

Matthew 21-07-04b

Thank Anne Lynn for our patriotic special music today, and we'll have some more music after class, but we're going to continue our study now in the Gospel of Matthew, picking up at verse six. And it's really important to catch the meaning through metaphor that Jesus employs here. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin.

Are we talking about children or are we talking about humble believers? It is of course the latter. That's fairly straightforward, but watch as we keep going. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin.

Notice all the way through in the previous section, Jesus said, if you receive them in my name, you receive me. The way you treat them is going to be viewed and judged and evaluated as though you had done it to the Lord Jesus himself. So this requires a kind of thinking where we read the Lord Jesus into all of our encounters with fellow believers.

This is not talking about unbelievers. It's not talking about the public in general. It's not talking about children or children in general.

This is specifically what we do in Jesus name and for his sake. And it continues here in verse six, whoever causes one of these little ones and these little ones he's talking about are not little children. They are those who have made themselves humble and specifically whoever causes one of them to sin.

Now this is in Greek skandalize, skandalizo. The word for sin and the word for make is not there. We've seen this a number of times before.

Skandalizo, we get our word scandal from it or scandalize is literally to trip up, to snare, to cause to stumble. Skandalizo was used for interrupting an animal's progress so that you could capture it, kill it, and often eat it. Um, but it was to snare, to trap or to cause to stumble, to, uh, interfere with his progress.

So what does that mean? You know, you could try to parse this out and say, well, as long as I'm not causing someone else to sin, I'm okay. But this is broader than that. If you slow down someone's progress, this could be spiritual progress.

It could be physical progress. If they are moving, you don't scandalize static targets. This is something that is in motion to trip.

Someone has to be walking usually, uh, or at least moving your feet. Uh, I know people that have been moving their feet and a dog or an impediment got in the way and, uh, you fall that's skandalizo. So whoever causes stumbling for one of these little ones.

So let's imagine this. Now there's someone who is humbling themselves. Let's say it's us, we and each other, we're endeavoring to apply the principles in this passage.

So this afternoon and for the rest of the holiday weekend and in our future dealings with family and, uh, fellow believers, wherever we encounter them, whether we know them well, or glancing acquaintance passing like sheep in the night, whatever it is, there is an occasion to cause someone to stumble. Paul, the apostle was a very advanced believer in his understanding of spiritual truth. But there were things that he did not do, even though he knew it was okay for him to do them because he knew that observing believers would stumble, would not be able to do what he did for the reasons that he did it.

And they would end up misapplying. He understood freedom in Christ. He understood that the law was no longer applicable, but the law of love and what they sometimes call the law of sacrifice or supreme sacrifice is that even though I have the right to a thing, I deny it to myself for the sake of believers around me.

Paul said, I've got the right to lead about a wife like the other apostles do, but I don't, I have the right to support from the churches that I travel around and teach and minister to and the cities where I evangelize. I have the right to support, but I don't claim it. I sit down with my fellow tent makers and we make a product and sell it because there has been abuse of that principle where people for dishonest gain pose as ministers and purport to do the work of God when they're really just interested in some other kind of gain, material or immaterial.

So whoever causes one of these little ones to sin, sin is not the issue here. Someone who is endeavoring to live the life of humility, they want to look out for the interests of others at their own expense. That's what a little one is.

I'm looking out for others at my own expense. It costs me something. Let this mind be in you that was in the Lord Jesus.

What he did for us cost him something. His time on this earth, just coming down here and living as a human being cost him everything he had in glory. He emptied himself and took on the form of a servant and came in our likeness.

What a demotion that was. Living in limitation, living under the hardships that we experience. Why did he do that? Couldn't there have been some glorious heavenly pyramid with Jesus up on top and a holy glowing sacrificial moment where he put on a dirty robe and bore our sins and then took it off again and coming down here into the squalor and the disgusting, self-interested, bickering world that he lived in, the religious facade, the cheap, shoddy way that people tend to treat each other.

