

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 18:6 - 18:10



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg analyzes Matthew 18:6-10, in which Jesus warns against being a stumbling block for children. Gregg emphasizes the importance of living a life according to God's calling and not causing others to sin. He compares the punishment of having a millstone hung around one's neck to the responsibility of causing someone else to stumble. He also highlights the vulnerability of children and the responsibility of adults to protect and influence them positively.

### Transcript

Let's continue our study in Matthew 18, beginning at verse 6. And if your hand or foot cause 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. 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. Well, some of this passage repeats material that we've run across earlier in Matthew, especially this matter of cutting off the hand and plucking out the eye. The same statement, the same teaching was given in Matthew chapter 5 in the Sermon on the Mount.

We will have something to say about that again, but let me say at this point, first of all, that many have taken that more literally than Jesus really intended that anyone would. Jesus used figures of speech just like all speakers do, and this is a hyperbole. This is giving something of an exaggerated case in order to make a point with potency, with strength of statement.

And really what he's saying is, if the thing that makes you sin, if the thing that keeps you from following Christ, that keeps you from the kingdom of God, if that thing is something ever so precious to you, like an eye or a hand even, then it would be better to be without it and go to heaven than to keep it and go to hell. That's basically what he's saying. Now, he is not really saying that cutting off your hand or plucking out your eye would ever really serve the purpose of getting you into heaven, because sin is not caused by hands

or eyes.

Sin is caused by your heart. And there are things in your life, perhaps relationships, maybe possessions, maybe activities and associations, that do lead you into sin. Your eye does not lead you to sin, and if you plucked out your eye, whatever sin may be committed with the eye could be committed by the remaining eye.

And if you plucked out both eyes, you could find that those same sins were committed in your mind and in your heart without any eyes to help you in it. Likewise with your hands. Cutting off your hand, plucking out your eye would not literally resolve the problem, and therefore it's not literally what Jesus is suggesting.

The sin is not caused by the hand or the eye. The sin is caused by corruption in the heart. But there definitely are things in our lives, things that we'd be as unwilling to part with as we would to part with our hand or our eye, which do contribute to our stumbling and falling.

And those things, no matter how precious they are, even if they're as precious as our hand or our eye, we should be willing to get rid of them rather than to hold on to them for life and then go to hell without them later on. That's what Jesus is saying. What he's saying is there should be nothing so important to us that we would not sacrifice it if that's what is necessary to get us to live the life God is calling us to live.

Now, what about this business, whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin? It'd be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea. And then he says, woe to the world because of stumbling blocks or offenses because offenses must necessarily come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes. Here, Jesus is warning us not to be the occasion of causing somebody to stumble or to sin.

It's important that we don't sin ourselves. So important that if our eye or our hand were causing us to sin, we should be willing to part with it rather than to continue sinning. We should have a very intolerant attitude towards sin in our own lives.

And this intolerance for sin should also make us equally unwilling to see somebody else sin because of our influence. Now, a Christian, of course, is around sinners all the time in the world. And Paul said this is impossible to avoid.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul said that we should not associate with certain kinds of sinners, but he means by that persons who profess to be Christians and are living in these kinds of sins. We should avoid them, but he said you can't avoid all the fornicators and idolaters in the world. You'd have to go out of the world to do that.

And so Paul is saying that we cannot choose a lifestyle, living off in a cloister or a monastery somewhere, separate from sinners. We have to be among them. We have to

be having an impact upon them.

We are to be light in the world and not put a bushel over that light. But, while we must be tolerant in a certain sense of sinners around us, we must never be tolerant of sin itself in ourselves or certainly in others if we ourselves are the ones causing it or influencing it. Now, to influence another person to sin is a grievous, a very grievous offense against God.

Jesus specifically talks about causing one of these little ones to sin. Now, in the context, he's been talking about little children. In the previous verses, he was talking about little children.

So, he's talking about people who cause a little child to sin. But, it doesn't really matter whether that little child is a little child, still little or grown up. If you cause somebody else to sin, you bear a great responsibility.

Now, at the same time, the little child has less responsibility in the matter than an adult and that may be why he singles it out. If you, through your influence, lead an adult to sin, you have done a terrible thing. But, the adult also bears responsibility for their responsible decision.

You see, if you have sinned because somebody influenced you, that person who influenced you or who hindered you or stumbled you bears some responsibility. But, you also bear great responsibility for it. But, if it's a little child who doesn't know better and doesn't really have the power to make informed and responsible choices, if your influence on that child is to lead them into sin, then that child does not bear responsibility.

You bear all of the responsibility for that person's sin because it's a little person who doesn't know any better and can't know any better. Therefore, your responsibility for causing one of these little ones to sin is immense. So much so that Jesus said, you'd really be better off if somebody would put a millstone around your neck and throw you in the ocean.

Now, a millstone was a big round wheel of rock that was used to grind grain. It was so heavy, usually they'd use oxen to pull it around in a circle on another stone. These two stones were like two very large discs of stone.

And I mean large, they could be as big as a person. And one would be laid horizontally and the other would be vertically rolled over it so it crushes grain between the two. And these millstones, of course, must have weighed tons.

