

Amputating Temptations

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Date: 22 January 2006

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Well, at this Christmas time just passed, 2005, Ness and the kids and I went to a number of family celebrations, as you do, and ate far too much, as usual, trying to lose the weight now.

But at one of them, there was something a little bit different last year. The host of the party gave a short speech to try and help us to remember the true meaning of Christmas. After the meal, they said, well, we've got a lot to be thankful for in 2005.

Family, the world we live in, and not least Jesus, who was born 2,000 years ago, and for all the other inspiring figures in history who've come after him and who've influenced and shaped our lives.

Who is or who was Jesus, according to this way of thinking? Well, one of a number of important historical figures who, over the centuries, has inspired and taught us.

But is that all? Certainly Jesus is an inspiring figure. But is that all? Can we just slip Jesus into our lives to help us somehow have better ones or provide us with some moral direction from time to time when we feel that we need it?

[1 : 33] Well, according to the earliest historical documents, recording Jesus' life and work, the Gospels, according to Jesus himself, he won't allow us to reduce him into this kind of figure.

We certainly see this in Mark's Gospel. Well, Jesus comes with an authority that he demonstrates in his power over the world of nature, the world of people, even over the world of spirits. He demands absolute allegiance to himself as the king of God's kingdom.

He comes not to make all our dreams and hopes come true, but to carry out the will of the Father that would lead to him dying on the cross for the sins of the world. Jesus is an inspiring figure.

Well, in the last few weeks in chapter 9, we've seen the Father's endorsement of Jesus as nothing less than the Messiah, his anointed king in the record of the transfiguration.

We saw in Andrew and Warwick's talks Jesus' refusal to just fit into the status quo. He turned the disciples' world and their values and priorities on their head. He challenged their self-sufficiency, their pride, and so lack of faith in him in the account of the young boy possessed by a demon.

[2 : 39] We heard last week Jesus challenging their petty ambition and rivalry, redefining leadership in terms of self-sacrifice and humble service rather than self-promotion and glorious position.

And in our passage today, Jesus continues to focus his teaching in on the 12 and on the revolution that God's kingdom will mean for their lives, indeed, for the whole world.

A revolution that God alone can enable to be a reality for them, for us, through his son Jesus. And these words spoken to the 12 are, of course, written down as God's word to us.

They don't merely consist of some good advice from a wise teacher. No, we're actually being addressed by the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ, our saviour and our judge, who claims the right to rule our lives his way.

That's why we need to have our Bibles open. That's why we need to listen to our King, to trust in him, to obey him. And I'm reading from verse 38 of chapter 9 of Mark's gospel, which you can find on page 821 of the New Testament part of your Bibles.

[3 : 49] Please turn to that. Mark 9, verse 38. John said to Jesus, Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.

The pastoral problem of the apostles, so evident in chapter 9 so far, once again rears its ugly head. Remember these people who trusted in their own position and power rather than praying?

Remember these people who were primarily, at least at this stage, concerned about how others were perceiving them, whether they will be rightly honoured, arguing amongst themselves about who's the greatest? Well, now we find through their spokesman at this point, John, that they're indignant.

Someone is inching in on their territory. Somebody is doing what only they should be doing, casting out demons in Jesus' name. And so, of course, they try to stop this interloper.

This is our job, our responsibility. We're the ones who've been commissioned for this. We're the professionals here. Once again, Jesus has to reorient them, doesn't he? Verse 39.

[4 : 49] 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. Whoever is not against us is for us.

Jesus recognises at this point that this deed of power done in his name is evidence of genuine faith and real obedience, that he is for and not against Jesus and his disciples.

And ironically, this unnamed exorcist does exactly what the disciples couldn't do because of what Jesus describes back in verse 19 of this chapter as their lack of faith, their faithlessness.

See, Jesus is teaching the disciples that being a true disciple of Christ is not about being self-sufficient, a special person with special powers. It's about our connection to Christ.

That's what matters. And even those that we least expect are used by God because it's God's work. It's the power of Jesus shown in the lives of even the least of his children, or at least those we consider to be the least.

[5 : 53] And so it's about Jesus' name being honoured and not ours. So easy to underestimate how God is working the world through his people, while at the same time overestimating our own personal importance in the carrying out of God's work.

This came home to me a few years back in our work on campus at Melbourne Uni with the Christian Union. At Christian Union we do this thing called gospel roaming. It's a bit like the door knocking that happens in this church, but without doors, obviously.