Jesus came and lived and swam in this pond as scummy as it is for us. And to take someone who is seeking to follow the Lord in that way, they are doing their best to humble themselves like a little child. Look out not for their own interests, but the interests of others.

Now, someone else, someone in the periphery of that person causes them to trip up. Trip how? Certainly not literally tripping. What is the progress that is being stopped or slowed? What is the stumbling? What area is it? Well, what does a little one represent? Humility.

So you're making it hard for them to be humble. Now, this is not the old song that Mac Davis or somebody had. It's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way.

I can't wait to look in the mirror because I get better looking each day. To know me is to love me. I must be a heck of a man.

This is not that, that it's hard to be humble. But if you make it difficult for someone to operate that way, let's say, I mean, just use your imagination. I think we can be unappreciative and ungrateful to each other.

We can be demanding and take advantage of someone who is a selfless. And, and I know many people who are very, very careful about this. And they, the last thing they want to do is take advantage and they are very appreciative.

And that's a healthy paranoia to be worried about taking advantage to, to not be um, taking for granted and, uh, relying on the generosity of others without returning that generosity oneself. You could cause one of these little ones to stumble. Someone who is still, and all of us to some extent are still figuring out how, where to do this.

Are there other areas of my life? It's, we can do each other favors. We can help each other out with a task or a project. Uh, we can do something for someone that they can't do for themselves.

These, these are the simple areas. That's those are the baby steps we take. But what about in conversation? What about the course that a discussion or an argument or a story may take? Are we sharing information with others that is going to stick in their mind and cause them to stumble later? Are they going to think differently about fellow believers? Are they going to have a harder time, uh, looking out for the interests of people because we have told tales or we have put them in a shadow of some kind.

If someone is, is trying to improve their walk of humility and love and our conversation, uh, makes issues out of things that make it very difficult to do that. If we can guard our tongues, set a watch on the door of our lips. You remember James's famous comparison, the tongue is like a flame of fire and it's set on fire by Gehenna.

Uh, that's the, the city dump trash fire that never went out. And if our tongue becomes a city dump trash fire, because we are thoughtless most of the time when we tread on someone's humility or we tread on someone's selflessness or their love, we're insensible. We're unconscious.

We're, we are literally inconsiderate. We're just not considering. We're not taking the time to think how is my action or my speech or my operation here affecting this believer? Am I harming them with insensitivity, with callous indifference or lack of consideration that can be causing a little one to stumble, to make it difficult to put one step in front of the other in living a life of dedication to Christ and humility before God.

You can make an issue. You can make an excessive issue out of politics. You can make an excessive issue out of climate change or, or, uh, you know, uh, medical problems, uh, assaulting the world.

Uh, if, if we get worried and, and take up a lot of space with discussions about things that crowd out the opportunity to focus on who we are as believers and why we're here, we can be agents of stumbling. Well, you know, I hadn't really thought too much about global warming, but I use that because I don't think anybody in our church is worried about global warming. But if I made an issue out of that and, and talked about it and, and someone said, wow, you know, Sam's the pastor of the church and he's really on this global warming thing.

I would, I wonder if I need to be worried about that. I, maybe I need to get some insulation or, you know, throw out my hairspray or, you know, uh, turn off the air conditioner. I don't, we sometimes just with an offhand remark, um, thoughtlessness in our conversation can lead to stumbling on the part of people that we may not even know we're listening.

So it's useful to think about and to plan for. And once again, Jesus puts himself, he gives us the key. If you receive one of these little ones, you receive me.

If you talk around one of these little ones, you're talking around me. If you have a behavior around these little ones, you're having that behavior around me. Is this the way you would act? If Jesus were in the room, is this the way you would talk? If Jesus was listening to the conversation, he gives us the key.

What you do to these little ones you do to me. Therefore, if you trip them, it would be better for that man. If a millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea, I think the Lord gets our attention.

