

The Gospel of Mark, Teacher's Guide

Week 13: Greatness in the Kingdom of God

Mark 9:30–50

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Mark 9:30–50 is one of the most demanding ethical and formational sections of the Gospel. It binds together the second passion prediction, the disciples' embarrassing argument about greatness, Jesus' stunning answer about being last of all and servant of all, His blessing of a child as the very form of welcoming Christ in the world, His rebuke of sectarian instincts in His own disciples, and His most severe warnings about causing little ones to stumble and harboring sin in our own lives. Doctrinally, the lesson must address several large themes. The cross as the model for greatness in Christ's kingdom. The genuine humility and self-emptying that mark His disciples. The dignity of the "least" and the unity between receiving Jesus and receiving them. The unity of disciples beyond tribal circles, while still holding firmly to the New Testament pattern. And the eternal seriousness of sin, the reality of final judgment in 'Gehenna,' and the urgency of decisive action against sin in our own lives and in our influence on others.

At the same time, this lesson is profoundly formational. Most of the disciples in front of you are carrying at least one private scoreboard. They have a quiet measure of their own value (income, achievement, parenting, ministry, intelligence, position, appearance) and a steady comparison going with someone else who outpaces them or whom they outpace. The argument on the road is still happening in the church. The lesson must help students name their actual scoreboard, see how Christ has come to dismantle it, and learn what last-of-all greatness looks like in their specific lives.

Finally, do not soften Jesus' warnings in verses 42–48. He uses the strongest language in the Gospel about both the eternal danger of leading others into sin and the eternal danger of nursing sin in our own lives. The teacher should handle these verses carefully but not avoid them. They are addressed to disciples. Hell ('Gehenna') is real. Final judgment is real. The cost of unrepented sin is real. The decisive action Jesus calls for (cut it off, pluck it out, treat sin with the seriousness it deserves) is the call of the Spirit through the Word to every believer. The lesson should land with both the comfort of being welcomed by Christ at His level of greatness and the sober reality of His call to walk with Him faithfully to the end.

Question 1

Student Question:

For the second time Jesus tells the disciples plainly, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise" (9:31). What does Mark tell us about how the disciples received this teaching (9:32), and what

does it reveal about the difference between hearing Christ's words and actually understanding them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the second of three passion predictions in Mark (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34). Each one becomes more explicit. The first said the Son of Man would suffer and be killed. The second adds that He would be “delivered into the hands of men”, using a verb that anticipates the betrayal. The third will name the actors (chief priests, scribes, Gentiles), the actions (condemn, mock, spit, flog, kill), and the timing (third day). Christ is preparing His disciples step by step for what is coming.

Mark records that the disciples “did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him” (9:32). This is a striking sentence. They were close enough to ask. They had been on the boat with Him. They had walked with Him on the mountain. They had heard Him say the same thing six days before. But they were afraid. Why? Probably because they suspected that understanding would require them to face what they did not want to face. The cross frightened them. So they let the moment pass.

Hearing Christ's words and understanding them are not the same thing. We can carry sentences from Scripture in our minds without ever letting them land in our lives. Jesus said, “I am going to die.” The disciples heard the words. They did not allow themselves to understand them. Many believers do the same with hard teachings today. The words about repentance, about generosity, about purity, about forgiveness, about the cost of following, are sitting on the shelf, half-heard but not received.

Help students see that real discipleship requires the willingness to ask. To ask the hard question. To press for the meaning. To let the answer come, even if the answer rearranges our lives. Faith is not the avoidance of hard truths. Faith is the willingness to receive them honestly and to walk with Christ into them.

