

“What Kind of Sacrifice Will You Be?”
SERMON DRAFT
Mark 9:42-50
March 9, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to the Gospel of Mark, as Jesus instructs his disciples on what it means to follow him.

With that in mind, we turn now to Mark 9:42-50.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{9:42} “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.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, our souls long for your salvation,
and so we hope in your word.
We long for your promise,
and we long for your comfort.
As we come now to your word,
We ask that in your steadfast love you would give us life,
Strengthen and guide us
so that we can keep the testimonies that have come to us from your lips.
Grant this we ask, for Jesus’s sake. Amen.
[Psalm 119:81-84, 88]

Introduction

We have before us a fairly dramatic portion of Jesus's teaching. And one thing I want to suggest is that it might be even a bit more dramatic than it appears at first.

What I want to suggest is that the underlying assumption of Jesus's teaching here is that everyone – every single human being – will, in some way be consumed as a sacrificial offering. The only question for us is: What kind of sacrifice will we be?

We all will be consumed as sacrificial offerings. The question is whether we will be sacrificed to hell, resulting in eternal death, or sacrificed to God, resulting in eternal life.

That's what Jesus is saying to us here in our text.

Let's break that down a bit.

We Will All Be Consumed As Sacrifices

First, Jesus makes it clear here that we all will be consumed as sacrifices.

He communicates something like this in verse 49, where he says that "everyone will be salted with fire."

It's an odd sentence. But the word choice seems intended to evoke the concept of sacrifice, because "both fire and salt played indispensable roles" in the sacrificial system of Israel. [Edwards, 296]

Sacrifices were offered by fire – they were burnt and consumed by fire. And sacrifices for Israel were always to be offered with salt (Leviticus 2:13).

So Jesus's wording in verse 49 evokes the idea of sacrifice. And once we see it there, we begin to see the theme of sacrifice throughout the passage. As we'll see, every verse in this passage links in some way to the theme of sacrifice, and verse 49 makes it overt that everyone – every single person – will be salted with the sacrificial fire.

Everyone will serve as a sacrifice in some way – everyone will be sacrificially consumed ... whether they want to be or not.

And if we're honest ... most of us don't really like that idea. Most of us, as modern Western people, want an existence that's comfortable, independent, self-contained, and mostly for ourselves. Sure we want to serve a higher cause or help other people here or there ... but we don't really want to be consumed as a sacrificial offering. We may like big sacrifices in our movies or our favorite books or our sports storylines ... but we don't want to be consumed as sacrifices ourselves ... no thank you.

But Jesus says here that everyone will face the sacrificial fire ... we will all be consumed as sacrifices.

But he also tells us that those sacrifices can be very different from each other.

And so central to this text is a choice: Jesus is calling his followers to be one kind of sacrifice and not another. To get more at what he means, we need to dig down a bit further and see what options – what forms of sacrifice – Jesus is saying lie before us.

Which is what we'll do next.

So, to start, we're told that we all will be consumed as sacrifices. The question is: What kind of sacrifice will you be?

Either Sacrificed to Hell, Leading to Eternal Death

The first option – the first possibility he holds out, is that we may be sacrificed to hell, leading to eternal death.

Now, where do we see this?

Well, a helpful place to start is to look at the exact language used in our text.

As commentators as well as a footnote in the ESV translation point out, what the ESV has translated as “hell” is actually, in Greek “Gehenna.”

Now, the translation of “hell” is not misleading! By the second century BC Gehenna had come to be used by some to refer to the hell of the final judgment. [Edwards, 294; TDONT, 1.657]

And it's clear here that Jesus is speaking of hell as an eternal destination for those who reject God. He speaks of its eternal nature in verse 48, where he says that it is a place where the “worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” – in other words, the death and destruction there doesn't reach an end, it continues on forever. And by alluding to Isaiah 66:24 with that description, Jesus highlights that this is a place for those who ultimately reject Yahweh – the God of Israel. [Edwards, 293]

So Jesus is speaking about the Biblical concept of hell here.

But if we dig more deeply into Jesus's word choice, I think we get a deeper and richer picture of what Jesus has to say to us about hell.

