

In a way, today's text seems a lot like life: So **many** points that you end up not knowing what the real point is:

Point Number 1: Jesus teaches, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Okay, I can understand that.

Point Number 2: Jesus teaches us not to do something to weaken another's faith. That definitely makes sense. Okay to that, too.

Point Number 3: Jesus teaches that if any part of our body causes us to sin it would be better to cut it off than to miss out on eternal life. What?! That's **not** okay! But wait, please relax; Jesus is speaking **figuratively** here not literally. However, He is making a very important point: Do whatever it takes to avoid hell- and **that's** definitely okay.

Point Number 4: Jesus says, "Have salt in yourselves." Okay; after all, we are to be the "salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13). So, let's flavor things up, make the world a better place-with our words and actions. Finally, Point 5: "Be at peace with each other."

Isn't this text a lot like life? So many points, good points, but in the end, you may well not know what the **main** point is. (Pause 4-5 seconds)

Several years ago in Montana, a shepherd got sick and was taken to the hospital in the town of Fort Benton. His sheep dog followed his master to the hospital and kept watch outside his door. Sadly, the shepherd died and his body was taken to the train to be shipped back to his family out East. The dog, Shep was his name, appeared at the train station. He cried for his master, and in vain he chased the train down the tracks. For the next five and a half years, Shep met every train that came into Fort Benton, hoping that one of the passengers getting off would be his master. Shep became well known, and kind people took care of him; but he refused to be taken to anyone's home. He had only one devotion: waiting for his master to return. Shep's devotion did not waver until the cold winter day in 1941 when he died.

It's a true story; and when I read it, I couldn't help but think: If only I, if only we, could demonstrate that same unwavering devotion to our heavenly Master. When we take our eyes off Jesus, day-to-day living loses its ultimate purpose, it's point.

Take your eyes off Jesus, for example, and the Bible becomes a book of nice moral & spiritual teachings. That's why some people, even though they may not be believers, like the book of Proverbs. Nice teachings, but they're not connected. Without Jesus, what's the ultimate point?

Another example: Take your eyes off of Jesus, and **other** things become your reason for living. They may be good things, like family, health, or career. Or bad things, like drugs, excessive use of alcohol, greed - whatever. If a lot of **things** are vying for your heart, chances are you feel pulled in different directions, scattered, with no ultimate purpose in life.

The point is, or should be, that **all** our being **all** the time should be focused on our Savior, Jesus. In Deuteronomy 6:5, God makes His **command** quite clear: "Love the Lord your God with **all** your heart and with **all** your soul and with **all** your strength."

Unlike Shep's focused devotion to his earthly master, our devotion to our Savior is often scattered. None of us, nobody, is as devoted to the Lord Jesus as they should be. But wouldn't it be something if we lived every day in joyful expectation that our Lord Jesus could return at any time, even today, just as He promised. That's why He's told us to watch and be ready. Wouldn't it be a tremendous blessing if on any given Sunday almost every able-bodied member of First Lutheran was here whenever they possibly could be like Shep was there for every train that came into town?

Just showing up, though, isn't enough. Once our bodies are here in attendance, whether that attendance is sporadic or every Sunday, is our mind and heart here too, or is it elsewhere? Instead of concentrating on listening to God's Word, are your eyes looking around to see who else is here or not here, what so-and-so is wearing, how someone else's kids are behaving? Do we ever fit in with the Pharisees about whom Jesus once said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." I know I've felt convicted of that at times, when during a hymn I've found my thoughts wandering to what I want to do after church or wondering what's for lunch, I'm getting kind of hungry here! The sad fact is none of us is as devoted to God as we should be, in the way that we think, in the things that we say, and in all that we do. As we confess in the

Small Catechism concerning the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "We daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment." So, what's the solution?

Jesus gives us some painful prescriptions; "If your hand causes you to sin cut it off... If your foot causes you to sin, cut *it* off... And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out". This is His compelling way of telling each of us to be done with sin so that we avoid eternal death and receive His gift of life.

C.S. Lewis, wrote, "Christ says, 'Give me all. I don't want so much of your money and so much of your work- I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there; I want to have the whole tree down... Hand over the whole natural self... I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you *Myself*; my Own will shall become *yours*.'" (C.S. Lewis, "Beyond Personality," in Sermon Illustrations for the Gospel Lessons [St. Louis: Concordia, 1982, 81]. God's Son, Jesus, calls for our sin to be cut out and Him to be put in its place.

One very important thing any carpenter or construction worker knows is that in order to do the proper work you need the proper *tool*. You wouldn't use a hammer to cut a piece of wood and a saw won't do you a whole lot of good when you're pouring wet cement. The same goes for spiritual construction. In order to root out a spiritual problem, namely sin, it calls for using the proper spiritual tools.

In this case only one tool will do. In order to get rid of our sin, God uses the mighty power tool of His Holy Word. Hebrews 4:12 describes how strong and effective it is: "For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

The Word of God is like a two-edged sword, only much sharper. One side is the Law, the other side is the Gospel. The Law portion of God's Word exposes our sin. It cuts us open, down to our thoughts and the attitude of our heart, to realize how we haven't loved God as we should, that we haven't loved our neighbor *as* ourselves. After this half of the sword of God's Word has done it's work and left us feeling sorrow over

our sin, we're ready for the second side of God's powerful Word to go to work: the Gospel! The Gospel is the Good News that through Christ; there is total and complete forgiveness. You are set free from sin and from the power of the law to condemn. As Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!"

Through His perfect life and sacrificial death in our place Jesus has dealt **decisively** with sin. Through His victorious rising to life, our Lord assures us that all Who trust in Him will live forever in the joys of paradise. We believers in Christ have so much to look forward to, the indescribable beauty of heaven!

Even now on this earth, while we must deal with the consequences of living in a sinful world. A place where things don't go as they should, our lives are made better by the Good News of Christ. In Romans 5:1 St. Paul proclaims, "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Then interestingly, a little later on, in Romans 12:18, He adds: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." In other words, since God has made peace with us through His Son, we are to live at peace with others. So, when Jesus says in our text "Have salt within yourself," He is telling us that since You have been seasoned with God's forgiveness, love, and peace, you in turn, are to share that forgiveness, love, and peace with others.

Now let's see how this all comes together in today's text from Mark 9, as we tie all Jesus' points together:

Point 1. Jesus teaches, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Point 2. 'Don't do something to weaken another's faith.'

Point 3. 'It would be better to mutilate yourself than to miss out on eternal life.'

Point 4. "Have salt in yourselves."

Finally, Point 5. Jesus says, "Be at peace with each other."

"Be at **peace** with each other." This verse reminds me of the slogan that I've seen on everything from t-shirts to bumper stickers:

"No Jesus (N-O); no peace. Know Jesus; (K-N-O-W) know peace."

So, center all of your being all the time on Jesus. At the end of the text, at the end of all the striving, at the end of *life*- at the end, we learn the point of it all: (Pause 1-2 seconds) Jesus, the *Prince* of Peace. It really is all about Him and what He's done for us! Peace be with you! Amen.