He certainly got the attention of the disciples. They're arguing about who is going to be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. How far opposite can you get from a gilded chair in the kingdom of heaven? Can you get much further away than the very bottom of the sea with a stone around your neck, meaning you're not coming back up? The reason I talk so much here about our conversation and our behavior is that's the context.

There are 12 disciples. I doubt that all 12 of them were arguing about who will be the greatest in the kingdom. It was probably a few of the stronger personalities and the ones

that Jesus seemed to assign more tasks and take with him to upper rooms and take to the top of the Mount of Transfiguration and so on.

We know from another passage that James and John, the beloved apostle John, as much as we love him, he is one of three parties that went to the Lord Jesus, his brother James and his mother, to see if he could sit at one side or the other of the Lord Jesus in the kingdom. John came and asked that question. James came and asked that question.

Two of these 12 men on another occasion go directly to Jesus and say, in the kingdom, we really want to sit right next to you, one on the right hand and one on the left. We'll let you pick which one. We do this in our prayer sometimes.

We give God two options, neither of which he's going to fulfill. But think about it. The context here, what are some of the other disciples, how conducive and how helpful and how upbuilding, uplifting and encouraging is it to hear James and John, let's say as brothers, arguing about which one of them is going to be greatest in the kingdom? And you're the other Simon, you're the other James, you're Bartolomeo or Nathaniel.

What are these guys going to think? Well, boy, you know, if greatness in the kingdom depends on the things that these guys are doing, maybe I ought to just leave. It can be a discouragement to have a thoughtless conversation and not be aware of those around us. And Jesus says, y'all are trying to figure out how great you're going to be.

How would you like to be at the bottom of the sea with a millstone around your neck? If you're causing others to stumble, that would be a better fate than what's going to happen to you. Now, let me ask you this. What would be worse than having a millstone around the neck and being thrown into the sea and sinking to the very bottom? What would be worse? Jesus invites us to answer that question because he says, the man who trips these little ones, it is going to be worse.

It would be better to be at the bottom. So what would be worse? How long do you experience being at the bottom of the sea with a millstone? A couple of minutes till you run out of air and you drown and then you're unconscious, right? As ugly an experience as drowning is, it is something that is accomplished in a matter of minutes. You don't drown over three days.

You drown in a few minutes, sometimes a few seconds. What is the fate of those who trip God's children who are trying to live a life of self-sacrifice and humility? The consequences are eternal. The consequences are eternal.

That is the implication here, which Jesus is going to make explicit as we go forward. So we see now that Jesus uses this little one to represent conveniently in a nice little package, the entire concept of living a life that is sacrificial to self beneficial toward others. And as we do that, we want to look to our right hand and to our left and ensure

that as we are trying to do that, we are not tripping those around us.

You have to be as old as some of us are to remember the famous race where there was a very famous runner who was about to set an Olympic record and a barefooted runner from Australia or New Zealand or somewhere named Zola Budd. If you don't know about Zola Budd, look it up sometime. But she tripped Mary, I can almost remember her name, Mary Decker, I think was her name.

And this was going to be her last Olympic. She had set many records, won many medals, but this was her final appearance and she was set to win the gold. And Zola Budd came up there running barefoot and had a knock-kneed style and her foot went over there and tripped Mary Decker who fell and didn't even complete the race, left in tears and her career was over at that point, causing someone to stumble.

Why? Did Zola Budd go out there saying, well, I'm going to trip the front runner and that'll help me. It was thoughtless. It was heedless.

It was being uncareful, incautious that caused that tragedy. There's probably a YouTube clip of it somewhere. It's worth watching to think about this point.

We don't want to cause one another to stumble and a pattern of doing this has eternal consequences. It would be better to drown because that only lasts a little while than to be permanently displaced in the kingdom. Instead of being great in the kingdom, you are in the darkness outside looking at a dim glow on the horizon in the direction of the capital city of God.

That's forever. That doesn't change. You can't undo that.

That's how seriously the Lord Jesus takes His people and those who are seeking to have that mind in them that He had. So, woe to the world because of offenses. And this is the same thing.