So the suggestion that you'd put a millstone tied around your neck and be thrown in the sea is comparable to the threat of the mafia bosses who say they're going to give you cement slippers and throw you off the pier. Similar situation. The idea here is you would

be better off dying a gruesome and horrifying death than to face the consequences that you will face before God if you cause one of these little ones to sin.

Now, does this sound like Jesus is teaching tolerance? It doesn't sound very tolerant to me. But again, while we must tolerate imperfection in other people and even live among sinners without being debilitated by the total disgust that we have for their sin, yet we must never be tolerant of sin in ourselves and we must be so hateful of sin, so despising of sin, that we would be loathe to contribute to the sum total of sin by leading someone else into it. Now, leading a child into sin, stumbling a child, does anyone really do that these days? I believe people do that now more than they ever did.

I think our age is an age which has many agencies and institutions and even parents who lead their children into sin. And this is, according to Jesus, not a light matter by any means. Any more than a millstone around the neck is a light thing.

It doesn't float. Now, what am I talking about here? There are people who not only hate God or reject God in their own lives and love sin, but they take a certain delight in seeing their children sin. Back in the 70s when I was a teenager, there were people, most of my generation were smoking dope and taking drugs and so forth.

And I know of people who, when they had little children, they delighted to show off to their friends when they were over that their kid could smoke dope or that they could get their kid drunk. I mean, this is hard to imagine today, but there were people who thought it was cute or cool or impressive or amusing to acquaint their children with corruption and to get them drunk or get them high on drugs. This was often done for their own entertainment, but to a certain extent, they were eager to see their children follow in their own steps in this matter.

They wanted their children to become like them in this matter. I remember a very corrupt hippie who actually involved himself in immorality with his children and hoped to get them sexually active at an early age because he himself was a wicked, sexually immoral person and it was very important to him that his children follow in his ways. Now, here are obviously some very gross examples of persons causing children to sin, but most of us would stand back and say, oh, that's horrible.

I mean, such a person, I can see why Jesus would say what he'd say about that, about it better for him to have a millstone around his neck thrown in the sea, but let's stand back and look at cases that aren't quite so gross. Suppose, let's say we don't introduce our children to drugs and alcohol and sexual immorality, at least not directly, but let's say that when we have opportunity to raise our children in the ways of God, we instead send them off to school to be trained by unbelievers and to be immersed in the fellowship of unbelieving peers. While it is the case that some children go through a school experience like this and still somehow maintain their faith, there are very few that I've ever heard of that did so without being jaded, without having their innocence damaged.

And I say this as one who has some very good personal experience in this matter. I was a Christian from age four, and as near as I can tell, as sincere a Christian as there was in our church, in our youth group, I really believed in the gospel, I really believed in God and in Jesus. But I went through the public school system, and that was, by the way, a public school system that was much less corrupt than the modern schools are, and where my peers were much less acquainted with evil than are the peers of children who go to school today.

And although I retained my faith, and believe it or not, I actually preached the gospel. As a person in public school, I preached the gospel. I was a true Christian.

But I can look back and say there are many, many ways in which my own innocence was violated, simply by what I was exposed to in the conversations of my peers and just the exposure to wicked people. At an early age, when a child is young and impressionable, he picks up his ideas and his loyalties very much from the people that he spends most of his time with. If those are his peers at school rather than his parents, then that child is much more likely to be peer-dependent and to pick up values and ideas and attitudes from his peers rather than from his parents.

That just happens. And while I would say that I was a reasonably, in my own case, what most people would call a success story of a Christian going through public school and not being corrupted, the corruption that I experienced was not outward. I never got drunk.

I never went to parties. I never lost my virginity in school. I never really had any of those scandalous things in my life, although I went through public school.

And most people would say, well, you see, Christians can go to public school and not be scathed. Well, I never did those things outwardly, but I will say that I was exposed to many things in public school, many attitudes and many temptations and many corruptions that are not so obvious as things like promiscuity or drug abuse or whatever. And I will say that I was led into sinful attitudes and I was exposed to imagery and subject matter and so forth, not so much from my teachers, but from the peers in the school that were very unhealthy for a young person, especially a young Christian person, to be exposed to.

And I would say that my experience was not atypical. If it was atypical, it was in this respect that I was not corrupted as much as most seem to be who are Christians going to public school. I was one who was corrupted much less than most, and yet I would say I was corrupted to a degree that was not at all acceptable.

And while my own parents did not know and did not anticipate how much damage that would do, and I certainly don't hold them responsible, I hope God does not, but I believe it was a mistake for them to send me there, because in a sense they exposed me to temptations that led me into sins. These were more of a mental sort, but Jesus has

taught us not to think of mental sins as less significant than external sins. And I was led into sin.

I was stumbled by the influences that I was placed in as a young child. Now who put me there? Well, I'm not going to blame my parents for this. My parents were themselves products of Christianity of their own generation, and I don't think they knew better, but really there's a whole system, a whole system of our society that assumed that children need to be exposed to each other in this kind of an environment early on, and that system definitely has corrupted a great number and destroyed the faith of many young people.

