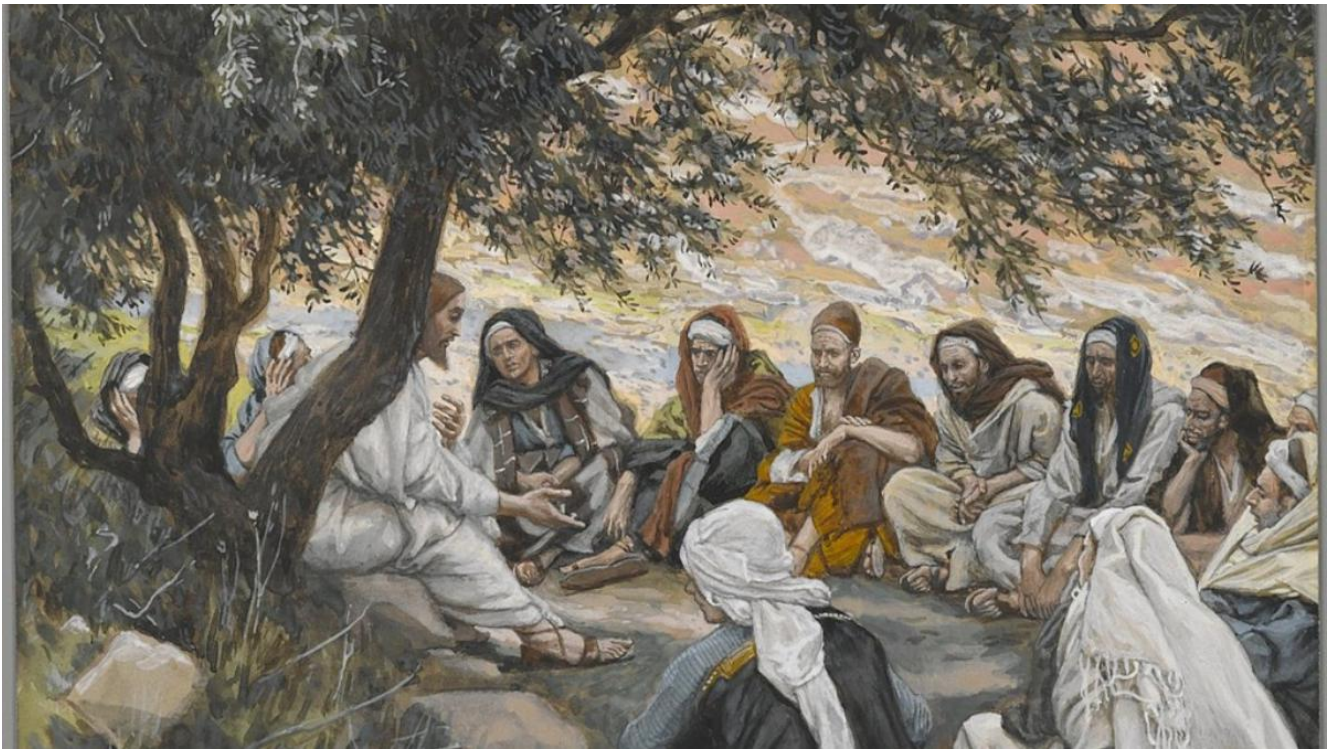


## In My Name

<sup>38</sup> John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.” <sup>39</sup> Jesus replied, “Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. <sup>40</sup> For whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup> Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward. <sup>42</sup> “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe (in me) to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. <sup>43</sup> If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. <sup>44</sup> .... <sup>45</sup> And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna... <sup>46</sup> ... <sup>47</sup> And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, <sup>48</sup> where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ (Mark 9:38–48)



*The Exhortation to the Apostles | James Tissot | Brooklyn Museum | US-PD*

## Least and Greatest in the Kingdom

As noted regarding the gospel last Sunday, the time of miracles, healings, and casting out demons seems to have passed. Moving forward, Mark's gospel continues to primarily focus on the teaching and preparation of the disciples for the coming times when they will be without Jesus in his familiar presence. In our passage it seems clear that Jesus is pointing out some of the problems that the apostolic community will face – and many of them can be understood as problems of the human condition. The concerns of this passage are: (1) ambition among themselves (vv. 33–37); (2) envy and intolerance of others (vv. 38–41); and (3) scandalizing others (vv. 42–48).

