

Are You A Stumbling Block?

Almost everyone has stumbled while walking. Maybe we were admiring the scenery while walking down a dirt path and our foot stepped on a rock or into a hole, causing us to trip. Or maybe our ankle twisted due to the ground not being level and we fell to the ground, or almost did. Falling and hurting our leg, hands, or knees is not enjoyable. But what happens if someone purposefully allows us to trip? They saw us walking, saw the danger but did nothing or said nothing. It would be even worse if someone intentionally causes us to trip and fall. Now what would you think should happen to an individual who intentionally allowed us to fall? In our study, Jesus warns us to not be a stumbling block or a stumbling stone. Are you a stumbling stone? Do you know how you can avoid being one? Our study is from Luke 17:1-4.

DO NOT BE A STUMBLING BLOCK. Having finished with the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) Jesus then warned those listening about stumbling blocks.

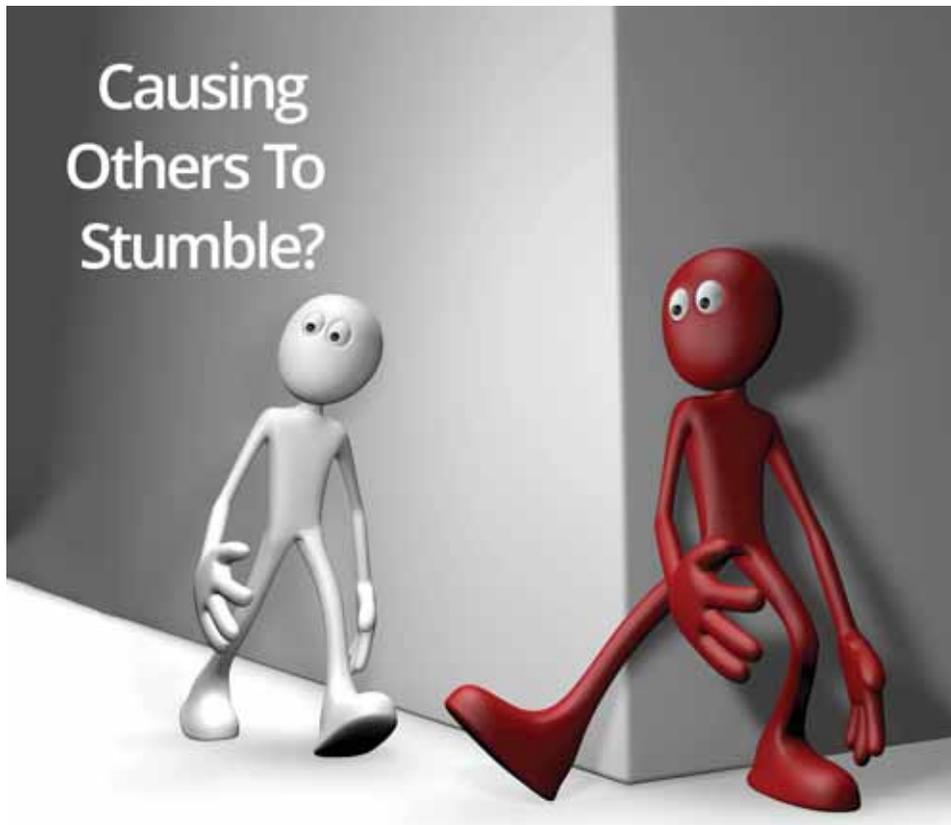
He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come! Luke 17:1 (NASB)"

This is the second time that Jesus has taught this principle. The first time occurred about nine months before in the Summer of A.D. 32. It is now the first part of A.D. 33. Christ will die soon in April A.D. 33. A quick compar-

ison of Jesus' first statement in Matthew 18:6-7 reveals that this second time Jesus reversed the order of His teaching and changed some of the wording. But the message is the same. While Matthew 18:6-7 was directed at the disciples

who were struggling with the sin of pride, Luke 17:1-4 is directed at the Pharisees and for the benefit of the disciples. It is important to note that in Luke 14, Jesus' teaching has been about the Pharisees (Luke 14:1, 3; 15:2; 16:14). He has been giving warnings the Pharisees.

