

The Pros and Cons
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“John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.⁴⁰ Whoever is not against us is for us.⁴¹ For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.⁴² “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.⁴⁹ “For everyone will be salted with fire.⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:38-50).

“Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying,¹¹ “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.”¹² When they told Mordecai what Esther had said,¹³ Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.¹⁴ For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”¹⁵ Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai,¹⁶ “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:10-16).

Lord, bless the words of my mouth that your voice will be heard and not mine. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Are you aware that we live in the middle of a spiritual

battlefield? Every day our decisions influence the battle between good and evil. Researchers at Cornell University estimated that the average person makes about 35,000 decisions every day! Wow. That's one decision every 2 ½ seconds. You will decide right now whether to believe this or not! Every day we make decisions about what to eat, when to eat, what to wear, where to go, which seat to occupy, what to post on Facebook. Even little decisions can be life-changing choices. Your choice of pastrami versus turkey can affect your health and your life span. We also make decisions about what to say, what to believe, what goals to set, and who to associate with – these choices have significant impacts on our lives, because these types of decisions create the framework for subsequent choices we make. If you decide that attending your daughter's dance recitals is more important than having a high-powered career, then this impacts your job choices, financial goals, and social commitments. If you decide to believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God and therefore true in every respect, then that affects the decisions you make regarding your social circle, your choices of entertainment, your spending habits, your choice of words in conversation, the schools you choose for your children and the goals you set for your family. In fact, if we choose to be disciples of Jesus Christ, choose to worship him as our savior, this one decision should guide every other decision we make for the rest of our lives. As our Bible reading today revealed, in God's world, the choices we make ultimately have life and death consequences.

In our scripture today Jesus gives his disciples some guidance on decision-making, which is the usual precursor to action. You *decide* what to do, before you do it. Earlier in this chapter Jesus and the disciples were returning from a preach and teach session to what was likely Simon Peter's house in Capernaum where Jesus stayed. While Jesus was off with James and John and Peter, the disciples had tried & failed to drive out the demon in a boy violently possessed by an unclean spirit. Then, during the walk back, they had been speculating on their relative status in the coming kingdom. We know Jesus gave more attention to Peter, James and John over the others, so likely this led to their debate about who would have a greater role in the kingdom. However, when Jesus asked about their conversation, they didn't want to tell him – a sure sign that they realized he would not approve. *Don't we do the same? We conceal from others those discussions or activities that we know would be frowned upon! At least the*

disciples had the good sense to keep silent rather than to lie to Jesus. But of course, Jesus had supernatural discernment –and he knew. He could probably have read their shame-faced demeanor in any case. He therefore started a little discussion on the importance of humility. As soon as he paused for breath, John interrupted him. You know how it is when you've done something wrong. -you don't want the lecture on top of the guilty feelings.

I think John was feeling really guilty during the talk on humility because he immediately changed the subject to report on **a man** who was not one of them **casting out demons in Jesus's name**. Can't you imagine the horrified looks on the faces of the other disciples? *WHAT?!? How dare he!! That's our job!* The commentaries point out that in the region there were disciples of John the Baptist, who had listened to and believed in Jesus, but did not hang around with our Lord's disciples. But so what? it's obvious that he had a successful ministry going, because only God can allow the use of Jesus' name to execute miracles. And we know from the disciples' efforts earlier in the chapter that demons don't obey just anyone who decides to tell them to leave. This was reinforced in Acts 19:15. When the sons of a Jewish chief priest tried to cast out a demon, it answered, "Jesus I know and Paul I know, but who are you?" And then the demons leapt on them and terrified them.

It's kind of ironic that these same disciples who had failed earlier in exorcising demons in Jesus' name should criticize someone else for doing the same thing – and moreover doing it successfully! It sounds like jealousy, or to put a good spin on it, maybe trademark protection.

We apostles are the only ones who have earned the right to use Jesus' name to perform miracles. This man isn't *one of us!* What elitist nonsense. The name of Jesus is not a proprietary formula to be used whenever a miracle is needed. God doesn't confer any special blessing on the words themselves. It is Jesus himself who conveys the power. The power **ONLY** comes from belief and complete trust in Him as the son of God.

