



"Hokey-Pokey"
Rev. Dr. Scott Field
Mark 9:38-50
September 30, 2018
9:15 AM Service

The Challenge of Decluttering

If you've attempted to declutter your living space, or down-size your home, clean out the basement or organize the garage, you know how challenging it can be.

Dr. Alice Boyes, in the current issue of *Psychology Today*, lists ten things we might find difficult to get rid of---but ought to nonetheless.

1. Items you took for free but shouldn't have
 2. Old electronics
 3. Gifts you don't want
 4. Items where you've been thinking, "I should do something with that" but you haven't.
 5. Useful items where you have more than you need
 6. Purchases you regret
 7. Items that expired before you used them
 8. Items you've already kept for a while (when you never should have kept the item in the first place)
 9. Physical manuals when you have a PDF copy
 10. Items with memories
- (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-practice/201809/why-decluttering-is-so-hard>)

Part of the reality here is that we have a hard time dealing with reality.

Here are three "realities" involved:

1. We're the ones who got the stuff or maintain the stuff in the first place. This is our choice.
2. We think we have unlimited time – so we can always take on things that we'll get to "when we have time." But our time and energy are actually limited.
3. We think we have plenty of space – but we don't.

So often we are attempting too much and too many when we actually have too little time and too few square feet of space.

When we down-size, when we intentionally and deliberately move into a smaller space, we get the reality that some of what we have will need to go. But oh, how hard!

This is difficult because it is radical. We have to make decisions on what is “most important”, “most useful”, and “most valuable.”

We approach a lot of life in this way of presuming we can handle more than we actually can, have more capability than we actually do, and are more expert at multiple projects, priorities, timelines, and outcomes than we actually are.

This includes our spirituality in general and our faith in Christ specifically. When it comes to the spirituality we practice it is, like our decorating style, eclectic; some of this and some of that because we like it – for whatever reason. And when it comes to our faith in Christ specifically, well, since we have a lot of various things we believe, it seems to be sort of like “Jesus among all the other gods we worship.”

This leaves us in our spiritual lives generally, or our faith in Christ specifically, cluttered. Competing loyalties. Competing loves. Competing expectations for ourselves, for ourselves, and for God.

Decluttering our soul is pretty radical, too.

And, like the other areas of our lives, we think we have unlimited time to attend to our soul. And we have unlimited ability to make competing loyalties mesh seamlessly.

In this, however, we are not simply fooling ourselves, but leaving ourselves at grave risk.

Let’s dive into the Scripture where Jesus pulls back the curtain on our common self-deception.

Who’s in and Who’s Out?

³⁸ John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he wasn’t in our group.”

³⁹ “Don’t stop him!” Jesus said. “No one who performs a miracle in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ Anyone who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I tell you the truth, that person will surely be rewarded.”

You may remember last week that when we were considering the disciples of Jesus, the earliest followers, that they had a propensity to fuss and compete with each other over who was best, first, most faithful. And the response of Jesus was that the greatness is marked by serving others, not being first ahead of all the rest.

The scene shifts now. Instead of competing amongst themselves, it appears that somebody is cutting in on the disciples’ self-perception as sole distributors of “the power of God.”

There is someone who is casting out demons from afflicted people – and he is doing it in the name of Jesus. The disciples are upset because this man is not “one of them.” He’s kind of doing it on his own without a license authorizing him to use the name of Jesus – or something like that. The disciples are miffed and want the man stopped. Jesus, however, reprimands them sharply. If the man isn’t against us he should be welcomed as part of the Kingdom of God infiltrating the world. The mercy and grace of God show up in thousands of places that you and I might not expect. Sometimes faith is growing in people, like the freshening of a breeze, so softly that we don’t perceive it. This is like Jesus’ story about

the seed scattered indiscriminately. The seed is the word of God and sometimes it takes root not just in the carefully planned garden plot we have in mind but also in whatever place the seed happens to land. (Mark 4:1-20; 26-29).