We walk up to people around campus and ask them what they think about Jesus, whether they'd like to talk about that and respond to him in some way. And we usually have a team of people who are trained to go out and do this.

But a couple of years back there was a very enthusiastic first year. You know, he came to Bible talks occasionally. He wasn't all that regular. But one of the staff found out about halfway through the first semester of his very first year at uni that he was going out off his own bat three lunchtimes a week gospel roaming.

Of course, he didn't give it that title. He just called it sharing my faith with people at uni. In fact, he didn't even know that CU was officially doing gospel roaming. He was just going out sharing his faith, inviting people to become Christians.

[7 : 05] And I remember at the time there was a little bit of murmuring that went on. He hasn't done the training course. He's not very regular to public meetings. Unauthorised evangelism. What's going on? What's going on? Who is this guy? Of course, God was showing us that while he was at work through our structures, our programs, that God's kingdom wasn't dependent upon us and our plans and our training, even our presence on campus as a club.

See, we were underestimating God and showing suspicion towards a brother in Christ. It was a great lesson to learn. And we really need to grab hold of this, don't we? Perhaps especially at a church with as great a reputation as Holy Trinity Doncaster has.

Do we really believe that if this church shut down tomorrow, that God would continue his work of saving people for Christ, his great deeds of power in Doncaster? Do we really believe that if Paul Barker ran away to become the captain of the Richmond Football Club and finally lead them to victory, that God would raise up a faithful preacher of the word in his place?

Do we really believe that God is at work outside our Anglican denomination? That the revival we yearn to see in this city, in this country, may not come through our planning, our people, if you like, our strategies, our chosen leaders?

The disciples need to know that, yes, of course, Jesus had chosen them and he was working powerfully through them. But that God's kingdom was bigger even than them and their ministry, their work.

[8 : 32] We really need to believe this, don't we? Otherwise, we'll start to think that it's about our training, our politics, the right person in the right place, our power, our skill. We'll start to put confidence in ourselves and glory in ourselves rather than trusting in Jesus and glorying in him and his powerful gospel, who in his mercy even chooses to use us as part of his purposes.

See, whether we're professional ministers, as it were, or whether we just became a Christian last week, we are no less dependent on God's mercy towards us in the death of his son and his power at work in us.

God is at work in his world, saving a people for himself and using his people to grow his kingdom. Let's have our eyes open to what he's doing and welcome our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ that God is adding to our number all over the world daily and not be so focused in on ourselves and what we think we are achieving.

Well, speaking of these, in the disciples' eyes at least, maverick disciples, these outsiders, Jesus goes on. Verse 40, Whoever is not against us is for us, 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.

If anyone 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. Jesus is challenging a wrong-headed exclusivism here.

[10 : 06] The disciples have a view of the true believer. Clearly they are one of the true disciples of Christ, but perhaps they have a view of the true disciple as the one who does the big jobs for God, the spectacular things.

But Jesus yet again turns their view of God's kingdom on its head. Who is the one who is for Jesus? Who is the one who belongs to the number of his little ones?

Well, according to Jesus, in verse 42 there, it is the one who believes in him, who has faith in him. And in Mark's gospel, faith isn't about powerful, almost self-sufficient people who walk around doing God favours, helping God out, giving him a hand.

It's about people who know they can do nothing for themselves, who desperately depend upon the Lord Jesus. In verse 41 here, Jesus describes a person who has faith and so who will receive the reward, eternal life, perhaps simply as the one who welcomes the Christ.

And how do they show that they've done that? Well, by welcoming the ones whom the Christ sent to make him known, the 12. That's what I think giving a cup of water to the one who bears the name of Christ means here.

[11 : 15] See, Jesus isn't degenerating into some sort of nostalgic, do a good deed and go to heaven kind of theology, you know, more glasses of water given away, especially on a day like today and more chance of heaven. No, in a hot, thirsty environment, sharing water with someone was a mark of hospitality.

You welcomed them into your home. You cared for their basic needs. And in this case of welcoming the one who bears the name of Jesus, such a person shows they not only welcome the person they're giving a cup of water to, but the one whom they represent, who sent them, namely Jesus.

And indeed also the Father who sent him, as Jesus says earlier in this chapter. By the way, giving a cup of water, welcoming Jesus and his people in this way is no small thing.

Identifying with the one who would be rejected and ridiculed and crucified is a costly thing to do. As Jesus said, his followers would be treated in the same way. If they hated me, Jesus said, they will hate you.

