

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THAT MAN THROUGH WHOM THE STUMBLING BLOCK COMES

Matthew 18:5-9

The followers of Christ have to face constant temptations. These temptations are referred to as 'stumbling blocks' in Matthew 18. They are a real danger and Jesus speaks very seriously about them. This is what He teaches in Matthew 18:5-9.

*Matthew 18:5. "And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me;
6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea.
7 "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!
8 "And if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the eternal fire.
9 "And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out, and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into the fiery hell.*

A millstone around the neck

In ancient times, a child was considered unimportant, someone who did not count. Jesus says in v. 5 that whoever cares for a child, pays attention to him in His name, does so to Him. He equates the attitude of welcoming a child with a willingness to receive Him.

The caring is for *one such child*. The word 'such' suggests that Jesus is moving beyond the specific child introduced in v. 2 to a wider category of people whom that child represents. That category includes no doubt those who are literally children, but also all those who have adopted the childlike position. It is therefore a reference to Jesus' disciples. They are the ones who have accepted the child's lowly status. They are described in v. 6 as *these little ones who believe in Me*. So Jesus takes any kindness done to any humble believer as if it were done to Himself. This is similar to Matthew 25:40 where He said, *To the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine ... you did it to Me*.

The next sentence is harder to understand. V. 6: *But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea*. There were two types of millstone in those days. One was a small millstone found in every household. People would use it to grind a little grain at a time. The 'heavy millstone' was much larger. It was too big to be turned by hand. An animal, usually a donkey, was tied to it. The grain was ground as the donkey walked in a circle. The words in Greek, *mulos*

onikos, actually means 'a millstone turned by a donkey.' There is no doubt that in v. 6, it was the larger kind that was intended.

The Lord is saying, 'If you cause one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for you to get a big millstone that you will tie around your neck (i.e. put a rope through the central hole of the stone and hang it around your neck). Then jump into the sea with it.'

The millstone ensures not only that there is no chance of survival but also that the body could never rise to the top and be recovered for proper burial.

This sounds severe, very severe. What does it mean? Is Jesus teaching that it is better for a person to die before he had committed any kind of sin? Here we have to define very accurately the meaning of the term 'to stumble', 'causing a little one to stumble.'

A fatal fall

You may have noticed that this passage is held together by the repeated mention of stumbling. The verb *skandalizo*, to stumble, appears three times: in v. 6, v. 8, and v. 9. The noun 'stumbling block' (*skandalon*) occurs three times in one verse, v. 7. A total of six times in four verses.

In the NT, 'to stumble' is used with the thought of a stone or obstacle in the way, over which one can trip and fall. It is important to understand that we are not talking about a small fall. The type of hindrance involved here is much more drastic than simply 'being offended' or even 'scandalized'. We are talking about a fatal damage to the disciple's relationship with God. He is caused to 'trip' so as to be in danger of falling out of the race altogether, of losing his faith in Christ. As you can see, it refers to a very serious situation.

In many places, this word 'to stumble,' *skandalizo*, is translated by the words 'to fall away.' To stumble is to fall away. It is used in this sense in the parable of the seed in Matthew 13:21. Speaking of the one who received the seed that fell on rocky ground, Jesus says that he falls away, he stumbles, when persecution comes.

*Matthew 13:21. Yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he **falls away** (skandalizo).*

It is used again in Matthew 24:10 in relation to the last days, before the coming of Christ. Persecution will cause many 'to fall away' from the faith and become betrayers of their brethren.

*Matthew 24:10. And at that time many will **fall away** (skandalizo) and will deliver up one another and hate one another.*

The stumbling of Matthew 18 is not different. It is not a matter of giving a personal offense. It is to be understood in the serious sense of causing a person's faith to collapse completely.

God's love for His little ones

Such a serious problem demands an extremely serious measure in the punishment of the person responsible. 'It is better for that person,' Jesus says, 'If he were to be drowned in the depths of the sea with a millstone attached to his neck.'

The Lord's way of putting His words is sometimes so striking that it really shakes us up. What is He saying here? The fundamental purpose of Jesus' statement is to show us how much He loves His disciples. He makes a comparison between being drowned with a millstone hung around one's neck

and the damnation of a person at the last judgment. He says that if anyone were to cause one of His disciples to fall away, then God's judgment will be so devastating that nothing this person could do to himself would compare with what God will do to him.

You might find that hard to swallow if you are at the receiving end of God's judgment. But that is the Lord's way of telling us how much He loves His disciples. They are so dear to Him that He will not accept anyone to hurt them. The same idea is expressed beautifully in this OT passage. *For he who touches you* (the people of God), *touches the apple of His eye* (Zechariah 2:8). You know how painful it is when you have a little dust in your eye. God takes what is done against His children as done against the very apple of His eye. That is how sensitive God is to anyone who seeks to harm His people. That is how precious they are to Him.

Stumbling block (1)

Now, how can a disciple be 'tripped up'? What kind of things could be done that will cause a disciple's faith to be misled? We need only to consider Genesis 3 to see one classic example of such temptation. Satan tempted Adam and Eve in this way. 'If you eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, you will be like God. You will know good and evil.' Were Adam and Eve allowed to eat from that tree? No. Did they know about it? Yes. Nevertheless, they ate the forbidden fruit and that was it. They stumbled. Satan tempted them to do something they knew they were not supposed to do.