This question also sets up the rest of the chapter. The disciples did not understand the cross, and so they immediately fell into an argument about who was greatest. We always misunderstand greatness when we have not understood the cross. The two are connected. Christ's death is the only school in which His kind of greatness can be learned.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The three passion predictions in Mark as the spine of the second half of the Gospel (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34)
- The cross as central to the gospel from Jesus's own lips, not only from later theology
- The difference between hearing Christ's words and actually understanding them (Mark 4:24; Hebrews 5:11–14)
- Fear and avoidance as enemies of honest discipleship

- The willingness to ask and to be taught as a mark of growing faith (James 1:5)
- Understanding of the cross as the foundation for understanding the Christian life

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Mark tell us that the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus what He meant?
- Where in your own life are hard teachings of Scripture sitting half-heard?
- How does understanding the cross reshape the way we hear everything else Jesus says?

Question 2

Student Question:

The disciples did not understand the prediction, but they were afraid to ask Jesus what He meant (9:32). Where in your own walk are there teachings of Christ or passages of Scripture that you have quietly avoided asking about because you suspect they will require something costly of you, and what would it take to bring those questions honestly into the light?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Most disciples have a quiet list of teachings they have been avoiding. The passages they read past quickly. The questions they have never asked an elder or a brother or sister. The doctrines they have not allowed themselves to consider too long. Sometimes these are theological questions about which the Bible is more clear than we let it be. Sometimes they are practical questions about money, about sexual purity, about reconciliation with someone, about the priorities of our daily life.

The fear behind this avoidance is the same fear Mark records in the Twelve. We are afraid that if we ask, we will get an answer. And we are afraid that the answer will require something we are not ready to give. So we keep the conversation at a comfortable surface and stay just close enough to Christ to remain disciples without being changed by Him in the costly places.

The corrective is honesty. Bring the question out into the open. Ask an elder. Ask a class. Open the Bible to the passage you have been avoiding and read it slowly with prayer. Talk to your spouse about the area you have not been willing to talk about. Sit with a trusted friend who will not flinch. Christ has never punished anyone for asking honestly. He has often graciously dealt with disciples who finally were willing to bring the question out.

Help students identify one specific question they have been avoiding. It may be a theological question (about giving, about the Holy Spirit, about elders, about the Lord's Supper, about marriage and divorce, about end-time things, about a personal struggle). It may be a practical question (about a relationship that needs honesty, about a financial pattern, about a habit they have not been willing to name). The lesson is one of the best places to surface such a question and to commit to bringing it into the light this week.

And help them see that bringing it into the light is not a sign of failure. It is a sign of growth. The Twelve who were afraid to ask in Mark 9 would, after Pentecost, become the men who asked the right questions and gave the right answers to the church. Honesty is the doorway through which Christ leads His people into deeper obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest engagement with Scripture as essential to faithful discipleship (Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 2:15)
- The role of elders, brothers, and sisters in helping us bring hard questions into the light (1 Timothy 5:17; Galatians 6:1–2)
- The danger of avoidance: convictions left unfaced eventually shape us in the wrong direction
- The patience of Christ with disciples who finally come asking honestly (Mark 9:33–37; John 14:1–11)
- Asking, seeking, and knocking as the steady posture of growing disciples (Matthew 7:7–8)

Discussion Prompts

- What teaching or passage have you been quietly avoiding?
- What would it look like to bring it honestly into the light this week?
- Who could help you ask the question well?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus answers the disciples' argument about greatness with one of His most striking sayings: "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35). Connecting this with Philippians 2:5–11, Matthew 20:25–28, and John 13:1–17, what is Christ teaching about greatness in His kingdom, and how does this reorder our understanding of what "success" looks like in the Christian life and in the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Mark 9:35 contains one of the most countercultural sentences in the Gospel. "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." This is not a rhetorical flourish. It is the actual logic of Christ's kingdom. Greatness is measured by service. Position is measured by humility. The deepest kind of leadership is the kind that takes the lowest place.

Philippians 2 fills out the doctrine. Christ Himself is the model. "Though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore

God has highly exalted him” (Philippians 2:6–9). The path to greatness in the kingdom of God is the path Christ took. Down before up. Servant before Lord. Cross before crown.