Of course, we now have an option that my parents never heard of, and that was homeschooling, where Christians are at least able these days, if they wish to, to keep their children home and protect them from the corrupting influences. But even children who are kept at home are sometimes not protected. Even homeschoolers can become guilty of stumbling their children if they allow certain forms of entertainment in the home or certain associations with neighbor kids or the kids of other families who are not good kids, not good influences on them.

Let me just enumerate, if I might, some of the influences that are in Christian homes, many times, by which children may be led into sin and into corruption. I would say, first of all, there is the assumption that children ought to be sociable with the other children in the neighborhood. Now, if the other children in the neighborhood are godly children, then I don't think there's any problem with it.

But to expose impressionable young Christian children to corrupt children, especially in our day where corrupt children are often raised in homes where there's pornography or the worst kind of entertainment or even some extremely bad examples of single parents who are promiscuous or parents who drink or whatever, to suggest that these kinds of children make companions for godly children is to be blind. And while, of course, many people say, well, I want my children to play with the neighbor's pagan kids because I want them to reach them for Christ. Listen, God never in Scripture appointed a child to be an evangelist.

Children are at that stage in life where they're to be protected and trained and influenced. They are not commissioned to go out and influence the world. There are ways to reach pagan children, but to compromise and to risk the purity of your own children in order to hopefully reach them, first of all, it's a fool's errand.

It almost never works. Secondly, it is counterproductive in the sense that almost always the Christian children pick up more of the influence of the pagan children than vice versa. There's a reason why God did not have the children of Israel live tolerantly among the Canaanites, because he knew that they would pick up the practices of the Canaanites rather than evangelizing successfully the Canaanites.

And your children, if exposed to unsaved children, are more like, well, even if they remain saved, even if they remain Christians, they will pick up influences that they would not have gotten in a completely Christian home. Now, where they should have been influenced in the formative years of their lives. I think also people make the mistake of thinking that unsaved and corrupt relatives should have access to the children.

Aunts and uncles or grandparents who may ridicule the Christian faith or may allow influences in their home that you would never allow in your home, or who may espouse philosophies that you would find abhorrent. Somehow, just because they are relatives, sometimes people feel obligated to let their children be around them. This is really wrong thinking.

Remember, Jesus wouldn't even associate with his mother and brothers when they came with the wrong agenda. They said, your mother and brothers are here to see you. He said, who are my mother and brothers? Those who do the will of my father are my mother and brothers.

This idea that grandparents and aunts and uncles have some kind of intrinsic right to have influence on the children, just because they are relatives, is simply not agreeable with the Christian teaching. And Christian parents need to protect their children from evil influences, even if those evil influences are your own mom and dad, or your brothers and sisters, you parents. There's, of course, the obvious bad influence of television.

I don't need to say much about that because everybody, I think, who has a brain knows that television is not an influence for good in society. Even though there is Christian television, even it presents, in many cases, a kind of Christianity that is plastic and unattractive to people who have any concern about reality and truth. Christianity is not best propagated by television, and certainly there are many other things contrary to Christianity that are very effectively propagated by television.

A Christian who has a television in the home and allows children to watch it is certainly taking a great risk of stumbling their children and planting in their children ideas and attitudes that they may never be able to get out of their minds. And they may well be stumbling them, and there may be a millstone waiting for you. If so, you're lucky because Jesus said you'd be luckier, you'd be better off having a millstone put around your neck and thrown into the sea than what you're really going to get if you stumble your children.

You should take this not lightly. A lot of parents have never considered that letting their children have a radio in their room is a foolish thing to do. Children who have their own radios and can listen to the radio unmonitored usually end up hearing a great deal of worldly philosophy on advertisements, even on Christian radio stations.

There's much worldly philosophy behind much of the advertising. And then, of course, if

they listen to the secular music of their generation, this music is not just for entertainment, it is for philosophical indoctrination. And if your children are listening to secular music, don't be surprised.

If they wind up immoral in their thoughts or actions, if they are addicted to idolatry of musicians, and therefore of the lifestyles of musicians, they begin to imitate them. Don't be surprised if they rebel against you as their parents. This is what that music is there to propagate.

Now what I'm telling you is this. If you don't homeschool your children, if you let them watch television and have a radio in their room, if you let them play with relatives or neighbors who are a bad influence on them, you may very well be doing serious harm to your children in terms of their spirituality, in terms of their faith and their walk with God. And if to them, what Jesus is saying to you too, you have a responsibility for your children, and if you have an influence on them by the decisions you make for their training and upbringing, and the exposure to things that they are allowed to have when you have control over the situation, then how do you not classify yourself as one who has stumbled a child? I think our culture really stands condemned in this matter.

The whole institution of public school is guilty of stumbling children, and I think that parents need to rise up and say, I will do this no more. These children are a trust that God has given to me, and I will have to answer to him for how they turn out. The Bible says this, and Jesus says this here.

It's not a happy saying, it's not one of the easy sayings of Jesus, but it's a true one, and we would be very foolish if we do not take it to heart.