For this reason Jesus does not react as I think John expects him to. Jesus doesn't condemn the man. He doesn't thank John for making him aware of this unauthorized use of his brand. In fact, in his own unique and loving way **he reprimands John for trying to inhibit someone from pursuing his God-given calling**. Imagine John's surprise when Jesus says, (v.39) *"Do not stop him; for there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us, is for us."* Really?

Let's look at the Pro's and Con's. Pro's – he's doing good works, helping people and giving Jesus the credit. Pro's – his actions don't harm Jesus or his name and align with God's plans to exalt Jesus. Con's – he's not affiliated with the disciples so, he could be a loose cannon doing who knows what! Since he didn't ask permission of Jesus or the disciples, or choose to join them, John assumed there must be something havey-cavey about him. They chose to think the worst of this man as if It were ONLY the 12 apostles who were to be called and used by God. What can we learn from this? Do we not sometimes do the same thing? Don't we occasionally adopt the same "us and them" mentality and choose to think the worst of someone we actually know very little about?

This example should remind us not to condemn Catholics, Baptists, Mormons, or anyone else who brings unbelievers to Christ, even if they don't belong to the "right church" or any church for that matter. We all have the same mission – to defeat Satan's conquest of souls. Yes, we can disagree on specific doctrines, but Jesus is not concerned as much with religious rules as with gaining souls for his father's kingdom. Next time you are tempted to feel superior to those Jehovah Witnesses roaming your neighborhood, remember – our primary mission as Methodists is not to defend John Wesley's honor and theology, but to bring people to Christ. Christians should rejoice over every soul saved from hell, no matter who brought it about. Save your battles for the real enemy, who seeks to divide and conquer. We are all servants of the risen Lord. Jesus tells us that the last will be first in God's kingdom. We don't need to fight to the head of the line.

In verse 41 Jesus re-emphasizes his theme of humble service with his remark about the rewards for offering water to a thirsty disciple. None are so humble in his kingdom that they cannot do good, and receive God's rewards. Yet I think Jesus was also warning John about what would have been the consequences of stopping the man from doing healing in Jesus name. Woe to those who attempt to thwart the efforts of someone carrying out God's commands.

Jesus tells his disciples that bad things happen to people who cause other believers to go astray & to lose faith. Those who lead God's children into sin come to a bad end. In verse 42 Jesus declares that for such people, it were better for them "if a great millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea" – a **millstone was used to grind grain and was so large as to require it to be turned by a donkey**. Taken literally, some ancient historians reported that the Romans had used this punishment in Galilee to execute some of the ringleaders of the insurrection led by Judas

Maccabee. It appalled their families because they never got to bury them. **This punishment however is still less horrific than what God has planned for those who lead others away from God** – esp. children and people who have recently come to Christ. Paul gives examples of such false teachers in his epistles. They tried to convince the gentile converts that without circumcision they were not saved. And Satan continues to work against believers today: How many children entered first grade believing that God made all creation in 6 days and by the time they graduated from high school had been brainwashed to believe not only that God did NOT create the world, but that God was a myth and creation was all a cosmic accident. Woe to those individuals who separate God's children from their faith. Now before we all sigh with relief, thinking that doesn't apply to us, we might think of the many other behaviors that drive believers away from God. Hypocrisy is an oft-cited cause of why people leave the church. We can't be holier than thou on Sunday and talk trash on Monday. Feeling rejected also causes people to leave. Jesus has told us to be wary of putting conditions on a person's acceptance as a child of God. Decide to think the best of everyone. We need to regularly ask God to show us areas in our lives that are a threat to our walk with Christ and our encouragement of other believers. Sometimes making the right choice requires courage. Esther risked her life just for the possibility of saving the Jews from Haman's evil plot. Yet the choice of *inaction, of doing nothing*, would have preyed on her conscience for the rest of her life. She stepped out in faith and as a consequence Judaism celebrates her bravery with a feast every year. She let God use her to win a sizeable victory in the battle between good and evil.

