

Better Off Dead

Picture this, you are on a part of I-5 freeway up in WA, where there are four lanes going in one direction. The freeway is packed and everyone, including you, is driving 12-15 mph over the speed limit. You see a speed limit sign reminding you of your offense, warning you that someone out there is against you speeding. A highway patrolman knows he can enter the freeway and chase anyone he wants since everybody is speeding. He does so and decides to pull you over. He approaches the driver's side, and asks you, the driver for license, registration and insurance. He does not ask the passengers, but you, the one responsible for the crime of speeding. You see, the Highway Patrol targets all vehicles that speed but can only pull one over one at a time to narrow the focus of the law right down to the individual. Now imagine if your crime of speeding caused an accident. The car you caused to crash was the highway patrolman's daughter. His determination to apprehend you and to see the full weight of the law applied to you would be fierce. You would have been better off had you not gone on this road trip. You would have been better off staying right at home versus being arrested for reckless driving and the restitution for damages against the officer's daughter. Let's now look to the text. As I read the passage, notice how Jesus sets the tone for His message to his disciples. Jesus is against the sin of the whole world but is very interested in the individual. Unlike the highway patrol, Jesus is motivated by love for the world, love for the sinner, and love for the criminal. To see them repent and to forsake their sin.

⁵“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶but 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.

⁷“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! ⁸And 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. ⁹And 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.

So we see Jesus, still holding the child, getting the attention of the disciples that were there that day. In essence, He is speaking to the whole freeway of law breakers, mankind, and progressively narrows His focus down to the individual. Romans 3 tells us all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. This includes His disciples. The self-righteousness mind, you know, the “I am not as bad as the other guy, I am mostly good”, that mentality was just as pervasive then as it is now. That same mind was the one in verse 1 of this chapter asking who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Most humans like hiding their sins by the idea that they are part of larger group. Perhaps they are no worse than all those around them, maybe even a little better than most. We can easily justify our sin by looking around us to see we are not the only one. Perhaps God does not see me sinning amidst the whole world's atrocities. Besides, my sins are not so bad. They only affect me. Jesus thinks otherwise. He sees sin in the world. He sees people causing others to stumble into sin. He hates it.

Today's passage will reveal how jealous God is over His children, how much He hates sin, and how much He hates people placing stumbling blocks before His children causing them to stumble into sin. You should know that in today's verses, all the phrases like; causing others to sin, temptations to sin, temptations to come, all have Greek word usage of stumbling or placing a block or stone in front of others with the purpose of stumbling them. The first use of this is found in Leviticus 19:14 You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling

block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. Ancient Jewish culture was a walking culture. To walk many miles in sandals would be very difficult if the path was covered in stones to trip or stumble on. Jesus audience knew full well to stumble or to place a stumbling block was synonymous with providing an occasion for sin, or apostasy, to ruin, idol worship, or moral failure. 1 Cor 8:9 Paul addresses saints not allowing their rights to be stumbling blocks to the weak. An unintentional stumbling. And again in Rom 14:13 Paul asks the Romans to not pass judgment on one another but to decide to never put a stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a believer. With that in mind, let me get into vs 5.

Looking at verse 5 we learn that receiving children in His name is also receiving Him. This is additional to Matthew 25, where serving Jesus is serving the hungry, thirsty, the stranger, the naked, and the imprisoned. Jesus here establishes His intense love for children. Little children desperately need their parents and are so vulnerable. He wants them cared for, protected, and highly valued. Moreover, if a person was to cause one of these little believing children to sin, causing them to stumble, he should think twice. Jesus knew that all people needed a warning against causing others to stumble. Here, Jesus sets a comparison of life options for disciples and for any who may hear this powerful warning; cause a child to sin, **or** suffer a violent death being drug quickly to the bottom of the sea by a several hundred pound stone. Most of my life I thought this was a picture of what God would want for a person who hurts children. It is not. It is actually a much better option for those that would hurt children.

You will see as we continue in the passage why you would be better off dead than stumbling a believing child.

Verse 7, Woe to the world, this funny three letter word continues to sets the stage for Jesus disdain for those causing children to sin. The word woe is a passionate cry of grief or despair. Warning of impending judgment, impending doom. God is grieved over sin in the world, but it is part of His plan, part of His eternal purpose. He has not lost control. It **is** necessary that temptations come. Prophetically we are told what the future will look like prior to the return of Christ. Trials, tribulations, wars, rumors of wars, people being lovers of themselves, greedy, abusive, and treacherous. Listen to me, just because we know temptations will come, it does not mean they should come through us! Jesus said woe to the one by whom the temptation comes. Jesus lays out doom for those that are placing stumbling blocks before others. As He holds this child, He creates this emotion of despair and doom for the world, **and** for the person responsible for stumbling His children. His disciples listening would have been caught off guard but still thinking, "I don't stumble others, and I certainly wouldn't purposefully stumble children." Jesus knowing their thoughts and their deceitful hearts continues His pursuit for the individual. The one who is responsible. A person with a name. The disciples are now thinking, "is He talking about me? There are no scribes or Pharisees, no brood of vipers here! Why is He still looking over here at me? I must be paranoid."