When Jesus said that it is "inevitable that stumbling blocks come" He means that we will encounter them and cause them. Have you ever done something that inadvertently motivated someone to misunderstand your intentions and as a result they sinned? If so, then you unintentionally caused someone



to stumble. The worst stumbling block is one that hinders a person from becoming a Christian.

There are a variety of stumbling blocks that we can commit. Matthew 16:21-23 teaches us that we can inadver-

tently become a stumbling block by focusing on our own wishes and not the will of God our Father who is in heaven. Notice in this passage that after Jesus told the disciples He would “suffer many things,” Peter protested. Here is what happened.

From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.” 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.” Matthew 16:21-23 (NASB)

Not only did Peter not understand why Jesus was going to suffer, he was also only concerned about himself. Just imagine what would have happened if Jesus had followed Peter’s advice and did not go to Jerusalem and suffer and die for our sins. If Christ had followed his advice, Peter would have been the motivator—the stumbling block.

Romans 14:13 is another example of a stumbling block.

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this — not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way. Romans 14:13 (NASB)

This verse occurs at the end of a discussion about causing others to stumble. That is, it is a sin to do something that we know will offend another person. Sadly, many today do not care if they offend someone else because they do not want to be hindered from “having fun.” The retort we often hear is, “That is their problem.” Therefore, as the result of a lack of love towards others, such people become a stumbling block. In Ezekiel 44:10-12 God warned the Levitical priests who were leading the Israelites in false worship that they were a stumbling block. God told them that they would be punished as a result of their sins.

But there is one stumbling block for which we will be rewarded. That stumbling block is sharing the good news about Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:22-24 warns us that

people will stumble when we preach Christ. They are not stumbling over us but over Christ.

For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 1:22-24 (NASB)

It is ironic that Jesus Himself is a stumbling block to the Jews. How was Christ a stumbling block? The Jews were spiritually blind and did not understand that Jesus was their Messiah. Consequently, they rejected Him and turned against all Christians (Acts 4:13-22; 5:17-32; 8:1-3; 26:10-12). As a result, people were killed and some were fearful of becoming a Christian.

Now notice Jesus’ last words in Luke 17:1. He says, “Woe to him through whom they come!” That is, woe to those who cause others to stumble. Obviously, Jesus is not talking about being a stumbling block as the result of sharing the gospel or acting righteously. All of the apostles suffered for their faith in Christ. Jesus warned us that the world will hate us (John 15:20) and in the last days murder us (Matthew 24:9-10). This does not include the negative response from disciplining a child, or someone whom you had to confront in the process of church discipline (Matthew 18:15-18). Therefore, Jesus is talking about any sinful behavior that could cause others to sin or to stumble!

The Pharisees were guilty of causing others to stumble over Christ by their own rejection of Him. Since people will usually follow their leaders, the Pharisees influenced those who followed them. We have already discovered that these leaders did not believe what Christ taught and found something wrong with every miracle He performed. They objected to everything about Him. They did not believe He was the Messiah or God, even though His works screamed that He was God. They were a stumbling block to many people who were also influenced to doubt Christ.

BETTER IF YOU COMMITTED SUICIDE. In the next verse, Jesus tells us that if any one of us is a stumbling block, committing suicide is a better choice than living.

It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble. Luke 17:2 (NASB)

Why would Jesus say this? We can imagine that many people would struggle with His statement. The Roman Catholic Church once taught that suicide was a mortal sin, that is, committing suicide would send someone to hell.¹ Even most non-Roman Catholic people consider suicide to be a great sin. Secular people consider suicide to be a horrible act. The sixth commandment warns us to not commit murder.

You shall not murder. Exodus 20:13 (NASB)

Therefore, why would Jesus say it is better to murder yourself if you are a stumbling block?