From last week, it is good to remember that Jesus told the Twelve: “Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.” (Mark 9:37) The radicalness of this simple verse can be lost on us because in our time we have a

different view of children. We hold children to be innocent and precious. This does not seem to have been the view of the 1st century. In ancient culture, children had no status. They were subject to the authority of their fathers, viewed as little more than property. Perkins [p. 637] writes:

“... the child in antiquity was a non-person...Children should have been with the women, not hanging around the teacher and his students (cf. 10:13-16). To say that those who receive Jesus receive God does not constitute a problem. A person’s emissary was commonly understood to be like the one who sent him. But to insist that receiving a child might have some value for male disciples is almost inconceivable.”

Perkins is pointing out that Jesus is telling the disciples that while there are times they will indeed be Jesus’ emissaries, but this is not the problem at hand. The problem is that the Twelve cannot conceive of welcoming the least important people in society, those ranked lowest in human convention. Yet Jesus is saying, “you’ll need to work your way down to the most marginal and lowest (by human convention) in order to find me. I am last of all.” The Kingdom of God involves giving status to those who have none. The disciples are not to be like children, but to be like Jesus who embraces the child, the one thought to be least of all in human convention.

### **Speaking on behalf of God**

One key phrase that has importance for this Sunday’s gospel is: “*in my name.*” It doesn’t take much to assert that “*the Word of God came to me...*” It was a problem in the Old Testament where several individuals claimed to be prophets or were regarded as prophets by others, but they were not truly commissioned by God. These false prophets often spoke messages that were contrary to God’s will or led people astray. Here are a few examples:

- Hananiah (Jeremiah 28): Hananiah was a prophet during the time of Jeremiah who falsely proclaimed that God would break the yoke of Babylon and return the exiles to Judah within two years. Jeremiah confronted Hananiah, stating that his message was not from God. Hananiah’s prophecy was false, and he died shortly afterward as a sign of his falsehood.
- Zedekiah (1 Kings 22): Zedekiah, the son of Chenaanah, was one of the false prophets who encouraged King Ahab to go to war against Ramoth-gilead, claiming victory in the Lord’s name. However, Micaiah, a true prophet of God, warned that Ahab would be defeated and die in battle, which ultimately happened, proving the false prophets wrong.
- Shemaiah the Nehelamite (Jeremiah 29:24-32): Shemaiah was another false prophet who opposed Jeremiah. He sent letters to the priests in Jerusalem, urging them to punish Jeremiah for his prophecies. God, through Jeremiah, condemned Shemaiah for causing the people to trust in a lie, declaring that Shemaiah and his descendants would not survive.

But what about prophets that people think were not “authorized”? In Numbers 11 when the Lord assigned 70 elders to assist Moses in leadership and administration of the people, we read:

*The LORD then came down in the cloud and spoke to him. Taking some of the spirit that was on Moses, he bestowed it on the seventy elders; and as the spirit came to rest on them, they prophesied\* but did not continue. Now two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, had remained in the camp, yet the spirit came to rest on them also. They too had been on the list, but had not gone out to the tent; and so they prophesied in the camp. So, when a young man ran and reported to Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp,” Joshua, son of Nun, who from his youth had been Moses’ aide, said, “My lord, Moses, stop them.” But*

*Moses answered him, "Are you jealous for my sake? If only all the people of the LORD were prophets! If only the LORD would bestow his spirit on them!" (Nb 11:25-29)*

## In My Name

The expression "in my name" in the New Testament carries significant theological weight, often indicating the authority, power, or presence of Jesus in various contexts.

- **Prayer and Petition:** Jesus instructs His disciples to pray "in my name," signifying that their requests are made with His authority and in alignment with His will (e.g., John 14:13-14). Prayers made in Jesus' name are understood to be powerful and effective because they invoke His authority and character.
- **Acts of Service and Miracles:** The expression is also used in relation to performing miracles or acts of kindness, indicating that these deeds are done by His power and under His commission (e.g., Mark 9:39, Luke 9:49). This underscores that the works of believers are done not by their own power but by Christ's.
- **Salvation and Identity:** Being "in my name" can also refer to the identity and salvation believers have in Christ. For instance, baptism is performed in the name of Jesus, signifying a new identity in Him and a participation in His death and resurrection (e.g., Acts 2:38).
- **Gathering of Believers:** Jesus promises His presence wherever two or three are gathered "in my name" (Matthew 18:20). This emphasizes the communal aspect of Christian faith, where Jesus is spiritually present among His followers.

