

BAPTIST BIBLE SEMINARY

“ALIGNMENT WITH CHRIST’S RADICAL PRIORITIES”
HOMILETICAL IMPLEMENTATION OF MARK 9:33-41 STUDY

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO
DR. RODNEY J. DECKER
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE
EXXEGESIS OF MARK
NT811

BY
NATHAN T. WINGERT

CLARKS SUMMIT, PA

APRIL 1999

Part I : Sermon Manuscript

ALIGNMENT WITH CHRIST'S RADICAL PRIORITIES

I. Introduction

Every one of us has some arrangement of priorities in our lives. These are things for which we would sacrifice almost anything. For some, a ride on a roller coaster is such an adrenaline rush that they are willing to wait in a crowded line full of impatient people, in the heat, for up to two hours. For others, a religious zeal drives them to make ridiculous sacrifices. When I was in Ecuador, I visited the site of a supposed appearance of the mother of Jesus some five years earlier. The site, some 60 miles away from the city, high in the surrounding mountains, had become so idolized by the people that it attracted thousands of city-dwellers to make the trek by foot to kneel in front of the statue that marked the place where Mary had supposedly appeared. The painful journey paled in comparison to the excitement of being there.

God's Word lays down very clear priorities for our lives, as well, priorities that make our selfish agendas pale in comparison. Jesus lays down three of these in a key episode with his disciples shortly before his betrayal and arrest in Jerusalem.

- Turn in your Bibles to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9.
- **BACKGROUND:**

Mark's gospel is fast-paced and filled with accounts of direct conversations and confrontations. Many of these, like the one we will examine, vividly depict the scene in such a way that the reader is instantly drawn into the emotions of the characters involved. It is also important to keep in mind the purpose Mark's gospel: Mark wrote to give the "gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1), and he did so by paralleling the servanthood of Christ with his life-changing authority at the same time. Chapters 8-10 are the center of the gospel, structured around three predictions of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, given to his disciples. Each instance portrays very ironic results as the disciples respond by seeking their own greatness and then being instructed by Jesus on the true nature of discipleship.

It is immediately after the 2nd of these predictions that we find ourselves today in Mark 9:33-50. Having just returned from a glorious transfiguration with Peter, James, and John, Jesus encounters the other 9 disciples frustrated over their inability to cast out a demon. He emphasized the power of faith then took his disciples alone through Galilee to teach them what was about to happen to him. After such a humbling succession of events, one would surely expect the disciples to be sobered! But let's read verses 33-50 and examine Mark' account of what happened.

TRANSITION: In light of his coming passion and death, Jesus is ready to readjust the value system held by his proud, confused tribe of followers. You and I must also grasp these values if we are to call ourselves true followers of Christ.

II. **First, true discipleship demands that I serve even the most lowly of people.**

Verses 33-42 The very 1st occurrence in this passage is indicative of what will what is going on. Having entered Capernaum, Jesus initiates a very important conversation. Knowing the hearts of his beloved disciples, he is intending from the start to teach them, to disciple them. This is very similar to what he did in 8:27-32, asking his disciples about his reputed identity with the intention of teaching them what was about to come and then the true nature of discipleship.

Thus, again, the teacher and shepherd knew exactly what he was doing. He was alone with the 12, as he usually was when he had something very close to his heart to share.

Jesus asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” This word “discuss” carries with it the idea of arguing. What was their response? SILENCE. For, as the narrator Mark points out, their argument had centered on the subject of who was greatest among them. **They had just been told that their great leader, who had fed 4000 with 7 loaves of bread, healed a blind man, and cast out a seemingly impossible demon, *was going to be delivered into men’s hands, killed, and raised.* But they were talking about which of them outdid the others! They were so concerned about how men viewed them and what impressive reputation they conveyed, that Jesus’ words of anguish had drifted right past their attention.

Therefore, it was time for a lesson. A tough lesson. Sitting down, Jesus called them to listen and laid down a principle that was quite the opposite from how they had been living.

“If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all.” (35)

The impact of the word “shall” in this verse is crucial. It is an unusual form of emphasis in the gospels, except in Matthew, where it is more prevalent. It is similar to the 10 commandments which use the most emphatic form of command possible to tell people what they SHALL do. There is absolutely no other choice of action. If greatness was desired, here is what must take place:

You must take the last place.

You must serve ALL people.

This concept of greatness was strange to the disciples, who were looking for the kingdom to come in power. It is strange to us, who live in a society where self-esteem is worshipped and positions of influence are given to those who achieve personal greatness at the expense of others.

So what exactly does it mean to serve even the most lowly of people?

