

Cut it off * Mark 9:43-48

March 26, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

I have a little confession to make.

About six months ago, I got really self-conscious about the way I look on camera. Everybody here, you're fine, but for people who are joining us at home, you've got my big old face, right close up on your laptop or ipad or whatever and I realize that I'm no Carey Grant.

On top of that though, I've had these little skin tags around my eyes and I started to get really self-conscious about them. Which is silly because lots of us I'm sure have skin tags and they're no big deal. They're just there, a part of our body; they hurt a little bit if they get caught on a sweater or something but by and large, skin tags are just there. No biggie.

Now that being said, I have dealt with a 'biggie' here at Langford – do you remember back before COVID, like a month before, I went into the hospital late one Saturday afternoon and ended up having my appendix removed late one Saturday night? I had pre-recorded my sermon just in case and a truly reliable team of people here made Sunday morning happen without me. And good thing because that appendix could have been trouble if I hadn't dealt with it. That's not something that you tolerate; it's something that you get rid of as quickly as possible.

Now, I'll bet you're wondering why I'm talking about skin tags and appendixes? Somebody out there is going – 'here it is, the Sunday when Pastor Graham loses it.'

Don't worry, I haven't lost it. I'm talking about skin tags and appendixes in order to ask – 'Which one is sin more like?' A skin tag? Or an appendix? Is sin like a skin tag which is just there, you put up with it, it might hurt a little if you get caught, but otherwise, no big deal? Or is sin more like an appendix? Something that you need to deal with immediately or else there will be trouble?

Let's see what Jesus has to say about it. Mark 9 starting in verse 43. Turn with me to Mark 9 and we'll look at it together. And I really do encourage you to look at it with me. Mark 9:43. It's a pretty short passage so I'll just read it all in one go:

Jesus says:

43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.

44

45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.

46

47 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell,
48 where " 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" (Mar 9:43-48 NIV).

What do you think? How would Jesus answer our question – ‘Is sin more like a skin tag or an appendix?’

Sin is an issue that needs to be dealt with and it has deadly consequences if we don't act.

Now before we dive into that idea, I want to take a moment to address something that you might have noticed when I was reading the text. Do you have a verse 44 in your Bible? Unless you're reading a KJV Bible, there's no verse 44. What about verse 46? It's missing too, isn't it? Where did our Bible verses go?

Have you ever been writing something out, something that you know so well that you get ahead of yourself while you're writing? I don't know how much longer this illustration will work, but do you remember writing out recipe cards? And maybe you accidentally jump ahead as you're copying it? I find that when I write my sermons out, sometimes I'll be writing a second sentence before I'm even finished the first one because I'm already thinking ahead to what I'm going to write.

That's what's happened here. In the days before photocopiers and instant printing, you had to copy everything by hand, including the Bible. We don't have the actual pages that Mark wrote his Gospel on, but we do have accurate and trustworthy copies of them, carried on through years of copying. And at some point between Jesus' life and the 1500's, some monk got a little excited about what he was going to write and inserted verse 48 at the point where verses 44 and 46. So the KJV says:

43 says – you'll go where the fire never goes out, verse 44 - where the worm does not die.

45 says – you'll go where the fire never goes out, verse 46 – where the worm does not die.

47 says – be thrown into hell where the worm does not die.

Somebody just took verse 48 and stuck it in between the verses and that became a part of the transmission history. The people who translated the KJV of the Bible just happened to use Greek manuscripts based in this tradition and so when the numbers went into the text, we got a verse 44 and a verse 46. Later though, archaeologists found older manuscripts and lo and behold, they just weren't there. And so, rather than trying to renumber the whole Bible, modern translations just leave those verses out because we know from those older manuscripts they weren't there when Mark wrote it down.