Use of the "name of Jesus" played an important role in the early church as seen when Peter heals the man at the "Beautiful Gate" of the Jerusalem Temple (Acts 3:6, 16). When the Apostles are arraigned before the Sanhedrin, they are asked by the authorities: "*By what power or by what name have you done this?*" (Acts 4:7) The apostles' response is clear: "*it was in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.*" (Acts 4:10). Even today, during the Sacrament of Healing (Anointing) as part of the rite, the priest speaks: "*Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord.*" (James 5:14)

"In Jesus' name" seems to indicate the motivation by which one does something -- welcoming a child, casting out demons, doing mighty deeds. Bearing the name of Christ and acting in Christ's name seems to indicate belonging to Christ or acting as a representative of Christ or perhaps even, being Christ's presence. But as Stoffregen notes, Mk 13:6 states: "Many will come **in my name** saying, 'I am he!' and they will deceive many." How do we know if those who act **in Christ's name** really belong to Christ or are leading us astray? One way that the early church tried to assure the people that their ordained leaders were truly acting "in Christ's name" was that all pastors had to be ordained, and thus certified to be orthodox by bishops; and all new bishops needed at least three older bishops to certify that the new ones were orthodox in their beliefs and actions.

The word "name" occurs frequently in chapter 9:

- Whoever welcomes one such child **in my name**.. (v. 37)
- ...someone driving out demons **in your name**... (v. 38)
- ...no one who performs a mighty deed **in my name**... (v. 39)

- ...whoever gives you a cup of water to because you belong to Christ... [the literal translation of this verse is “because you bear the **name** of Christ.”] (v. 41)

The phrase, “in the name...” denotes the source of power, but it also will reveal the sense of who is “inside” and who is “outside.” In last Sunday’s gospel, Jesus pulls a child “inside” and bids the Twelve to welcome and include the child. In this Sunday’s gospel we will see how well the lesson was received.

### Outsiders

<sup>38</sup> John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.” <sup>39</sup> Jesus replied, “Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. <sup>40</sup> For whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup> Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.

One should not miss the irony in this passage. The disciples were attempting to prevent another from doing what they had just failed to do: “I asked your disciples to drive it out, but they were unable to do so.” (9:18).

Mark continues to narrate the on-going saga of the Twelve and their presumptions about their privileged position close to Jesus. Now another prominent disciple, John (like Peter in 8:32) speaks for the group: “we saw...we tried...not follow us.” What seemingly had disturbed the group was the exercise of Jesus’ name and power by someone the Apostles viewed as an outsider. The implied question seems to be: “He is not one of the invited. He hasn’t traveled with us. Who commissioned him, and besides... he didn’t listen to us when we tried to get him to stop.” One should hear the echo of the story of Moses, the 70 elders, and the two non-elders who received the prophetic spirit. John and the others of the Twelve fail to grasp the irony: they are the “insiders” yet they were unable to cast out a demon earlier (vv.14-18). And now an “outsider” was successful in the same endeavor. Is this another mark of their own ambition, a case of us-versus-them (“he does follow us” – of whom are they speaking? Themselves or Jesus?), or, more deeply, a significant lack of understanding about the mission and the work of God?

The unnamed outsider clearly understood whom he was following. He did not try to oust the demon in the “name of the Twelve,” but in the name of Jesus. We should note that others try to invoke Jesus’ name for exorcism to no avail (Act 19:13-16; Mt 7:21-23). Their failures offer a point of clarity. The unnamed man likely held a trust in the person of Jesus and obedience to the mission of the Kingdom. In this way our unnamed man is a true witness to the will of God working in the world.