Jesus now illustrates his radical way of thinking in 3 different ways:

a) First, he takes a child from the room, standing him in their midst and holding him in his arms, and explains that receiving such a child in his name meant receiving Jesus himself, which in turn meant receiving God, the one who sent him! This is a lesser-to-greater sequence which focuses our attention on the end result: GOD the Father becomes yours by the simple act of receiving a child...the very thing most Jews were least eager to do. Children were denigrated in that society, as is seen in the disciples' rebuke later in Mark 10. The implication of this was a tearing down of the pride in their hearts. It meant not only children but any outcasts of society were just as deserving of service as rulers or officials; the basis for it was the **name** of Jesus, which signified agreeing that this was someone also accepted by Jesus. Can we as believers really say we know Christ if we display a resistance against receiving any person, whether for reasons of their poverty, their lack of social status, their annoying habits, or their ungratefulness for gestures of kindness?

b) But not only are children used as illustration, verse 38-41 speaks of people who may be strangers to us. Here, John speaks up. The implication of the way he worded his statement is that they were unsuccessful at preventing this man. Their reason for trying was that he "was not following us."

Apparently, the disciples were unready to receive anyone who were not actively part of their company. Perhaps they were jealous or at least suspicious of this independent exorcist. However, Jesus rebukes them! On what basis? The fact that this man was casting out demons **in his name**.

Jesus' argument boils down to the fact that ALLEGIANCE to JESUS was more important than adhering to some expected norms.

***In fact, this seems to bring our attention back to Mark 8:38, where we learn that true discipleship means not being ashamed of Jesus and his words in an adulterous generation. This man was not ashamed of Jesus!*

"Whoever is not against us is for us" indicates that this man was probably a follower. Verse 41 goes on to explain that the giving of a CUP of WATER to someone who is "of Christ" (associated with him) is a sufficient grounds by which to demonstrate that one has a sure reward coming!

*Note that this reward is ABSOLUTELY POSITIVELY sure. That is the implication of the wording used. Mark seems to be using a type of hyperbole, a dramatized effect, as he does all through this passage. For the miniscule act of giving a cup of water, a reward is assured. Earlier Jesus said that simply receiving an infant (the meaning of the word) signified the receiving of the Almighty God of the universe. Being first means being *dead last* in God's economy. The shocking effect of these comparisons will continue. But what is their meaning? Perhaps to alert the disciple, and the reader as well, to radically different value system that Christ has and brings to his disciples.

- c) The last illustration Jesus is the most dramatic of all; it is chilling in its effect. Verse 42 brings the disciples back to the theme of children – this time telling them how horrible it is to cause a little one who believes to stumble, or sin. In order to show how high a value Jesus places on anyone, no matter how small, who believes, (and perhaps to emphasize his love for children) he says such a person is better off drowned in a sea. The phrase “upper millstone” indicated a very heavy stone pulled by a donkey. The powerful yet ludicrous nature of the imagined scenario is heightened by the fact that death by drowning was very non-Jewish and by the fact that one’s head could never fit inside the center hole in such a stone. Jesus wants his disciples to make no mistake about his acceptance of even the most humble of believers.

TRANSITION: At this point, Jesus moves from a focus on servanthood and reception of anyone who expresses allegiance to him, to radical obedience to God required of anyone who wants to be a true disciple of his. Again, notice that the words about Jesus coming death still ring in our ears. Jesus’ submission to his Father’s will teaches us that:

III. Second, true discipleship demands that I remove whatever keeps me from obedience.

Verses 43-49 In the next few verses, Jesus gives a series of three parallel sayings relating hypothetical situations. Each use the word “cause to stumble” again from verse 42, but in a more emphasized verb form when it is now applied to self-imposed sins. These three situations are somewhat shocking yet again; cutting off certain body parts is an extreme measure few would dream of taking.

But by means of such dramatic effect, Mark shows how seriously God takes obedience to him. This brings our attention again back to Mark 8, this time verses 35-37, which speak of the relative worthlessness of one’s earthly life in comparison to the value of one’s soul. The vivid descriptions of Hell in these verses make it clear that if anything can be done to avoid it, the action is worth it no matter what the cost. While these hypothetical situations do not necessitate that the reader assume they are possible, they emphatically shout the message that *a true disciple will adopt Christ’s radical priorities by taking whatever painful steps are necessary to live obediently to God.*

Lastly, verse 49 speaks of judgment which shall come on all people. Fire that tests the works of the believer and fire that tortures the unbeliever forever.

What does that mean for you and I today? It means no price is too high to pay to love God by obeying him. What sin am I hiding? Is there a habit I cherish more highly than I do God himself? The obedience of Christ to go to the cross in my place must motivate me to take steps of action NOW if I dare name myself a follower of Christ.

IV. **Third, true discipleship demands that I practice peace with *all* believers.**

Let's read verse 50. In this verse, Jesus brings to a conclusion his teaching which was in response to the disciples' craving for greatness.

→ They had been in an argument with each other fueled by pride and selfish ambition.

→ They had gotten riled up with a man who was casting out demons in Jesus' name, trying to no avail to stop him. This was probably also fueled by pride.

*Note also that Jesus uses wordplay with the word "salt." Yes, salt symbolizes judgment. But now he says that salt is "good." This is the same Greek word as that translated "better" 4 times in verses 42-48.

SALT here represents peace. This can be seen by the way the last two phrases are put side by side. Being "salty" people meant being peace-loving people.

