

Matthew 5:29-30

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Jesus uses two graphic metaphors—it is better for disciples to pluck out their eyes and cut off their hands—as a way to memorably express an important truth. It is better to deny yourself in this life for His sake than to miss living life in His kingdom and enjoying its incredible benefits.

The parallel account of this teaching is found in Mark 9:43-46.

Jesus continues with two graphic metaphors for zealous discipleship.

The first metaphor begins *if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you*. The second metaphor begins *if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you*.

What can Jesus mean by such drastic statements? Are His disciples supposed to literally tear *out* their eyeballs and cut *off* their hands? The short answer is, “No. He is not speaking literally but figuratively.” Nowhere in scripture does Jesus or the Bible teach that physical mutilation of the body is a requirement to enter the kingdom. The Apostle Paul says it has no value (Galatians 5:6; Colossians 2:23). The sound practice of interpreting any passage is to observe what it says, make an interpretation, then compare the principles of that interpretation with the immediate context and teachings of similar passages. Passages are to be read in a normal manner, as intended by the author or speaker. These statements are clearly metaphorical.

Because these metaphors follow a clear pattern, we will consider them together.

The reason Jesus gives for these drastic actions is that *it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for you whole body to go into Gehenna*. This explanation is repeated after each warning. To better understand what Jesus means we need to look at each element of the metaphor. There are four parts to its pattern. They are a condition, a command, a comparison, and a subtle but powerful contrast.

The conditions are: *if your right eye makes you stumble; if your right hand makes you stumble*. They apply to those who are prone to *stumble* and sin, which is everyone. Everyone is tempted to sin, but the actual temptations we face can vary. Some of us are tempted by lust (*your right eye*). Others are tempted by greed or ambition for power (*your right hand*). Others are tempted by other sins. The point is we are all tempted to *stumble* and sin. Sin prevents us from gaining the benefits of Jesus’s kingdom. Therefore, Jesus’s words have meaning for His disciples, if they are to be disciples who enter kingdom living, and gain its benefits.

The commands are: *tear it out and throw it from you* and *cut it off and throw it from you*. Since all are prone to *stumble* into sin, Jesus tells His followers to get rid of—*tear it out* and *cut it off*—the parts of their body that tempt them and *makes* them *stumble*. He says this figuratively, as is shown by what follows.

The comparisons: *it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than your whole body.* No one naturally desires to lose any part of your body. Jesus understands this. And so, He draws a comparison, saying *it is better for you* to do these drastic measures and lose *one part of your body* than the *whole* of it. Something will be lost, and it will be costly. But we get to decide what it is. Jesus asks which would *you* rather lose: a little or all? Only a fool would choose to lose everything.

Jesus's body parts metaphor likely refers to various aspects of our lives that might cause us to sin. Perhaps it is a possession, or an activity. Perhaps a relationship or an occupation. Terminating any of those things is losing a part of our lives. It is painful. But if the disciples don't rid themselves of any aspect of their lives which *makes* them *stumble*, they can end up losing all they value.

An example might be a relationship that tempts us to commit adultery. It might be painful to lose that relationship, but vastly better than going through the *Gehenna* of adultery and perhaps divorce, with the possible result of losing all the relationships you cherish.

A contrast of place and time is vital to apply Jesus' stern command: *it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body* (here and now), than later on in the future find your *whole body* thrown *into Gehenna*. There is a time lag between sin and its consequence. James uses the metaphor of pregnancy to illustrate the progression of sin:

"But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" (James 1:14-15).

There is a gap between sin being conceived, and sin that leads to the consequence of death. Jesus is saying that *it is better for you* to prune away parts of your life now that are counter to the kingdom than to have those pleasures or comforts cause you to end up in *Gehenna*, a picture of death.

This entrance into His kingdom could apply to this life or the next. In each case it applies to a believer who is a disciple, and the reward of their choices. There is normally a delay between self-denial and its benefits. The reaping and sowing principle applies to both good and bad behavior. There is a delay between planting and harvest. It could be days or years between sowing to the denial of fleshly desires and reaping a tangible benefit.

The sowing and reaping principle also applies to rewards we receive for deeds done during our lifetimes. Our entire life is a time of sowing. The time of the judgement determines what eternal benefits disciples will harvest. These rewards will likely be dispensed and enjoyed during Jesus' thousand year reign on this earth, as well as in the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 3:21). *It is better for you* to go through life feeling the loss of that unmet desire and temptation, than to be completely unfulfilled when *your whole body* is *thrown into Gehenna*. What does Jesus mean by His reference to *Gehenna*, which translators translated as *hell*?

The contrast of locations is between the Valley of Hinnom (*Gehenna* in Greek, G1067) outside Jerusalem's walls, vs. the inside of the city, in houses and palaces. The Hinnom Valley (*Gehenna*) is just south of Jerusalem's city wall. It functioned as the ancient city's garbage dump. Jesus refers to being in this valley as a contrast to being in His kingdom. The King and His faithful followers are inside the walls of the city, perhaps residing in the palace. They are enjoying the safety and bounty of kingdom living. They are not outside the walls of the city living in the garbage dump.

The garbage dump and sewer of the Hinnom Valley, *Gehenna*, was a place of waste and decay. Dead and decaying carcasses, trash, and dung were constantly smoldering. It could be a picture for the consequences of sin in this life. And it could be a picture of the burning up of deeds of "wood, hay and stubble" that do not survive the refining fire of God's judgement in the day of judgement (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). It would not be consistent with the context of the Sermon on the Mount for Jesus to be telling His disciples they will "spend eternity in the lake of fire" if they sin. Were that the case, Jesus would not have needed to die on the cross (Colossians 2:14). It would be up to each disciple to earn their way to heaven through avoiding sin.

When Jesus says *it is better for you to tear out your eye or cut off your hand*, He is speaking of making choices that are *better*. Any choice has consequences. Putting away lust and temptation means loss of a temporal pleasure. But it is *better* to lose that fleeting pleasure than to suffer the adverse consequences of the sin. Putting away things that cause you to *stumble* frees you to enjoy the benefits of kingdom living. It might feel good to curse someone out, to take revenge. But that likely results in an ongoing feud, with substantial damage. It is a vastly *better* outcome to forgive and live with healed relationships. However, forgiving or confessing sometimes feels like cutting off an arm or poking out an eye.

The message of these metaphors is similar to Jesus's famous challenge to deny ourselves for His sake and take up our cross each day (Luke 9:23-26). If we give in to sin and do not rid ourselves of lust and its baggage, if we do not deny ourselves and take up our cross, then we seek to save our life, which means we will lose it (in the *Gehenna* of this world). By contrast, if we lose our life for His sake we will find it (in His kingdom.) The message of Jesus's metaphors here and Jesus's command from the passage in Luke are a consistent theme throughout scripture.

The theme is this. Do not give into the temptation of enjoying earthly sin now, because it will cost you great fulfillment in God's kingdom later. Denying self is *better*. If we give into sin we will regret it when we find ourselves in *Gehenna*. If you are faithful to follow Christ and resist sin, you will be granted entrance into the "city" that is His kingdom, and enjoy its blessings. The experience in *Gehenna* can apply in this life, experiencing the adverse consequences of sin, which leads to death. And it can apply in the next life, losing rewards at the Judgement Seat of Christ.

Biblical Text

If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.