

## Build or Break

Matthew 18:6-9

### Introduction

**Towers Tumble:** What is it about kids wanting to knock down a tower that is built? (Don't believe in original sin? Then you don't have kids; demons in a diaper; cute and small but they would kill you; cat vs. tiger. Some people never grow out of their destruction phase (e.g., work, reputation, relationship, faith, etc.).

- But I also worry that a lot of people don't realize they're destroyers.
- Some *Christians* (so-called) even revel in destruction under the guise of "defending the faith" (e.g., the best defense is a good offense).
- There are **systemic** and cultural issues. But there are also very **personal** applications.
- What kind of Kingdom citizen am I going to be? What kind church are we going to be? Are we going to be a refuge for the hurting? Are we going to be a place where faith is nurtured and celebrated? Or are we going to be another in the long line of Christians and churches that does more harm than good?

And I wish I was immune to it (e.g., plagiarizing pastor; gossip almost a spiritual gift; embezzlement in churches; quid pro quo arrangements; sexual abuse from a youth pastor at nearby church).

- Even on smaller things, I heard terrible Biblical interpretations (e.g., mark of the beast is everything from supermarket scanners to RFID chips; every election is "the most important election of our lifetime"; price of oil ca. 2008 is a sign of the second coming). Did any of these pastors (some quite famous) ever apologize for being demonstrably wrong? No, they just move on to stir up the next hornet's nest because few things bring donations better than fear.
  - JW came to my door (as they are want to do); funny story in the parking lot; terrible timing on Christmas; thought the objection would be Trinity, co-eternal nature of Jesus; nope – grew up Baptist and saw too much hypocrisy. The gospel didn't seem real to the people of the church because they didn't live as if it was true.
- By God's grace I was able to see through the charade of so many "Christians." I saw an example of imperfect but genuine discipleship at home. I knew godly Christian missionaries who had no platforms but devoted their lives to serving the marginalized and far off. It really is the unsung heroes that are my "giants of the faith" (e.g., my faith and view of the church was rehabbed in college by a few imperfect Christians you'll never hear about unless I tell you, Marco and Jess, etc.).

Will we take our obligation to one another seriously? Will we actually live as citizens *worthy* of the gospel (i.e., live up to it)? Or will we continue to dishonor the name of Christ and tarnish the reputation of the gospel. I don't think we can fix the larger problem but we can do the best with what we have and where we are.

<sup>6</sup> But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. <sup>7</sup> “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! <sup>8</sup> And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. <sup>9</sup> And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.<sup>1</sup>

**1. The Church Should Be a Safe Place from the Dangers of the World (vv. 6-7)** <sup>6</sup> But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin (stumble), it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. <sup>7</sup> “Woe to the world for temptations to sin (stumble)! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!

**Little Ones:** <sup>6</sup> But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin Jesus is continuing the using the metaphor of children for discipleship (previously called a “live” child to him). But “these little ones” are a **metaphor for any disciple** who would come to God as his child (e.g., submissive, obedient, dependent, etc.). Hence they are those who believe in [him].

- We are always God’s children (e.g., “little ones”) no matter how “grown” we are, either physically or spiritually (e.g., I’m still my mama’s baby; that baby has a beard). *This is why God takes our care of one another so seriously* (e.g., if a good earthly father would treat you one way; how much *more* does your heavenly Father love you?) God wants his *children* to love and support each other (e.g., great prayer that my kids will love and care for each other).
- Is there something to the “little ones” idea. New in faith? Young in faith? “When we are first converted... we are likely to be almost too naive for our own good” (Tozer). As such we depend on the guidance and example of other believers.

**Stumbling Block:** causes... to sin (σκανδαλίση) What does this really mean? I just really think this is an overtranslation of this word (σκανδαλίζω). It might *imply* sin in some way. But let’s look at the evidence:

- “Blessed is the one who is not **offended** by me” (Matt 11:6).
- The seed that has no root and “immediately **falls away**” (Matt 13:21).
- “The Pharisees **were offended** when they heard this saying” (Matt 15:12).
- “However, not to **give offense** to them” (Matt 17:27).
- Jesus said, “You **will all fall away** because of me this night” (Matt 26:31).
- “I have said all these things to you to **keep you from falling away**” (Jn 16:1).

