

Homiletics Analysis: Mark 9

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Mark 9 is a structurally dense chapter that moves through four major episodes: the Transfiguration (vv. 1–13), the healing of a demon-possessed boy (vv. 14–29), the second passion prediction and its aftermath (vv. 30–37), and a cluster of sayings on discipleship, stumbling, and salt (vv. 38–50). The chapter opens with a direct promise — some standing with Jesus will not taste death before seeing the kingdom come in power — which is immediately illustrated on the mountain when Moses and Elijah appear and the Father’s voice ratifies the Son. The disciples descend confused about resurrection and Elijah; Jesus clarifies both, pointing to his own suffering as the interpretive key. Below, the disciples have failed to cast out a demon; Jesus heals the boy, and when they ask why they could not, he identifies their failure as a failure of prayer-dependent faith. Jesus then explicitly predicts his betrayal and death a second time; the disciples do not understand and do not ask, and their response is to dispute about greatness. Jesus answers with a child — the one who receives the least is the greatest. The chapter closes with a series of sayings about in-group versus out-group (the man casting out demons in Jesus’ name), radical self-discipline against sin, and the imperative of being “salted” — preserved, effective, at peace with one another.

This Text — Intent

God is pressing a single relentless question through every episode in this chapter: *Will you see Jesus for who he actually is, and will that seeing reshape everything — your faith, your ambition, your relationships, and your self?* The Transfiguration answers the identity question definitively; the rest of the chapter exposes how thoroughly the disciples have failed to integrate that answer into how they live. The intent is diagnostic and corrective: to unmask the gap between confessional proximity to Jesus and genuine, transforming faith in him. The reader is meant to feel the weight of that gap and be called to close it — not by greater willpower, but by hearing the Father’s command: “Listen to him.”

Subject Sentence: The glory of the Son of Man silences every competing claim — to power, to status, and to self-sufficiency.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every disciple with the full identity of Jesus — unveiled in glory, secured in suffering — and demanding that this vision of Christ, not the hunger for greatness, become the organizing center of the disciple’s life.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Transfiguration (vv. 1–9): Apocalyptic Preview vs. Confirmation of Identity

Some dispensational interpreters read the Transfiguration primarily as a preview of the millennial kingdom — a literal, future display of Christ’s physical glory in his coming reign, with the “some standing here” of verse 1 referring to Peter, James, and John as witnesses to a proleptic vision of that future state. This reading has the virtue of taking the glory language seriously. However, it imports a prophetic scheme the text does not establish and severs the scene from its immediate function: the Father’s ratification of the Son’s identity and authority at the precise moment Jesus has predicted his suffering. The canonical grounding — Moses (Law) and Elijah (Prophets) appearing — points backward to the fulfillment of Israel’s covenantal story in Jesus, not forward to a dispensational schedule. The Reformed reading rightly sees the Transfiguration as Christological confirmation: the Father’s “Listen to him” is the interpretive key, not a calendar marker. The disciples’ fear and the instruction to silence until after the resurrection (v. 9) reinforce this: the event is inseparable from the cross and resurrection, not from a future millennial program.

The Demoniac Boy (vv. 14–29): “This Kind” and Prayer

The phrase “this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer” (v. 29) has generated two distinct misreadings. Pentecostal/Charismatic interpreters sometimes read this as establishing a hierarchy of demonic power requiring specialized techniques or extended prayer warfare — spiritual combat methodology. The text does not support this. Jesus does not demonstrate a technique; he commands and the demon leaves. The second misreading comes from those who add “and fasting” (some manuscript traditions include it) and build ascetic disciplines into the framework for spiritual authority. The textual evidence for “and fasting” is mixed, and even if original, the point is not the mechanism of fasting but the posture of prayer-dependent faith. Jesus’ diagnosis is not inadequate technique but inadequate faith (v. 19, v. 23) — specifically, faith that operates in dependence on God rather than on accumulated spiritual competence. The Reformed reading holds that “prayer” here is a synecdoche for total God-dependence: the disciples failed because they approached the situation as a problem their authority could solve rather than as an occasion for faith in Christ’s power alone.