This is the noun form of scindolizo in the plural. Woe to the world because of stumblings. We have enough problem trying to live a life of faith and humility and self-sacrificial love with the world against us.

Woe to the world because of offenses. One of the reasons the world is going to be judged is its treatment of God's people. This is what we're seeing in the Zechariah visions, right? You remember the horns that God is going to grind down and the judgment He is going to wreak on all of the nations that have scattered His people? They scattered His people.

They put them in places they didn't want to go. They essentially helped them to stumble and took advantage of their stumbling. The world is going to be judged for doing that.

Woe to the world because of these stumble causings. But look what He says next.

Stumblings must come, but woe to that man by whom the stumbling comes.

We read those famous seven woes to the Pharisees. Woe to you, scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites. You wash the outside of the dish and inside it's filthy.

You whitewash the tomb and inside it's full of dead men's bones. Woe to you. You pray upon widows and you make long prayers.

And we say, well, those rascals, those scribes, Pharisees and hypocrites. Jesus rightfully is pronouncing the woes. He's pronouncing a woe here on you and on me.

If we are insensitive to each other, if we do not turn and become as little children ourselves, and if we are not sensitive to those around us who are seeking to do the same thing, woe. It's the very same word Jesus uses to the scribes, Pharisees and hypocrites. And He uses the millstone around the neck for its vivid shock value.

Woe to the man by whom the offense comes. Now here's the payoff for our careful, belabored attention to these preceding seven verses. Look at verse eight.

If your hand or foot causes you to sin, if your hand or foot causes you to sin, what do you think the word is in verse eight for a cause to sin? Well, that's a new thing. Usually I wave my hand and hit the touch pad. This time I dropped a book and it hit something else.

Look again. If your hand or foot causes you to sin, scratch it out. It is causes stumbling.

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, causes you to stumble. Now, where have we seen causing to stumble previously? Millstone around the neck guy caused a little one to stumble, right? Little one equals a humble person. So what is hand or foot here? We know it's not literal because we're talking about spiritual stumbling.

We're talking about stumbling in the area of living the life of faith and obedience. So if your hand or your foot, something that you rely on daily, your hand is where you do work and get things done. Your foot is where you go and the environment that you find yourself in, your feet take you there.

We don't walk on our hands and we don't work with our feet typically, right? So if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble. Now, if a little child isn't really a little child, it is someone who is seeking to live the life of humility, humbling themselves, turning, becoming as a little child. And this is not a literal hand or foot.

Then what is the literal hand or foot? What does context tell us causes people to stumble? Fellow believers, it is a man. It would be better for him if he had a stone on his neck and went into the sea, right? So the hand or foot that causes to stumble. These are people, not just any people.

These are essential people. These people are as close and as dear to us as our hands and our feet. We feel like we can't get along without them.

And it's, it's a group. We've got more than one hand and we've got more than one foot, but they are the closest, nearest and dearest people. Put it in the margin.

I assure you from the context, if you look at this carefully in the same way that little child equals believer, humbling himself, hand and foot equals believer, causing fellow believer to stumble hand and foot here. Now there's wonderful application. If you've got a habit that causes you to stumble, cut it out.

If you, you know, the TV, you know, throw it in the trash. People have used this verse for all kinds of things. But what Jesus is talking about is people, people you can't do without.

You're dating them. You're engaged to them. You're working with them.

You're, you're sharing a hobby with them. You are spending time with them. You're conversing with them.

You're related to them, whatever it may be. If this person causes you to stumble, prevents you from living the life of humility, cut it off and cast it from you, cut it off and cast it from you. This is end the relationship.

You can talk about, you know, the parameters of divorce or something another time, but this is close personal relationship. And if it causes you to stumble, you know, I just can't stay focused on an outward looking sacrificial to self beneficial to other others point of view, because this person just completely distracts my mind, sends me in a dark direction. Now I wind up being defensive.