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>6</sup> Ὃς δ’ ἂν σκανδαλίση ἓνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων τῶν πιστευόντων εἰς ἐμέ, συμφέρει αὐτῷ ἵνα κρεμασθῆ μύλος ὀνίκος περὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ καὶ καταποντισθῆ ἐν τῷ πελάγει τῆς θαλάσσης. <sup>7</sup> οὐαὶ τῷ κόσμῳ ἀπὸ τῶν σκανδάλων· ἀνάγκη γὰρ ἐλθεῖν τὰ σκάνδαλα, πλὴν οὐαὶ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ δι’ οὗ τὸ σκάνδαλον ἔρχεται. <sup>8</sup> Εἰ δὲ ἡ χεὶρ σου ἢ ὁ πούς σου σκανδαλίζει σε, ἔκκοπον αὐτὸν καὶ βάλε ἀπὸ σοῦ· καλὸν σοὶ ἐστὶν εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν ζωὴν κυλλὸν ἢ χωλὸν ἢ δύο χεῖρας ἢ δύο πόδας ἔχοντα βληθῆναι εἰς τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον. <sup>9</sup> καὶ εἰ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου σκανδαλίζει σε, ἔξελε αὐτὸν καὶ βάλε ἀπὸ σοῦ· καλὸν σοὶ ἐστὶν μονόφθαλμον εἰς τὴν ζωὴν εἰσελθεῖν ἢ δύο ὀφθαλμοὺς ἔχοντα βληθῆναι εἰς τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός.

- “Therefore, if food **makes** my brother **stumble**, I will never eat meat, lest I **make** my brother **stumble**” (1 Cor 8:13).

The word “sin” is just too specific. Better “stumble” or “fall away” (cf. “lose their faith”). It is *probably* implied in many instances of this word (e.g., stumbling, falling away). But you can’t *cause* someone to sin. Their sin is their sin. Your sin is your sin (don’t try to blame someone else).

- However, you can tempt someone by weakening, undermining, or harming their faith. You can be a **stumbling block**.

**Finish the Race:** I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Tim 4:7). Life is hard. Following Christ is a marathon, not a sprint. We need less Christians who start fast and more that finish well.

- Persevere, overcome, be faithful **to the end** (e.g., Revelation).
  - I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary (Rev. 2:3).
  - The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son (Rev 21:7).
- No guilt in life, no fear in death / This is the pow’r of Christ in me / **From life’s first cry to final breath** / Jesus commands my destiny / No pow’r of hell, no scheme of man / Can ever pluck me from His hand / **’Til He returns or calls me home** / Here in the pow’r of Christ I’ll stand (*In Christ Alone*).

**How Do I Apply This?:** What does this look like? First, I should take care to never cause spiritual harm.

- **Spiritual abuse** is a real thing. Where leaders manipulate or guilt people into service. Where they use people for their own ends rather than loving them and protecting them.
- Being a **bad example**. God has not called me to perfection but I am called to purity of motive. If I teach one thing from the Bible but exhibit something else in my life, then I am undermining the message of the gospel for those who listen. Any sort of false motive will harm people.
- **False teaching** is a direct way to trip someone up. If someone comes to God with childlike faith, trusting him with their life, and you teach them false things about God’s plan or his character, then you are what the OT calls a “blind guide.” And there’s a reason why the “false shepherds” of the OT are judged most harshly.
  - “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (Jas 3:1).

I want to take *extreme care* not to lead anyone astray by my teaching or example. This is *more* about my **heart** and **posture** than my **head** or my **perfection**. The information I teach matters because knowing God according to who he has revealed himself to be matters. But I’ll never have all the knowledge and answers and I’ll never be perfect in my behavior.

- But if my heart is genuinely following God and I’m approaching my calling with real love for the Lord and love for people, things will be ok. Heart and posture not head and perfection.

- “Above all, **keep loving one another earnestly**, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever” (1 Pet 4:8-11).

I *really do* want to be someone who cares for others well, who forgives generously, who displays the gospel clearly. I **don’t** want to encourage sin or display hypocrisy.

- Growing up I was warned of the great dangers of secularism and loose living (e.g., “don’t drink, smoke, or chew, or hang out with women who do”). And I see plenty of dangers in those things. However, the more I look around the more I see that the greater enemy of the church is sometimes things like: hypocritical Christians, abusive leaders, spiritually and emotionally distant parents, toxic church cultures, and people obsessed with being ‘right’ but unwilling to love others like Jesus.

**Stakes Are High:** It would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Jesus is making it clear that the stakes are particularly high!