Now why do I tell you that? I tell you that to give you greater confidence in the Bible. If I didn't say anything you might be wondering ‘why are those missing?’ But now you know, they're not missing; they are evidence that Christian scholars are always working to make sure that we have the best translation of the Bible based on the best and oldest evidence that we have. When they discovered that, Bible translators could have said ‘oops, that's embarrassing’ and just

covered it up; instead, they said 'look, let's acknowledge that they did the best with the resources available to them; as we find older sources, we're going to do our due diligence and make these little alterations so that Christians can be confident that we are reading the Bible the way that God intended.' And by and large, they ARE little alterations. No doctrine is ever challenged by an older copy.

So, there's your translation history lesson for today.

But that's not the main point of this passage, is it? Jesus is saying something very important about sin and we need to talk about that. So let's look back at our passage. And as we look back at the passage, I want you to see that Jesus says three things, three times about sin. Jesus follows a very specific pattern as He tells us about sin.

First, He tells us what causes us to sin. Second, He tells us what to do about sin. And then finally, third, He tells us what will happen if we don't do something about sin. Three times, He follows that pattern, which could very well explain why some monk put the final line, verse 48, with the other verses, just because he thought it belonged in the pattern.

Let's look at it together; three times over, Jesus tells us what causes sin, what to do about sin and what will happen if we don't.

43 If your hand causes you to sin...

Our hands can cause us to sin, can't they? You can do all kinds of sin with your hands, can't you? You can hit people. You can steal things. Just the other day I had the weirdest conversation with a cashier at the grocery store; I was using the self-checkout line and she was telling me about how when she was a kid, her brother would distract the shopkeeper so she could steal them popsicles.

Jesus tells us that our hands can cause us to sin. They can cause us to take part in all sorts of things that are counter to God's good will for us.

Well, if that's the case, what should we do about it? What does He say? We should cut it off. Get rid of it. Make every effort to separate ourselves from the things that cause us to sin.

Now does that mean that Jesus intends for us to literally chop off our hands? There are people in church history who have LITERALLY done stuff like this. But, no, Jesus is not telling us to literally mutilate our bodies. Jesus is making a radical statement to get our attention and show how serious He is. Grant Osborne writes:

"The command to amputate these parts is an element of the imagery and not intended literally. Jesus uses hyperbole to emphasize the violent rejection of temptation that is necessary to be victorious over sin."¹

Don't actually cut off your hand if it causes you to sin, but be just as radical, just as ruthless at cutting off whatever sin is causing you trouble.

Because, Jesus tells us, if you don't, you are bound for hell where the fire never goes out. Jesus says 'it's better to go to heaven with one hand – ie., depriving yourself the pleasure or benefit of sin – than to go into Hell with two.'

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off, because Hell waits for those who don't.

That's verse 43; Jesus uses that same pattern to make a similar point in verse 45.

45 And if your foot causes you to sin... If you are going places that you shouldn't, if your feet are taking you places where you know you'll be tempted... Here's what to do -

cut it off. Get rid of them. Ruthlessly cut out the thing that is causing you to sin. Because,

It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.

What can cause you to sin? Your feet. What should you do? Cut em off. What happens if you don't? The consequence of not dealing with sin is unquenchable fire.

If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off, because Hell waits for those who don't.

Now, once again, verse 47, Jesus is going to use that very same pattern, to make His final point.

47 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.

Now, let's talk about this, because I know that probably the first thing that you think of here has to do with lust.

Mathew 5:27, Jesus says: 27 "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'

28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

So yes, if you eye looks lustfully at another person, in person or online or whatever, you gotta deal with it. Statistically speaking, men struggle with this more than women but according to Barna research, lots of women do too.ⁱⁱ Lust and sexual impurity need to be dealt with.

But listen, lust isn't the only sin that the eye can commit. Flip back a couple of pages to Mark 7, starting at verse 21. Jesus lists a smattering of sins and a lot of them have to do with the eyes.

21 For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,

22 greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

Greed – seeing something and automatically wanting it; envy – seeing something someone else has and wanting it for yourself; arrogance which is really a comparison thing, which comes from the eyes; whatever the case may be, the eye can cause you to sin.

And when that happens, pluck it out, because as Jesus says –

It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, 48 where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'

That's actually a quotation of the last line in Isaiah; Isaiah 66:24, God says at the end of the age, all those who rebelled against Him will pay and 'their worm will not die, nor their fire be quenched.'

