

## Stumbling Blocks

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Everybody likes to be encouraged. The feelings that come from being encouraged can often last a lifetime. It is not uncommon for people who have lived a good long life to happily remember back to an encourager that they knew when they were a child. Encouragement makes an impact. It is also looked on very positively in scripture. Encouragement is powerful; but so is discouragement. Discouragement may be as negative, or more negative, than encouragement is positive. It can be downright harmful.

In **Matthew 18**, Jesus responds to his disciples, asking, *“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* (**verse 1**) Jesus called a child over to use as an example and explained that the expectation was to become like little children and if you don’t *“you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”* (**verse 3**). Jesus then adds an explanation *“Whoever, then humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”* (**verse 4**). Then Jesus adds a warning that we must take seriously:

*But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a huge millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the open sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! It is necessary that stumbling blocks come, but woe to the person through whom they come* (**verses 6-7**).

Jesus makes it clear that his point is not about the age of the “little ones” but the spiritual maturity of a person. He was making his point to his adult followers. The point is also made that putting a stumbling block in the path of a less mature followers might even cause them to sin. This does not take away the personal responsibility of the weaker follower. It is teaching that temptation or discouragement of weaker and less experienced followers is a dangerous thing to do. How dangerous? Well, the result is compared to having a heavy millstone hung around your neck and being drowned in the sea. Our soul depends on it.

There are a variety of ways that a person might place a stumbling block that would cause someone to sin. A stumbling block would be placing a temptation in front of others that they are not prepared to overcome or being a poor example to others. But another, too often overlooked, stumbling block is discouraging weaker Christians or those seeking Christ. We can be discouraging if we make the weaker feel that they are more flawed, more sinful, or not as valued as the experienced.

The danger of stumbling blocks is also addressed in other teaching. **Romans 14** provides some very clear words on this by instructing us to *“receive the one who is weak in the faith”* (**verse 1**) and further explains that *“we must not pass judgment on one another”* (**verse 13**). What we should do is made very clear in **verse 19**, *“let us pursue what makes for peace and for building up one another.”*

God desires that we meet to worship in a congregational setting. When done properly, this method of worship not only glorifies God but also benefits all of us as followers. In a group setting, we are always going to have part of the family that is weaker or struggling in some way. To behave properly, we must focus on edification and building each other up. We must be merciful as God has shown us mercy. We must not place stumbling blocks in the paths of our spiritual family by having an expectation of sinless perfection. We must be patient.

Sometimes, discouraging words and behavior from more experienced Christians can be damaging to weaker brothers and sisters struggling with living a faithful life. The correct response is not to condone sin or poor decisions but to have compassion. In **Romans 15:1-2**, the writer Paul tells us *“we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not just please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good to build him up.”*

When believers are struggling with their faith and with living an obedient life, they need our consistent love, compassion, and encouragement. We would never want a believer to fall away because they don't receive the encouragement that they need. We also never want to be in a position of placing the stumbling block of discouragement in their path. Which is the correct behavior? To point out people's faults to them and make them feel like they are in the spotlight of judgment? Or to be patient with them with a deep concern for their soul and to do all you can to help them succeed? God's mercy works this way as pointed out in **2 Peter 3:9**, *“The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some regard slowness, but is being patient toward you, because he does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”* Now those are words of encouragement.

The inspiring gospel preacher Winford Lee once said, “By the time people show external symptoms of backsliding, they're 75% gone. Encourage them before you really realize that they need encouragement. Everybody needs it.”

An encourager clears the path. A discourager lays the stumbling block.