- Think about these “little ones” coming to Jesus. They are leaving traditions and communities that they’ve known their whole lives to place their faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. What happens if they stumble? They will return to the dead works of Judaism (cf. I’ve seen too many new believers faith confused or dampened by churches).

For Jesus, it is a very serious and horrific matter to cause the spiritual downfall of another person.

- The metaphor here is *extreme* (to put it mildly). Maybe we should take our care of one another *a little more seriously*.

The **heavy** warning (“millstone”) but also **heartfelt** (“little ones”). It is full of **care**. God’s children are so valuable to him that it would be *better* to be drowned in the sea than cause one of them to fall. *Are God’s children that valuable to you?*

**The Mission Suffers:** “Tying weights to people’s necks and drowning them was something the Romans did in special cases of infamy. Another way to look at it is that because the business of saving lives is such a serious business, whoever sidelines an ambassador of God does incalculable harm. The world is lost and in need of salvation, and God uses us (his ‘little ones’) to reveal the Savior. But we won’t get on with the business of pointing people to Jesus if we’ve stumbled, been sidelined, or quit the race. **A primary tool of Satan is to sideline you and sideline others through you.**

- Don’t let anyone damage your childlike dependency on the Lord. Don’t let anyone cause you to stumble over the grace of God revealed in Jesus (e.g., fix your eyes on Jesus). E.g., young in the faith wanting to follow Jesus, become a missionary, enter the pastorate but tripped up by girlfriend/wife, debt, fear, etc.
- Don’t trip anyone on their way to Jesus.

**Don't Be the Problem:** "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! The world has enough challenges. There are enough stumbling blocks we face every day. The world has enough problems, we shouldn't be the problem! Temptations happen, but you don't need to be the cause of them. When someone comes to faith and comes to the church having been bruised and beaten by sin and the world, we should **put out the fire, not fan the flame**.

- The world is a dangerous place with lots of stumbling blocks (that's the nature of life in a fallen world). Discipleship *isn't* easy but the **church shouldn't make it harder** with irresponsible behavior toward fellow disciples.
- Too many Christians have been sabotaged in their faith from friendly fire. It should not be so.

**Kingdom Values:** We believe the church should be different than her current reputation. We believe avoiding causing spiritual harm to another disciple is worth enormous sacrifice.

- Really it's a question of how far you are willing to go to protect a brother or sister.
- There's no place for selfishness and self-centeredness in the church. Narcissists and their organizations leave a massive trail of collateral damage.

But if we're a real team, a spiritual family, then we work differently. We care for others more than ourselves. We bear with each other's shortcomings. A win for one of us is a win for all of us.

- We want our church to be a place where faith is nurtured. It's not a safe place for sin but it is a safe place for sinners.

Are you going to be a stumbling block or a stepping stone? A builder or a breaker? An encourager or a discourager? An ally in your spiritual siblings' pursuit of holiness or a temptation to sin? Will you be dependable or unreliable? Faithful or selfish?

- Community isn't found, it's built. Are you a giver or taker (two types of people)? Give your time, God's grace, your preferences away, etc.
- What God can do with a group of people *this* committed to each other's spiritual growth is incalculable.

**2. The Disciple Should Remove All Obstacles to Following Jesus (vv. 8-9)** <sup>8</sup> And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin (stumble), cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. <sup>9</sup> And if your eye causes you to sin (stumble), tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

**Odd Fit?:** This section which is primarily about this new Kingdom community all of the sudden switches to a more personal application. Why is that? What does your personal fight against temptation have to do with anyone else? I actually think it's a **perfect fit** because your pursuit of God directly impacts your ability to help others pursue God.

- It's hard to \_\_\_\_\_ others if you won't \_\_\_\_\_ yourself (e.g., lead, disciple, forgive, care for, etc.).
- You can't take someone where you've never been (e.g., discipleship, holiness, Bible reading, prayer, etc.). An interesting extension of the Golden Rule ("do unto others as you would have them do unto you"; doing in your life what you call others to do in theirs).

Your sin will be one of the primary things that trips others up.

- Fighting sin is for your good, God's glory, and the good of others. How many Christians have stumbled because of the sin of someone else?

**Start With Yourself:** Your The focus is on **you**. This part of the passage is about you (you not being a stumbling block and you not stumbling into sin). Never focus more on the sins of others than your own.