Well, Jesus has hard words to say to the disciples, I think, in verse 42. You see, by potentially getting in the way of people, little ones coming to Jesus simply by entrusting their lives to him, because the disciples have some other kind of criteria for who really belongs, who's on the in crowd.

[12 : 32] They're not carrying out the mission, at least at this point, that Jesus gave them to do. In this way, I think verse 42 belongs to this first half of the passage, as well as it does to the second half.

Let's hear it again. 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.

In other words, it would be better to get on the wrong side of the mafia, get some concrete boots and go swimming with the fishes, than experience God's anger for causing one of his little ones to stumble.

That is, getting in the way of one of these little ones coming to faith in Christ. And again, I think this is a warning for us not to be so quick to unchurch people, as it were, or form an in crowd of God's people, creating burdens for people, rules for belonging to God's people that they just can't bear, whether it's conforming to a certain social or traditional criteria or being able to speak at length on a particular doctrinal statement.

So we mustn't add to the free gift of the gospel our particular brand of legalism, whatever that might be. I think these verses are saying that those who received Jesus, who put their trust in him by receiving God's word given through his servants, these, says Jesus, are his little ones, they will receive their reward.

[13 : 52] No question about this. And we have no right to exclude them from our fellowship and worse still, come between them and their precious saviour, Jesus. Well, Jesus has been talking about one extreme so far and unhelpful kind of exclusivity.

And if we stop at this point, we might be tempted to water down the way of life and the moral demands of God's kingdom that Jesus also spoke about. Maybe we'd be tempted to think or say something like this.

Well, you know, we see in this passage today that Jesus isn't on about excluding people. You know, times have changed. The church needs to get in step with the culture, the thought of its day. Words like sin or judgment or hell, they're no longer appropriate for people living at the beginning of the 21st century.

They smell of legalism, of self-righteousness. But Jesus won't let us water down his exclusive claim to authority or the way of life that he calls us to live in obedience to him.

For if he speaks against a wrong kind of exclusivism, he also speaks in this passage against an undiscerning and undisciplined way of viewing sin in our lives and in the lives of others.

[15 : 02] See, according to Jesus, wrong belief about him and the wrong living that flow from this aren't great things that liberate us, as many teachers would lead us to believe. You know, we're being liberated from the shackles of a fundamentalist past and coming into our fullness as mature human beings.

No, that's not true. These are things that cause us to stumble, according to the Lord Jesus, leading inevitably to judgment, to hell, Jesus sees. So I think verse 42 also applies in this direction of the passage.

Remember back in verse 36 when Warwick was preaching to us last week, we heard there that Jesus had taken a child in his arms, showing what it means to receive Jesus. And now probably still holding that child, Jesus speaks of how seriously God treats anyone who would cause one such as these, a little one, a disciple of Christ, perhaps especially a new believer, to stumble, to be led into sin, to deny Christ in their thinking or in their actions.

You see, like a parent who is rightly protective of their child, who refuses to tolerate anything that would lead to their harm or destruction, Jesus is very protective of his little ones.

So those who would seek to lead them astray, beware. It would be better to be drowned than face the wrath of God that comes against those who would dare to lead his little ones away from his son.

[16 : 28] Well, we all have a grave responsibility, don't we, to each other, especially to young believers, especially if we have leadership or teaching roles. It matters what we teach, how we live, how we speak, whether or not we turn a blind eye to patterns of wrong thinking or living.

See, it may be more polite and personally safer in our culture not to have that hard conversation with our Christian friends or with our kids or something. You know, I didn't want to put them off. I didn't want to come on too strong. But in view of God's judgment, it's the most loving and wise thing for us to do.

It's certainly the most God-honoring thing for us to do. But of course, if we're actually going to be of use to our Christian brothers and sisters, indeed to the world around us, and honour God as we should, we need to take the sin in our own lives seriously first.

And Jesus talks about this now in verse 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.

And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame and to have two feet than to have two feet and to be thrown to hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out.

[17 : 40] 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 where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. I knew someone once who had a very novel philosophy about gardening that quite appealed to me.

And one of their classic sayings was, a weed is not a weed, it's just an unwanted plant. It's profound. A weed is not a weed, it's just an unwanted plant.

And this appealed to my, it still does, my natural laziness as a garden. You see, the weed is just another plant. It doesn't need to be pulled up. That's fantastic. It can be embraced into my garden just like another plant.

