

# Mark 9:38-50 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

## Another Exorcist

<sup>38</sup> John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone<sup>[a]</sup> casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup> 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.

## Temptations to Sin

<sup>42</sup> "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,<sup>[b]</sup> it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. <sup>43</sup> 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,<sup>[c]</sup> to the unquenchable fire.<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>[e][f]</sup> <sup>47</sup> 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,<sup>[g]</sup> <sup>48</sup> where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

<sup>49</sup> "For everyone will be salted with fire.<sup>[h]</sup> <sup>50</sup> Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?<sup>[i]</sup> Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

# James 5:1-6<sup>New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)</sup>

## Warning to Rich Oppressors

**5** Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. <sup>2</sup>Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. <sup>3</sup>Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure<sup>[a]</sup> for the last days. <sup>4</sup>Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. <sup>5</sup>You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. <sup>6</sup>You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

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Mark 9:38-50; James 5: 1-6

Punished *By* Our Sin or *For* Our Sin

It has been a rather embarrassing week to own two Volkswagens. If you haven't heard the news yet, VW designed some of their engines, the diesels in particular, to fake pass the emissions test. The cars really weren't the "clean diesel" that they advertised. Rather, when they were put on the machine for emissions testing, the engine was designed to be triggered in such a way that it could pass the test though it was woefully awful in spewing dirty exhaust during regular driving times.

On the flip side of that, it's a good day to be a graduate of West Virginia University. It was WVU's Center for Alternative Fuels, Engines, and Emissions that was hired by the International Council on Clean Transportation to test the emission of diesel vehicles while in motion. They were the ones who discovered the discrepancy and reported it, which has led VW to issue apologies and pay fines and start recalling cars, and at the same time, the negative press has taken their stock falling into a significant nose dive. Buddhists would call that karmic retribution. But in many ways it's just common sense. When someone or some entity builds that kind of a lie – doesn't it make sense that eventually the deception would be discovered?

In sharing these two biblical texts for today – we come up against a similar principle. Sin is not something that one can hide, at least not long term. We don't call it Karma, but religiously it's a similar understanding. We are punished for our bad behaviors. In Christianity, sometimes we think that it's a future thing waiting for us after we die. We **WILL BE** punished for our bad

behaviors, later on, if they are bad enough to merit a hellacious afterlife. But let's pay attention to what these texts are trying to tell us about sin and the consequences of our sin. In James, I hear more corporate overtones of the sinfulness that follows greed, and for Jesus speaking through Mark's gospel, we get an interpersonal understanding of the dynamics of sin that, by example, we can easily lead others astray. In both cases, there will be dire consequences. James says, your gain will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. And from Jesus, you might end up in hell where that fire is never quenched. Strong words!

Certainly for Volkswagen, the consequences of their lie will have effects on their company for years to come. The trust that they worked to develop in their customer base has been compromised. Those who held VW stock are getting rid of it as quickly as they can, and surely at a loss. Those in the upper level of management who were privy to and perpetuated the research that allowed this to happen have been caught not only lying but doing environmental damage. How do you get another job from there? (If you have an answer to that question – I may not want to know what it is.) There is no cover up or blame they can shift around to get away with it – no, not this time. So what happens now?

This, to me, is evidence of what it means to be punished BY our sins, rather than FOR our sins. Volkswagen won't have to wait to feel this burn. The punishments are falling down all around them. Some of those punishments will seem well-deserved. They will get what's coming to them as they make massive pay-outs to set this right. And yet perhaps at the level of the dealers and supporters of the company – maybe they are just casualties of a larger picture if they were truly unaware of what their parent company was doing. Will this greedy stupidity to nab a bigger market share kill VW? It's hard to tell at this point. I hope not. We have grown fond of our zippy little Jetta and family friendly Golf Sportswagen, but the company will have to be

amazing in its turn-around if they want to get me to buy another one down the road when our cars wear out.

