ.

And yet, with the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can actually do what Jesus tells us to do. And we can start putting off sin. But we must use that power.

We mustn't think, oh well, and be defeatist about it. Oh well, I'm just a sinner. No, you have the Holy Spirit in you if you are a disciple of Christ. And you have not only the privilege but the responsibility to fight sin and to put it off and to be holy for God is holy.

And so these are the ways that true disciples stand out and are distinctive from the world around them. In summary, in how they treat others, they are humble, they don't put themselves first, they don't cause unnecessary division.

And in how we live our lives and how we think and speak, we are pure and we put off sin. And true disciples are able to do both of those. Uniquely, I think, true disciples, because of the power of the Spirit in them, are able to do both.

[29 : 26] They can both maintain moral standards but also do that with grace and humility. And you don't find people in the world who can do both. Either you have people who maintain very high standards for themselves but they are completely judgmental and filled with pride and bigoted towards other people who can't.

And they look down on them and they treat them like dirt because they are not as good and holy as them. You know, the holier-than-thou types. Or you get people who are really nice to be around. They just really get on with everyone but they condone all kinds of things which are wrong and sinful and impure and which God says shouldn't be part of our lives.

And that's why they get on with everyone. Christians can do both uniquely. and that is a work of God's Spirit. Christians can be people with high moral standards but also with great humble grace in their dealings with others.

That is a work of God's Spirit and that is what makes us salty in the world. And that's how Jesus ends in Mark 9. Have a look in Mark 9 verse 50.

the last thing he says in this section. He says have salt among yourselves and be at peace with each other.

[30 : 50] Have salt. And that's vital because of what he just said in verse 49 a very strange thing he says. He says everyone will be salted with fire.

Okay. What? What does that mean? Everyone will be salted with fire. Interesting. We read that and we go okay we just skip that carry on reading but a Jew would have understood what he was talking about.

You see in Leviticus the sacrifices that were commanded had to have salt with them to be acceptable to God. In Leviticus we read of the grain sacrifices. Later on we read about all sacrifices needed to have salt included to be acceptable to God.

God liked his sacrifices salty. It seemed unnecessary. They burned just the same with or without salt. They were commanded to include salt. It was a sign of a distinctive and acceptable sacrifice to God.

And so what Jesus is saying here when he says everyone will be salted with fire he's probably talking about true disciples and how the trials the fiery trials that come their way will actually show up their saltiness.

[32 : 02] It will prove them to be genuine. In fact Peter who worked a lot with Mark and who was the inspiration for this gospel writes in his letter later 1 Peter writes about this and he says this 1 Peter 4 12-13 Dear friends don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you as if something unusual were happening to you.

Instead rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ so that you may also rejoice with great joy when his glory is revealed. Rejoice when the fiery trials come your way because they show you to be true disciples and you're actually sharing the suffering of Christ he says.

And so at the end of the day if we take what Jesus is saying here in Mark 9 and he's talking about two types of fire and he's saying everyone is going to face one type of fire or the other.

No matter who you are every human being is going to face some kind of fire. Either the fire that we endure in following Christ and sharing his sufferings but there's another fire for those who are unwilling to do that those who are not salty, those who don't stand out from the world around them, those who don't bother about cutting off sin in their lives and that is the consuming fire of God's holy presence when he comes to destroy all that doesn't belong in his city and in his kingdom and in his world.

Who among us can dwell with a consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with ever burning flames? the one who lives righteously and speaks rightly, who refuses profit from extortion, whose hand never takes a bribe, who stops his ears from listening to murderous plots and shuts his eyes against evil schemes, he will dwell on the heights.

[34 : 03] Those who will survive the purifying judging fire of God when he comes is those whose salvation is evident in lives that are deliberately and noticeably distinct from the ways of the world.

Are you one of them? Well, let's pray. Lord, we thank you for such an important reminder from your word at the beginning of this new year, that as we go out and we have various responsibilities and goals and tasks for the year ahead.

Thank you that you've started us off with this reminder that we are to go out distinct from the world around us, that we are to be peculiar people, different and noticeably different in the way we treat other people and the way we seek purity in our lives.

And we pray, Lord, that you would give us your spirit, help us as we prayed earlier to control all those parts of our bodies that we and all of the parts of us may be used to glorify you and in being distinct and salty, would you cause us, use us, to point others, to point others to you, to point those who are lost and who need salvation to the only one who can save them, Jesus Christ our Lord, and help us to live lives which are worthy of him as we await his return.

In Jesus' name. Amen.