

Sermons on Matthew

Scandals in the Church

Matthew 18:7-11

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999*

pastorpaul@integrity.com

www.branchofhope.org

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Preface

All of the sudden I find myself a busy person. The luxury of time has proved elusive. I must be selective about my decisions. What are the necessary things and what things are optional? What are the more valuable things? What are the less valuable things? Where should I marshal my efforts in life?

There is a great temptation to be utilitarian; to exert myself in things that have a direct connection to the observable growth of the church. And yet the Bible seems to teach that the small and secret things are precious to God.

I am convinced that the truth of the word of God is beyond value. To downplay that is to downplay truth itself, which is to downplay Christ Himself. To seek to understand the demands, curses and blessings of God's law and the height, width, length and depth of God's love and grace through the gospel of Christ must be ever before us. We should view these things as grand and glorious. But Jesus, in this passage and others like it, exhorts us to rethink our priorities.

Years ago a little girl in church asked me if I'd mind tying her shoe. I told her it would be an honor. Weeks later her mother told me that her little girl had continually recounted how Pastor Paul "said it was an honor to tie my shoe." I tend to believe that those things that we might easily miss are highly significant.

The flow of thought leading into this morning's passage contains imposing events and doctrines:

- Jesus chastised clergy for failing to discern the signs of the times
- He warns His followers of the doctrine of the Pharisees
- He pronounces a blessing on Peter because God revealed the truth to him and talks of establishing His church
- He prophesies His own death and resurrection
- He proclaims the cost of discipleship (take up cross)
- He prophesies the judgment

- His is revealed in the Transfiguration
- We read of the limitations of the disciples to heal
- He again prophesies His own death and resurrection
- Jesus teaches how His disciples are to interact with their culture (the temple tax)

Then we see His followers begin to argue about who is greatest in the kingdom—Jesus puts forth a child as an example—warns against causing the child to stumble. It is in that context—with the child standing before the followers of Christ—that we read these words.

Woe to the world because of offenses! For __offenses must come, but __woe to that man by whom the offense comes! ⁻⁸⁻ __“_If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast *it* from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. ⁻⁹⁻ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast *it* from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into __hell fire. ⁻¹⁰⁻ “_Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven _their angels always __see the face of My Father who is in heaven. ⁻¹¹⁻ _For __the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost (Matthew 18:7-11).

Introduction

The word “offense” and “sin” Jesus uses is *skandalon*—similar to our word *scandalize*.¹ It means to create a stumbling block or an obstacle or to set a trap. The thought of scandalizing others (especially little ones) should be so dreadful to us that Jesus (similar to the hyperbole He used regarding sexual purity—Matthew 5:29), speaks of avoiding that behavior even if it requires extreme measures.

There are five questions I’d like to ask and seek to answer in this text:

- Why must offenses come, and if they must come how is the offender culpable?

¹ Rather than the common word for sin which is *hamartia*.

- Is Jesus advocating self-mutilation and is it possible to enter eternal life with one hand, eye or foot?
- Do we have to overcome these offenses/sins in order to make it to heaven?
- What is the nature of this particular offense and how do we avoid it?
- What role do angels play in all of this?

Woe to the world because of offenses! For __offenses must come, but __woe to that man by whom the offense comes (Matthew 18:7)!

Necessary Offenses?

Why must offenses come, and if they must come how is the offender culpable?

Before answering those questions let's keep in mind the primary purpose of the statement. Those who seek to scandalize the church will come. And they most often come from within the church itself. Paul taught charges church leaders:

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit __has made you overseers, to shepherd the church __of God __which He purchased _with His own blood. ⁻²⁹⁻ For I know this, that after my departure __savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ⁻³⁰⁻ Also __from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking __perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves (Acts 20:28-30).

Jesus wants us to be aware and well armed for the assault—offenses will come.

Why must they come? Paul gives us one example:

For _there must also be factions among you, __that those who are approved may be __recognized among you (1 Corinthians 11:9).

Divisions in the church were, and are, necessary in order to bring to light the truth.

It is a hard teaching but a much repeated theme in Scripture that the blueprints of God's creation include evil in order that His own glorious attributes might be revealed.

the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, *“For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth”* (Romans 9:17).

But in this passage Jesus is quick to teach that the necessity of scandal in no way relieves sinful men of their responsibility. That sinful man cannot escape God's overwhelming sovereignty does not mean they can sin with impunity. As Paul explains elsewhere:

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? *Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.)*⁻⁶⁻ Certainly not! For then *how will God judge the world?*⁻⁷⁻ For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner?⁻⁸⁻ And *why not say, “Let us do evil that good may come”*?—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their *condemnation is just* (Romans 3:5-8).