The Second Passion Prediction and Greatness Dispute (vv. 30–37): Moralism vs. Gospel Inversion

The Clowney anti-moralism principle is directly relevant here. A common homiletical error treats the child-object lesson (v. 36–37) as a straightforward moral imperative: “be humble, serve the least, don’t seek status.” This is not wrong, but it misses what drives the command. The disciples’ greatness dispute is not merely a social failure — it is a symptom of having entirely failed to receive the passion prediction. Jesus has just told them he will

be betrayed and killed. Their response is to argue about rank. The inversion Jesus demonstrates — “whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” — is not primarily an ethics lesson about humility; it is a gospel re-ordering of the entire value system. The one who shares in Christ’s suffering posture (receiving the powerless, the non-prestigious, the marginal) participates in Christ’s own mission. The application must be grounded in this gospel logic, not extracted as a standalone virtue.

The Sayings on Stumbling and Salt (vv. 38–50): Tolerance vs. Radical Discipleship

The “whoever is not against us is for us” saying (v. 40) is sometimes used to argue for a broad ecumenism or a minimalist definition of Christian community — anyone working good in Jesus’ name deserves support regardless of their association. This over-reads the saying. The context is a man casting out demons in Jesus’ name, not an abstract principle about denominational breadth. Jesus is correcting sectarian exclusivism, not endorsing indiscriminate theological tolerance. The Wesleyan tradition helpfully emphasizes the radical seriousness of the stumbling-block language (vv. 42–48) as a genuine call to discipleship holiness; this is worth retaining. The Reformed reading, however, is careful to ground that call in the gospel: the shocking language about cutting off hand, foot, or eye is hyperbole in service of one point — the stakes of spiritual life are absolute, and no compromise with sin is worth the cost. The “salt” sayings of vv. 49–50 most likely point to the refining, preserving, peace-making character of genuine discipleship — the disciple who has been “salted” (tested, purified) becomes a preserving presence rather than a source of strife.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 24:15–18; 34:29–35** — Moses’ face shining and the cloud covering the mountain provide the direct typological background for the Transfiguration; Jesus is the new and greater Moses, receiving not commandments but the Father’s ratification.
- **Isaiah 53:3–12** — The Suffering Servant passage grounds Jesus’ passion predictions within Israel’s prophetic expectation; the disciples’ failure to understand (v. 32) reflects the same incomprehension Isaiah anticipates in the servant’s contemporaries.
- **Psalms 22:1–11 / Psalm 23** — The movement from abandonment to trust prefigures the pattern Jesus embodies; the disciples’ lack of faith in the valley (vv. 14–29) is implicitly contrasted with the shepherd’s own faithfulness in extremity.
- **Philippians 2:3–11** — Paul’s kenotic hymn provides the fullest canonical commentary on the greatness-reversal of Mark 9:33–37; the one who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped is the model against which the disciples’ status-seeking is measured.

- **James 4:1–10** — The quarreling and ambition James addresses mirrors the disciples’ dispute about greatness and flows from the same root diagnosis: desires at war within, rather than reoriented to Christ.

Aim: To confront readers with the full Christological claim of Mark 9 — that Jesus is who the Father says he is — and to expose every competing center (self-sufficiency, status, sectarianism, undealt-with sin) as incompatible with genuine discipleship.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Promise: some standing here will not taste death before seeing the kingdom come with power	Debated; most naturally fulfilled in the Transfiguration immediately following; possibly also resurrection/Pentecost
2–4	Transfiguration: Jesus’ appearance altered; garments brilliantly white; Moses and Elijah appear	“After six days” links to Peter’s confession (8:29); three witnesses — legal sufficiency
5–6	Peter’s offer to build three shelters; narrator notes the disciples are terrified and Peter does not know what to say	The shelter-offer is a reflex of confusion, not insight — Peter attempts to manage the unmanageable
7	Cloud overshadows; voice: “This is my beloved Son; listen to him”	Direct divine ratification; “listen to him” is the command the rest of the chapter measures the disciples against
8	Only Jesus remains; the vision is over	The exclusive finality — Moses and Elijah gone, Jesus alone
9–10	Descent; Jesus charges silence until after resurrection; disciples question what “rising from the dead” means	Messianic secret maintained; disciples still cannot process resurrection
11–13	Disciples ask about Elijah coming first; Jesus says	Jesus reframes Elijah-expectation through the lens

