

## Mark 9:38-48; 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Jesus' words today are quite shocking and kind of disturbing. What is going on here? How should we understand this Gospel? Does Jesus really mean for us to be cutting off our hands and our feet and plucking out our eyes? He seems to be very concerned about sin and the effect that it can have on our lives now, but more importantly on our eternal life. What I hope to do today is to try to better understand what Jesus is saying to us and, also, better understand why He is so adamant in what He is saying. But first, since the idea of sin is so prominent in today's Gospel, I think it is important to define what we as Catholics mean by the word sin. I do understand that focusing our attention on sin may not be the uplifting message you were hoping to hear as you were getting ready to come to Mass today, but, again, Jesus seems to think this is important, so we should do our best to listen to Him.

The Catechism, as you might expect, has quite a bit to say about sin, but the definition I would like to use is found in paragraph 1850, which says,

**“1850** Sin is an offense against God: “Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight.” *(This is a quote from Ps 51:4, a very famous Psalm of repentance attributed to Israel's great King David, a complicated man who on one hand is described in Scripture as a man after God's own heart, but elsewhere we see him as a great sinner, having an adulterous and murderous heart.)* Sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become “like gods,”<sup>123</sup> (Gen 3:5) knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus “love of oneself even to contempt of God.” *(This quote is from St. Augustine, another complicated man who is one of the greatest minds of Western Civilization and a great saint of the Church, but also someone who knew a thing or two about sin, who said things like, Lord make me chaste, but not yet!)* In this proud self-

exaltation, sin is diametrically opposed to the obedience of Jesus, which achieves our salvation.<sup>125</sup> (1440; 397; 615)<sup>1</sup>”

From this definition, we see that sin is a rupture of our relationship with God. It turns our hearts away from Him. This definition also highlights the idea that all sin is rooted in the first sin, where our first parents, Adam and Eve, used their freedom, their free will, to disobey God in order to become like God, to be able to decide what is good and what is evil for themselves.

This idea, this sin, that I will use my freedom to decide what is right and what is wrong for myself, is found and celebrated everywhere in our culture today. Bishop Barron describes this as one of the primary problems of our culture; he calls it the “Culture of self-invention”. He says that our tendency today is to say, “*No, No, don’t impose any of your authoritative, objective, truth on me; I, in the depth of my freedom, will determine what is true, and in the depth of my will, I will determine what is valuable for myself.*” Now this idea of self-invention sounds pretty good, as most temptation does, but what Bishop Barron means by an “authoritative, objective, truth” is something grounded in reality that governs all of us; in other words, “God’s law”. When we deny an authoritative, objective, truth we are denying God’s reign in our life.

That we still find ourselves with this ancient problem of using our freedom to turn away from God; that we still find ourselves struggling with sin, is what we might call the “Bad News of the Gospel”, there is something about sin that we can’t seem to escape, and that is what Jesus speaks to today. We can see a kind of progression in Jesus’ teaching. We first hear John tell Jesus about a man who was casting out demons in Jesus’ name, but they stopped him because he wasn’t one of them. We hear a similar story in our Old Testament Reading where Joshua tells

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Church. (1997). [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) (2nd Ed., p. 453). Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Moses to stop the two men from prophesying because they weren't following the rules! Jesus corrects John and Moses correct Joshua for their desire to silence someone who is doing God's work because it didn't fit into their idea of who God should be blessing with His gifts. Again, we see two examples of very holy and righteous men: John, the beloved disciple, and Joshua the great Israelite general, because of their pride, envy, and jealousy, putting their desires of how things should be ahead of God's will.

Next, Jesus speaks about those that cause one of these little ones, who believe in Him, to sin. This is the sin of scandal, which happens when one intentionally causes an innocent believer to turn away from God and to do evil. Jesus uses startling and violent imagery to drive home the seriousness of scandal. Those that cause others to sin will face a severe judgment; such that it would be better for them to have a great millstone hung round their neck and they be thrown into the sea. We should be aware and vigilant about these sins, but also know Jesus is a just judge and we can trust in Him that justice will be done. He seems to be telling us that He doesn't want us to focus on the punishment of these offenders because it is very easy to look at another person's failings and convince and congratulate ourselves, "At least I am not as bad as that guy."

And then Jesus pivots, and instead of speaking about the things other people are doing, He turns the focus onto you and to me:

- If your hand causes you to sin – cut it off!
- If your foot causes you to sin – cut it off!
- If your eye causes you to sin – pluck it out!

It is better to enter life maimed or blind than to be thrown into Gehenna, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'

Does Jesus really want us to harm our bodies to keep us from sinning? No. We as Catholics read the Scriptures in their entirety and Jesus does not contradict Himself. We know

that these words are spoken as hyperbole and are not meant to be taken literally because it was exactly a month ago Jesus told us in Mark Chapter 7, <sup>20</sup> ***“But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles. 21 From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. 23 All these evils come from within and they defile.”***<sup>2</sup> Jesus knows that it isn’t our hands or our feet or our eyes that cause us to sin. He knows the evil that we do begins in our hearts, and what He is so urgently and emphatically asking us to do today is to look into our hearts and root out that evil that manifests as sin in our lives. There is a quote from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian author, philosopher, and prophet, in his book, “The Gulag Archipelago”, he says, ***“The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart...even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains...an uprooted small corner of evil.”*** Solzhenitsyn’s great insight into the human condition echoes what we heard earlier about Israel’s great King David and the Church’s great Saint Augustine and also with John and Joshua, and, in fact, that each and every one of us is capable of, on one hand, great holiness but on the other great evil. If I can sum up Solzhenitsyn’s thought, every one of us is in need of a savior, and none of us are beyond redemption.

This is why Jesus’ words today are so intense and so powerful and so shocking. This is about His life’s mission. This is why He has come into the world, to fight and defeat the power of sin and death by pouring out His life Blood on the Cross, for each one of us, so that we no longer have to live as slaves to these powers. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of

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<sup>2</sup> [New American Bible](#). (2011). (Revised Edition, Mk 7:20-23). Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

the world; the savior we desperately need to change that ancient narrative that continues to plague us. Through Jesus' life, Passion, Death, and Resurrection we are set free. This is the "Good News" of the Gospel. But we have to participate in that Good News. We have to make a choice; we have to use our freedom to choose, not to turn away from God, but instead, turn to Him and to follow Him and to surrender to Him. We have to learn to say, "Thy Will be done." Today, it is as if Jesus is shouting at us to shake us from our slumber, to shock us out of our comfortable acceptance of our sinful condition. He is telling us that what we do with our lives matters and that we are made for more. He is begging us to look into our hearts and to recognize the darkness there and to turn to Him for the healing and forgiveness that only He can give. This is why He came, this is why He died, and this is why He Rose Again, so that we may be overwhelmed by His Divine Mercy, the Mercy that leads to that new and abundant life steeped in His Freedom and in His Love now and always.