Matthew 20 records Jesus making the same point. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25–28). The Gentile pattern is upward. The kingdom pattern is downward.

John 13 shows this in action. The Lord of glory takes a towel, kneels, and washes the disciples’ feet. “I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:15). The footwashing is not optional symbolism. It is the picture of what every Christian is called to be: a foot-washer in the lives of others, for the sake of Christ.

For the church, this teaching is essential. Elders are called to shepherd by example, not by domineering (1 Peter 5:1–3). Deacons are called to serve. Members are called to outdo one another in showing honor (Romans 12:10). Husbands are called to give themselves up for their wives as Christ for the church (Ephesians 5:25). Parents are called to lay down their lives for their children. Brothers and sisters are called to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2). At every level, the shape of life in Christ’s church is service.

This reorders our understanding of success in the Christian life. Success is not measured by visibility, position, applause, or accumulation. It is measured by faithful service in the hidden places. The widow with her two small coins (Mark 12:41–44) is closer to greatness than the Pharisees with their long robes. The unnoticed Christian who quietly cared for an aging neighbor for a decade is closer to the heart of Christ than the famous one who built a brand. The first will be last and the last will be first in ways most of us are not currently calibrated to recognize.

For students, this is meant to land as both reorientation and freedom. Reorientation, because most of us have been chasing the wrong kind of greatness. Freedom, because the kind of greatness Jesus offers is available to every disciple in every season of life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as the model of true greatness through self-emptying servanthood (Philippians 2:5–11)
- Service as the shape of life in Christ’s kingdom (Matthew 20:25–28; John 13:1–17)
- Elders as shepherds who lead by example, not domineering (1 Peter 5:1–3)
- The dignity of unseen, faithful service in the church and home (1 Corinthians 12:22–26)
- The kingdom’s reversal of worldly value systems (Luke 6:20–26; James 2:1–9)
- Visibility and position as poor measures of spiritual greatness

Discussion Prompts

- How does Christ Himself model the greatness He calls us to?
- Where in our church life is this servant-greatness most visible, and where is it most lacking?
- How does this teaching reshape what “success” should look like in your own walk?

Question 4

Student Question:

Almost every adult carries a private scoreboard, comparing themselves to others in some category (income, achievement, appearance, ministry, parenting, marriage, knowledge, popularity). What does your scoreboard usually measure, and what would it actually look like, this week, to take the lowest position rather than the highest one in that area?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Most adults carry a private scoreboard. We may not say it. We may not even consciously acknowledge it. But somewhere in our minds we are measuring ourselves against someone else in some category. Income. Career achievement. Parenting outcomes. Marriage. Body. House. Education. Influence. Ministry. Followers. Likes. We rarely say “I am better than that person” out loud. But we feel it. And we feel its underside, the sting of falling behind in our chosen comparison.

The scoreboard is one of the great enemies of life in Christ’s kingdom. It keeps us measuring the wrong things. It distracts us from the people right in front of us. It feeds either pride (when we are winning) or resentment (when we are losing). It builds tribes and walls. It robs us of the joy Christ intends in service.

Help students identify their actual scoreboard. Be honest. Not the scoreboard you wish you had. The scoreboard you actually use when you scroll social media, when you walk into a room, when you compare yourself to a classmate or coworker. Each person’s board is slightly different.

Then ask the harder question. What would it look like, this week, to take the lowest position in that area instead of competing for the highest? If the board is income, perhaps it looks like generosity. If the board is reputation, perhaps it looks like a confession. If the board is parenting, perhaps it looks like a more honest conversation with one of your children, in which they see your humility. If the board is ministry, perhaps it looks like serving in a hidden place rather than a visible one. If the board is influence, perhaps it looks like deliberately giving away credit.