The answer is that Jesus is not encouraging or urging us to commit suicide; He is saying it would be *better!* The emphasis is on the word *better*. We fail to understand the seriousness of sin. Do you sin? Have you ever lied? Do you argue with the goal of winning? Do you hoard your money when you see someone who is in need? Do you sexually lust after someone? Do you watch pornography, look at photos of naked men or women? Do you rob God by giving Him less than you spend at restaurants? When someone points out a sin or a fault that you commit, do you get angry? Do you gossip about others? Do you confess those sins to God? Do those sins trouble you? Do you see those sins as God does? Listen to these words from our God,

For all of us have become like one who is unclean,
And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;
And all of us wither like a leaf,
And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
Isaiah 64:6 (NASB)

The Hebrew word that is translated as “filthy garments” is

1. Ramon Martinez De Pison. Death by Despair. Peter Lang Publishing. 2006. ISBN10: 0820463825, p .51. The author is a full professor in the department of Counseling and Spirituality at the University of Saint-Paul (ustpaul.ca/index.php?mod=employee&cid=8).

idda. It refers to the menstrual cloths a woman would use in ancient times. God considers our righteous deeds to be as filthy as a used or soiled menstrual cloth. That is how good we are! Now imagine how filthy your “little lie” was, or your uncontrolled display of anger? It is much worse than the ancient soiled menstrual cloth. Next God teaches us in Isaiah 64:6 that we wither like a leaf - here yesterday and gone tomorrow. We are insignificant in comparison to eternity; but we think we are important. Then God says our sins take us away. You see, sin is what sends us to eternal judgment or hell. God is not painting a beautiful picture of us.

Consider another statement that God has made of us in Jeremiah 17:9,

The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick;
Who can understand it?
“I, the LORD, search the heart,
I test the mind,
Even to give to each man according to his ways,
According to the results of his deeds.”
Jeremiah 17:9-10 (NASB)

He says we are very deceitful and desperately sick in our hearts. In contrast, we think we are wonderful and that others should treat us as though we are the most wonderful person who has walked this earth. Everyone should be kind, generous and loving. The truth is we are horribly sick and sinful. We deserve nothing! Jesus says if you are a stumbling block, then it would be better if you committed suicide. Then you will not do it again! We just do not understand the seriousness of sin and how evil we are! Or, are you an exception? If you answer yes, then you are terribly deceived. Jesus’ message is that when we are a stumbling block, we have motivated someone(s) to sin. In such cases it would be better if we had someone tie a millstone around our neck and throw us into the sea. That reveals the seriousness of sin. It is better for us to die than to motivate someone else to sin. That is what Jesus meant by “than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble.”

Now who are the “little ones”? It is a term Jesus had used

before. He used “little ones” in Matthew 10:42 to refer to others in need of a cup of water. In Matthew 18:6 it referred to children, but in Matthew 18:10, 14 and Mark 9:42 it referred to unbelievers. In John 13:33, Jesus used “little children,” a slight variation of the expression, to refer to His disciples in the Upper Room. The apostle John also used the same expression in 1 John 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21. This helps us understand that the “little ones” and “little children” was an expression of endearment that was used for both children and adults. This

means Jesus deeply cares for anyone who stumbles or sins. He cares for anyone who sins because of another person’s sinful behavior. He cares for us. He is not an angry God seeking to crush us.

OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE STUMBLER. Stumbling is like tripping and falling because someone else bumped you. However, this illustration is incomplete because James 1:14-16 tells us that we are still responsible for

our stumbling or sinning. Ultimately, we choose to commit the sin. For example, someone became angry with you and you responded in anger. That person did not make or force you to become angry. James 1:14-16 teaches us that we gave into our emotions and became angry. 2 Thessalonians 1:6 is an important verse for believers who stumble as the result of being motivated by another’s sin.

For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those

who afflict you . . . 2 Thessalonians 1:6 (NASB)

This verse should provide us comfort that God is aware of every sin that is committed by others, and by ourselves. God is aware when a believer is persecuted or when someone is a stumbling block. He will pay them back. We do not need to return evil for evil. We should return good for evil. God will repay them.



Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord. “BUT IF YOUR ENEMY

IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:16-21 (NASB)

Do you see why it may be better to hang a milestone around your neck and be cast into the sea? The issue is your sin.

RESTORING A SINNING BROTHER. Then Jesus addressed the issue of what should we do if someone else sins? Notice

how he started.

Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. Luke 17:3 (NASB)

Now Jesus' words may seem strange to us when He said, "Be on your guard!" He wants us to be on guard when another person sins. Why? Most people do not want to be told they sinned. Most people do not want to be rebuked. But God is not like us. The Psalmist said,

You thought that I was just like you . . . Psalm 50:21 (NASB)

God is more concerned about the sin than we are. God does not want sin to gain control of us. Notice in Romans 6:12-13 that the apostle Paul urges us,

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. Romans 6:12-13 (NASB)

God does not want sin to seize control of us. We were slaves of sin before we became Christians. Now we must not let sin regain the throne of our lives.

Notice the following illustration from Ezekiel 33:7-8 where God told the watchmen of Israel to warn the wicked.

"Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth and give them warning from Me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand." Ezekiel 33:7-8 (NASB)

Now we should ask, "Why did God warn the watchman to warn the wicked?" The answer is given three verses later in Ezekiel 33:11,

"Say to them, 'As I live!' declares the Lord GOD, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live.'" Ezekiel 33:11 (NASB)

The passage teaches us that God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked. He wants us to love our neighbor by warning him about his sin. Your neighbor may not like being warned, but God approves!

Do you see that there is a connection to Luke 17:1-2 where Jesus warned us to not be a stumbling block? We can be a stumbling block by not rebuking others who are caught in a habitual pattern of sin. The rebuke is not one of condemnation but an encouragement to flee sin and live righteously. The goal is restoration and not condemnation. The Greek word translated as "guard" in verse 3 is *prosecho*. It means "to hold on to" or "to pay close attention to." It has the idea of paying attention to someone. This verse has the idea of being concerned for another's captivity to sin! Usually we are indifferent and do not want to become involved for fear of the response we will receive. But we are our brother's keeper! The believer who always ignores another's sin is unloving and contributes to the person's sinfulness.

But how do we help a family member, friend, or neighbor who is caught in sin? Jesus says "rebuke him." But how do we rebuke the individual? Galatians 6:1-2 helps us understand that we are to approach someone who is caught in a sin with gentleness and to be careful that we do not sin in the process.

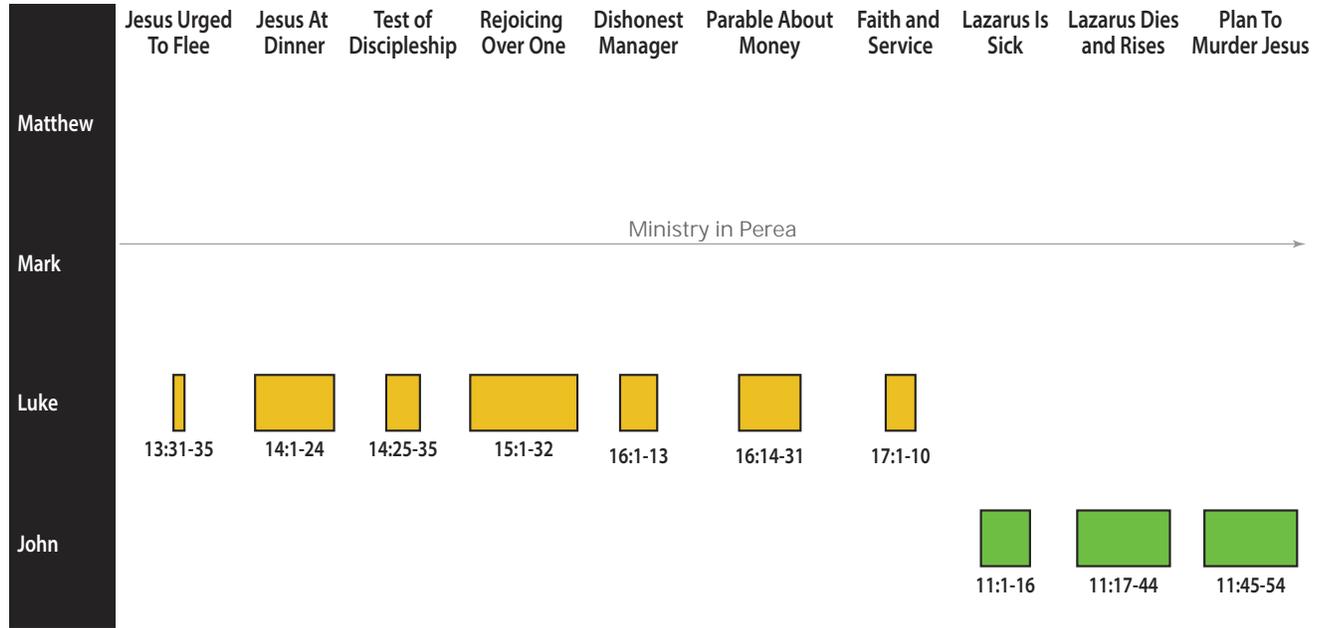
Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:1-2 (NASB)