Jesus talks bluntly with the disciples about looking at the long-term effects of day to day choices. Option #1: Pluck out your eye if it's full of sin in this life and you will enjoy eternal rewards in heaven. OR Option #2: Enjoy your earthly life with an eye that sins then suffer unspeakable torment in eternal hell. It's shocking language to hear from a loving savior. But it's BECAUSE Jesus loves us that he is so candid. Don't we all know that if someone develops gangrene in their foot, a good doctor will amputate it to save the leg and preserve the health of the patient?

Jesus recommends amputating hands if they cause you to sin rather than ending up in hell when you die. Yikes. That's drastic. Hell must be really really awful. Jesus assures us it is, but wait a minute - The *source* of your sin problem isn't your hands, your feet, or your eyes. They just carry out your decision to sin. In Mark 7 Jesus made it clear that the source of sin is our wicked hearts. So, if you can't trust your heart, take counter-measures

while the Holy Spirit helps you change it. I suspect some people interpret Jesus' advice literally, which would lead to our streets, neighborhoods and even our churches being filled with blind amputees. This is happening now in Afghanistan; the Taliban announced on Sept. 3rd that they will implement Sharia law and cut off the hands of anyone convicted of stealing. That's certainly a deterrent to crime, and although cutting off your hand is pretty agonizing, Jesus is telling us it is a cakewalk compared to the extreme horrors of hell. Someone who loves you will try and keep you from wrong choices that lead to irreversible suffering in unquenchable fire.

My take on this is that Jesus is advising us to remove ourselves physically from the things that tempt us to sin and take us away from God. This might be restricting your access to the internet if you're tempted to visit pornographic web sites, or disassociating yourself from unsaved friends who try and talk you into ungodly pursuits. The choices we make are SO important to our spiritual health and to that spiritual battle which will culminate in Armageddon. Remember Peter warned us in 1 Peter 5:8 that Satan roams around like a lion, seeking someone to devour. The enemy has a million disguises. Be vigilant. He will only be able to hurt us if we let him, if we rely on our own wisdom rather than on the Holy Spirit. We make ourselves more vulnerable when our choices are not in line with God's will for us. Watch over your children and your grandchildren so that they are not led astray. An immature Christian is somewhat similar to someone just being released from prison. After your release, you don't go back and hang around with old friends who live a life of crime. Instead you seek out people who will guide and support you in your newly acquired freedom, in your walk of faith. Every one of us has made the wrong choice at one time or another and ended up in sin! That's why we need Jesus. That's why we need people around us who will guide us through repentance, forgiveness and a change in direction when we slip up. We need each other to encourage and lift one another up in times of suffering or hardship so that we hold onto our faith even when God seems to be absent. We need to connect to Jesus not just once a week but several times a day, to keep ourselves protected and productive when everything around us is designed to separate us from God. I worry that too many people think life is like a video game where their actions have no lasting consequences, and everyone gets a chance to replay it for a better result next time. Not so! Don't end up with regrets. Don't procrastinate. Jesus could come back tomorrow.

The Pros and Cons are pretty clear cut: They are summed up succinctly by Jesus in Mark 8:36 when he asks, "***For what does it benefit a man to***

gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?“ If anyone here has not yet accepted Jesus as their lord and savior, has come to church for awhile but never committed themselves to Christ, or feels that they’ve strayed too far to be forgiven, don’t wait til it’s too late. Speak to Pastor after the service and take steps to safeguard your soul.

Let’s pray.

Gracious and Loving God, we bow down to you and give thanks for the light of your word and the guidance of your spirit. Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who live according to the Lord’s instruction. They do nothing evil. Oh that our habits may be established to observe and keep your statutes, then we will not be ashamed!

Do not let us wander from your commandments, neither through ignorance nor through willful disobedience. Let your hand be ready to help us. Turn our eyes away from things that perish. Remove us from the way of falsehood and unfaithfulness and renew us through your righteousness. Open our eyes to spiritual truth so that we may experience the wonderful peace that comes from following you. We praise your holy name, now and forever. AMEN.