The point is concrete obedience this week. Christ’s teaching is not abstract. He sat the disciples down, named their actual argument, and called them to a specific kind of life. The same word lands on us. Take the lowest position. Serve the person in front of you. Stop comparing. Watch what He does in you.

There is also a sweet release in this kind of obedience. When the scoreboard is laid down, the noise quiets. We can serve without bookkeeping. We can rejoice in the gifts and good of others

without diminishment. We can be at peace, both with ourselves and with the people we used to be quietly fighting in our heads.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Comparison as a thief of joy and a corruption of love (2 Corinthians 10:12; Galatians 5:26)
- The freedom of life lived under God's eye rather than the eye of comparison (Galatians 1:10; Colossians 3:23–24)
- Generosity, hidden service, and honest confession as concrete forms of taking the lowest place
- The Spirit's fruit (especially love, joy, peace, patience, kindness) as evidence that the scoreboard has been put down (Galatians 5:22–23)
- The danger of measuring ourselves by visible standards rather than by Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What does your private scoreboard typically measure?
- What would taking the lowest position look like in that area this week?
- How does life without the scoreboard look different from life with it?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus takes a child in His arms and says, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me" (9:36–37). What is Christ teaching about how He is welcomed in the world, the high value of receiving the "least", and the unity of receiving Jesus and receiving the Father in the small, hidden acts of love we offer to those the world overlooks (compare Matthew 25:31–46; James 1:27)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus answers the disciples' argument by doing something startling. He takes a child, sets the child in the middle of the room, takes the child in His arms, and says, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me" (9:36–37). Children in the first century were loved but not socially significant. They did not contribute economically. They did not vote in synagogue affairs. They had no platform. They were the easiest to overlook.

Jesus binds Himself to such a child. To receive a child in His name is to receive Him. To receive Him is to receive the Father. The chain of welcome runs through the small and overlooked. Whoever cannot welcome a child, cannot really welcome Christ, no matter how loud their confession.

This teaching is consistent throughout the New Testament. Matthew 25:31–46 records the King receiving His own based on how they treated the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). James writes, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27). The pattern is clear. The hidden, unspectacular act of welcome and care for those the world overlooks is the very form in which we receive Christ Himself.

For students, this is meant to relocate the center of the Christian life. We tend to imagine our walk with Jesus is mainly in the moments of visible spiritual activity (worship, Bible study, prayer, service projects). All of these are good. But Mark 9 tells us that Jesus is met just as decisively in the small, daily welcomes we offer to those the world considers small. The aging mother in the next room. The needy child in our care. The struggling neighbor across the street. The forgotten member of the congregation. The new family at worship that no one has talked to. The lonely classmate. The difficult coworker. The lost relative.

There is also a quiet warning here. A Christian who is convinced of their love for Jesus but who routinely overlooks the small ones does not yet see what Mark 9 is saying. The chain runs through them. We meet Christ in them, or we do not meet Him at all.

Help students examine their lives for the “small ones” they have been overlooking. Almost always there will be one or two specific people whom the Lord is pressing on the conscience. The question is whether the student is willing to receive that person “in His name,” which means with the intentionality, attention, dignity, and gospel-shaped love Christ Himself would extend.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ identifying Himself with the “least of these” (Matthew 25:31–46)
- The unity of receiving Christ and receiving those whom He cares for (James 1:27; Hebrews 13:1–3)
- The dignity of every image-bearer, especially the overlooked (Genesis 1:26–27)
- Hospitality as a core Christian virtue (Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9)
- Caring for children, widows, and others without natural advocates as central to pure religion (James 1:27; Psalm 68:5)
- The danger of professed love for Christ that bypasses His people

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus tie Himself so closely to the welcome of a child?
- How does Matthew 25:31–46 fit with Mark 9:36–37?
- Who in your life are the “small ones” you have been quietly overlooking?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus pictures receiving a small child as the way we receive Him in the world. Who is the “small one” the Lord is asking you to receive in His name this season, what about that person makes them easy to overlook or postpone, and what specific act of welcome would change that this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is meant to be specific. Almost every student in the room has someone the Lord is pressing on their heart. The aging parent in the rest home whose visits have thinned out. The grandchild in their care who needs more than a screen. The needy member at church no one has invited to dinner. The new neighbor whose family is struggling. The lonely widow whose name has slipped from the prayer list. The difficult brother or sister whose presence has been easier to avoid than to engage. The small one in our path.