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Elijah has come (John the Baptist) and been treated as Scripture predicted; the Son of Man will suffer likewise	of suffering; John's fate forecasts Jesus'
14–16	Return to crowd; scribes arguing with disciples; crowd runs to Jesus	Scribes seizing on the disciples' failure as an argument; Jesus enters an ongoing controversy
17–18	Father describes son: mute spirit, seizes him, foams, grinds teeth, becomes rigid; disciples could not cast it out	Vivid, detailed description of severe suffering — the father's desperation is palpable
19	Jesus: "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? Bring him to me"	Sharp lament — directed at the disciples, perhaps the broader generation; the presence of Jesus is the only solution
20–22	Spirit convulses the boy before Jesus; father describes long history of suffering and asks "if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us"	"If you can" echoes the disciples' failure and transfers it to the father's own tentative faith
23	Jesus: "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes"	Jesus redirects the condition: not "if I can" but "if you believe" — faith as the operative channel of Christ's power
24	Father: "I believe; help my unbelief!"	One of the most honest prayers in Scripture; the paradigm for honest, faltering faith
25–27	Jesus rebukes the spirit; boy appears dead; Jesus takes his hand and raises him	The raising language (ēgeiren) resonates with resurrection vocabulary
28–29	Disciples ask privately why they could not; Jesus: "This kind cannot be driven out by	Total dependence on God, not spiritual technique or authority-assertion, is the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	anything but prayer”	answer
30–32	Second passion prediction: Son of Man delivered into human hands, killed, rise after three days; disciples do not understand and are afraid to ask	“Delivered” (paradidōmi) — same word for Judas’ betrayal; the passivity is deliberate, not accidental
33–34	In Capernaum: Jesus asks what they were arguing about; they were silent — they had argued about who was greatest	Silence as guilt; the contrast between Jesus’ passion prediction and their status-dispute is as stark as possible
35	Jesus sits (teaching posture), calls the Twelve: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all”	Formal, deliberate reversal — the kingdom’s entire value-ordering inverted
36–37	Jesus takes a child, places in their midst; “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me”	The child is the least-prestigious member of society; receiving the marginalized is receiving Christ himself
38–40	John reports a man casting out demons in Jesus’ name who is not of their group; Jesus: “Do not stop him...whoever is not against us is for us”	Correction of sectarian gatekeeping; but note the qualifier: “in my name” — not a blank endorsement of all religious activity
41	Whoever gives a cup of water in Christ’s name will not lose his reward	The smallest act of mercy, done in Jesus’ name, has eternal weight
42	Warning: causing a little one to stumble — better a millstone around the neck and drowning in the sea	The severity is commensurate with the stakes — spiritual stumbling-block language directed at leaders/influencers
43–48	Hand, foot, eye stumbling-block sayings; repeated	Hyperbole pressing radical self-dealing with sin;

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	refrain: “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched”	Gehenna language — the valley of Ben Hinnom, Jerusalem’s refuse fire, as image of final judgment
49–50	“Everyone will be salted with fire”; “Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness...”; “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another”	Salt as preserving, purifying, peace-making character; the chapter closes with a call to internal integrity and community peace — direct counter to the greatness dispute

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–13	The Son Unveiled: Transfiguration, Descent, and the Elijah Question
2	14–29	The Son’s Power and the Disciples’ Failure: Faith, Prayer, and Dependence
3	30–37	The Son’s Suffering and the Disciples’ Ambition: Passion Prediction and the Greatness Reversal
4	38–50	The Son’s Standard: Inclusivity, Stumbling, and the Salt of Discipleship

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The glory of the Son of Man silences every competing claim — to power, to status, and to self-sufficiency.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every disciple with the full identity of Jesus — unveiled in glory, secured in suffering — and demanding that this vision of Christ, not the hunger for greatness, become the organizing center of the disciple’s life.