So what is Gehenna?

Well, it's a geographical location on earth. It's a valley outside of Jerusalem. In Jesus's day it was a garbage dump. But it wasn't always a garbage dump. In Israel's history, and in the Bible, it was “notorious as a place given over to human sacrifice” [Horne, 140] – specifically child sacrifice.

And so when Jesus mentions Gehenna in verses 43, 45, and 47 – he would again be raising the theme sacrifice, but in a very different form than Israel's temple sacrifices. [And in a way that would naturally link with the theme of “little ones” that Jesus raised in verse 42 (and children, in verse 37).]

In Second Chronicles and the Book of Jeremiah [2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31; 32:35] “the Valley of the Son of Hinnom” or the “Hinnom Valley” which later came to be abbreviated to

“Gehenna,” is described as the site of human sacrifice in Israel ... a sacrifice made by fire to false gods. And then, in Second Kings, in order to stop such practices, King Josiah defiled the Hinnom Valley [2 Kings 23:10] and turned it into a garbage dump [Edwards, 294] ... which is what it was in Jesus’s day. Now, as a refuse dump, Gehenna was a place of perpetual decomposition and decay – a place “where the worm does not die” ... as well as a place that perpetually smoldered ... a place where “the fire is not quenched.” [Wright, 128]

It's this place that Jesus and others chose to look to, to describe eternal damnation.

And it's worth reflecting on that choice. Because there's depth here. Gehenna was not just an unpleasant place, or a grotesque place, or a place marked by fire. It was a place of human sacrifice, resulting in the refuse of perpetual decay and consumption. And Jesus says that as such, it's a picture of the final outcome of one way of living our lives.

It's safe to say that hell is one of the more unpopular Christian doctrines. But Tim Keller points out that hell is a necessary concept if evil is real and if the soul is eternal.

First of all, on some level, all people agree that there is evil in this world, and that it's wrong. If someone tries to do certain things to us, we object – we say “No, stop it – that's wrong, that's not right.” Beyond that, as we look out at the world around us, we all see things that distress us – that horrify us – that outrage us – things that we know are not the way they're supposed to be.

And most of us ... if we're honest ... we see troubling things in ourselves as well ... things we know are wrong, things we'd be embarrassed for other people to see.

We may not use the word, but we all believe in evil. And we see that evil can work on the large grand scale of the world, and also on the small scale of individual choices and human hearts.

So most people believe that evil is real.

And then, most people – Christian and secular alike – agree that such evil, and self-centeredness, and cruelty have very harmful consequences. Especially as it plays out in forms like exploitation and oppression, evil has clear and observable consequences.

So evil is real, and it has terrible consequences.

But then, third, Christians and many others also confess that the human soul is eternal. Human souls don't die.

But that means that if evil in a human soul is not checked, if it's not remedied, then the selfishness and evil residing in the human soul will continue to bear fruit, and to give birth to more and more terrible consequences ... forever. For eternity.

Think of it like this: As we so often observe in people, if their selfish or sinful tendencies are left unchecked and unremedied, then those tendencies will grow over time. The tendency to complaining, or to self-indulgence, or to bitterness is worse at 80 than it seemed, perhaps, at 50 ... or at 30.

Over the span of 10, or 20, or 80, or 90 years, unchecked sin grows and gets worse. It seems to consume more and more of the person. And we can see that in just the span of decades.

But what if Jesus is right. What if our souls don't die? What if they're eternal? What if they continue on, for hundreds, and then thousands, and then millions, and then billions of years? Many of us have seen what some selfish character flaws can grow into over the span of 80 years. What would those same tendencies look like with a thousand years of growth? Or a million years? [Keller, 80-81]

Well ... they'd look like hell.

C.S. Lewis has perhaps described this better than anyone else in his short novel *The Great Divorce*.

There, at one point, Lewis considers the sin of grumbling – of complaining – a sin most of us don't even think much about. But grumbling, left to itself, grows. It can grow quite a bit in a lifetime of 80 years. But what would it look like if its consuming growth were left unchecked in someone's soul for a billion years?

