

Matthew 18:6-7

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Having taught about greatness in the kingdom, Jesus now teaches about failure. He teaches that becoming a stumbling block to little ones is an immediate disqualifier for the rewards of the kingdom. He compares becoming such a stumbling block to having a heavy weight tied around one's neck and being hurled into the sea.

The parallel gospel accounts of this teaching are found in Mark 9:42 and Luke 17:1-2.

Jesus continued to teach His disciples about greatness within the kingdom of heaven as He held a child in His arms. He had just told them that true greatness is becoming humble like a child and serving those, like children, who cannot pay you back. He said that *whoever* receives and serves *these little* children, serves Jesus and receives Him (Matthew 18:5). *Whoever* does this will be the greatest in His kingdom. *But whoever* does the opposite will be least in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus's teaching in Matthew 18:1-7 is an expansion of His teaching in Matthew 5:19 from His Sermon on the Mount.

“Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them; he shall be called great in the kingdom.”
(Matthew 5:19)

Just as there are positive rewards from Jesus for *whoever* humbly receives children with loving attentiveness, there are dreadful consequences for *whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble*. Apparently, how we treat *little ones* matters a great deal to God. This likely includes anyone of lesser status whom we can benefit, but who cannot repay us in this life.

Who are *these little ones who believe in Me* that Jesus was referring to?

There are three possible answers. First, they could be children who have faith in Jesus. Jesus is literally holding a young child when He said this. This image seems to indicate that *little ones who believe in Me* are literal children who believe in Jesus or who look to Him for their needs to be met.

A second possibility is that Jesus is using the child as an illustration for everyone who is young, unimportant, or in some other way “less than” what the world sees as important. The Greek word that is translated as *little ones* is not the typical Greek word for “infant” or “child.” It is “mikron” (G3398). It means tiny, small, less, etc. The English word for “mikron” is micro. Matthew could be using it to show how Jesus is referring to everyone who is overlooked and outcast in society, and who believes in Him. Among earthly kingdoms they are “mikrons”—nobodies. But in God's kingdom they are sons and daughters of the King.

A third possibility is that they are *little ones* in the faith. They are new believers in Jesus and do not yet have the knowledge to easily discern the truth from subtle lies.

It is likely that *little ones* would include all three of these categories. What is made clear is that *whoever causes just one of them who believes in Jesus to stumble* will regret it.

What does Jesus mean by *causes to stumble*?

The Greek word translated as *stumble* is “skandalizo.” From it we get the English word “scandalize.” In this context it means putting an obstacle in someone’s path that hinders them from proceeding. In other words, Jesus likely means *whoever* hinders *these little ones* from following *Me* is in danger of God’s wrath.

God’s wrath pours out upon all unrighteousness, even on believers. This is made clear in Romans 1 and 13. In Romans 13, the wrath of God is poured out upon unrighteousness through the agency of human government punishing people for crimes against one another; believers are not exempted. And in Romans 1, God’s wrath upon people who persist in sin is to give them over to their own fleshly lusts. God’s wrath is to allow us to inflict destruction upon ourselves. God allows us to be enslaved by our own passions (Romans 1:24,26,28).

All our choices have consequences. Making a deliberate choice that leads God’s children astray will have severe adverse consequences. Jesus says *it would be better* for the one who is a hinderance and a *stumbling block* to *have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea*. A millstone was a huge rock that was used to grind down grain into flour. Millstones could weigh hundreds, if not a thousand or more pounds. If a millstone were to be tied *around* someone’s neck, and it were to be tossed into *the sea*, that person would swiftly go straight to the bottom and drown. Jesus is saying *it would be better* for someone to die prematurely than to live, and lead His children astray. It would be better to suffer the terrible consequence of drowning, and ending life early, than to face the much greater negative consequence God will visit on those who lead His children astray.

Jesus’s graphic image reveals how significant and precious *little ones* are in God’s sight. And how seriously He takes offense at those who offend them. Jesus was teaching His disciples that children and other “mikrons” are great in God’s sight. Treat them greatly and you will be great. Treat them poorly and you will lose your reward in His kingdom. Be mindful and careful then how you treat *these little ones*. This also makes clear that Jesus’s perspective on this life is that the primary goal of life is not to extend it, but to make good use of what time we are given.

Jesus then broadens the warning to include the world. *Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!*

Woe means more than simply “Look out” or “beware.” It is a lamentation for the future. It is an ominous warning that deep trouble lies ahead.

Jesus says *woe to the world because* it has many *stumbling blocks* that scandalize and hinder *little ones* from following Him.

The world will be accountable for its *stumbling blocks* (Revelation 18). Babylon is used figuratively by John in the book of Revelation as an image of the world and its systems. John describes a strong angel hurling a gigantic millstone into the sea with Babylon going with it.

“Then a strong angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, ‘So will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence, and will not be found any longer.’” (Revelation 18:21)

In this fallen *world it is inevitable that stumbling blocks* and temptations *come*. Everyone faces temptations. Everyone encounters obstacles that hinder them from following Jesus. Jesus encourages believers to overcome these *stumbling blocks* by faith (Revelation 2:7; 2:11; 2:17; 2:26; 3:6; 3:12; 3:21). He encourages us to avoid the broad road leading to destruction and to enter His kingdom by the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13-14).

But even though *stumbling blocks* to God’s kingdom abound throughout *the world*, each *man* is individually responsible for the good and the bad that he does. Each man will be accountable for the blessing or the hinderance he is to others—especially to *little ones*. Jesus says *woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!*

Students of American history might be interested to know that Abraham Lincoln quoted Matthew 18:7 in his Second Inaugural Address. He phrased it as “Woe unto the world because of offenses for it must needs be that offenses come but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.” Lincoln’s application related to slavery based on race, the idea that humans would extract labor from others against their will, and exploit them for their own ends.

Jesus warns that anyone who hinders little ones who believe in Jesus from entering His kingdom will regret it (like Babylon in Revelation 18:21). Such a person will lose his place, position, inheritance, in God’s kingdom. Such a person might be like the one Paul envisions at the judgment seat of Christ whose works are all burned up. Paul says “If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.”(1 Corinthians 3:15).

This is a warning that every person, and every believer, should take very seriously.

Biblical Text

but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. “Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!