I wind up being self-centered. I wind up having issues that make my thinking all about me. This is someone very, very close.

This is a hand or a foot. They are connected to you in a, in an organic way. This is a relative.

This is somebody with whom you've got a really tight bond. Jesus says, now let's, let's take kind of an innocuous example. Suppose the disciples who are listening to Jesus say this the first time he says it look around at their fellow disciples with whom they've got a close personal bond.

Some of them are brothers to the others. Andrew and Peter are brothers. James and John are brothers.

But if being in that group and being around that brother is slowing them down and preventing them from living this life to which they have been called a life that is dedicated to God in selflessness and humility. Jesus is basically saying, leave the group.

Your walk before the Lord is more important than your relationship with this person.

This ties in with what we've seen. Jesus say, I've not come to bring peace, but a sword. And it's going to divide parents and children.

It's going to divide households. The issue of the Lord Jesus having the mind that was in Christ Jesus. If a relationship with a person is preventing that Jesus says here and that relationship, you cannot deny the connection that follows here.

What causes people to stumble? Other people. Jesus spends a whole verse on it in verse six. The world is full of offenders causing others to offend stumblers who cause others to stumble and woe to them.

This is all about people. And you say, well, but I can't just get away from these people. Jesus says, yes, you can.

And you must why it is better for you to enter into life, lame or maimed missing that foot, missing that hand and entering into life, entering into life. What does it mean to enter into life? What are we talking about? Who will be great in the kingdom of heaven? What is going to happen in the kingdom of heaven? Are you going to enter into it in its fullness? This is eternal life with its abundance, with its reward, with its opportunity. What's going to prevail? What is going to take place? It is better to have lost that person, that relationship and enter into life.

Why? Remember the millstone? This is the second time that Jesus has said it is better. One thing is better than another. Why is the millstone better than causing little ones to stumble? Because the millstone is temporary.

The consequences of causing fellow believers to stumble is permanent. Same thing here. The relationships that we have, the infatuations, the gratifications, the enjoyment, the sometimes positive, sometimes negative relationships that we have here are constructed around earthly things in an earthly context.

We've got time, we've got material, we've got things that make our relationships what they are. Are we close with the people that we were very close to in school? Are we close with people that we once talked to on a daily basis at some previous job or in some other context? When the circumstances change, time, space, distance happens. People we used to live next to are now halfway across the country.

You just can't have the same kind of relationship. I'm not talking about is my wife or husband not going to be interested in me in the eternal future. That's a different thing.

We're talking about relationships here that are functional. He doesn't say, if your heart offends you, rip it out. This is hands and feet.

This is associations over which we have some control and have an option. I have the option of cutting this off, right? So there are things that this applies to, and there are some things that it doesn't. But these relationships are, if you look at them, they are temporal anyway.

They are earthly and fitted to a time and a place in life anyway. But if it causes us to stumble, Jesus says, cut it off. Your goal is to enter into life, not to maintain this temporal close bond.

Better for you to enter into life lame or maimed without this relationship, without this person attached to you or in your immediate periphery than having two hands and two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. Notice, cast into everlasting fire, and he's talking to believers. Who's the audience? These are the disciples.

Do they believe in the Lord Jesus? Are they saved? And yet he says, if you fail to heed this warning, the fire is everlasting and you are cast into everlasting fire. Now, does this mean your soul is going to go to hell if you're not obedient as a believer? Because this is obedience. This is an obedience challenge, not a believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.

So how can he be talking about eternal fire? Nobody wants to talk about this verse when they're using a traditional understanding of salvation and eternal conscious torment and whatnot. Because Jesus says here, if you fail to separate from that which causes you to stumble, that's the principal way of stating it. If you fail to separate from that, and I would say from those that cause you to stumble, you will end up, your body will end up in eternal fire.

Now, what is the body? Is this, you know, the literal body? Jesus is speaking in similes and metaphors here. What is the body? This is the earthly life that we have constructed. Hands and feet are people.