Lewis writes that for some, hell may begin “with a grumbling mood, and you yourself still distinct from it: perhaps criticising it. And yourself, in a dark hour, may will that mood, [may] embrace it. [You] can repent and come out of it again. But there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no *you* left to criticise the mood, nor even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine.” [Lewis, 77-78]

That's what it looks like to be consumed with sin for eternity. It can happen with the sin of discontentedness – of grumbling. But it can also happen with the sin of lust. Or greed. Or self-centeredness. Or sloth. Or pride. Or vainglory.

And typically, that process of being consumed by such sins doesn't happen all at once. It's gradual – almost imperceptible to us. And it plays out on a day-to-day basis, in the often mundane trials of life: what you choose do on a day-to-day basis with your eyes, your hands your feet ... your heart, your mind.

Left to ourselves, bit by bit, day by day, we sacrifice ourselves to our sins. We allow them, one tiny bite at a time, to consume us. In a week, or a year, the growth may seem small. But for an eternity, it will be a complete offering of ourselves. It will be hell.

Left unchecked, sin grows ... and given over to sin, we will become a sacrifice of Gehenna – a sacrifice to hell – offered up to be consumed by our sins, living out eternity in a state of perpetual decay: on a human sacrificial alter, converted to a decomposing refuse dump.

This is the picture of hell that Jesus gives us here. This is one way we can live our lives as sacrifices. It's the path of least resistance. It's the way our sinful hearts naturally lead us, left unchecked and uninterrupted.

So Jesus tells us that we all will be consumed as sacrifices. One option is that we may sacrifice ourselves to hell, leading to eternal death.

Or Sacrificed to God, Leading to Eternal Life

But then, Jesus offers another option: Alternatively, we may be sacrificed to God, leading to eternal life.

As we said, the talk of fire in verse 49 and then salt in verse 50 point us to the sacrificial system in the temple of Israel, as it's described in the Old Testament.

But a lot of Christians have a limited understanding of that system.

We tend to think of Biblical sacrifice mostly ... or even only ... as it relates to the theme of cleansing and forgiveness of sins – a theme highlighted especially in the sin or the guilt offering, also known as the purification offering. And element is certainly there. And that aspect of Biblical sacrifice was especially fulfilled in Jesus's death on the cross.

But sin and guilt offerings were not the only, or even the most common form of Biblical sacrifice in the temple for Israel.

The most common form of sacrifice that God called for in Israel was the ascension offering – translated in the ESV as the “burnt offering.” And while the ascension offering certainly contained the element of shed blood and forgiveness of sins, that wasn't the main emphasis. The main emphasis was that the animal sacrificed would ascend into the presence of God. The animal would be cut up, re-arranged on the altar of the tabernacle, and then, by fire, the animal would be transformed into smoke. And that smoke would then ascend into the presence of God. In Moses's day the glory cloud of God, which represented God's special presence – that glory cloud hovered over the tabernacle. And the smoke from the sacrificial offerings in the tabernacle would ascend and be joined to and absorbed into the glory cloud of God above the tabernacle. The Bible speaks of it as a “food offering” to Yahweh – a “pleasing aroma” to God. It's not of course that God needs food. But still he can delight in it, as a gift.

But what did this offering represent? If the guilt offering especially pointed to the sacrifice of Jesus, what did the ascension offering especially point to?

Well, one thing it pointed to, was the offering of us – of ourselves – to God.

As one theologian puts it: “What the worshipper really wants is to draw near to God himself, to be [God's] friend and companion. [...] By offering an animal [...], the Israelite worshipper is [really] offering himself to God. And this is the ‘gift’ that God really wants. [...] That's the sacrifice that pleases Him [...] God wants to eat *you*.” [Leithart, *House*, 87-88] [For more on the ascension offering, see the bibliography at the end.]

The question at the heart of the gospel is “How may sinners, who are unclean and rotten, become tasty meals for Yahweh?” [Leithart, *House*, 89]

One key ingredient we see here is salt. That comes up in verse 50 of our text.