What makes that person easy to overlook? Usually one of a small list of reasons. We are busy. We are tired. The relationship is hard. The person does not give us much in return. The cost in time, money, or emotional energy is real. The change of plans is inconvenient. The person reminds us of something we would rather not face. Whatever the reason, the result is the same. The small one slips out of our attention while our visible Christian life keeps running.

What does actually receiving them in His name look like? It is rarely dramatic. It looks like a phone call. A visit. A meal taken to a doorstep. A note written and sent. An hour spent listening. A repeated, faithful showing up. The willingness to be inconvenienced. The slow, patient presence that does not depend on the recipient being grateful, charming, or in any way impressive. The kind of love Christ has shown us, extended to one more person in His name.

Help students identify one specific person and one specific act of welcome this week. The phone call to be made. The meal to be delivered. The visit to be scheduled. The note to be written. The hour to be set aside. Then, if possible, ask one other person from the class to walk with them in that obedience for accountability and prayer.

This is the soil in which Christ-shaped greatness grows. Quiet welcome of the small in His name. The disciple who learns this learns to see Christ in places no scoreboard would ever count.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Concrete acts of love and welcome as the daily form of Christian discipleship (1 John 3:16–18; James 2:14–17)
- Hospitality, visitation, and quiet care as means by which we receive Christ (Hebrews 13:1–3; James 1:27)
- The deliberate refusal to overlook the small ones in our path (Galatians 2:10; Acts 6:1–7)
- The Spirit’s fruit producing patient, faithful love (Galatians 5:22; 1 Corinthians 13:4–7)

- Christian community as a network of mutual care, not autonomous individuals (Romans 12:9–13)

Discussion Prompts

- Who is the small one Christ is asking you to receive this week?
- What about that person makes them easy to overlook?
- What is the one specific act of welcome you can offer in His name?

Question 7

Student Question:

John reports that they tried to stop a man who was casting out demons in Jesus' name because he was not part of their group. Jesus tells them, "Do not stop him... for the one who is not against us is for us" (9:38–40). What is Christ teaching about the broader work of His name in the world, the danger of sectarian tribalism even among genuine disciples, and how we should rejoice in faithful work done by those outside our immediate circle while still holding firmly to the New Testament pattern?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John's report in verse 38 is honest. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Notice the final phrase. He was not following 'us.' The disciples have unconsciously made themselves the center of the kingdom. The standard is no longer whether the man is following Christ; the standard is whether he is one of their group.

Jesus corrects them firmly. "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. For the one who is not against us is for us" (9:39–40). The man was acting in Jesus' name. He was doing genuine kingdom work. He was not part of the inner circle of the Twelve. Jesus refuses to allow His disciples to police that boundary.

There is great care needed in applying this passage. Christ is not endorsing a vague "as long as they say they love Jesus, they are fine" ecumenism that ignores doctrinal truth and the New Testament pattern. He does not contradict elsewhere His own teaching that we should test the spirits (1 John 4:1), that there are wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15), that some teaching is poison (Galatians 1:6–9), and that the church is called to the apostolic pattern of doctrine, worship, and practice (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 11:1–2; 1 Timothy 4:16).

What Jesus is naming is the danger of confusing our group identity with Christ's identity. There is a long human history of disciples drawing tighter and tighter circles, sometimes around true things (the apostolic doctrine, the New Testament pattern) and sometimes around things that are merely ours (our preferences, our heritage, our personalities, our cultural style). Jesus rebukes the second. He never rebukes the first.