The Holy Spirit urges us to be gentle in our attempt to restore a sinning person. It is possible to be so confrontational with someone that you sin in the process and motivate them to sin more because you are too insensitive. The goal is not condemnation, but restoration.

Now what are the steps we should follow? The answer is found in Matthew 18:15-17.

Life and Heart of Jesus

Ministry In Perea - Fall of A.D. 32



If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Matthew 18:15-17 (NASB)

This passage is commonly referred to as the passage on church discipline. It teaches us that the first step is to speak with the individual privately, one-on-one. Too often Christians speak to the pastor first, share the problem with another Christian or want someone to accompany them. But that is not what Jesus said. He said to go in private. If the sinning believer does not respond, the next step is take someone with you and meet with the individual again in an attempt to help them stop sinning. Then if that effort fails, that is the person does not repent, you must go to one of the elders of the church. We must remember the goal is restoration and not condemnation. The goal is not to shout at them but to

demonstrate love in the process. For more information on this process, read the study titled, "[Church Discipline and Sinning Christians.](#)"

If he or she repents, then we are to forgive him. Sadly, some Christians withhold all forgiveness until the offending individual apologizes and asks for forgiveness. But Jesus is not talking about every major and minor offense. Just imagine what home life and church life would be like if we confronted people for every sin they committed. No one would want to go to that church or live in that home. In fact, that is the root cause of divorces. Since we are sinners, we sin every day. Jesus is concerned about habitual repetitive sins. He is concerned with sins that have become a pattern of life. The individual has become a slave to the sin and needs help if they are going to respond correctly. If the person responds in repentance at any step in the process, then we are to forgive them. We are not granting God's forgiveness. Our forgiveness is communicating our acceptance of their repentant heart and restoration of the relationship.

IF HE SINS AGAINST YOU. Then Jesus tells us that if even the person sins multiple times in a day, we are to forgive

them each time.

And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." Luke 17:4 (NASB)

Why does Jesus tell us to forgive others? The answer is that it is common for people to hold grudges and to become bitter. Bitterness is the result of continued refusal to forgive individuals. Jesus also warns us in the Lord's Prayer that if we do not forgive, then God the Father will not forgive us.

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. Matthew 6:14-15 (NASB)

Why would God withhold forgiveness? The answer is because we refuse to forgive! When we sin by refusing to forgive, it would be a sin for God to ignore our sin of refusing to forgive!

CONCLUSION. While this instruction applies to every person, especially Christians, this teaching was actually directed to the Pharisees who were a major stumbling block to many people. They motivated people to reject Christ. They refused to forgive and they withheld forgiveness. They are the example of what we should *not* be like. They were not committed to holiness and godliness.

Are you a stumbling block to others? That is the conclud-

ing question we must ask. We have learned that we can be a stumbling block and cause another to sin. This occurs when we are thoughtless and insensitive. We do not think about our actions or words. Jesus reminded us in Matthew 12:36 that on the day of judgment we will give account for every careless word. We are responsible for motivating another to sin.

But we can also be a stumbling block by not helping another believer break free from a pattern of sin and by refusing to forgive them. Maybe you have observed someone committing a pattern of sin. Gossip is one such sin that is common. Maybe you have avoided helping that person stop gossiping. You know gossip is sin, but you do not want to speak to them about it. If so, then you are a stumbling block to them. Or, have you ever been offended by someone and then later discovered that the person could sense that you had not forgiven them? In some relationships, that lack of forgiveness results in divorce, murder, robbery, or some other evil.

If we would pursue holiness in our own lives and seek holiness in the lives of others, then we could avoid being a stumbling block. God's desire is that we become like Him. In 1 Peter 1:15-16, God urges us to be holy with these words,

... but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY." 1 Peter 1:15-16 (NASB)