



[Pastor Keith GeRue](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 18
September 26, 2021

The Fire of God – Now or Later?

Mark 9:38-50

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

⁴² “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ ⁴⁹ For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The words that we heard in the Holy Gospel for today are powerful words. An imagine, for a moment, what all of us here today would look like if we did what those words say and cut off offending and sinning members of our bodies! What parts of your body would you have left? . . .

- + Our **feet** have taken us to places we do not belong, and we know we should not be.
- + Our **hands** have touched what should not have been touched and taken what did not belong to us, and have been much too slow to help.
- + Our **tongues** have spoken words we know were not true, words that were unkind, words that hurt other people and their reputations.
- + Our **eyes** have wandered where they should not have.
- + Our **ears** have drunk in gossip and filled our minds with thoughts that should not be thought.
- + Our **minds** have thought thoughts that we would be ashamed if other people knew.
- + Our **hearts** are filled with sinful desires and selfish ambitions and greed.
- + We have **sat** in the company of people who mock God with their words and lives without saying a word.
- + Our **backs** have bent in compromise with the ways of the world instead of standing tall and firm on God’s unchanging and wholly truthful Word.



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+ Our have bent our **knees** before false gods, we have turned up our **noses** at what God desires of us, and our **shoulders** refuse to carry the cross our Lord would desire us to carry.

. . . Have I missed any parts? Probably – but you can fill in the rest. It's not hard to do! If we did what these words of Jesus tell us to do

. . . not one of us would be here. Every part and every member of our bodies is stained with sin.

But we don't do those things -- maiming and dismembering our bodies. But why not? Jesus Himself spoke these words to His disciples – do we now just disregard them? Picking and choosing which of God's Word we will follow and which we will not? Clearly, we cannot do that. Every part of God's Word is important for our lives. But then we must ask again: why don't we follow these words of Jesus? The answer, of course, is forgiveness. We don't cut off our body parts because Jesus forgives our sin. But while that is the answer, at the same time it's not quite that simple. Because some people, perhaps many people, will use that answer to make the mistake of not taking sin – and the consequences of sin – seriously enough. Our attitude may become "Well, we can do this because we know God will forgive us." Or, "We won't get caught . . . and God will forgive us!" Or maybe even in the thinking that "The ends justify the means. Therefore, it's okay as long as something good comes out of it." But that kind of an attitude toward sin is a completely different attitude than we see in these serious words of Jesus in the Holy Gospel. It is an attitude which *minimizes* the seriousness of sin. An attitude which regards forgiveness very lightly. But Jesus does not regard sin so lightly. He knows that sin – which is rebellion against God and His will, and not just the breaking of some rules – must be taken seriously. So seriously, in fact, that He also tells His disciples that ***"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea."***

He's serious. Jesus is providing a stern warning for us here. Your sin cannot be so easily shrugged off with the attitude, "Oh well, I'm forgiven!" Your sin has serious consequences.

Knowing that makes the next sentence that Jesus speaks sound very threatening: ***"Everyone will be salted with fire."*** The fire we should immediately think of when we hear that is the fire of hell, for that is what Jesus was just talking about when He said that for those who are thrown into hell, ***"their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."*** And if you've ever felt the pain of a burn, then you can imagine what that unending burning will feel like . . . and that those who experience it will wish they had cut off their hands and feet and everything else while they still had the chance! Your sin has serious consequences.

But for you and I and all believers in Christ, the good news is that those consequences have already been dealt with. That's what it means when we say that we're forgiven – not that God just *overlooks* what we have done wrong, or *ignores* it – but that He has dealt with it. Because it had to be dealt with, and instead of making us maim ourselves and cut off our body parts – which, as we read, is what should happen because of our sin – instead, Jesus came to deal with it personally. He did this by offering all the parts of His body on the cross, in place of all the parts of our body that sin. All the parts of His body were, in a way, cut off. Think about it:

+ **Our feet** take us where we do not belong, so He offered His feet to be nailed in place.



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- + **Our hands** touch what they should not, so He offered His hands to be pierced so they could not touch or close around anything.
 - + **Our tongues** speak gossip and lies and unkind words, so He offered His tongue to become swollen and dry and to be burned with stinging wine vinegar.
 - + **Our eyes** have wandered, so He offered His eyes to be closed in death.
 - + **Our minds** think sinful thoughts, so He offered His head to be pierced with thorns.
 - + **Our hearts** beat with sinful desires, so He offered His heart to be stopped in death, with no blood left to pump after it ran into the ground.
 - + **Our stomachs** demand too much food, so He offered His stomach to be pierced with a sword.
 - + **Our backs** bend in compromise with a sinful world, so He offered His back to be ripped open with painful lashes.
 - + **Our shoulders** refuse to carry our crosses, so He bent His shoulders to accept our burdens.
- . . . And the fire that was meant for us, that should have consumed us because of our sin, consumed Jesus instead, as He offered Himself as a sacrifice in our place.

Knowing that will help us to properly understand what Jesus meant **for us** when He said, ***“Everyone will be salted with fire.”*** That fire cannot just mean the fire of the punishment of hell because not everyone will experience that. We will not experience that because Jesus has taken that for us, in our place. Rather, what Jesus is referring to here as “fire” is the very presence of God. For all throughout the Bible fire is used to show the presence of God. For example, Moses stood before God at the burning bush. The sacrifices in the Old Testament that were offered to God were consumed by fire. God was the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness. The tongues of fire on the disciples’ heads at Pentecost indicated the presence of the Holy Spirit. Even here in our church we use the flames of the candles at the altar to indicate the presence of God. Therefore, when Jesus says here that ***“Everyone will be salted by fire”*** He means that everyone will be required to come into the presence of God. For those who are not in Christ, it will be a consuming fire, the fire of hell, the fire of the unending presence of the wrath of God.

But **for us**, those who ***“have been baptized into Christ”***, who by faith receive the forgiveness of sins earned by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross – we live in the gracious, loving presence of God. On our own, we should be afraid of that fire! But the wrath of God against our sin was already poured out upon Jesus. Therefore, in Christ, the presence of God is now for us a Fatherly presence, a loving and encouraging presence, a forgiving presence.

We are living in that presence right now – that is not something that will only happen in the future. He comes to us now, really and truly, in the simple means of water, Word, and bread and wine so that we will not fear His presence because of our sin, but gladly ***“draw near to Him”*** to receive His gifts for us – His forgiveness and His Spirit. It is really a sign of His gentleness and mercy that He comes to us so simply. He comes to us gently, quietly, almost insignificantly, to salt us with His gracious, forgiving presence. As He does, He fulfills the words that Moses spoke at the end of our Old Testament Lesson, when Moses said: ***“Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit on them!”*** The Lord has given His Spirit to us. We now speak His Word as we speak of Him to the world in our words and deed. As He continues to salt us with His grace, His forgiveness, and His love, so we salt the world, as we live as His children and freely give to others what He has freely given to us.



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That is why we don't carry out these words of Jesus in the Holy Gospel. That is why we don't cut off our hands and feet and pluck out our eyes – because Jesus doesn't want us to offer them in payment for sin, He has already done that! We now have the high privilege and opportunity to offer them to Him, in His service, so that through us He may continue to salt the world. That through us He may continue to come into the lives of those who do not yet know Him. So that through us, His will and His work will be done.

In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.