Applications (Five)

1. (*Mind/Belief*) — Let the Father's command reorder what you actually listen to.

The Father's word over the Transfiguration is not theological data — it is a command: "Listen to him." The disciples in Mark 9 demonstrate precisely what it looks like to *not* listen: they build shrines out of confusion, they fail at spiritual work because they have stopped operating in dependence on Christ, they dispute about rank while Jesus predicts his death. The application is diagnostic. What are you actually listening to when you interpret your circumstances, your worth, your direction? The Voice that declared Jesus as Son is the same Voice that reorients every other voice you are taking cues from. Deliberately, practically, bring your operating assumptions under the authority of what Jesus actually says — not what ambition, fear, or comparison says.

2. (*Affections/Worship*) — Bring your faltering, half-faith to Jesus, not away from him.

The father in verses 23–24 is the emotional center of this chapter: "I believe; help my unbelief." He does not wait until his faith is adequate before he comes. He does not resolve his doubt before he asks. He brings his inadequate faith to the one who can do something with it. The application for the person in spiritual struggle, chronic doubt, or faith that has been ground thin by suffering is not "get your faith stronger and then approach Christ." It is the reverse: bring the thin, faltering, honest faith to Christ now. He does not rebuke the father's ambivalence — he answers it. The most honest prayer in this chapter is also the one that gets answered.

3. (*Will/Behavior*) — Identify the one status-seeking behavior that the passion prediction should have already killed in you, and put it down.

The disciples' greatness dispute in verses 33–34 is not incidental — it follows directly from their failure to receive Jesus' suffering. Their status-seeking is a symptom of a Christology that is still managing Jesus rather than being shaped by him. For the contemporary disciple, this takes concrete forms: positioning yourself in conversations to be seen as capable; comparing your ministry, your parenting, your spiritual progress against others'; needing credit for contribution. Identify one specific instance where this operates in your week. Name it. Then hold it against verse 35: "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Not as a guilt-exercise — as a gospel reorientation.

4. (*Mind/Belief*) — Refuse the assumption that spiritual failure means Christ's power is insufficient.

When the disciples fail to cast out the demon, the scribes are ready with an interpretation: Jesus' authority is limited or transferable only under conditions. This is still the operative assumption whenever ministry fails, prayer goes unanswered, or spiritual work produces no visible fruit: "perhaps there is a limit to what God can do here." Jesus' diagnosis is the opposite. The failure is never on the power side; it is on the dependence side. The application is not a formula for guaranteed results. It is a fundamental reorientation of

where you locate the bottleneck: not in God's willingness or ability, but in the disciple's prayerless self-sufficiency. Come back to prayer-dependence as the default, not the last resort.

5. (*Affections/Worship*) — Let the smallness of those you serve be the measure of your Christlikeness, not the size of your platform.

Jesus takes a child — the least socially significant person in a first-century household — and places this child in the center. He does not say “serve the important, and that will honor me.” He says receiving this child, in his name, is receiving him. The affectional application is an invitation to revalue the people and roles you currently undervalue: the person no one notices, the task that generates no recognition, the service that is invisible. Ask where your emotional energy for service is actually coming from — is it from the dignity that comes from association with status, or from the dignity that comes from the one in whose name you serve? Reorient your sense of honor around Christ's own definition: the last, the child, the servant.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance:

Mark 9 makes a sustained and unrelenting argument about the identity of Jesus and the nature of the kingdom he is inaugurating. The Transfiguration is not merely a miraculous event — it is a disclosure of Christ's eternal nature, set within history and confirmed by the Father's own speech. The Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah) appear and defer to Jesus, establishing that he is not one voice among many but the one toward whom all of Scripture moves. The Father's declaration — “This is my beloved Son” — employs the same language as the baptism (Mark 1:11), bookending the Galilean ministry with the definitive divine verdict on Jesus' identity. Against this backdrop, the chapter's repeated disclosure of the disciples' failure is theologically significant: even those who see the glory, walk with the Son, and hear the Father's voice are not transformed by proximity alone. Faith, dependence, and a willingness to receive the suffering Messiah are the only adequate responses to who Jesus actually is.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance:

