

## For or Against?

Mark 9:38-50

New Store/Maysville Presbyterian Churches

Numbers 1:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

September 26, 2021

Sometimes when reading the Bible, it pays to pay attention to what's happening around the passage you're reading, or what has happened a bit before. As a side note, while I like my e-reader on my tablet for carting around several books to read at any time, I find it very hard to read certain books on it, one being the Bible, for the very reason I stated above.

Our New Testament reading relates to both our Old Testament reading about the Israelites in the wilderness and the disciples' first foray away from Jesus. Now if you just focused on the verses of our passage, you might get the first reference, but unless you've got a great memory, you might miss the second. Hear God's teaching from the Gospel according to Mark:

### **{read the New Testament Passage}**

Now let me begin with some folk sayings and see if you recognize any.

Chime in, if you do...

A stitch in time saves nine.

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink.

Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.

(My mother used to say, "Silence is golden.")

Words that soak into your ears are whispered not yelled

There's the one that we all learned in childhood:

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.

And there's:

Good fences make good neighbors.

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Life is simpler when you plow around the stump.

Here's one out of the Scottish tradition:

Where everyone goes, the grass never grows.

Whoever came up with that one must have been a golf course greens-keeper.

Some others we probably know include:

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Wishes don't wash dishes.

Better to be safe than sorry.

Then, there are the ones I call "The Don'ts":

Don't judge a book by its cover.

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Don't cut off your nose to spite your face.

Don't put all your eggs in one basket.

Don't throw the baby out with the bath water.

Don't hide your light under a bushel.

Here's one I had not heard, but like:

A little help is better than a lot of pity.

This last one is of a form of proverbial wisdom called the "better than" proverb that presents two sharply opposed choices, one of which is clearly good and the other clearly not.

Some examples from the Bible are:

*One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city ([Prov 16:32](#)).*

*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold ([Prov 22:1](#)).*

*Better is open rebuke than hidden love ([Prov 27:5](#)).*

Some "better than" proverbs convey that wisdom is a better choice than any alternative.

*Her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold ([Prov 3:14](#)).*

*My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver ([Prov 8:19](#)).*

*Proverbs isn't the only book in the Bible with such sayings. Here are a*

Proverbs isn't the only book in the Bible with such sayings. Here are a couple of "better than" proverbs in *Ecclesiastes*. In response to seeing people being oppressed, the author utters this "better than" proverb: *I thought the dead who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive, but better than both is the one who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun* ([Eccl 4:1, 2](#)).

Other examples of "better than" proverbs from *Ecclesiastes* include

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"Wisdom is better than weapons of war,  
but one bungler destroys much good" ([Eccl 9:18](#)).

Jesus used the traditional "better than" form, but, much like Qohelet, the author of *Ecclesiastes*, he invested them with edgy, subversive content. You can't read our passage this morning without stumbling over four "better than" sayings.

*If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea* ([Mk 9:42](#)).

*If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire* ([Mk 9:44](#)).

*If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell* ([Mk 9:45](#)).

*If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched* ([Mk 9:47-48](#)).

Taking a traditional proverbial form used to offer clear-cut options, Jesus then adds a dash of paradox and a big dollop of hyperbole. But, why the paradox and hyperbole? What reasons does Jesus have for saying these

things that give us alternatives that make the choice even harder? After all, who finds amputation better than the prospect of going to hell?

New Testament scholar Robert Tannehill, in his classic book *The Sword of His Mouth*, calls these sayings "focal instances." They picture a specific scene and make a statement or command relative to that scene. They imply an exaggerated judgment and make an extreme demand. They are not legal rules meant to be enforced literally as general regulations. They are meant to make us look at human behavior in a whole new way.

So, what is going on here in *Mark*? As I've said, I have noticed, in studying Scripture, that I can learn a lot when I'm paying attention. For example, if I am paying attention, I would remember, when I read our passage for this morning, which has to do with the disciples' objections to someone beyond their circle casting out demons, that they themselves were not successful in this same effort back in Mark 9:14-29. There they try to cast out a demon from a boy, but are unable to do so because they forget one little detail: they forget to pray first (9:29).

How could they forget such an important activity, one that acknowledges the source of the healing's power? It may be that they were each trying to outdo one another in demonstrating their skills as exorcists and praying just slipped their minds. We can't be sure. As we do know, the disciples were complaining that someone on the outside of their group was able to do something the disciples themselves weren't able to do. That made the disciples suspicious, distrustful, frustrated, and maybe a bit angry.

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Perhaps even more so, as they had just been chastised for how they quickly became embroiled in an argument over who is the greatest among them (9:33-37). Were they unable to do a good thing for someone else (cast out the demon from the boy in 9:14ff) because they were preoccupied with their own power and forgot to call upon the power of God? This then begs the question did their self-centered desire for position and prestige impede the accomplishment of God's desire that evil be overcome and that healing take place?

It has also never occurred to me in previous readings of this text just how bad John's comment to Jesus in 9:38 makes the disciples sound. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not with us." It's as if John is saying, "Well, if we couldn't do it, we're hardly going to stand by and let somebody else who isn't even a disciple do it! That can only make us look bad. Never mind the peace and new lease on life the formerly tormented person may now enjoy. That's not the point."

It certainly seems as if the disciples have taken a step beyond allowing their self-centeredness to impede their own ministry. They have progressed to impeding the ministry of someone else. All because they desire the wrong thing: recognition and advancement. A great deal of harm can be done by people who desire the wrong thing. People who desire the wrong thing can place stumbling blocks in the path of others (9:42). This text invites us to identify the self-constructed stumbling blocks that prevent flourishing. In other words, we are invited to consider the subtle ways in

which we in the church sabotages its own ministries. Are the goals of committees in conflict with each other? Is the ministry of the church controlled by a select few whose needs and interests do not represent the larger body? Is the church clinging to a self-identity that no longer reflects its membership or a vision that no longer holds relevance?

Let's remove any impediment to encouraging the work of Christ in the lives of others. Let God's compassion fill us and direct our words and deeds, so that God's Kingdom is made visible, that God's love enacted.

Let us pray: Mighty and ever-loving God, You are greater than our human understanding. Your invitation to live in Your Kingdom is broader than we imagine. Remove the impediments in our hearts and minds that prevent us from seeing Your love, Your grace, Your mercy enacted in the work of others, in making such known through us, and in sharing all with all. We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ, our Lord, Your beloved and risen Son. Amen.