Mark shows in this way that even the most privileged of the disciples failed to understand what the predicted Passion signifies for their life and mission. The use of the first person plural (“we saw ... we forbade him ... not following us”) indicates that John was speaking for all of the disciples. Is this an echo of the scribes (3:22) who assailed Jesus as being himself possessed by a demon because he was outside the group of recognized religious leaders and “thus” must be casting out demons by means most nefarious? The unnamed, outsider exorcist is unlike the scribes in that there is no indication that he spoke against Jesus. This is perhaps what leads to v.40: “For whoever is not against us is for us.” As Perkins [639] notes: “The final saying (v. 41) reminds the disciples of the conditions of their mission. They are to depend on those among whom they work. Therefore, they must trust others to provide the basic necessities of life. Such outsiders will also receive a reward. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus seeks to draw the boundaries between those who are “with Jesus” to include as many people as possible. He came for sinners, not for the righteous.”

## Causes of Sin

<sup>42</sup> “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe (in me) to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. <sup>43</sup> If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. <sup>44</sup> .... <sup>45</sup> And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna... <sup>46</sup> ... <sup>47</sup> And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, <sup>48</sup> where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ (Mark 9:42–48)

In seminary exegesis courses one is taught to look for details that indicate a change of scene, location, or other markers to indicate the boundaries of a particular pericope (a technical word used in exegesis meaning “narrative” – and a word that auto-correction keeps wanting to change to “periscope,” which given my history serving on nuclear submarines is kinda’ interesting.). There are no such markers in the text. It is a safe bet to assume Jesus is still in Capernaum, surrounded by the Twelve, with a child in their midst (9:33-37). The expression “*little ones*” may well also include those given a cup of water because they bear the name of Jesus (v.41).

Some scholars note that these are likely a series of independent sayings about sin that are inserted here. That might well be true, but the question still lingers, “Why were they dropped in here?” I would offer that there is an implied return to the idea of what it means to serve: “*If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.*” Christian service always has a point of pointing to Christ as the foundation of all service. What could be of greater disservice than to point another towards sin? The opening saying is clear as it sharply denounces such behavior and its resulting consequences. The underlying expression for “*to sin*” is more literally, “to cause to stumble” or “to scandalize” (*skandalizo*). This might point to more-than-simple sin in its varieties of kinds, but more pointedly to a loss of faith. This loss of faith is the sense of *skandalizo*’s use in 4:17 and 14:27, 29. It is this latter understanding that might be better suited to the consequences. If loss of faith implies loss of the eternal reward of the Kingdom, then the Christian disciple, who is at root of this loss due to their service, suffers the same fate.

Because of the expression “*one of these little ones*” we easily think of the child references from last Sunday’s gospel (vv.33-37), but what about the unnamed exorcist “*who believe[s]?*” How did he or she respond to the disciples trying to stop them from ministering in the name of Jesus? Were the words scandalizing? Were the words used in that attempt as severe as the ones Jesus now uses as he teaches the Twelve? Just as Peter rebuked Jesus and received a direct and pointed reply, so too John and the disciples in this scene.

The punishment by drowning while being weighed down might have been known to the disciples. Acts 5:37 notes the insurrection of the early Zealot leader, Judas the Galilean. The Roman historian Suetonius and the Jewish historian Josephus, both report Judas and his follower’s execution by such downing. But what follows v.42 moves from history to hyperbole.

Among Christians that might argue how to interpret Scripture, one would be hard pressed to find a group that would take vv.43-48 as a literal command of God. But I would offer that all understand the underlying message: each man and woman is a concrete moral agent who is responsible for their actions and the consequences of those actions. This is the realism expressed in this very Semitic thought. The radical demand that the hand or foot should be amputated or the eye plucked out, gruesome as those demands are, point to the intrinsic differences between physical life and the absolute value of imperishable life given by God alone. Jesus calls for the renunciation of possessions and

family (Mark 10), as well as life itself (8:34) if these things stand in the way of following Jesus. In this same way, Jesus calls for the complete renunciation of a sinful life and activity. These expressions are not a call for radical, mutilating actions, but the continued call for sacrifice to set aside those things that keep you from God. This is emphasized as Jesus moves into the personal: “*If your hand...*” and “*If your foot...*” It is a direct plea and teaching for his disciples.

