

To Enter With Only One Eye

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Preached on the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, (27September) 2009.

Text: Mark 9:47

“And if your eye makes you lose your faith, take it out! It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with only one eye than to keep both eyes and be thrown into hell.” ~ Jesus

I planned in this sermon to speak about the verse in the Mark on those for us and against us, as you can tell by my title printed in the bulletin. But something happened while I was in Washington this week which has so haunted me that I have changed gears. The new title is *To Enter with Only One Eye*, from the text in v. 47:

If your eye makes you lose your faith, take it out! It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with only one eye, than to keep both eyes and be thrown into hell.

I have always read this passage moralistically. That is to say, you will be in big trouble if you see something lustfully with your eye or touch something you should not touch or your feet take you somewhere you should not go. Were Mark and Jesus here teaching about simple sins and keeping your eyes on good things and your hands clean of filth? Perhaps, but my reading this week has made me reconsider. Note how Jesus phrased it in Today's English Version, “if your eye *makes you lose your faith*....” Perhaps this string of warnings is not about compromising values but rather losing faith?

Let me tell you what happened Thursday in Washington. You know I visit wounded warriors from time to time at Bethesda Hospital. I always find the young men I call on there inspiring. What they have sacrificed never fails to move me and when I pray for them something happens. The sacrifice they have made when placed before God brings us both into the presence of the Almighty. The first Marine I visited Thursday morning was a corporal from Indiana. Less than two weeks ago he and his squad were surprised in Afghanistan and came under mortar fire. He lost his right eye in the explosions. At times the injuries are so severe as to make a visitor squeamish. I have learned to control my response by remembering I am in the room with them for God, not me. It helps me focus on them, their needs and God's desire to heal them.

The Corporal told me about the ambush, a little about himself and his family, and what was medically ahead for him. One of his buddies lost his life in the attack. When he told me that fact the room got just a little cooler and his voice dropped. I said to him, “I'm sorry.” After a few moments of quiet he told me he will eventually receive an artificial eye and wants to fulfill the rest of his obligation to the Marine Corps. That is often what these fellows say, and it never fails to put a lump in my throat when I hear such dedication. As the visit ended I prayed for him and went on to visit six more Marines before we left to go back to the Navy Annex. But his face, the missing eye and

the still unhealed scars remained with me, following me, reminding me of this young man and his sacrifice.

On Friday I spent some time working on this sermon, first trying to figure out what to say on the earlier verse about the man who was not a disciple who healed in Jesus' name. The disciples tried to stop him since he was not part of their group. But Jesus forbade it, saying, "whoever is not against us is for us."¹ But I still kept thinking about the Corporal's one eye. While studying, I read the text out of a Marine Bible I found on the office shelf. The American Bible Society prints up Bibles in various translations with camouflage covers and Marines and soldiers love them. This one was also the same translation as the *Good News Bibles* we gave our church school children today. This translation is simple to understand, at a typical third grader's reading level. (I remember my grandfather Saunders' comment about this translation. He was an elder in my home church in Bonham, Texas, and had a bookstore where he sold Bibles. He said he liked the *Good News Bible* to read to himself, but it did not sound like the Bible when read out loud in church. For that he preferred the King James Version!) Anyway, I read on beyond the 'for us/against us' verse and there it was.

If your eye makes you lose your faith, take it out! It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with only one eye, than to keep both eyes and be thrown into hell.

With the memory of the Corporal's one eye lingering in my mind, I could not help but be fascinated with this verse.

The passage follows two of Jesus' passion predictions² and the prophecy that the disciples will have to take up crosses of their own. Each time Jesus brought this business up about cross and sacrifice, the disciples grew quiet, especially after Peter's first outburst about it, when Jesus scolded him for his lack of faith.³ In the verses just prior to today's story, when he told them a second time about the death that awaited him in Jerusalem, Mark wrote of the disciples, "they did not understand what this teaching meant, and they were *afraid* to ask him."⁴

Now at this time, during the period of the Second Temple, Judaism emphasized that sacrifices brought to the Temple had to be perfect, without blemish. Only these gifts were *acceptable* to God. There is no question in Mark 9 Jesus was speaking of sacrifice and the cross. So when he told them to cut off an arm or a foot or pluck out an eye, was he alluding to this notion of an *acceptable* sacrifice? Paul also spoke of this when he wrote to the Roman Christians,

So then, my brothers [*and sisters*], because of God's great mercy I appeal to you: offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing

¹ Mark 9:39-40.

² Mark 8:31ff; 9:30ff

³ Mark 8:32-33.

⁴ Mark 9:32.

unto him. This is the true worship you should offer. Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God—what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.⁵

Paul's passage is about *acceptable* sacrifice and how it is the real worship we should offer. You must know, sacrifice has forever been in almost all religions the path to God. I found myself wondering if in Jesus' riff on giving up hands, feet and eyes if he were turning upside down the Old Testament teaching about the necessity for a sacrifice without blemish?⁶ Thereby, perhaps he was making a point about just how serious faith is and how important sacrifice is. If you think faith is only about giving up a goat or a lamb, that is one thing. But what if to be a disciple you may have to give up something so necessary as a hand? The point went deeper when I reread the translation. Notice how the *Good News Bible* renders it:

If anyone should cause one of these little ones to *lose his faith* in me...
If your hand *makes you lose your faith*....
If your foot *makes you lose your faith*....
If your eye *makes you lose your faith*....⁷

It is about keeping faith versus losing faith. Sacrifice has always been the path to God. Another way of saying it: sacrifice is how we find faith, keep faith and grow in our faith in God. The cross of Jesus is his sacrifice, and it is the way God gets to us. By the time Mark wrote his gospel some in the early church had been tortured by pagan authorities to renounce their faith in Jesus and in the process lost hands, fingers, feet, perhaps eyes. These words were not just something from a book to them. Some had lost these body parts in keeping the faith. Though now disfigured, they were still acceptable to God because in their sacrifice, they had not lost faith. Indeed, others in their uncomfortable presence also *found* faith stronger because of their sacrifice.

Thursday morning in a hospital room I came to see the stark and grim reality of what it might mean to lose an eye. What might we need to give up in order to keep faith? Is *giving up* the same as sacrifice? Why we hardly like to change our weekend schedules to come to church! We do not like to give up our things, except perhaps for our children. But even then, few of us can imagine giving up something so important as a foot, an eye, a hand to keep from losing the faith.

I ask you, what might you have to sacrifice to keep your faith?

End

To Enter with One Eye.DOC

⁵ Romans 12:1-2.

⁶ Numbers 19:2; 28:2-3. See also 1Peter 1:19 and 2Peter 3:14.

⁷ Mark 9: 42, 43, 45, 47.