- Many people start focusing on the sin out there. Or even the *temptation* out there. The point of this passage is to deal with what's right here (e.g., *your hand*; *your eye*). E.g., modesty matters (it's a biblical thing). But what a woman wears doesn't justify any lewd looks or lustful thoughts. Someone else's sin doesn't justify your own.

We can't help others overcome their sin unless we're actively dealing with our own. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye (Matt 7:3-5). The only way we can become helpful and loving to others in their fight for holiness, so they can enjoy God's will for their lives, is to make sure that we see ourselves, our sin, and God's holiness clearly.

- We can't control what temptations come our way but we can respond correctly. You can control what you intend to do, what boundaries you set up, and what plans you have in place. "You can't keep a bird from flying over your head but you can keep it from making a nest in your hair" (Luther).

**Eternal Perspective:** It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. The metaphor pushes us to think about what really matters. Sin sacrifices eternal joy for temporary pleasure. It takes you further than you want to go and costs more than you want to pay.

- Jesus is warning us that our eternal destiny is more important than any temporary sin we might indulge.
- We need to remove from our lives any impediments to our discipleship because "any loss, no matter how painful, is preferable to the total lostness" of eternity apart from God.

\*Now some people will charge that we only care about heaven with this kind of thinking (so heavenly minded that you're of no earthly good).

- We know that, in Jesus, we have true life now and forever. We have life that is truly living. We know that "our salvation makes us more connected, equipped, concerned for the problems of this world, not less" (Lesslie Newbigin).

**Metaphor but Not Hyperbole:** Is Jesus just being hyperbolic here? Is he just being over the top? No, actually, he's not. He's using an extreme metaphor of cutting off our hand and tearing out our eye because extreme danger calls for extreme measures of escape. It's just a metaphor (don't really cut off your hand or tear out your eye), but it's not hyperbole.

- We know it is a metaphor because the literal loss of a hand or an eye doesn't get to the root issue of sin. "Our problem is not in our eyes or our hands, it's in our hearts."

- But radical and painful amputation of stumbling blocks out of our lives may be the only way to escape falling headlong into sin's insidiously deceptive snare.

There are so many applications to this: Is there a sinful relationship that is tripping you up in your pursuit of God? It's got to go. Is your pursuit of money or a career or success sabotaging your discipleship? Which would you rather have? Life with God or "stuff" now. And on and on the applications go. "We may need to amputate a habit, a relationship, a career, certain personal freedoms, whatever is causing us to stumble. Because far better that we enter life having lost those things than kept them and lost our souls."

**Personal Application:** What in your life needs to go? It's worth it.

## Conclusion

**Grace in Our Weakness:** I know this can sound a little harsh at first reading but don't let that discourage you. Jesus is not saying God will smite you if you stumble or saying he hates hypocrites. He gives grace to doubters and fallen disciples alike. This passage is meant to impress deeply on our hearts the eternal consequences that go beyond what we see. It's a call to be the kind of church that reflects the values of his rule and reign in our lives.

- None of us comes to God with clean hands and pure heart, but we open them to God to purify us and make us useful for his kingdom.

**Vision of Equipping:** We want to be the kind of church where disciples are equipped and encouraged to make it across the finish line, where stumbling blocks are removed.

- We want to be the ones sacrificing our preferences so others can pursue Christ.
- We're happy to bear the cost so others can reap the reward of the gospel.

Let me tell you the story of **Paul Scott**. As a freshman, Paul is a member of the West Fork cross country team in Fayetteville, Arkansas. And the fact that he is blind isn't going to stop him from running his race. So, the high school went looking for volunteers to serve as guides. And that's where fourth grader **Rebel Hays** comes in. He loves to run and he loves to help others, so he volunteered. He's quite the athlete but he's still only a fourth grader competing with high schoolers. So he has to practice every day to keep up. He has to sacrifice his time and train hard. In his words, "If I don't run this distance, it's like I'm cheating Paul. I can't cheat him, so I have to run the right distance and the right time no matter what." Using a rope, the duo navigates the cross-country courses. They started running two-mile races but now are running 5ks. "I'll admit it's pretty hard, but it's all for Paul. I have to do it for him," says Rebel.

- I just imagine all the things a typical fourth grader would rather be doing (e.g., video games, TV, playing with friends, etc.) than training. And what's his reward? Paul is the one who is running the race and getting the reward.

What if we had more Christians like this, who take the spiritual success of others so seriously that they forego their own time, comfort, and preferences for others. **What are you doing to help others run the race of faith?**