And the Bible notes that as far back as the book of Job [Job 6:6], salt was used not just as a preservative in the ancient world, but to enhance taste. Salt makes food taste good.

And in Leviticus 2:13 God commands that every sacrifice Israel offers to him, should be seasoned with salt. Food offered to God should be tasty. But the main point here is not culinary. Because in the same verse God explains that the salt is the “salt of the covenant.” [See also Numbers 18:19]

Salt, in the Old Testament sacrificial system, was a mark and a symbol of the covenant of grace between God and his people.

And so the salt sprinkled on the animal sacrifice of the tabernacle was meant to symbolize the covenant of grace sprinkled on God's people. It's the covenant of grace – the free offer of the gospel accomplished by Jesus Christ – that makes us palatable – that makes us tasty even – as a food offering to God. [Horne, 140]

So we need the salt of the covenant of grace ... and then also the cutting of repentance.

Because the other key element in becoming food for Yahweh is repentance. As David puts it in Psalm 51, “a broken and contrite heart” is the kind of sacrifice that God most truly desires [Psalm 51:17]

In the symbolism of the ascension offering, that repentance is portrayed by the cutting and the re-arranging of the parts of the animal itself, to transform it into something that can be set before God.

And Jesus picks up the same imagery in our text, with his stark call to cut off and rearrange any part of ourselves that might cause us to sin – that might make us unpalatable to God.

Now, “virtually all readers agree that these commands are not to be taken literally.” Jesus is not advocating physical self-mutilation here. [Wright, 127; also Edwards, 293]

But the imagery is still supposed to be jarring. Because Jesus is calling us here to ruthlessly, and sacrificially, cut out from our lives not just sin itself ... but even good things God has given us, if they have become temptations to sin in our hearts and lives.

And Jesus uses such stark language because the alternative to offering ourselves to him – the alternative to sacrificing our hand, or our foot, or our eye, to him ... is to offer ourselves instead to Gehenna – to give some part of ourselves as an offering to sin itself ... so that first that part of us ... and then our whole selves, will be consumed in the end by sin ... both in this life, and for all eternity.

We will offer ourselves either to Gehenna as human sacrifices, or to Jesus as living sacrifices.

Sacrifice is unavoidable, and Jesus urges us here to take drastic action to offer ourselves wholly to him.

Which may mean cutting out not just sin – but also good things in our lives which are tempting us to sin.

So what is it for you? What sins do you struggle with? And what might Jesus be calling you to cut out or drastically re-arrange in your life, in order to flee from that sin?

Maybe for you it's the abuse of drugs or the misuse of alcohol. And you know that to really avoid that temptation you need not just to say no to the misuse of the substance itself, but you need to avoid certain people and certain places that so often tempt you to that misuse.

Or maybe, for you, it's sinful anger – getting worked up, and bitter, and hateful towards others. And if you're going to get serious about repentance, then need to get serious about cutting out

those voices from your life that encourage that sin in you – whether friends, or websites, or podcasts, or 24-hour news programs – those voices that tempt you to bitter or sinful anger.

Or maybe it's sinful sloth – refusing to do the things that God has called you to do in this life. And you're really going to change, you need identify and then to cut out those things that tempt you and encourage you and enable you to neglect the callings God has given you.

Or maybe for you it's lust – the misuse of your sexuality. And if you're honest with yourself, there may be certain people, or certain places, or whole routes of access to the internet that Jesus is calling on you to cut yourself off from, in a radical way.

Or maybe it's self-indulgent greed – sinful overspending on yourself, and you need to cut off your own ability to spend in those ways.

Or maybe for you it's a hoarding kind of greed – a sinful and idolatrous trust that you place in money stowed away, and perhaps Jesus is calling on you to give some of that money away to bless others in need, rather than sinfully trusting in it to secure yourself.

Or maybe for you it's soothing else. But whatever it is, Jesus calls us here to identify not just the sin in our lives – but the things that lead us to sin, and to be willing to sacrifice those things to him: To cut them off, and offer them up, as a sacrifice of repentance to him.