The focus shifts again – from what is going on “out there” where we draw circles on who is in with Jesus and who is out – to “in here”, among the followers of Jesus. Because the Lord Jesus speaks very directly about whether we, the ones who claim to be his followers, are actually “in” ourselves...or whether we are playing at religion and in so doing walking the line between heaven and hell.

Living with the Long View

But if you cause one of these little ones who trust in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone hung around your neck. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better to enter eternal life with only one hand than to go into the unquenchable fires of hell with two hands. ⁴⁵ If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better to enter eternal life with only one foot than to be thrown into hell with two feet. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. It's better to enter the Kingdom of God with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ 'where the maggots never die and the fire never goes out.'

There is a lot in this passage – a lot that is uncomfortable for middle of the road Methodists in Middle America. The late Father Andrew Greeley, Roman Catholic priest and professor of sociology said,

“If Jesus makes you feel comfortable with your agenda, then he's not Jesus.... Once you domesticate Jesus, he isn't there anymore.”

Andrew Greeley, "There's No Solving Mystery of Christ," Chicago Sun-Times (1- 16-04)

Let's take up a few of these uncomfortable phrases and words to bring some clarity.

Fall into sin/causes you to sin: This is a Greek verb, passive voice, (σκάνδαλο), from which we get our word “scandalize”. It means something that we find to be unacceptable and which causes us to fall away from our devotion to Christ, from the moral standards of following Christ, and/or from the doctrines of the Christian faith.

What would make someone fall away from their faith in Christ and all it entails?

Jesus identifies four means through which we can be tripped up in our singular devotion to Christ:

- The influence of others: If you (or anyone) causes someone who trusts in Christ to fall away.
- Your hand: that is, if what you do – as a job, as hobby, a pastime keeps you from pure and holy devotion to Christ.
- Your foot: that is, if where you are, the setting in which you find yourself...maybe the family or friends you have or the people whose opinion of you is so important, their acceptance so valuable that you are willing to betray your Savior
- Your eyes: that is, our desires, ambitions, jealousies, covetousness, addictions.

What we do, where we are, what we desire, and who influences us – these are the ways we can be pulled away from our devotion to the Lord, rationalize our disobedience to God’s way, and tailor our beliefs to include ourselves in the company of the righteous when our hearts are actually bobbing and weaving to hide our deception from ourselves.

Cut it off/gouge it out:

Jesus uses startling language here. It is hyperbolic, not literal. We are not to literally amputate a hand or a foot or gouge out an eye. How come? This is a Hebraism – a Hebrew way of speaking in concrete and practical terms about something that is not so concrete. It actually means, be done with focusing your eyes on what inflames your desires. Stop doing whatever it is you do that takes you away from your devotion to Christ. Quit going to the places or being with the people who pull you away from Christ. The point is not to taper off the temptation, not to wean ourselves from it. Stop it. Period.

Why so dramatic? Your eternal destiny hangs in the balance.

This is playing with poison that hardens our hearts, muffles our ears, and steals our faith in Christ. So, Jesus is resolute and demanding. Don’t allow two masters in our lives. Don’t try to be holy enough to be righteous and sinful enough to have fun. Don’t fall for the demonic lie that God is holding out on you, that God does NOT have your best interest at heart, that you know better than the Almighty about what is true, right, joyful, and beautiful.

Hell, where the maggots never die and the fire never goes out.

The word we translate in English as “hell” is the Greek word (gehenna). That itself is a transliteration of the Hebrew referring to the Valley of Hinnom, on the southwest edge of Jerusalem. It was the place where, in Old Testament times, the people of Israel had fallen away under the influence of the culture around them. They began to worship the pagan god Moloch. And the form of worship of Moloch included the Jewish people sacrificing their children by fire to this pagan deity. (see Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5-6; 32:35) King Josiah put an end to this dreadful practice (2 Kings 23:10); the Valley of Hinnom came to be used as a place where human excrement and rubbish, including animal carcasses, were disposed of and burned. The fires of gehenna never went out and the worms never died. It became the local reference point for God’s eternal punishment.