This body is what we think of as our presence in this world and what we get done in this life. And if we do not stop stumbling and separate from those who cause us to stumble, that body, everything we are and everything we do in terms of effort and accomplishment, no matter where we go, no matter what we do in this life, it is all, the product of it is an eternal fire. It is the eternal fire of judgment.

Our life will be judged as no value. It will be all wood, hay, and stubble, no gold, silver, precious stones, if you want to put it in those terms. This is not the fate of our eternal soul and our resurrection body.

This is the earthly body that has hands and feet that might need to be separated from. All of your relationships, all of the time you spend talking and sympathizing and working together and serving and being served and hospitality and all the rest of it, if it isn't done

in the Lord's name, if it isn't done in humility, and if it actually by its thoughtlessness and incompetency causes others to stumble, the product is all dead branches. There's no fruit.

And at the judgment, our life will, and its product will go up in smoke. This is our accomplishment. This is what we get judged on.

We get a zero on the test and we fail the course. And for that reason, we do not graduate into the kingdom of the father. We're going to be outside somewhere and it's an eternal consequence.

It's an eternal fire. You don't get a do-over. There is no mulligan for this life.

There's no second try. There's no retake. It is important to evaluate our relationships and end relationships with people who cause us to stumble.

Even psychology recognizes this. There are people who enable other people. If they've got an alcohol problem, they get around this person and they're always drinking.

You've got a smoking problem, this person is always smoking, or they smell like smoke. People who habitually gossip and malign and judge. And anytime you get around them, the conversation just takes this dark turn and winds up being subjective and sinful and involves judging and trying to raise self up by pushing others down and all that.

Get around those people. It doesn't matter how dear, doesn't matter how close, doesn't matter how long you've known them. End the relationship, Jesus says.

Cut that off now or do you want to be cut off from the benefits of life eternal in the eternal future? You'd be better off putting a millstone around your neck and jumping in the lake because that's momentary than suffer the consequences of failing to heed these warnings. So people cause other people to stumble. And if your eye causes you, notice you've got foot, hand, and now eye, or hand, foot, and eye.

The eye is put separately. Why? People that we are around help shape our viewpoint, don't they? I didn't even worry about thus and so, but everybody's talking about it. I didn't give a thought to this person's behavior or that person's appearance or this person's mode of life or whatever, but so-and-so was talking about it, you know, fill in your name here.

And now it's all I can think about. I can't look at that person the same way anymore. I can't think about that situation the same way.

I don't know what to do now because this person has changed my viewpoint. If you've got people that disrupt and change your viewpoint, pluck that eye out and cast it from you. That's not a viewpoint that's going to lead to life.

Well, we have a lot more to say about this, but we're out of time for this morning. So, in conclusion, notice how Jesus gives us the key to understand what He's saying. The body is not the literal body.

It's not even the future habitation. You don't have to worry about going to hell if we fail in this regard. Just think about the Gospel of John where Jesus says, unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no portion with me.

People got shocked because they didn't read the clues to understand what that represents. Same thing in the upper room. This is my body, which is broken for you.

This is the blood of the new covenant. This is my blood, which is shed for you. It's not the literal blood.

It's not the literal body, although His work is reflected in those. But they represent something higher and deeper. Same thing here.

Child represents something bigger. Body represents something bigger. Hands and feet and eyes represent people in our periphery.

And we need to evaluate that which causes us to stumble. And when it's people, we have got to get away from them. He doesn't say, resist the stumble maker, and he will flee from you.

He says, cut it off. Otherwise, everything we do by way of efforting in this life will be consumed by the fire of judgment, and we will have nothing in the eternal future. So is this important? Is it something we should think about and seek to put into application? Absolutely.

Let's close here in a word of Father, thank you for the truth of your word. Thank you for the preservation of this wonderful teaching of the Lord Jesus. So essential and so beneficial for us.

We pray that God, the Holy Spirit will help us understand it, see its pertinence and application in our lives. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.