

Stumbling Blocks

Matthew 18:7-9

The last sermon from Matthew focused on what it meant to be a little child, to “become as little children.” Only in that way, Jesus said, could you enter the kingdom of heaven. “Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Then, as we studied, then comes the call to humility. We are to live before God with the helpless, dependent, trusting humility of a little child. So in answer to the disciples’ question about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus replied, “Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

There is something, however, very vulnerable about the humility of a child, and that is Jesus’ point, I believe. Vulnerability. A child trusts. A child believes. A child has no pretense, and often no protection either. Thankfully, by God’s common grace in our culture and in the laws of our land, children are still granted some measure of legal protection in a number of ways. That’s good and necessary, and one of the things that has stuck with me following my ministry as a very young man as a prison chaplain is how even most hardened prison inmates recognize the morality of protecting children. Even men otherwise very hardened in their sin will realize the need to protect a little child. Sadly, some consciences are hardened even at that point, but many are not, and it is not hard to understand the goodness of protection given to our children.

That’s the transition to our text this afternoon, that vulnerability of children that requires them to be protected. So the warning is clear, as we ended last week.

v.6

Then the rebuke,

v.7

The world here must have reference here to the unbelieving world. The world apart from Christ, hostile to Jesus and alienated from God. Woe to that world, that ungodly world. Because that world brings temptations to sin! That world becomes a stumbling block, a trap. Literally, the Greek word has reference to the trigger of a animal trap, the movable stick that snares an animal in a trap set for that very purpose.

A stumbling block, that actually seeks to lure an animal into the trap. Sometimes we have had to catch mice in the houses we have lived in. Recently, it has been squirrels on our deck. We use a live trap, often with peanut butter as the bait. Peanut butter or some other food is used to entice the mouse or the squirrel into the cage, and the door would shut. That’s the idea of a stumbling block here, the temptation that traps you in its cage. And the world, in this sense, is full of them. In the world, there is,

I. THE CERTAIN REALITY OF TEMPTATION.

Because the world, again used in this sense, represents all that is opposed to God. It is not neutral. It is not indifferent.

1 John 5:19 “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.”

Therefore, you cannot afford to be neutral. The battle lines must be drawn clearly, with this warning,

James 4:4 “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

Even more clearly, John says,

1 John 2:15 “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”

So Paul describes the life of an non-Christian with these words,

Eph. 2:1 “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.”

You see, to follow the course of this world is to follow the prince of the power of the air. To love the world is to follow Satan, and Satan is the tempter. He lays the stumbling blocks out for you. That’s his strategy. That’s his method. That’s his goal, to entice you into his trap like that little mouse seeking a bit of peanut butter. That’s the certainty of temptation in the world, the certainty of stumbling blocks. And so you see,

A. The nature of a stumbling block.

It’s evil purpose. It’s wicked intention. A stumbling block is a temptation, an intentional inducement to sin. An intentional appeal to lead you to sin. And Satan is the one who is at work in that world. As he has been since the beginning of time, for that enticement is what brought mankind into sin.

Gen. 3:1 “Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?”

That, beloved, was a temptation. Calling God’s word into question. “Did God actually say that?” And the enticement worked, because we read that Eve stopped listening to God and instead, began to be her own judgment, her own god.

Gen. 3:6 “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.”

Those stumbling blocks remain in the world, they remain the tools which the Devil continues to use. Thus the pronounced judgment of,

v.7 “Woe to the world because of offenses.”

That word offenses means temptations, enticements to sin. And temptations are inevitable, we would say. Verse 7 continues, “For offenses must come.” The idea there is certainty. The certainty of their presence. It is certain that temptations will come. And you need to recognize that, and admit it, especially as we will soon move on to the second point of the sermon, from verses 8-9, in which you and I are urged to fight against those temptations at all costs. But let me first linger with this certain reality of temptation for a few moments longer. What are they? What are the temptations of the world? What are,

B. The stumbling blocks in the world.

I really answered that question a few moments ago, quoting from 1 John 2:16, describing “all that is in the world.” This is how John defines it: “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.”