That gives us a wide range of possibilities that can cause a Christian to stumble. Basically it can be anything that tempts him to do something that he knows he should not do. It may be in the area of sex for example. The double saying in vv. 8-9 is constructed from that of Matthew 5:29-30 which is concerned with sexual temptation. See the resemblance.

Matthew 5:29. And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

30 "And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell.

Notice the verse that comes just before that passage, v. 28.

Matthew 5:28. But I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.

The reference to the 'right eye and the 'right hand' is given in the specific context of the enticement of sexual lust. Sex can be an instrument of stumbling.

In the OT, the term 'to stumble' occurs more frequently in Ezekiel than any other OT book. And we read in Ezekiel 7:19 that greed for silver and gold is called a stumbling block and a cause of ruin for Judah.

Ezekiel 7:19. They will throw their silver into the streets, and their gold will be like refuse; their silver and their gold will not be able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of the Lord; they will not satisfy their souls, nor fill their stomachs, because it became their stumbling block of iniquity.

So for some, it is sex. For others, it is money. In fact, the number of ways to hurt the faith of a Christian is almost infinite. Each one has those parts in his life that can potentially pull him away from Christ. The idea is that you put before a person something that is illegitimate, something that he knows he should not do, but this something is so attractive to him that he stumbles into it. He falls for it. We can cause a person to fall in this way.

Stumbling block (2)

The second thing is not about doing something sinful as such, but it is doing something against a person's conscience. That was Paul's concern on the matter of eating meat offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8. He said that food can make a person stumble when it breaks his conscience.

*1 Corinthians 8:13. Therefore, if food causes my brother to **stumble**, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to **stumble**.*

Idolatry with its sacrifices permeated the Greek and Roman cultures of Paul's day. One might think that a true believer should obviously keep his distance from idolatry in any form. For the Corinthians, this was nearly impossible. Eating meals in temples or in places associated with idols was a common practice. To cut oneself from such gatherings would be like not attending most social events today. The problem was that during these meetings, meat was offered to an idol, and part of that meat was then eaten by the people. The Corinthian believers wondered if that meat should be considered as unclean and if by eating it, they would be participating in idol worship.

Paul explained that idols have no substance, authority, power or ability to curse or bless. A ceremony in front of a worthless idol could do nothing to contaminate it. Since they didn't believe in idols, Corinthian believers could eat with friends without problems.

However some find it hard to think in that way because they were accustomed to see idols as being real, and they could not separate the meat from the idols. So when they ate such meat, they felt that they violated their conscience and believed that they were sinning against God.

The believer who feels that he is free to eat can become a stumbling block if he is seen eating food that has been sacrificed to an idol. The weak believer might be tempted to go against his conscience by doing the same. And as Paul wrote, this could destroy him (1 Corinthians 8:11). When someone does something that he is not sure is right or wrong, that action will bring condemnation (Romans 14:23). So we can cause a person to stumble by doing an activity that is all right in and of itself but which offends the conscience of a believer who has a different view about it.

As the conclusion of this matter, Paul proposes his own advice. 'If eating meat offered to idols might lead to such bad consequences as to lay a stumbling block in the way of some Christians, I will refrain from eating any meat.' *If food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again.*

Notice that not only does Paul resolve to abstain from eating meat offered to idols, but he will not eat any other meat as well. And the abstinence is not only for a few days, or months, or years, but 'forever'. *I will **never** eat meat again.* This statement is comparable to Jesus' words in Matthew 18 about cutting off a hand and plucking out an eye. They both signify that we ought to do anything, to deny ourselves in anything, if there is a risk that we commit sin or that we become an occasion of sin to others.

Stumbling block (3)

There is a further point. The third way which can cause a person to stumble is mentioned in Matthew 16:23. Listen to Jesus' reply to Peter.

*Matthew 16:23. But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a **stumbling block** to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."*

How did Peter function as a stumbling block? The Lord Jesus was going towards the cross. He was going to lay down his life for the world. And Peter said, 'Lord, don't go to the cross. You should not do this to Yourself. I love you too much to let You experience this kind of suffering. Don't do it, Lord.' Jesus said, 'Peter, get out of My way. You are stopping Me from doing the very work for which I came. You are opposing My Father's plan for the salvation of the world.'

You see, even in our good intention, we can stop somebody to progress on the spiritual path of walking with Christ. Peter was speaking to Jesus out of good intention. He loved his Master so much that when the Lord said that He had to go to Jerusalem to suffer many things and be killed, Peter did not allow Him to go.

Conclusion

How one treats a disciple is a fundamentally important matter for God. So important are believers to Him that to receive them is to receive Jesus Himself. In fact, the 'little ones' are so important to God that to cause spiritual damage to even one of them will result in a terrible condemnation.

Notice that the warning is not just about causing others to stumble, but also causing oneself to stumble. The repeated use of *your, you, from you* points to dangers in one's own life. Your hand, your foot, your eye... Cut it off, pluck it out...

The consequence of being caused to stumble by one's own fault is spelled out in this passage in terms of eternal fire and hell. And it is unlikely that the penalty for bringing about another's downfall would be any less.