

## “We Are a Sign Post”

Mark 9:38-50

My initial thoughts whenever I have read this passage, particularly the second section, make me think of child abuse – physical, emotional, sexual abuse. And sadly, we have seen enough of that only too recently. While these abuses would certainly be high on his list, is that all that Jesus is talking about here? For us to better understand his teaching, I'd like to look at the meanings of some of the key words used in this passage, beginning with stumbling block.

It comes from the Greek word, *scandalon*, from which we get the word, scandal, causing a scandal in someone's life. Temptations are surely to come; that is, stumbling blocks, stones that trip you up. Yes, we all have experienced events in our lives that were stumbling blocks and we were tripped up by them. If you are honest, you can think of the many occasions in your life where something happened to you and you were potentially tripped up by that incident, and you could have fallen on your face. Or you **were** tripped up and you took a fall.

Imagine someone walking down a path and there is a brick or stone there in the middle of the path and the person does not see it but stumbles, falls, and gets hurt. Temptation is a stumbling block. Temptation also means enticement. To entice. To entice someone else into sin. To entice a child into sin, to ensnare them, to ensnare someone into sinning.

Jesus says that stumbling blocks and enticements are certainly part of our worlds. Stumbling blocks and enticements are part of your life and mine through the radio, the TV, the newspapers, through our friends and family and parents, through our own inner thoughts and hidden desires and secret longings. Whatever you call them, they're just waiting to trip us up.

Another phrase in this passage, “little ones” has many different meanings. First of all, this word refers to children. So the primary teaching of Jesus for today reads, “Whoever causes one of these children to sin, to stumble and fall; whoever entices one of these children with the candy of sin to trap them into doing evil, it would be better that a giant millstone be put around their neck and they be tossed into the heart of the sea. All of us feel that way about children. Children are young, naïve, innocent of the hardness of life. Children are fresh, budding spirits, budding minds. All of us are instinctively protective of little children who are so vulnerable and don't know better. The contrast of little children is adults and we adults are responsible for own actions. We know better. Little children don't. So the first level of the meaning of the phrase, “little ones,” refers to children.

A second layer of the phrase, “little ones,” refers to people who feel powerless, weak, and vulnerable. A landowner lives in a Third World nation and owns a great plantation and he has the poorest of the poor people working for him. The landowner keeps his slaves weak, so they do not rise up against him and cause him trouble. Such slaves may even have to steal food and crops from their rich landowner in order for their poor families to be fully fed. The teaching of Jesus is still the same but there is new content to its meaning: whoever causes one of these little ones to sin, it would be better for him that a giant millstone... So little ones can refer to the powerless, the poor, those who struggle to survive and have to steal in order to get food.

A third meaning of the phrase, little ones, is disciples, followers of Jesus. In the South Africa of old, Dutch Christians were taught that it was permissible for them and their children and grandchildren to live off the poverty of blacks who would be a source of cheap labor for them.

So strong, loyalist Christians were taught to make money off of black slaves; “little ones” at this point refers to the loyalist Christians who were taught to sin. Whoever causes one of these loyal Christians to sin, it would be better for them that...

Finally, there's a third phrase to consider: giant millstone. It would be better that a giant millstone be tied around their neck. In every home in Israel at that time, there was a small household millstone. It had a similar function to today's rolling pin. You would put grains of corn on the small household millstone, and then with another rounded rock, you would grind the corn on your millstone. A household millstone could be held in the palm of your hand. But Jesus was referring instead to a *mule* millstone found in the rural villages. Those mule millstones are huge; they are about eight feet in diameter and about three feet high. They have a large wooden bar going diagonally across them, and at the end of the long wooden bar is a yoke for a mule or an oxen. The mule or oxen goes round and round and round all day long, round and round on the same track, grinding the grain for the rural village. The mule millstone is enormously heavy, being made of solid rock, chipped into a round shape eight feet in diameter and three feet thick.