At the risk of being too simplistic, John covers it all. He identifies the desires of the flesh, namely the desires that come from your own heart, from within. And the desires of the eyes,

namely the desires that are stimulated from what you see outside of yourself, what you see with your eyes. And then the overall attitude of sin, the pride of life.

We know that God himself is not a tempter. We are tempted from within and from without, but not from God, not in this sense of a stumbling block. We know that from,

James 1:13 “Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. 14 But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. 15 Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”

That describes so well the experience we all know too well, doesn't it? The stumbling blocks in the world are real. We are tempted and lured, and the desires come from within us. And the warning, of course, is that ultimately sin brings forth death. “The wages of sin is death.” That's why Jesus gives us such a severe warning. “Woe to the world for temptations to sin.”

It can be discouraging, can't it? Because the stumbling blocks that are “in the world” include those lusts that are within you, as well as those things outside of you, external to you. There is no escape. You are tempted to stumble by things within and by things without, temptations that originate in your own heart and temptations that originate in what you see outwardly. And the Devil uses them together, along with pride, to trick you. To trap you. To tempt you.

So please think in these terms. Think in terms of those temptations to which you are the most vulnerable. Those tricks and schemes that Satan is able to use the most effectively to cause you to stumble. Woe to the world because of them. And

woe to you if you fail to recognize their danger.

Even more pointedly, for Jesus,
v.7b “...woe to that man by whom the offense comes!”

You see, the real warning of Jesus in this text is against people who become stumbling blocks.

C. Other people as stumbling blocks.

So hear and heed that warning. Rather than tempt anyone else to sin, you should respond to,

Heb. 10:23 “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Let that be your endeavor, beloved. “Stir up one another to love and good works.” Encourage one another! Serve one another. Love one another. And above all else, do not become a stumbling block that would tempt anyone else to sin.

Now, having said all of that, let's look at the more familiar words of this passage in verses 8-9. Jesus now addresses you, yourself. The certain reality of the presence of temptations is clear. The warning has been given to the world, and the judgment of God. The danger of being a stumbling block to others has been declared. But what about yourself? What about your own responsibility?

There would be a great danger here to blame temptation on all of these things, and then to excuse yourself from any responsibility. Or from any motivation to do something about the

temptation. And Jesus won't have that. Rather, with such strikingly exaggerated words, he proclaims to us,

II. THE NECESSITY OF RESISTING TEMPTATION.

The words are unmistakable.

v.8-9

Before we look more closely at those words, let me remind you what Jude writes, a word of doxology and blessing to God, for what God would do!

Jude 24 "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy."

So God keeps you from stumbling! Praise the Lord. God promises to present you blameless before himself at the day of judgment. Praise the Lord. God promises to protect you, to preserve you, to keep you. Surely, that is your hope. You,

1 Peter 1:5 "...who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

Praise the Lord.

Phil.1:6 "...being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ."

Praise the Lord! All of those things are true. And Jesus doesn't contradict them here this afternoon. However, one important verse often misused is found in,

1 Cor. 10:13 "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

But then, the very next verse, he exhorts,

1 Cor. 10:14 "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry."

God promises to preserve you, but the Scriptures also exhort you to flee from sin. To flee from the sin of idolatry. Also we read,

1 Tim. 6:10 "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. 11 But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."

Flee from temptation! And pursue righteousness! Yes, God will protect you. Yes, God will preserve you. Yes, God will present you blameless. But you, you and I are called to resist! You and I are called to flee. When we see temptation, we are called to run the opposite direction. We are called to run away as fast as we can. We are called to fight the temptation, and to resist it. Even as we know and believe that God enables us to do so.

So the promise of the gospel does not leave you passive. The promise of the gospel doesn't leave you waiting around for something to happen to you when it comes to resisting temptation. The promise of the gospel doesn't come to you in a vacuum, nor is it an excuse to indulge sin with the thought that God hasn't yet enabled you to resist it.

Jesus doesn't deny the promises of the gospel, and those promises that come throughout the New Testament are not a contradiction of Jesus' teaching, but here is Jesus' teaching when it comes to temptations, facing stumbling blocks,

v.8 “And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away... 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away.”