→ But notice that a warning is given first. If God's people, who are supposed to be like salt, become unsalty, or full of strife with each other, what hope is there? The world certainly has nothing to offer by way of true brotherly peace. Jesus pleads with his disciples, again in light of his coming death and resurrection, that they lay down their vicious, selfish ambitions, and live in the humility that is characterized by peace.

→ What does this mean specifically? For them it meant to stop bickering over matters of greatness and exalt one another above themselves. That took humility! It also meant biting their tongue when they met people who did not do things like the disciples assumed they should. It meant esteeming Christ so highly they would accept a person immediately based on professed allegiance to him and let God do any judging of the heart.

CONCLUSION: It is vital to realize that taking on Christ's values necessitates a painful process: repudiating my current value system. This passage specifically pinpoints the following desires of man's heart, desires which are *absolutely worthless* in comparison with the GREATNESS of our Savior Jesus Christ:

- Human Greatness and Recognition
- Traditional or Personal Preferences
- My own physical life
- Commonplace luxuries in life (hands, feet, eyes)
- Winning out over the will of another person; seeing my agenda prevail

What will WE do in response to the Word of God laid out here in Mark 9:33-50?

Examine your heart right now. What pride do you find? Lack of willingness to serve certain people? Lack of willingness to forgo a certain sin? Someone in your life with whom you have not yet made peace? Take a minute to ponder the humility in Christ's death in YOUR stead. If that does not change the way we serve others, obey God, and live at peace, we are not worthy to be called TRUE disciples of Christ. If it does, it is the graciousness of God at work within us.

Part II – Exegetical Explanation

ALIGNMENT WITH CHRIST’S RADICAL PRIORITIES MARK 9:33-50

1.) **Pericope Choice** This was the result of much study and reading. The following are my reasons at deciding not to break up this pericope at verse 41 but rather regarding it as one:

- Vv. 30-32 are one pericope, as signaled by the change in location in both verse 30 and verse 33.
- Vv. 33-50 all take place in a house in Capernaum.
- Vv. 39-50 seem to be intentionally cast as one speech by the use of the words “And sitting down...” back in verse 35 and the words “And rising up...” in 10:1.
- The historical present λέγει in verse 35 indicate the start of a new pericope. The next historical present is found in 10:1, ερχεται.
- Verbal connections within verses 40-50:
 - γαρ - connects verses 40 and 41.
 - ος (αν) - connects verses 40, 41, and 42.
 - και εαν σκανδαλιση / σκανδαλιζη - the subjunctive verb connects Vv. 42-48, and the phrase connects Vv. 43, 45, and 47.
 - καλον εστιν - connects Vv. 42, 43, 45, 47, and 50.
 - αλληλους / αλληλοις - connects v. 50 with v. 3
 - εν των τοιουτων (παιδιων) / ενα των (μικρων) τουτων - connects v. 37 with v. 42.
- Conceptually, the inclusio formed by verse 50 seems to necessitate preaching this as a whole pericope. The reason for the command to be at peace with one another clearly referred to the two earlier incidents where there was a lack of peace. The only comfortable breaking point earlier is verse 37; but this does not leave room for the discussion of children picked up in verse 42 with common terminology. A break

between either 40 and 41 or 41 and 42 (or 42 and 43) would be awkward due to the fact that such strong ties link each verse together like chain links.

2.) **Focus on argument and silence** Vv. 33-34 - Though not mentioned explicitly in the sermon, the reason for this emphasis is the existence of three consecutive imperfect form verbs. These tend to serve more as foreground than do aorists, which leads one to suspect an emphasis on the embarrassment caused when the disciples realized the folly of their arguing.

3.) **ἔσται** - This is an imperatival future, as are the quotations from the Old Testament (10 commandments) in Matthew.

4.) **The progression from lesser to greater, V. 37** -

Aorist Indicative → Present Indicative → Present Subjunctive → Present Indicative

The weight of each form in narrative discourse leads me to this conclusion that the latter few are being emphasized.

5.) **“Trying to prevent” in V. 38** – The imperfect here is a “conative imperfect,” signifying an unsuccessful attempt.

6.) **οὐ μὴ + subjunctive** – This form is extremely emphatic; this explains the note on the sermon.

7.) **Emphasis on the millstone** – One of the reasons for the weight placed here is the perfect form found: βεβληται, meaning “cast.” Since the perfect implies the foreground of the story. It is the only perfect form in this pericope.

8.) σκανδαλιση — σκανδαλιζη → The shift here is from Aorist Subjunctive to Present Subjunctive. The second is emphasized according to discourse analytical theory.

Ludicrous Statements “Explosive” (Gundry):

- 1.)
- 2.)
- 3.)
- 4.)
- 5.)

HUMAN Desires – Worthless in Comparison with—CHRIST’S Values

- | | |
|-----|-----|
| 1.) | 1.) |
| 2.) | 2.) |
| 3.) | 3.) |
| 4.) | 4.) |
| 5.) | 5.) |
| 6.) | |

Brief Bibliography for Reference

Gundry, Robert H. *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

*Especially pages 507-528.

Lane, William L. *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.

*Especially pages 338-350/

Santon, Narry F. "The Paradox of Authority and Servanthood in the Gospel of Mark." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:616 (1997): 452-460.