(If you're curious about the worm thing, long story short, one of the kings of Israel wanted to get rid of a pagan worship site (Josiah - 2 Kings 23:10) and so he desecrated it and turned it into a garbage dump which was essentially always on fire; over time it became a place to get rid of dead bodies and they didn't always burn up which led to maggots – which is probably a better translation of that word and as you can imagine that became a pretty good metaphor for Hell).ⁱⁱⁱ

We need to cut off sin at the roots or we face eternal fire and the wrath of God.

And you know, it's not just our hands and our feet and our eyes that cause us to sin.^{iv} Based on Mark 7:21, I think we should probably include our tongues – malice, deceit, slander; our minds – foolishness and arrogance; our hearts. Frankly, I think that Jesus has set up a pattern here so that we can fill in the blanks for ourselves.

If your 'blank' causes you to sin, get rid of it because the fire is waiting for those who don't. What goes in that blank for you? Your phone? Your TV? Your friends? Your anger? Your liquor cabinet?

Whatever it is that fills in that blank for you, cut it off.

This cuts close to home doesn't it? This hits at some of the most intimate places in our lives. And it can be hard to contemplate this. Satan wants us to think that these sinful habits are just as much a part of us as our hands and feet and eyes. But listen, sin is not a skin tag. Harmless and innocent. Sin is an appendix waiting to burst. Don't tolerate sin in your life any more than you would put up with an appendix that's ready to blow.

But listen, you are not alone in this. I think one of the biggest victories that Satan has pulled off is making us think that we're the only ones that struggle with whatever it is we struggle with and so we feel ashamed and don't seek help.^v Shame over sin can keep us from seeking help because we don't want to be perceived as 'weak' Christians.

But we need to get over that and realize that it's better to admit the problem and deal with it en route to Heaven, than to keep it a secret all the way to Hell.

If there is some sin you can't seem to shake, you're not alone. If you struggle with something, somebody else does and if it's not the same thing, it's something else. And if we can be transparent enough and vulnerable enough with each other to admit it and share our struggles, that is just the kind of radical step it takes to get rid of sin. If you know that you have someone to call when you're struggling or someone who will hold you accountable the next day, it makes resisting temptation way easier.

If someone asks you for help with accountability, take them very seriously. Don't be all holier than thou on them. Realize that they are being vulnerable with you and relying on you for help. Please, honour them and help them.

In this passage, Jesus tells us what can cause us to sin – hands, feet, eyes, lips – what to do about it – cut it off – and what happens if we don't – eternal fire and God's wrath.

Now, I have to admit to you that as I was organizing this message, the 'preacher' in me really wanted to make use of alliteration and say that Jesus shows us the causes of sin, the consequences for sin and the cure for sin. You can see how that lines up, right? The causes of sin – hands, feet, eyes, whatever; the consequences for sin – unquenchable fire, but that would mean that the cure for sin is ruthlessly eliminating it.

Now there's something to that, but it's not the whole story. And maybe you've been thinking about it; I've certainly felt the tension in recognizing that Jesus Himself in Mark 7 says that it's not the external things that make us sinful. It's not exactly our hands and feet and eyes; they're accessories to the fact but it's really our hearts that cause us to sin. It's famously been said: 'A blind man can still struggle with lust even if he can't see.'

And so that's why we're talking about this during Lent. If you went away today thinking 'ok, I gotta hack away at all the things in my life to avoid the fires of hell,' then I've failed to do my job properly. Because no amount of pruning will save your soul unless Jesus renews your roots.

Whatever it is that your hands or feet or eyes or lips do, Jesus went to the Cross to pay for those sins. The things that I have done and will do, Jesus has paid for on the Cross. Ephesians 1:7 – 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.

Hacking off limbs does not make us right with God; Jesus' death on our behalf does. Jesus' death on our behalf pays for our sin and delivers us from Hell so that this is not a mere exercise in self-control.