There's no more weeding for me to do. This is great news. It's fantastic news. What would Don Burke say? No, definitely not. Weeds are noxious invaders, aren't they? They take over your garden.

They choke it. They make it unproductive. They eventually kill off your flowers or your veggies or whatever you're trying to grow. They've got to come out and quickly. Now, in Western society, sin has come to be seen in a similar way, hasn't it?

[18 : 43] In fact, concepts such as sin or evil or judgment are often viewed as embarrassing hangovers from a less sophisticated age. It should no longer be spoken of in polite company. You see, it's not sexual immorality anymore.

No, it's a lifestyle choice. It's not vanity and pride. No, no, no. It's healthy self-respect. It's not greed and lust. No, it's a growing, healthy appetite.

It's not a noxious weed that needs to be removed. It's just another kind of plant to be welcomed into the garden. But Jesus is more of the school of Don Burke, at least when it comes to sin, I think.

He has zero tolerance for weeds. There's no room for redefinition or flirting with sin or a wait-and-see approach. Jesus commands us to show immediate and decisive action.

Things that lead to stumbling, to wrong belief, wrong actions, to a turning away from true faith in Jesus and the demands of his kingdom, they need to be ripped out, even if like an eye or a hand or a foot, they seem indispensable to our way of life.

[19 : 46] Imagine a doctor who, on discovering untreatable gangrenous flesh, said, look, Andy, let's just leave it there for a few months, see how it works its way into the body. This is an interesting experiment. We'll see if it works out.

We can see if we can work out a compromise here. No. If I'm going to live, the limb must be removed. Dr. Jesus' diagnosis is the same.

Now, of course, when Jesus speaks of amputating limbs and gouging out eyes, he is exaggerating to make his point. He's using a particular kind of speech. Otherwise, it would be a horrific sight each Sunday, wouldn't it?

Everybody sort of walking around looking horribly maimed, without exception. But neither should we water down the strength of Jesus' words in this passage. You see, Jesus is comprehensive.

Your problem might be a seeing thing, eyes, or a doing thing, hands and feet. Whatever it is, the things which lead to sin must be removed. So if looking at internet pornography is a problem, get rid of your computer at home.

[20 : 45] If violence and feelings of vengefulness are a problem, don't turn on the TV when you know there's a film that celebrates that kind of violence and revenge ethic. If it's feelings of resentment towards loved ones, perhaps especially a husband or a wife, don't allow feelings of being hard done by to control the way you think about them.

Instead, replace that thought with the prayer that God would make you into a person who loves sacrificially. Just worry about money, consume and control the way you live and the way you're starting to treat other people.

Give it away. Whatever it is that blocks your relationship with Jesus and living for him, Jesus our King says, it has to go. But it's difficult, isn't it?

It's really difficult. And sadly, it's not often the way we do deal with sin in our lives. We have other, far more sophisticated tactics for dealing with sin. One of them, of course, is the good old comparing game.

Yes, I've done that, but did you see that person on a current affair the other night? I mean, really, at least I'm not like that. I mean, deep down, basically, I'm a good person. Or we flirt with sin.

[21 : 50] We allow weeds into the garden until we can't tell the difference anymore and we start to give them other names. We define it away, as I've already spoken about. It's a bit like the classic question that every youth worker at some point gets asked.

Something like this. Is it okay to be a Christian and still get drunk occasionally with my non-Christian friends? Is it okay for a Christian underage to go to R-rated movies? Or is it okay for a Christian to go out with a non-Christian? What's the real question being asked here?

The question is, and I have asked this question myself, how much can I get away with and still be in God's good books? It's the wrong question, isn't it? It's upside down.

The question of Jesus' disciples is not what can I get away with, but how can I live to please my God? Not how can I squeeze Jesus into my life in such a way as to cause a minimum of inconvenience or need to change, but how can I become more like Jesus in every part of my life?

Well, part of Jesus' answer here is, be done with sin. Start again with Jesus as your King. Jesus died on the cross and was raised again so that we could be forgiven, so that we could die to sin, so that we could live to God.

[23 : 02] Jesus wants His disciples to live like it's the truth. Well, I wonder if you're in a dangerous position today, in need of radical surgery.

Well, please listen to what Jesus is saying to all of us by His Spirit. Come back to Jesus, accept His forgiveness, ask Him to help you to have a fresh start living His way today, this morning.

