

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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EVERYONE WILL BE SALTED WITH FIRE

Mark 9:49-50

In the Scriptures, a few verses have the reputation of being ‘one of the most difficult passages in the Bible.’ We are going to study one of those today. The passage that I have in mind is Mark 9:49. We will read v. 50 as well. Mark 9:49-50.

Mark 9:49. For everyone will be salted with fire.

50 Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

It applies to everyone

For everyone will be salted with fire. That is our verse. What does that mean? *For everyone will be salted with fire.* This passage is found only in the gospel of Mark. It has just a few words, but its meaning is not necessarily obvious. It received numerous interpretations. Well, let’s take a close look at this verse and try to understand Jesus’ mind here.

‘Everyone will be salted with fire.’ The first thing to notice is that the statement relates to everyone. It is not just for some people. Every single person will be salted with fire. Everyone means you, me, and every human on earth. Not just the Christians. The non-Christians also. Everyone. Jesus is talking about ‘something’ that is going to affect every human being. Any interpretation of this verse has to take that into account.

Fire, salt and sacrifice

But what is this ‘something’ that the Lord is talking about? What we can say at this point is that this ‘something’ has to do with fire and salt, because Jesus is talking about being ‘salted with fire.’ Notice here the conjunction of fire and salt. Fire and salt are put together in the same sentence. Well, that must mean something. It seems to me that if we can find out why salt and fire are together here, we will be very close to Jesus’ thinking when He said those words.

Think about the Bible in its entirety. Where in the word of God do we find fire and salt together? Fire and salt found side by side, where? I can think of one place only, one place in the Bible. And it is in the sacrifice. Think of the OT sacrificial system. Think especially of the OT sacrifices. Fire and salt come together on the altar of sacrifice.

The OT has a lot to say about sacrifices. The first seven chapters of Leviticus give detailed instructions to Israel for offering sacrifices to God. Five types of offering are mentioned: the burnt

offering, the grain offering, the peace offering, the guilt offering and the sin offering. These five sacrificial offerings have one thing in common: the burning of animals or flour with fire on the altar.

Then there is the salt. The OT tells us that no sacrifice could ever be offered to God without salt. Salt must be found in every sacrifice. Let's read Leviticus 2:13.

*Leviticus 2:13. You shall season all your cereal offerings with salt; you shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be lacking from your cereal offering; with **all your offerings you shall offer salt.***

You see how salt, fire and sacrifices come together. Without fire, there can be no sacrifice. Without salt, there can be no sacrifice either. Fire and salt are essential elements of the OT sacrificial system.

Let's go back to our verse. *For everyone will be salted with fire.* Notice another thing. The fire will substitute the salt. 'Everyone will be salted,' that is a verb – being salted; 'with fire,' that is a noun. The fire will take the place of the salt in us. As you know, salt and fire are both purifying elements. Salt and fire will purify us in the sacrifice. Salt and fire will exercise their purifying properties on everyone in the sacrificial process. Everybody is going to be purified by the salt and the fire. And since salt and fire are essential elements of the sacrifices, it means that everybody is going to be a sacrifice. This is very important to remember. Everybody is going to be a sacrifice, the believer and the unbeliever. In that statement, the Lord Jesus gives no choice.

Have salt in yourselves

Then in v. 50, Jesus continues to talk about the topic of salt. After saying that 'Everybody is going to be salted with fire,' He says, *Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.*

These words were addressed to the disciples. Remember the context. Mark 9:33 gives us the context. *And they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest.* ³⁵ *And he sat down and called the twelve; and he said to them, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."* Jesus was with his disciples in a house in Capernaum, trying to teach them a lesson about true greatness. And when He said in v. 49, *For everyone will be salted with fire,* He was speaking exclusively to the Twelve.

As you know, salt refers to believers in the NT. We can take for example Matthew 5:13 where Jesus said, *You are the salt of the earth.* 'You, my disciples, are the salt of the earth.' And then in that same verse, interestingly, Jesus asked this question. 'If salt has lost its flavor, what are you going to do with it?' *How shall it be seasoned?* This is interesting because it is almost the same question that we find in Mark 9:50. *But if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it?* Good question. How do you season it? Well, in Matthew 5, Jesus tells us that it has to be thrown out because it is good for nothing anymore. *It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men* (Matthew 5:13).