How can a believer hold both together? Several principles help. First, the standard is what the New Testament teaches, not what our group does. Second, faithful, biblically grounded work outside our immediate circle should be received with thanksgiving, not suspicion. A brother or sister in another congregation who is preaching the gospel, baptizing penitent believers into Christ, observing the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week, walking by the New Testament pattern, is to be rejoiced over, not opposed. Third, where genuine departures from the New Testament pattern exist, faithful believers must lovingly hold the line and not paper over real differences. Christ called His church to one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father (Ephesians 4:4–6). Unity in the gospel is essential. Tribal sectarianism is sin.

For students, this is meant to soften both extremes. The extreme of suspicion toward everyone outside our circle. And the extreme of indifference to the real differences that matter. The faithful Christian is glad-hearted toward every disciple who is genuinely following Christ on the New Testament terms, and clear-headed about where teaching or practice departs from that pattern.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The wider work of Christ's name in the world, not confined to any one group "following us"
- The danger of sectarianism, tribalism, and party spirit (1 Corinthians 1:10–17; 3:1–9)
- The unity of disciples grounded in Christ and the apostolic pattern, not in mere group loyalty (Ephesians 4:1–6)
- The proper care to test teaching and practice against Scripture (Acts 17:11; 1 John 4:1; Galatians 1:6–9)
- The New Testament pattern as the standard for the church's faith and practice
- Glad-hearted recognition of genuine kingdom work done by those outside our immediate circle
- Faithful love of brothers and sisters in Christ, even where there is room for further teaching

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between holding to the New Testament pattern and falling into tribalism?
- How does Jesus correct the disciples' "because they are not following us" attitude?
- How can we rejoice in faithful kingdom work outside our circle while still being faithful to the apostolic pattern?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where in your own heart or in the way you relate to other Christians do you see tribal, exclusive instincts that need to be repented of, and what is the difference between faithfully following the

New Testament pattern of the church and falling into the “because they are not following us” attitude Jesus rebuked?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Most students will be able to identify, with honesty, some places where their hearts have tipped toward sectarian instincts. The quiet assumption that our congregation is the only one walking faithfully. The reflexive suspicion of any Christian outside our exact heritage. The harshness in the way we speak of other believers. The unwillingness to learn anything from a brother or sister of another fellowship who happens to be following Christ well. The pleasure we take in being part of an in-group rather than in being part of Christ.

These instincts have to be confessed. They contradict the Lord’s command to love one another (John 13:34–35), the apostles’ commands to maintain the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3), and the Lord’s own prayer that His people would be one, that the world might believe (John 17:20–23). Sectarianism does not commend Christ. It actively obscures Him.

At the same time, there is a kind of unfaithful “unity” that bypasses the apostolic pattern. We are not free to baptize without believer’s faith, repentance, confession, and immersion into Christ (Acts 2:38; 8:36–38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27). We are not free to abandon the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). We are not free to redefine the church Christ built. We are not free to compromise the gospel itself (Galatians 1:6–9). Holding firmly to the New Testament pattern is not sectarianism. It is faithfulness.

Help students see how to hold both together. We can rejoice with thanksgiving in every place we see the gospel preached, sins repented of, Christ confessed, believers baptized into Him, and lives transformed. We can refuse the smugness and suspicion that say no faithful work happens outside our circle. We can love brothers and sisters genuinely. At the same time, we can hold firmly to the New Testament pattern as the standard for our faith and practice and lovingly call ourselves and others to walk according to it.