Jesus says these things for good reason. There's a clear logic to Jesus' teaching here. You see, these aren't the arbitrary rules of an overzealous schoolteacher, no offence to schoolteachers here today.

This isn't some wows who wants to rip us off and stop us from really living life, you know, really getting into life. No, this is Jesus who wants us to choose life, not death, to do the things that are consistent with our heavenly calling rather than act as if we belong to a world living in rebellion against Him that will experience God's eternal judgment.

See, the sacrifices involved in living God's way, like the amputation of a diseased limb, though painful at the time, actually do make sense. Have another look at verses 43 to 48 there of Mark 9.

[24 : 17] It is better to enter life now and into eternity, into God's kingdom, maimed as it were, than to give in to sin and its consequences. And Jesus' strong warning in these verses reveals His amazing love for us, again, like a parent for a child.

I remember when I was at school, a friend used to hang on me from time to time because of what he saw as the strict rule of my parents. He said, look, I, on the other hand, can do anything. My parents won't do or say a thing.

They won't even lift a finger. It's great. But I remember one day he came to me and he was in tears, actually. He said, look, I wish my parents were more like yours. I couldn't believe it. I said, what are you talking about? You hate my parents.

What do you mean? He said, well, I wish they cared enough to tell me off from time to time. See, Jesus, with this teaching, as hard as it is, shows His great love for us.

He doesn't want us to be destroyed, to choose death and judgment. He wants us to choose life. Here is the Father's love. He sends His one and only Son to save us and to change us.

[25 : 18] God cares enough to tell us what His kingdom is really like, what it means to be God's people living in His world with Christ as our King. And when it comes to teaching about being a disciple, to discipleship, well, Jesus is a realist, isn't He?

Verse 49, everyone will be salted with fire. Sacrifices in the Old Testament were salted. God's people were to live lives, as we see right through chapters 8 to 9 of Mark's Gospel, of self-sacrifice, dying to self, living to God.

And Jesus says that such a life of sacrifice will include facing trials, being salted with fire in that sense, being opposed, even persecuted for living God's way. Salted with fire could also be a reference to the fact that everyone will be held accountable on Judgment Day, without exception, facing the fire of God's final judgment, as it were.

But I think the point here is that trials, being opposed or suffering for Christ's sake, and ultimately Judgment Day, these will be the times at which our true identity will be revealed, that will be shown for who we are, and even have an effect on those around us.

And in Jesus' words, which closed this section, he tells us that we show forth our true identity as disciples, by being salty Christians. Now verse 49 again, For everyone will be salted with fire.

[26 : 42] 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. Now salt was used as a preservative, as we know, before refrigeration.

Salt also brings flavour, it spices things up, as we sometimes still use it today. But once it's lost its saltiness, it can't be seasoned, it can't be re-salted, it's useless, isn't it?

It ceases to fulfil the function for which it's made. Jesus is saying Christians need to stand out in a bland world, like salt in food, like spicy food.

We are to have an effect on the world around us. What's the point of just falling into the way the world around us thinks about Jesus, or lives ignoring God? See, Christians are often accused of being the wowzers, boring, irrelevant, they're like bland food.

According to Jesus, actually, the opposite is true. In fact, the more we conform to the world around us, the more unspicy, irrelevant, and unproductive for God, and useless to the world around us, we actually become.

[27 : 44] Jesus says, Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. Be different, stand out, in the way you treat each other, in what you place your confidence in, in the way you view Jesus, in the way you treat his children, whoever they are, in your zero tolerance to sin in your life.

Be a true radical, a true non-conformist, really serve your neighbour by living as a disciple of Christ. Jesus has been responding to the disciples, who at this point were divided.

They weren't loving each other like brothers. They were imitating the world in its selfish ambition. They were asking, Who's the greatest? Instead of, How can I serve? Or, Who can I serve?

Jesus says, Be salty, stand out, be different. Then he says, You will relate rightly to each other. And the words of verse 50, Be at peace with one another.

And of course, we'll also relate rightly to the world, loving the world in a right way, I think, recommending a different way of life, of true freedom, of real God-honouring life, that is eternal.

[28 : 53] Life that comes only, as a gift of God, given through his Son, the Lord Jesus. Well, let's ask God to enable us, to take his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, on his own terms, as our only King.

And let's ask him to help us, to embrace the way of life, that he died, and was raised from the dead, to enable us to live. Let's pray. Let's pray.