I mentioned in the introduction of this lesson that in the OT, the conjunction of salt and fire is found in the sacrifices. Salt and fire come together in every sacrifice offered to God. But we find also this conjunction of salt and fire in the NT. Where? In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:13-14. After saying *You are the salt of the earth,* Jesus goes on to say, *You are the light of the world.* Light is fire. Light was produced by burning oil in those days. So we find salt and fire together in the Sermon on the Mount. What does that mean? Remember what we said. Fire and salt come together on the altar of sacrifice. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, this means that every believer has to be a

sacrifice. Jesus was speaking to his disciples in his Sermon on the Mount, and He was saying that each one of them had to be a sacrifice to God.

This salt then, has to do with sacrifice. We are talking about ‘sacrificial salt.’ When the Lord Jesus said, *Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another* (Mark 9:50), He was saying, ‘Have this sacrificial salt in yourselves. This is what makes a disciple a true disciple. If you have lost the spirit of sacrifice, how are you going to live for one another? Because this is the essence of sacrifice, living for one another. If you have the spirit of sacrifice in you, then you will be at peace with one another. Nobody will be arguing about who is the greatest.’ Remember that this section began with a conversation in which Jesus was speaking to His disciples. He asked them, *What were you arguing about on the road?* (v. 33). The disciples were embarrassed. *They kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest* (v. 34). They knew that it was a topic they should not have discussed. If we have the spirit of service, the spirit of sacrifice, we will not be interested in discussing the question of who is the greatest.

God’s purpose for man

What is the application of all this? Well, I would like to suggest that this has to do with the purpose of God for mankind. There are these classic questions. If God created man, what was his purpose? Why are we here in the world today? Where are we going? What is the direction of our lives? We have all heard those questions, but very few take them seriously. ‘Oh, it’s too philosophical. There is no answer to these questions.’ Well, I don’t think it is true. The Bible does have an answer. What is the purpose of God for you and for me? It is that each one of us will be a sacrifice. *Everyone will be salted with fire.*

God did not create us so that we can do our own things, just enjoy ourselves and ignore his existence. He made us in his image for a purpose, and his image is revealed in his Son. *He who has seen me has seen the Father*, Jesus said in John 14:9. And what does Jesus’ character look like? Jesus also said, ‘I came into the world not to be served, but to serve – to give my life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)’ In this statement, Christ reveals clearly the sacrificial nature of his character and of his mission.

That was God’s plan for his Son, to be a sacrifice for our sins. And God’s plan is also that we live a life of sacrifice. God’s nature, his whole character, is self-giving. This is what love is all about. It gives itself all the time. And if we are made in the image of God, we are to be like that too. The whole purpose of God for us today, the apostle Paul said in Romans 8:29, is to become conformed to the image of his Son, to be like Jesus. How do we become like Jesus? By having the same sacrificial attitude, by having the same mind of Christ who accepted to give his life as a ransom for us. That is the ultimate sacrifice. And we are called to live this kind of sacrificial life. You know, I have this dream. If each person starts to live not only for himself or herself, but also for the other person, think of the impact that it would have on our society. Imagine a society in which every person burns with the spirit of self-sacrifice, a society in which each lives for the other and all live for each. This is the vision that we can have when we talk about this fire, the fire of sacrifice, the fire of God burning in our soul.

So we see first the love of God in this spirit of sacrifice. But secondly, we see also the wisdom of God. The wisdom of God is seen in this way, that God’s purpose for man cannot be defeated. Nothing can defeat it, not even sin. Every person is going to be a sacrifice. Make no mistake about it. It was God’s intention in the first place; it is going to be his intention until the very end. Everyone is going to be a sacrifice of one kind or another. You see, the choice today is not whether you are going to be a sacrifice or not. The choice is about what kind of sacrifice you will be.

