

SALTED WITH FIRE OR WITH SALT? What does Mark 9:49-50 mean?

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49 For everyone will be salted with fire, and every sacrifice will be salted with salt.

Many recent translations omit the second half of verse 49. The two halves the verse end with the same word in Greek, *halisthesetai* (ἁλισθήσεται), “be salted.” Careful analysis reveals the relationship between the two parallel phrases in the verse.

Understanding the verse begins with the context. This grammatical section begins with the disciples arguing about greatness (9:33-37). Jesus urges them toward humility, using the example of a child. Humility is willing to serve others and to receive others. In 9:38-41, the disciples do not exhibit humility but pride, seeking to identify who is accepted (of us), rejecting others rather than receiving them.

The text in 9:42-50 must be understood as explaining Jesus’ response to their argument about greatness. In essence, Jesus says that their greatest concern should be their relationship with him (have salt in yourselves) rather than their status with one another. Jesus declares that his followers must be willing to make sacrifices in their lives (for example, hand, foot, eye, 9:43-48). Everyone who is unwilling to make such a sacrifice will be thrown into hell, that is, “salted with fire.”

Beginning in v. 49, Jesus adds an explanation. The “for” (Greek γὰρ) at the beginning of verse 49 shows that this is an explanation. All who enter the fire will be “salted” with fire. Those willing to live sacrificially will be “salted” with salt. Jesus likely refers to Leviticus 2:13, “Season every grain offering with salt. Do not let the salt of the covenant of your God be lacking from your grain offering. Salt all your offerings.”

Everyone is subject to being “salted,” either with fire or with sacrificial salt. The idea of Christians being living sacrifices is mentioned by Paul in Romans 12:1-2.

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The two groups that are contrasted in the verse represent two different responses to vv. 43-48.

Those being salted with fire are those unwilling to follow the instructions of vv. 43-48, that is, those who are thrown into hell.

50 Salt is good. But if the salt loses its flavor, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

Verse 50 explains the last half of v. 49. Being an acceptable sacrifice, salted with salt, becomes meaningless if the saltiness is lost. Salt without saltiness is useless; the sacrifice becomes unacceptable. Of course, one can note that the use of salt as flavoring or preservative is also lost.

Verse 50 provides a summary. Remember that this section began with the disciples arguing about which of them would be the greatest. Jesus warned them to worry about their eternal destiny (have salt in yourselves) rather than their status and position with one another.