Jesus said, “Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin, it would be better for that person that a giant millstone would be put around their neck and they would be thrown into the middle of the ocean.” Let's focus on the phrase, “the middle of the sea.” The middle of the ocean, into the very depths of the sea. One who causes another to sin was not to be thrown into an inch deep puddle, not into a shallow lake, not into some nearby pond, not into a neighboring river. But Jesus chose the deepest water he could think of: into the heart, into the middle of the sea. Not by the shore. Not by the bank. Not by the shoreline. But this giant millstone, tied to one's neck, was to be thrown out into the deepest part of the ocean.

And slowly or suddenly you realize, when you think about the actual words, that Jesus was very serious about this matter. In fact, this is the most venomous, most harsh, most acidic teaching from the lips of Jesus. If you cause another person to sin; if you entice another person to sin (and there is sin all around us and there is temptation all around us.) But if YOU are the one who causes another person to sin, God does not like that kind of behavior in us at all. YOU will be punished with all the wrath of God.

William Barclay, a British theologian, tells the following story about someone changing signs. At an intersection of the road, one sign would point to the city of Seattle and another sign would point to the city of Tacoma. And the boy wondered to himself: How many people could I send down the wrong road if I changed the signs? Your very life is a sign post with a sign on it. Are you sending people down the wrong road or the right road?

And then you come to the end of this passage and it says, “Take heed. Be careful. Be aware that you do not lead other people into sin.” That is the point of this text and its message: we are to be careful as pastors, parents, people, friends, relatives, students: we are not to lead other people into sin by what we say, what we do, and who we are.

Sure, we can quickly talk about teenagers who shop lift and get others to shop lift as well. We can talk about other people doing drugs and getting others to do drugs as well. We can talk about those who drink too much and get others to drink heavily as well. It would be better for them that a giant millstone was hung around their neck and they be thrown into the heart of the ocean. But this Biblical passage isn't about someone else. It is about us - about you and me.

The question is this: what are the ways that *we* lead other people into sin?  
What does it mean for *us, for you and me*, to lead someone else into sinning?

This story was on the Internet last week – it helps illustrate what it means to be sending people down the right road in a world where the signposts are so often twisted to mislead people.

DAY KUNDI PROVINCE, Afghanistan — The Afghan father left the mountains on foot, carrying his 2-year-old son, but the health clinic could not treat the skull fracture that blinded the toddler and immobilized his left side. By chance the next day, two American medics stopped by the clinic in Day Kundi Province to check on another patient.

The rooftop fall that cracked Malik's skull Aug. 19 set in motion a chain of events that took the boy from his remote village to the U.S. military hospital in Kandahar, where doctors patched the tear in his brain and replaced the bone. On Saturday, his crescent-shaped wound healed, Malik — the baby in the family of five children — headed home with his father, Khodadad. Khodadad carried Malik out to the gray truck hired to drive the rocky roads of central Afghanistan back to Ashtarlay, a northern district of Day Kundi. "God answered our prayers," he said. "God sent someone to save my son."

Josh, one of the medics who treated Malik and arranged to evacuate him to Kandahar, said the boy's father lights up every time he sees the Americans. The medics only give their first names for security reasons and as part of the Special Forces embed rules. Lt. Col. James Miller, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, said the resolve of the U.S. medics to treat the child "demonstrates we mean what we say." "And at the end of the day, the boy needed help," Miller said.

On Friday, his vision and movement restored, Malik was kicking around a soccer ball — and using both sides of his body as he played. Josh and Khodadad shook hands Saturday — and Josh got a high-five from Malik. The father touched his heart and thanked Josh repeatedly before climbing into the truck, driving away as the medic looked on from the front gate of the team's base in Day Kundi.

"When Malik goes home, that is a village of mainly poor people. This will be their only memory of Americans," he said. "At some point somebody will be working in that village and hopefully they will say these are the guys that helped that baby." Amen.

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