Encourage one specific act of repentance from any sectarian instinct this week. Speak well of another believer you usually criticize. Pray for a faithful work outside your congregation. Read a faithful brother or sister you have been quick to dismiss. Refuse the conversation that paints all other Christians with one suspicious brush. Hold the New Testament pattern with conviction and the believer next to you with love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Lord’s command to love one another (John 13:34–35; 1 John 3:11–18)
- The unity of the Spirit as a responsibility of every believer (Ephesians 4:1–6)
- The New Testament pattern as the binding standard for the church’s faith and practice (Acts 2:42; 2 Timothy 3:16–17)

- The plan of salvation as faith, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4)
- The weekly Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week as part of the apostolic pattern (Acts 20:7)
- Faithful, loving correction of error without sectarian pride (2 Timothy 2:24–26)
- Glad-hearted recognition of genuine kingdom work wherever it appears

Discussion Prompts

- Where in your heart have you noticed sectarian instincts that need to be repented of?
- What is the difference between faithful adherence to the New Testament pattern and prideful tribalism?
- How can you speak and pray this week in ways that resist both errors?

Question 9

Student Question:

In verses 42–48 Jesus uses some of the strongest language in the Gospel about both causing others to sin and harboring sin in our own lives. He speaks of a millstone and the sea (9:42), of cutting off a hand or foot, plucking out an eye (9:43–48), and of the unquenchable fire of “Gehenna” (9:43, 45, 47–48). What is Jesus teaching about the eternal seriousness of sin, the reality of final judgment, the urgency of decisive action against personal sin, and the great weight of how we influence those younger or weaker in the faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Mark 9:42–48 contains some of the strongest language in the Gospel. Jesus warns 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” (9:42). Then He turns the warning inward. “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, tear it out” (9:43, 45, 47). Each warning ends with the word ‘Gehenna,’ translated as “hell”: the unquenchable fire, where “their worm does not die” (9:48, quoting Isaiah 66:24).

The teacher should handle this passage with reverence and clarity. Christ Himself is the speaker. His warnings about hell are more frequent and more solemn than those of any other figure in the New Testament. Hell is real. Final judgment is real. The eternal consequences of unrepented sin are real. Christ tells His own disciples this not to terrify them into paralysis, but to wake them up to the seriousness of how they live and how they affect others.

The first part of the warning is about causing a “little one” who believes in Him to sin. The Greek word for “cause to sin” is the root of our word ‘scandalize’; it means to place a stumbling block. Jesus is solemnly warning about the eternal weight of how older, more visible, more influential

believers affect those younger or weaker in the faith. Parents leading their children. Older Christians influencing newer ones. Public believers shaping the watching world. Teachers leading students. Anyone with influence over those still finding their footing in Christ. To use that influence in a way that leads them into sin (by example, by teaching, by neglect, by abuse, by hypocrisy) is unspeakably serious. Christ says it would be better to be drowned in the sea than to bear that guilt at the judgment.

The second part is about our own sin. The “cut it off” language is meant to shock. Jesus is not literally commanding self-mutilation. He is teaching the urgency of decisive action against sin in our own lives. If a particular relationship, habit, possession, or pattern of life is dragging us into sin, we are to take radical action against it. Cut the source. Throw it out. Refuse to negotiate. Treat sin with the seriousness it deserves, because the eternal consequences are real.

The doctrine of ‘Gehenna’ comes from the Old Testament Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, a place historically associated with child sacrifice (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31) and later used as a refuse heap with continuously burning fires. Jesus uses it as a picture of the final, conscious, unending destiny of those who die outside of Christ. He speaks of it elsewhere as well (Matthew 5:22, 29–30; 10:28; 23:33). Scripture speaks of it as the “second death” (Revelation 20:14), the “eternal fire” prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41), and the place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30). It is real, conscious, eternal, and just.

For believers, the right response is not anxiety but awe and decisive action. Awe at the holiness and seriousness of God. Awe at the cost Christ paid to deliver us from this judgment. Decisive action in two directions. First, in our own lives, ruthless cooperation with the Spirit’s work to put sin to death (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5). Second, in our influence on others, careful attention to whether our example, our speech, our patterns, and our priorities are leading those who watch us toward Christ or away from Him.