In Matthew 7:13-14, the Lord Jesus speaks about two roads. ‘In life, there are two ways before you. There is the narrow road that leads to life. And there is the broad road that leads to destruction.

There is no other road to choose from. You will have to decide which road you are going to take. But whatever road you choose, you are going to be a sacrifice.'

That is the point of the Lord Jesus when He said, *For everyone will be salted with fire. Everyone* will be salted with fire. The Christians and the non-Christians. A Christian is salted with fire when he offers himself as a sacrifice to God. But what about the non-Christian? How is he going to be salted with fire? Fire, in the Bible, represents both the grace of God as well as the judgment of God. Every person is either going to be salted by the fire of God's Spirit, or by the fire of God's judgment.

Salted with an unquenchable fire

Here we need to go back to the teaching of John the Baptist. I would like to read to you Matthew 3:11. This is what John the Baptist said.

Matthew 3:11. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Notice the last sentence. 'He who comes after me will baptize you either with the Holy Spirit or with fire.' In other words, Jesus will baptize the truly penitent in the grace of the Holy Spirit but He will baptize the impenitent in the fire of judgment.

It is important to see that this verse is found in the context of judgment. This is clear when we look at the following verse, v. 12. John the Baptist continues his preaching with this statement. *His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.* 'The unquenchable fire' is an expression for hell. Jesus will gather his wheat into the barn (i.e. the baptism with the Spirit), and He will burn the chaff with never-ending fire (i.e. the baptism with fire). The Messiah's gathering of his people is his baptism with the Holy Spirit. The Messiah's burning of the chaff is his baptism with fire of the unbelievers in hell.

You see, either way, God is glorified. God is glorified in his love for man or in his judgment against evil. Those who are consumed as a sacrifice in hell glorify God, whether they like it or not. Because that is where God's justice and holiness are being vindicated. A world in which there is no justice is not a world that God had made. A world in which there is no judgment against evil would not be a world which is to God's glory. If gangsters can kill people, extort innocent people, if they can live a life of crime with no punishment for their wrongdoings, then God is not on the throne. If they can live in comfort and ease, accumulate a fortune by stealing, and when they die, they have many people coming to pay them homage and give them flowers, would that give glory to God? No! 'Don't be deceived,' Jesus says. 'God is not mocked. What you sow, you will reap (Galatians 6:7). Every person is going to be salted by fire. No gangster is going to get away with it, even if he never sat in jail in this world for one day. God is a God of holiness and of justice. Every evildoer will be judged. Every person will be salted by fire, either by the fire of God's love, or the fire of God's judgment.'

A choice to make

That is why we said that every person is going to end up as a sacrifice to God's glory. And here, there is a decision to be made. God gave us the freedom to decide now what kind of sacrifice we are going to be. We have to choose between two kinds of sacrifice.

You either choose to be a living sacrifice on earth, following the words of Paul in Romans 12:1: *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*

Or you choose to be a dying sacrifice in hell. Think of the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:28. 'Do not fear those who destroy the body, but fear God who can destroy both body and soul in hell.' Destroy both body and soul in hell. A perishing sacrifice. A dying sacrifice. A sacrifice being destroyed in hell.

A place of fellowship

Many years ago, I made the personal choice to be a living sacrifice for God. I chose to live in the fullness of God's purpose and to fulfill his glory in my life. Then I discovered something beautiful. In being that living sacrifice, I had fellowship with my God which I increasingly enjoyed. As I learned to become a sacrifice day by day, I felt closer and closer to God. I discovered that it is in the fellowship of sacrifice that we experience true fellowship with God. It is in the path of sacrifice that we find ourselves being yoked with him. Jesus said in Matthew 11:29, *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.* When two animals are yoked together, they bear the same burden. If I am yoked to Christ, I bear the same cross with him. When I am bound with him in this way, walking side by side, pulling the same burden, I have fellowship with Jesus. *Take my yoke upon you... and you will find rest for your souls.* So remember this. In this whole concept of sacrifice, you will find something beautiful. You will find the place of fellowship with God. It is the place of power. It is the place of rest for your soul.