However, it is interesting to note that in these few verses from James, verses that would never be read in church if one ONLY followed the lectionary, God is distinctly on the side of the laborers and harvesters. God hears their cry when they've been physically overworked and dreadfully underpaid. And God is frustrated with the land-owners, the rich CEO's of biblical times, who would take advantage of cheap labor and cutting corners to grow all the richer. Their luxury and pleasure is exactly what will condemn them – BECAUSE it has been at the expense of others, the workers in their care, those whose lives depended on the whole enterprise being successful.

These lines were perhaps difficult for James to write. They can be difficult for us to hear – especially as we are surrounded by a sea of luxuries and pleasures just by virtue of living in the United States. But as you read through James, he's pointing out some of the things we would do well to notice ourselves. He's not condemning abundance or pleasure so much as he's condemning the nature of growing richer BY taking advantage of the poor. In other parts of this letter, he condemns showing favor to the rich – just because they are rich, and to the rich, he reminds them that they are obligated by the gospel to show charity and treat their fellow human beings who work for them as real people.

The Pope's decision to have lunch with the homeless rather than stay and dine with the most powerful legislators in the world speaks volumes about this matter. It is obvious that Pope Francis takes verses like this pretty darn seriously. He listens to the forgotten ones, the outcast, and the impoverished, and then the ones with fattened hearts turn their anger toward the righteous one. To the point of murder? I don't know, but there are folks foaming at the mouth

over what the Pope is doing out of love. That's pretty serious inner judgment going on right there! James said it first, but we can feel it in our culture. The ones with ill-gotten gain are trying to hold on to their possessions, but their things and positions of power and need for favors are what will condemn them. Who needs to feel the wrath of hell, when it probably feels bad enough to have your invitation rejected by the most popular Pope in what seems like forever? And my friends, this has less to do with political affiliation than you might think. Whenever such light shines in a dark place, those who love the darkness scurry like cockroaches to find a place to hide, that's true. And yet, the Pope's visit to Congress also revealed many who were open to welcoming the light of Christ. John Boehner's emotional response and following resignation is not something to be ignored in all this. I hope and pray for his voice to come back even stronger in future days in ways that will help us mend the fabric of our nation.

In the Christian tradition, James and Jesus are both voices that say that we will be punished for our sins as well as by them. It's true. There's no completely getting away from Dante's fiery inferno! Both talk about fire and hell in ways that should scare us. And yet, I want us to remember and acknowledge that the sin itself has consequences. If we ONLY think of sin as punishable in the afterlife, I believe we take it less seriously. The delayed punishment seems acceptable in light of the riches I get for exploiting my workers today. Leading less savvy Christians astray seems a fine thing to do if I can get my way rather than having to listen to them. Jesus' metaphor is cutting, quite literally. If your eye causes you to sin, cut it out. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Better to be maimed than hurtful toward your fellow human beings.

These texts are tough ones to be sure, but we are living in tough times. Maybe we need them now more than ever. The people who walked in darkness are hungry for the light. We need Christ's light to remind us of the obligations we have to our fellow human beings. Businesses

aren't truly profitable when they only profit the few at the top. If we cause our fellow human beings to stumble, like by making a plan to fake emissions standards, it will have implications all down the line from the managers and engineers, to the dealers and car owners. I believe we are living in a time of great exposure to the truth, not unlike the time of Jesus and the great light he brought to humanity. The corruption can no longer bear the light of day. And those who have been the good and faithful servants also need to be recognized as such. Not all businesses are bad businesses. We need to be able to exchange goods and ideas in an economy that values work and cares for workers. Not all politicians want to pull apart the country to score a few points. Some are in the muck of it because they believe in our country and her people. There are many, many good people out there waiting to find their voice. Will it feel like a burning away – like eternal flames and like entering the pits of hell? Possibly. Sin has a high price and causes much damage in its wake. We've lived in the midst of it since the beginning, and no one escapes its touch. We can want our cars and our food and our schools to be exemplary models of clean energy, and good health, and wise teaching and yet none of us lives in a sin-free bubble, no matter how much we would like to. I cannot make absolutely pure choices, no matter how hard I might try.