When Jesus says 'if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out,' He's also thinking – 'because I've already died to free you from that sin, to demonstrate my commitment to you.' We deal

ruthlessly and radically with sin, not to deliver ourselves from wrath, but because we HAVE been delivered from wrath, to show that we are grateful for that deliverance.

Yes, the warning of hell is there to keep us from getting complacent and cozy with sin, but if we are truly walking with Jesus, cutting off every part that could cause us to sin and running back to Him to confess if we fail, then we are secure in the promise of life with Jesus. We ruthlessly eliminate sin, not to earn salvation, but out of gratitude and commitment to God because He has saved us.

Whatever causes you to sin, cut it off, because God has already given you life.

So, listen: sin is not a skin tag, a little part of you that you tolerate and is no big deal really; might hurt a little if you get caught but otherwise, nothing to worry about. No, sin is an enflamed appendix, ready to explode, ready to threaten your eternal wellbeing. Cut it out, ruthlessly, not a moment to waste. Don't tolerate sin any more than you would put up with a rupturing appendix. Not to earn salvation but because God has freely given it.

Whatever causes you to sin, cut it off, as God's precious child.

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ⁱ Grant Osborne, *Mark*, (Teaching the Text), 167.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.barna.com/research/christian-women-today-part-3-of-4-women-give-themselves-an-emotional-and-spiritual-check-up/>

ⁱⁱⁱ "At v. 44 we hear of gehenna. This term comes from the Valley of Hinnon, south of Jerusalem, where infants were formerly sacrificed to Molech (cf. Jer 7.31; 19:5f; 32:35). Josiah desecrated this pagan site during his reforms and consigned to it the burning of animal entrails and then garbage or waste. It appears that it was still used for the latter purpose in Jesus' day. At a burning garbage dump the maggots existed aplenty, feeding on carcasses, and the flame kept smoldering and burning. During the intertestamental period, what went on at this site began to provide stock images for hell." Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A socio-rhetorical commentary*, 272-273.

^{iv} 16 There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him:

17 haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood,

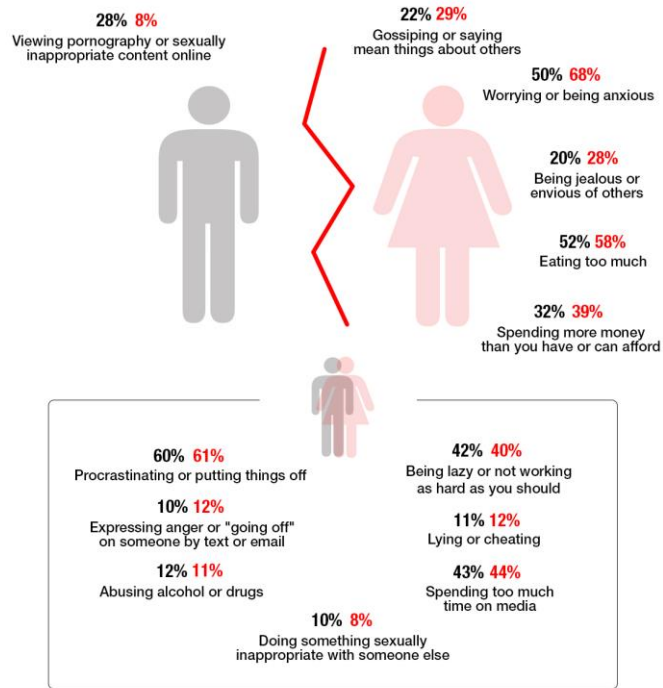
18 a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil,

19 a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers (Pro 6:16-19 NIV).

^v <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-explores-the-changing-shape-of-temptation/>

DO MEN AND WOMEN SIN DIFFERENTLY?

For the most part, men and women admit to being tempted by the same things at about the same levels. There are, however, a few temptations that seem to affect men and women differently. It's also notable that—with only a few exceptions—women are more likely to admit to feeling tempted.



Source:
 OmniPoll™ N=1,021
 Barna Group study conducted for Todd Hunter's book *Our Favorite Sins* (Thomas Nelson, 2012)