“These sayings challenge us to examine the quality of our discipleship. Is following Christ at the core of our being, something too precious to be surrendered lightly? Or is our Christianity merely a matter of taste and convenience, something we shelve at the slightest difficulty or inconvenience? Belief that is easily set aside cannot be the faith that Jesus calls for among his disciples.” (Perkins, 641)

### **Some Interesting Notes**

The end of the Sunday gospel reading makes several references to Gehenna beginning in v.43. *Gehenna* is derived from the Hebrew *ge-hinnom* = “Valley of Hinnom”. In that place some of the less-than-holy kings of Judah engaged in forbidden religious practices, including human sacrifice by fire (2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6; Jer. 7:31; 32:35). Jeremiah spoke of its judgment and destruction (Jer. 7:32; 19:6). King Josiah put an end to these practices by destroying and defiling the high place of the valley of Hinnom (2 Kings 23:10). Probably because of these associations with fiery destruction and judgment, the word “Gehenna” came to be used metaphorically during the intertestamental period as a designation for hell or eternal damnation. Perhaps more than a place (the place of the dead is usually called “Hades” in the NT); it represents a state of judgment and punishment.

In Mark 9:48, Jesus states that in Gehenna, the “*maggots never die and the fire never goes out.*” Judith 16:17 gives a Jewish view of judgment as endless conscious torment, since the condemned weep forever. See also Sir 7:17, where fire and worms await the dead. Some argue that Mark’s image is of a fire that burns endlessly, not of a body that burns endlessly. Judith does not read that way. This is also clear in the non-canonical books from the intertestamental period which do appear to teach annihilation (1 Enoch 27:2; 54:1–6; 90:26–27; 4 Ezra 7:36–44; see 4 Ezra 7:61)

You might have noticed that verse 44 and 46 are not included in the readings. It is not that the readings leave them out, but Mark 9:44 and 9:46 are part of a textual problem since many key manuscripts do not have them. The two verses read somewhat parallel v. 48. While their similarity might argue for them being original to Mark, the manuscript history (i.e., the verses not present in important copies) points to the more likely case that they were added by a later copyist. Mark 9:48 is a modified citation of Isaiah 66:24 - and Mark is not one to excessively use words.

### **A Final Thought: accepting others**

“Greatness in the kingdom” is an odd expression given we are *to walk humbly with God* (Micah 6:8) but then that is rather Jesus’ point in this Sunday’s gospel. We are all able to cite: “the first shall be last and the last shall be first,” but none of us really wants to be at the end of the line. One only needs to think of the boarding process for any airline. Before the “boarding group” numbers are called people are already crowding closer to the gate. A few years ago on a flight from DC to San Diego, when the attendant called for anyone who needed a “little extra time in boarding”, a very elegant, tanned, fit and handsome couple presented themselves offering that they were “retired.” They seemed a bit oblivious to nearby people in wheelchairs, on walkers, and a mom traveling with two small children and twin infants. Part of accepting others is to first notice them.

The theologian Karl Barth describes Jesus’ radical insistence on the acceptance of others - and putting them first - as the foundation of Christian ethics. He wrote: “To think of every human being , even the oddest, most villainous or miserable as one to whom Jesus Christ is a Brother and God is Father, and



we have to deal with him on this assumption. It is a challenge for volunteers at soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and other service organizations - not the first time, but perhaps after several sessions. The challenge is when the initial enthusiasm has worn off and reality that the people you are serving can be quite difficult sometimes - then comes the real challenge to treat them with dignity. And perhaps the first sign is that you stop listening to the one you are called to serve and simply serve them with little acknowledgment of them.

A few years ago, Thomas Friedman of the New York Times offered insight about such moments:

Humiliation, in my view, is the most underestimated force in politics and international relations. The poverty of dignity explains so much more behavior than the poverty of money. People will absorb hardship, hunger and pain. They will be grateful for jobs, cars and benefits. But if you make people feel humiliated, they will respond with a ferocity unlike any other emotion, or just refuse to lift a finger for you. As Nelson Mandela once observed, 'There is nobody more dangerous than one who has been humiliated.'

By contrast, if you show people respect, if you affirm their dignity, it is amazing what they will let you say to them or ask of them. Sometimes it just takes listening to them, but deep listening — not just waiting for them to stop talking. Because listening is the ultimate sign of respect. What you say when you listen speaks more than any words.

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