Verse 8 makes it clear Jesus is very concerned for His followers and for all who may hear them share this message. And if **your** hand or **your** foot causes **you** to sin! He is no longer addressing the direct act of placing a stumbling block in front of others but of you placing a stumbling block in front of yourself. He is shedding light on personal sin. Shedding light on responsibility for sin. Your hand, not another's. Your foot, not another's. He wants to wake His followers up from their false reality, false righteousness.

If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. Really?! Not being able to work with both your hands or comfortably walk distances would greatly limit your ability to live well. It would also limit your place in society. Even today most third world countries think crippled people are being judged for secret sins. They are seen as bad luck. People in Jesus day who were crippled or lame often begged for their very existence and were outcasts. Here Jesus states it would be better for you, you would be better off entering

the rest of your life crippled or lame and without sin, without stumbling blocks, than to be thrown into the eternal fire. He directly attacks the health, wealth, prosperity religion that existed. Reminding the audience that there will be judgment for sin and ungodliness. It will not matter how much you attained in this life if you don't find the forgiveness for your sins. Jesus helps the disciples see how important life choices are in light of eternity. That it is not about who will be the greatest in any kingdom but about humbly following God right into eternity. Humbly making choices to protect your relationship with God and others. Even as He addresses personal sin, it is still in context of causing others to sin. Have you ever noticed that when you sin you give others around you an opportunity to sin? Let me give some examples: You lose your temper which incites others to lose theirs. When you drive aggressively and cut someone off you get a rough gesture in response. When you frustrate your children, you give them an opportunity to lose their cool. Those are easy ones, what about discontentment, greed, purity, lust, adultery, pornography. The untold effects of those sins have caused countless stumbling blocks to all those around the sin. When you sin, there is almost always collateral damage causing others to stumble in their walks with God. We truly do not have the ability to sin privately without it jeopardizing those around us. A big reason we cause others to sin is the example we set for those that are weaker in faith, especially children.

Jesus continues to build His case with a parallel thought.

Verse 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For a Jew to have eyes gouged out is associated with Samson who the Philistines gouged out both his eyes before his death. Or in 1 Sam 11:2 where Nahash the Ammonite said to Israel, "On this condition I will make a treaty with you, that I gouge out all your right eyes, and thus bring disgrace on all Israel." It would be a disgrace socially and could lead to poverty not being able to use both eyes. Again, Jesus explains it is better for you to enter your life with one eye, possibly disgraced and poor than to be thrown into the hell of fire. In this verse Jesus modifies His description for final judgment. He uses the greek word Gehenna, the place of everlasting punishment. Again the disciples are being forced to contrast between eternity in hell fire or a crippled life living for God and repenting of sin. For many Jews they thought about justice being an eye for an eye. Exodus 21 and Leviticus 24 both reveal God's law, life for life, eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for a hand, foot for a foot. The disciples must have been scratching their heads about this teaching. Jesus reveals the war that rages within oneself. Instead of you losing your eye because you gouged out your neighbor's, you are to gouge your own eye out to deal swiftly with how it is causing you to sin. So, the tricky part with this teaching is you have to look at what Jesus was trying to accomplish with it and to not see it so literally. Jesus knows, and most of us know, that you cannot solve a sin issue by simply removing the temptation or the stumbling block. If that were the case, many zealous believers would be blind, handless, and footless and not worth a whole lot in serving God. Sin is a matter of the heart. Any Christian addiction counselor knows that if the matter of the heart is not dealt with, the root of addiction will just shift on to a new vice after one is removed. While God knows the heart is the issue, he does recognize the weakness of the flesh. We see wisdom in Romans 13:14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. In our walks with God, it is good to consider what causes us to sin and to strategically remove it from our lives. When we do, God honors those decisions. Years ago, my dear wife decided to cancel some home magazines because they caused her to be discontent with what she had. I choose to limit what entertainment and news I watch to protect my mind and eyes from things that stumble me. Some people change careers to protect themselves from temptation or to protect their time with family. Others do away with computers or smart phones to further protect what they look at. These can be tough decisions but nothing like cutting a hand off. That is

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Pastor Mark Idol

why I see Jesus strongly exhorting His followers to count the cost of their sin and to make the needed sacrifices to be right with the one who died for them on the cross.

Dear friend, if judgment and hell are still a terrifying prospect for you, would you cry out to Jesus today? Ask Him to forgive you and to make you new? Don't let anything or anyone stumble you from surrendering to Him. He loves you so much and is ready to receive you. Dear Saint, in light of God's hatred of sin, will you sacrifice anything that stumbles you in your walk with God? Not for fear of losing your salvation but for your love of the one who sacrificed His life for you.

Remember, Jesus paid it all. He made full provision for all our sins. Let us therefore approach His throne of grace continually and worship Him for ever.