But, of course, Jesus isn't just interested in parts of us. He's interested in having all of us. At root, that's what he demands. [For more on how this plays out symbolically in this text, see Horne 140, drawing on Leviticus 8:22-24]

Jesus wants our whole selves to be an offering – a sacrifice – to him.

And that might seem scary at first ... but understood in light of Scripture it's not.

Because being sacrificed to the Lord is not the same as being sacrificed to Gehenna. That which is offered to Gehenna is destined for eternal death and decomposition – for the valley where the worm does not die.

But that which is sacrificed to the Lord Jesus – to Yahweh – ascends. It is transformed by the fire of God's presence, and it rises up in new life, to be received into the glory cloud of God – into the beauty of his presence ... forever.

Those sacrificed to the Lord do not really die. They truly become living sacrifices, not just now, but for eternity, living forever in the presence of God.

Jesus's promise for all who offer themselves to him, through the covenant of grace, is that they will ascend to his presence, and they will live forever with him and his people, in a new heaven and a new earth. Eternal life – that's the promise to all who give themselves to Jesus, as living sacrifices.

And that offering of ourselves to him, instead of to sin, should permeate every aspect of our lives: our hands and what we do, our feet and where we go, our eyes and what we look to.

And it should permeate our relationships too.

Jesus actually starts and ends on that note. He begins by calling us to consider whether we are currently tempting others to sin, and he calls us to radical repentance if we are. And he ends our text, in verse 50, by calling us to be at peace with one another. Because that's so often what offering ourselves to Jesus as living sacrifices should look like.

And so Jesus makes it clear, that we direct not just ourselves, but we help others as well, to their eternal destination – whether for good or for ill.

Offering yourself to Jesus as a living sacrifice also means serving those around you to help them to do the same – you become their servant, helping them on the difficult path of offering themselves as living sacrifices as well, to the Lord Jesus Christ, so that they too might experience his life and peace for all eternity. [Lewis, *Weight*, 45-46]

Because we all will be offered to someone. We all will serve someone.

Conclusion

As Bob Dylan summed it up::

You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls

But you're going to have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're going to have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're going to have to serve somebody
[Dylan, "Gotta Serve Somebody"]

Whether we like the idea or not, we all have to serve someone. We all, in the end, will offer, and even sacrifice ourselves to someone.

“It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're going to have to serve somebody.”

Jesus holds out the free offer of the gospel, to turn from a track leading to the perpetual decay of Gehenna, and by his grace, to be put on a path to become a living sacrifice for him, by which he will then glorify and bless us with eternal life as we ascend up to him.

That is the offer of the gospel. We all must make that choice: to offer ourselves wholly to Jesus Christ ... or to offer first part ... and then eventually all of ourselves to the decay of Gehenna.

As we turn to Jesus, and offer ourselves to him, his grace and forgiveness and healing is available to us not just as we start out, but every step along the way, as every aspect of our walk with him is salted with his covenant of grace.

But still every steps we choose to take matter. Because with every action, we offer ourselves to someone, and towards some ultimate destination.

C.S. Lewis puts it like this – he writes: “Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war an hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.” [Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 87]

And so, brothers and sisters, as we go from here, let us devote ourselves fully to God – willing to sacrifice even the good things we have in order to turn from sin and towards him.

And as we seek to live as living sacrifices to him, let us look forward to the fullness of life for all eternity that he promises to all who offer themselves to him.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
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Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

For more on the Ascension Offering & sacrificial system, see:

- Pages 87-95 of Peter Leithart’s *A House for My Name*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2000.
- Michael A. Farley’s “What is ‘Biblical’ Worship?: Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship.” *JETS* 51/3. September 2008, 591-613. You can access this paper (which I highly recommend) here: <https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/51/51-3/JETS%2051-3%20591-613%20Farley.pdf>
- Pages 55-92 of Jeffrey J. Meyer’s *The Lord’s Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.
- Pages 51-78 of Peter Leithart’s *Theopolitain Liturgy*. West Monrow, LA: Athanasius Press, 2019.
- A.F. Rainey’s “The Order of Sacrifices in Old Testament Ritual Texts” in *Biblica* Vol, 51 No. 4, pages 485-498, 1970.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree

with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.