The absolute sovereignty of God **“who works all things according to the counsel of His will”** (Ephesians 1:11) should be a great comfort for those who call Him their Father. But we should never think this clears us of our responsibility for sinful behavior. The just wrath of God falls upon all who sin (Exodus 34:7). And this should ever cause us to flee to Christ who bears what we cannot and who wins a battle we could never win.

If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast *it* from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire.⁻⁹⁻ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast *it* from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into *hell fire* (Matthew 18:8, 9).

Self-Mutilation?

Is Jesus advocating self-mutilation and is it possible to enter eternal life with one hand, eye or foot?

When Jesus says we should cut off our hand, food or pluck out our eye, He is not advocating self-mutilation. A person with one hand, foot or eye can sin just as much as anyone else. Jesus is telling us to do a cost benefit analysis of our lives and fidelity (faithfulness). Are we being penny wise and dollar foolish?

When preparing couples for their vows we always discuss the word *cherish*. In the Bible it's the word *thalpei* which literally means to keep warm. Do married couples cherish each other? Do they understand that of all earthly relationships nothing comes before each other? Do they understand that the nature of things in second place in our lives is that they want to be first?

I encourage couples to take some time, go out to dinner and ask each other if they think, feel and believe that they are the most important thing that God has given them. And if something is threatening that it needs to be plucked out and cast from you.

Similarly there are offenses which pit themselves between man and God. Things that of themselves may not even be bad (there is nothing evil about a hand, eye or foot). A person's primary devotion must never be compromised. And if that primary devotion is anything less than God Himself the compromise will prove disastrous for all involved.

Herein lies one of the great values of the Sabbath. Retreats, conferences, seminars and Christian camps all have their place. But God has set aside one day in seven that we might be continually reminded of things heavenly.

Overcoming Offenses

Do we have to overcome these offenses/sins in order to make it to heaven?

A not-to-thorough reading of this passage may lead a person to think that it is their casting away of sin which delivers the person from hell—and let's be clear, Jesus speaks of hell and He speaks of it with the most frightful terms available. In Mark's account of this event he includes a reference to Isaiah 66:24

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life __maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to __hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—⁻⁴⁴⁻

__where __' Their worm does not die And the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:43, 44).

In this passage Jesus will refer to Gehenna. It was originally the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem where the filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned. But the horrors of Gehenna ran even deeper. It acquired a bad reputation because of the sacrifices offered to Molech there. It was written of the evil King Ahaz:

He burned incense in _the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and burned _his children in the __fire (2 Chronicles 28:3)

The Bible speaks of eternal *aionion* life (Matthew 19:29 and here eternal *aionion* death or fire. It does not speak of termination (or annihilation). Those who reject eternal death, in order to be consistent, must reject eternal life as well.

Back to our question: Is Jesus here telling us that we somehow merit eternal life by casting away our offense? Let us hope not for heaven would be a pretty empty place. None of us can cast fast enough or far enough to merit approval before God. And John tell us that if we think have (no sin) “we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Let us not engage in the logical fallacy of *post hoc ergo proptor hoc*, or ‘after the thing, therefore the cause of the thing’. “Every time Jimmy wears a red shirt it rains, therefore Jimmy’s wearing of a red shirt causes the rain” is an example of this fallacy. Those who love and dedicate themselves to their sin more than God die in their sins and suffer eternally. Those who love God and seek to cast their sins from themselves enter eternal life—but that is not the cause. The cause is the grace of God working through faith in Christ alone,

who has saved us and called *us* with a holy calling, __not according to our works, but __according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus _before time began (1 Timothy 1:9).

_Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven _their angels always __see the face of My Father who is in heaven (Matthew 18:10).

This Particular Offense

What is the nature of this particular offense and how do we avoid it? Popular scandals in the church include things like misappropriation of funds or ungodly intimacy. This particular offense has to do with pride. This entire discussion began with the disciples arguing about who would be greatest in the kingdom. And here Jesus warns us not to “despise” (literally to think down, lowly of) the little ones in their humble station in life.

Jesus had already taught that it was the humility of the child that we should imitate (Matthew 18:4). If our spiritual pursuits, be they wisdom, knowledge, piety, holiness or servitude are not producing humility then we aren't getting it.

And how is this offense avoided. I would have to argue that it is avoided by divesting oneself of all sense of worthiness before God and recognizing our totally depraved state and utter dependence upon the cross of Christ. We make our best effort to avoid this offense when we meditate on the words of Solomon, who explains,

For there is not a just man on earth who does good And does not sin (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

This offense is avoided when we grasp that man “**abominable and filthy**” and “**drinks iniquity like water**” (Job 15:16; Proverbs 19:28).