Now think about that. Jesus isn't speaking in a hyper-literal sort of way, as if there is any reason to think he expects you to fulfill this exhortation to the extent of actually gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand or foot. That would be absurd. But equally absurd would be to ignore the point that is so plainly made by that obvious and intentional exaggeration. For you English or grammar students out there, it is called an hyperbole. One dictionary definition is sufficient, simply an “obvious and intentional exaggeration,” “a deliberate exaggeration used for effect.” More fully, “A hyperbole is a literary device wherein the author uses specific words and phrases that exaggerate and overemphasize the basic crux of the statement in order to produce a grander, more noticeable effect. The purpose of hyperbole is to create a larger-than-life effect and overly stress a specific point.”

But we don't need to be too technical in terms of literary usage. The point is obvious, to anyone wishing to understand, anyone with ears to hear. Jesus is saying that,

A. Drastic effort is needed to put sin to death.

So cut off your hand! Cut off your foot.

Calvin explains the meaning this way: “And yet Christ does not mean, that we must mutilate our body, in order to obey God: but as all would readily wish, that they should not be restrained from the free use of their senses, Christ employs an exaggerated form of speech to show, that whatever hinders us from yielding that obedience to God which he requires in his law, ought to be cut off. And he does so expressly, because men allow

themselves too much liberty in that respect. If the mind were pure, the eyes and hands would be obedient to it; for it is certain, that they have no movement of their own. But here we are deeply to blame. We are so far from being as careful as we ought to be, to avoid allurements, that we rather provoke our senses to wickedness by allowing them unbounded liberty.”

So your hands are not pure, nor your feet. Because your mind isn't pure. The emphasis then is not upon the exercise of your Christian liberty, but rather upon the mortification of your own flesh. Putting to death the sin that is within you, the sin that so easily besets you. Put sin to death! That's what Jesus means by cutting off your hand and your foot. And that's what he means when he says to “tear out your eye and throw it away.”

Put sin to death. The Scripture is full of such exhortations.

Col. 3:5 “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, 7 in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. 8 But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, 10 and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.”

And, Rom. 8:12 “Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

Put sin to death! If you taking too much food to eat, if gluttony is the sin, then stop going to all you can eat buffet restaurants! If

alcohol tempts you to sin, then don't pour that first drink. Don't go to a bar. If you are violent when you are angry, then don't ever raise your hand in that anger. If there are triggers that tempt you to sin, avoid them! If there are situations that leave you vulnerable to sin, then avoid them, leave them.

If your eye causes you to sin, then tear it out! That will mean you will have to look the other way when you eye is tempted, looking away from many public advertisements. Looking away from many immodest people whose immodesty is a temptation to the purity of your eyes. It means refusing to watch many movies and video clips. And if the temptations of pornography on the internet are a stumbling block, Jesus words mean doing whatever is necessary to rid your life of that deadly danger. Don't let that often-secret sin ruin your life. "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you."

We do sing the appropriate doxology of praise to God, "to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy." But with that encouragement, you must also take whatever drastic effort is necessary in your own life to accept the responsibility to put to death the sin that comes to you through the stumbling blocks of your own life.

And Jesus gives us that exhortation with a sense of urgency that comes from the realization of an awareness of great spiritual danger.

B. An awareness of spiritual danger is needed to put sin to death.

Just read the words for yourselves. "It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire." Again, with the

literary device of the hyperbole, the point is so obvious. The real danger is not the loss of a limb, but the loss of eternal life! The danger is the danger of hell! So surely, "It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire."

That's the context for the mortification of sin. You must come to terms with the dangers of sin, the spiritual dangers. And the awareness of that danger should stir you on to do the very thing Jesus is urging you to do. Wherever sin is to be found, wherever the stumbling block is to be identified, cut it off! Put it to death. For, to quote John Owen, "either you will be killing your sin, or your sin will be killing you."

Please understand the urgency of that motivation. Don't lose the hope of God's promise, nor the encouragement of the promise of the gospel, that it is God who enables you to do these very things. But as you depend upon God for your help and strength, relying upon his grace even as you know and believe that your sins are forgiven, engage yourself actively and earnestly in putting sin to death wherever you might spot it in your life.

Thus to end with Paul's words in,
Phil. 2:12 "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."