Mark 9 is a sustained exposition of the doctrine of grace operating against human self-sufficiency and status-hunger. The disciples' repeated failures — in prayer-dependent ministry, in receiving the passion prediction, in their dispute about greatness — are not merely character flaws; they are the natural output of a heart that has not been genuinely reshaped by the gospel. Reformed theology insists that true knowledge of Christ is not

merely cognitive but transforming; the disciples in this chapter demonstrate exactly what unreformed religion looks like — outward association with Christ, inward allegiance to self. The greatness reversal of verses 35–37 is not a new law of humility but a description of the kingdom’s logic: because Christ himself “became last” (the suffering Son of Man delivered into human hands), those who belong to him are freed from the anxiety of status-seeking and liberated to receive the powerless. The Transfiguration secures this by establishing that Christ’s humility is not weakness but glory — the same one who serves unto death is the one whose garments blazed white before Moses and Elijah.

Main Takeaway

Jesus has been identified by the Father himself — glory, voice, Law, and Prophets all converging — and the Father’s one command is “Listen to him.” Every failure in this chapter, from prayerless ministry to greatness disputes to stumbling-block living, traces back to one thing: disciples who are in proximity to Jesus but not yet listening to him. The call of this chapter is not to try harder to be humble or to muster stronger faith — it is to stop, look at who is actually standing in front of you, and let that seeing displace every competing claim on your life.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Preaching the Transfiguration as spectacle rather than Christological claim.** The natural temptation is to spend the bulk of exposition on the phenomenology of the event — the white garments, Moses and Elijah, the cloud — and lose the interpretive center: the Father’s command. The Transfiguration is not primarily about what glory looks like; it is about who Jesus is and what the appropriate response to that is. The preacher who lingers on the visual and rushes past the “Listen to him” has missed the passage’s intent entirely.
- **Moralizing the father’s “I believe; help my unbelief” into a model of good prayer technique.** The father’s prayer is honest, not exemplary in some methodological sense. The pitfall is to reduce it to “it’s okay to have doubts as long as you admit them” — a therapeutic reframe that loses the Christological urgency. The point is not that ambivalent prayer is acceptable; it is that Christ is sufficient for ambivalent faith. The application must end in Christ, not in the father’s admirable honesty.
- **Treating the greatness reversal as a standalone virtue lesson.** “Be humble, serve others, don’t seek status” — this is not wrong, but it is the application detached from its root. The disciples’ greatness dispute is a *response to the passion prediction*, and the solution is not a moral upgrade but a Christological reception.

Preaching this section without connecting the disciples' status-hunger to their refusal to receive the suffering Messiah produces moralism, not gospel.

- **Extracting “this kind comes out only by prayer” as a formula for spiritual warfare categories.** This saying has been used to establish hierarchies of demonic power, prayer-warfare techniques, and extended fasting protocols. The text will not support this. Jesus' diagnosis of the disciples' failure is faithless self-sufficiency, not inadequate technique. The prescription is prayer-dependence — the posture of total reliance on God — not a method.
- **Using “whoever is not against us is for us” to endorse theological minimalism or uncritical ecumenism.** This saying is a correction of in-group sectarianism, not a principle about doctrinal latitude. The qualifier is clear: “in my name.” It does not say everyone doing good is implicitly for Christ. It says: do not obstruct someone who is genuinely operating in Christ's name simply because they are not in your circle. A preacher who extracts this as a broad argument for lowering doctrinal standards has moved well beyond the text.
- **Preaching the Gehenna sayings as merely rhetorical hyperbole with no real urgency.** The contemporary instinct is to quickly note the hyperbole and move on, leaving the congregation with the impression that the radical self-dealing with sin Jesus commands is optional or extreme. The hyperbole is in service of genuine severity, not in replacement of it. The preacher must let the sharpness land: some things in a disciple's life need to be amputated, not managed. The stakes are absolute.