This passage also assures us that there is no eternal danger left for those who are in Christ. The judgment Jesus warns of is the judgment from which He has died to deliver His people (John 5:24; Romans 8:1). The proper response of the believer is not constant fear of being lost but constant vigilance about walking faithfully in the Christ who has saved us, and constant care for the souls of others around us.

For students, the lesson should land soberly. Sin is serious. Influence is serious. Final judgment is real. The gospel response is real. The grace of Christ is real. We are called to walk with both eternal seriousness and gospel confidence, exactly as Jesus walked.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The eternal weight of causing little ones to sin (Mark 9:42; Matthew 18:6–7)
- The reality of hell (“Gehenna”) as final, conscious, eternal judgment (Mark 9:43, 45, 47–48; Matthew 25:41, 46; Revelation 20:14–15)

- The seriousness of personal sin and the urgency of decisive action against it (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5–10)
- The believer’s influence on others as a matter of eternal consequence (James 3:1; 1 Corinthians 8:9–13)
- The full sufficiency of Christ’s saving work for all who are in Him (Romans 8:1; John 5:24)
- The continuing call to walk faithfully and not drift back into hardness or sin (Hebrews 3:12–14; 10:26–31)
- The gospel hope of those who continue in faith, repentance, and obedience as the right context for receiving these warnings

Discussion Prompts

- How does Christ Himself speak about the reality of final judgment, and what does that mean for how Christians teach about it today?
- Where in your life right now is sin needing decisive action rather than continued negotiation?
- How does your influence on those younger or weaker in faith look in light of Mark 9:42?

Question 10

Student Question:

Jesus closes the section with, “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” (9:50). As you close this chapter, what specific “salt” do you need to recover in your own life (some lost distinctiveness, some lost flavor of holiness, some lost commitment to peace with others), and what step would put it back into your daily walk this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter ends with a strange and beautiful image. “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” (9:50). Salt in the ancient world was used to preserve, to flavor, and as a sign of covenant. Christians are called to have salt in themselves and to live at peace with one another. The lesson ends with the call to recover both.

Help students think about what ‘salt’ they have lost in their lives. Some have lost a particular distinctiveness as a Christian. They used to be visibly different; they have blended in. Some have lost a particular flavor of holiness. The disciplines that once gave their walk salt (the morning Word, the deliberate prayer life, the regular hospitality, the generous giving, the courage to speak about Christ) have thinned out. Some have lost the commitment to peace with others. They have allowed grudges, distance, or tension to settle in.

Then identify the step that would put salt back into the daily walk. Maybe it is a recovered practice. Maybe it is a hard conversation that has been delayed. Maybe it is a specific repentance from a pattern of speech or behavior. Maybe it is the deliberate cultivation of an attitude of peace in a relationship that has gone sour.

Tie the whole lesson together. The second passion prediction. The argument about greatness. The child set in the middle. The wider work of Christ's name. The sober warnings about causing little ones to stumble and harboring sin in ourselves. The closing call to be salty disciples at peace with one another. All of it is one chapter, one teaching, one road. The road of Christ-shaped greatness through hidden service, decisive repentance, and steady, salted peace.

Encourage students to leave the lesson with one concrete commitment. The salt to be recovered. The peace to be made. The small one to be welcomed. The repentance to be obeyed. The chapter is not finished until the road continues, in their lives, this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Christian as the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13)
- Sanctification as the preservation and cultivation of distinct Christian character
- Peace with one another as a fruit of the Spirit and a hallmark of Christ's church (Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 4:1–3; Romans 12:18)
- Daily practices of holiness, repentance, and service as the way salt is kept fresh
- The local congregation as the community within which Christian saltiness is lived out

Discussion Prompts

- What "salt" have you lost in your walk that needs to be recovered?
- What peace needs to be made before the salt can be restored?
- What one step this week will put the lesson into actual obedience?