I suspect there are some among us smirking at the possibility of hell. Aren’t we over that yet, Pastor? I certainly hope not!

Our ideas of tolerance for everything and presumption that God tolerates everything are so often just a cheap parody of love. God’s love is ferocious, tenacious, and relentless. It is a jealous love that rescues, forgives and redeems all who want to be rescued, redeemed, and forgiven; all who, as Jesus said, repent and trust the good news of God’s Kingdom.

But God is just. God takes you and me seriously; our choices, our character, and our desires. There is no blame-shifting. No deferring No delegating. Except in rare cases of mental disability, we are responsible and accountable. Hell is an expression of God’s love for the world through which God’s justice is served. Despite all of our jokes about hell, according to the words of Jesus, God takes that very seriously, too.

It's better (to make the sacrificial choice now) than to spend eternity in hell.

Jesus then states the obvious value proposition. Since life here is temporary, what we love here, what we do here, where we place ourselves here is temporary – and eternity is forever, it is better to make the sacrificial choice now to draw close to Christ, follow his ways, and live by his Word.

49 "For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? You must have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live in peace with each other."

Jesus ends this teaching on the eternal consequences of our choices with another image. It is about salt and sacrifices. The sacrifices he's just mentioned have to do with what we love, what we do, and where we place ourselves. You are likely not familiar that salt was an integral part of most sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple (See Leviticus 2:13; 2 Chronicles 13:5; Numbers 18:19; Ezekiel 16:4; 43:24). Salt was one of the ways of making covenants in the ancient Middle East. Covenants are relationships based on promises. The idea of salting a sacrifice was to indicate that it was an unbreakable and eternal relationship of promises. Salt was also used for seasoning and as an antiseptic Jesus and the people of his region, however, were familiar with the salt mined near the Dead Sea which could also contain mostly gypsum. So the metaphor has to do with not only looking like salt, but actually being salt – a symbol of authentic and undiluted devotion to the Lord; a promise that is authentic and disinfects the soul from other temptations. It preserves faith from spoilage.

Enough "Biblish!" What does this salty sacrifice actually look like?

Here's one example of sacrificing other desires to align ourselves with Christ's way and word and mission.

At the age of 19, Kylie Bisutti beat out 10,000 other contestants in the 2009 Victoria's Secret Model Search contest. But Bisutti said that getting married and growing in her Christian faith caused her to see her career in a different light. In an interview Kylie said, [The modeling world] is a very hard industry to be in without falling into things you don't want to do It's a very tempting industry Victoria's Secret was my absolutely biggest goal in life, and it was all I ever wanted career-wise [But] I'm a Christian, and reading the Bible more, I was becoming more convicted about it My body should only be for my husband, and it's just a sacred thing. I didn't really want to be that kind of role model for younger girls because I had a lot of younger Christian girls that were looking up to me and then thinking that it was OK for them to walk around and show their bodies in lingerie to guys. It was pretty crazy because I finally achieved my biggest dream, the dream that I always wanted, but when I finally got it, it wasn't all that I thought it would be.

(Adapted from interview on 2-2-12. See her book, *I'm no Angel: From Victoria's Secret Model to Role Model*)

So, you might be wondering what this all has to do with the Hokey Pokey.

Some of us have fallen into a hokey-pokey faith where we put part of ourselves in, practice our faith in Jesus enough to convince ourselves that we are fully devoted; but, our desires and behaviors and influences from others overall indicate that we're pretty much a mixed bag.

The Lord can deal with a mixed bag – that is why even a small amount of faith is at least a beginning and is to be nurtured rather than snuffed out. Our expectation, however, is that over time and under the influence of the Holy Spirit, we put our whole self in. As we experience that decluttering in our soul, we have the joy of relationship with the Lord, we have the assurance of our eternity in heaven with him, and we have an impact on those around us. That's the long view.