If we refuse to agree with God's testimony concerning man, how can we help but gravitate toward the error of the disciples in nurturing an attitude of self-superiority? And this insidious nature of this sin is promoted when we fail to recognize that our efforts and faith itself is a gift from Jesus who is the, “**author and finisher of our faith**” (Hebrews 12:2), which is literally understood “**faith beginner and completer**”.

Angels

What role do angels play in all of this? So grievous is this sin as it pertains to the corrupting of little ones who should be taught humility before God rather than status groping before men that Jesus augments His threat with an appeal to angels who are ever aware of the presence of God.

One might think that a reference to God's omniscience (complete knowledge) would suffice here. But Jesus appeals to our weakness of understanding an incomprehensible aspect of God's nature by speaking of God's messengers who He gives charge over us to keep us in all our ways (Psalms 91:10, 11). Of angels it is said that they are

- Created by God and Christ. Ne 9:6; Col 1:16.
- Worship God and Christ. Ne 9:6; Php 2:9-11; Heb 1:6.
- Are ministering Spirits. 1Ki 19:5; Ps 68:17; 104:4; Lu 16:22; Ac 12:7-11; 27:23; Heb 1:7,14.
- Communicate the will of God and Christ. Da 8:16,17; 9:21-23; 10:11; 12:6,7; Mt 2:13,20; Lu 1:19,28; Ac 5:20; 8:26; 10:5; 27:23; Re 1:1.
- Obey the will of God. Ps 103:20; Mt 6:10.
- Execute the purposes of God. Nu 22:22; Ps 103:21; Mt 13:39-42; 28:2; Joh 5:4; Re 5:2.
- Execute the judgments of God. 2Sa 24:16; 2Ki 19:35; Ps 35:5,6; Ac 12:23; Re 16:1.
- Celebrate the praises of God. Job 38:7; Ps 148:2; Isa 6:3; Lu 2:13,14; Re 5:11,12; 7:11,12.
- The law is given by their ministration. Ps 68:17; Ac 7:53; Heb 2:2.
- They Announced
 - The conception of Christ. Mt 1:20,21; Lu 1:31.
 - The birth of Christ. Lu 2:10-12.
 - The resurrection of Christ. Mt 28:5-7; Lu 24:23.
 - The ascension and second coming of Christ. Ac 1:11.
 - The conception of John the Baptist. Lu 1:13,36.
- They ministered to Christ. Mt 4:11; Lu 22:43; Joh 1:51.
- Are subject to Christ. Eph 1:21; Col 1:16; 2:10; 1Pe 3:22.
- Shall execute the purposes of Christ. Mt 13:41; 24:31.
- Attend Christ in his coming. Mt 16:27; 25:31; Mr 8:38; 2Th 1:7.

- Know and delight in the gospel of Christ. Eph 3:9,10; 1Ti 3:16; 1Pe 1:12.
- Minister as an answer to prayer. Mt 26:53; Ac 12:5,7.
- Rejoice over every repentant sinner. Lu 15:7,10.
- Not to be worshipped. Col 2:18; Re 19:10; 22:9.
- Provide examples of meekness. 2Pe 2:11; Jude 1:9.
- Are wise. 2Sa 14:20.

And we learn here have...

charge over the children of God. Ps 34:7; 91:11,12; Da 6:22; Mt 18:10.

Let us heed the words of Christ and humble ourselves before God. Let us cast away the offense of self sufficiency and superiority and let us cast our souls upon the mercy of the Cross of Christ.

-Thus says the Lord: “_ _Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty *man* glory in his _might, Nor let the rich *man* glory in his riches; ²⁴ But _let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I *am* the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, _judgment, and righteousness in the earth. _For in these I delight,_” says the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23, 24).

Questions for Study

1. Why does Jesus tell us offenses must come (page 4)?
2. Why must offenses come (pages 5, 6)?
3. Are people not responsible for their behavior because of the necessity that offenses occur? Explain (pages 5, 6).
4. Is Jesus telling people they should hurt or mutilate themselves in order to avoid sinning (pages 6, 7)?
5. Does the Bible really teach there is a hell (page 7)?
6. Do we avoid hell and get to heaven by casting out sins away? Explain (pages 7, 8),
7. What is the particular offense/ scandal that Jesus was addressing in this passage (page 8)?
8. What are some ways we can seek to avoid this scandal in our own lives (pages 8, 9)?
9. Why does Jesus mention angels (pages 9, 10)?
10. What do angels do (pages 9, 10)?