

Matthew 18:8-9

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Jesus repeats a metaphor from the Sermon on the Mount warning His disciples that it is better for them to lose part of their body now and enter His kingdom, than to keep all of their body now and miss entering His kingdom.

The parallel gospel accounts of this teaching are found in Matthew 5:29-30 and Mark 9:43-48.

As Jesus held the young child in His arms and taught the disciples about greatness within His kingdom, He reiterated two graphic metaphors that He told them during the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:29-30).

The first thought was *if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire.*

The second thought was similar. It was *if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell.*

Both of these expressions were graphic metaphors. They are figurative and not literal commands to mutilate one's body. 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). Jesus is using hyperbolic comparison to make a point. *It is better* to lose a part of your body, than to lose all your body. In using this illustration, Jesus exhorts His followers to set aside anything that might cause them to create an offense, or stumbling block for His children.

The reason Jesus gives for these drastic actions, to lose a *hand* or *eye*, is that *it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for you whole body to go into fiery hell.* Here the word *hell* is a translation of "Gehenna." The Greek word Gehenna is "Geenna," a transliteration of the Hebrew word "Hinnome." "Gehenna" was the Hinnom Valley, bordering Jerusalem. It was the trash dump/landfill/sewer, and would have had a constant burning of dead carcasses, and a stench of death and decay. The reason Matthew (and the other Gospel) writers likely transliterated the Hebrew "Hinnome" into "Gehenna" instead of translating it was because it was a culturally familiar term that had a vivid meaning.

As a point of reference, the word "hell" in most modern translations is a translation of "Gehenna" in all but one occurrence, when hell is a translation of "tartaroo" which was a compartment of Hades. The place most like what is usually considered as "hell" is Hades. Hades had two compartments, one a place of torment for the wicked, and one a place of paradise (Luke 16:19-30). However, Hades will ultimately be thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14). So the ultimate destiny for those who reject the free gift of God's grace will be to dwell in the lake

of fire. Gehenna could be a picture of any aspect of the adverse consequences of sin. Since Jesus was speaking to His disciples, it would have applied to their experience of life, rather than their eternal destiny.

This “*better for you*” explanation is repeated after each warning. To better understand what Jesus means we need to look at each element of the metaphor. There are three parts to its pattern. They are a condition, a command, a comparison.

The conditions are: *if your eye causes you to stumble; if your hand or foot causes you to 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; what we see (*your eye*). Others are tempted by greed or ambition for power (*your hand*). Others are tempted by other sins. The point is we are all tempted *to stumble* and sin. Sin prevents us from entering Jesus’s kingdom and gaining its benefits. 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: *cut it off and throw it from you; and pluck it out and throw it from you*. Since all are prone to stumble into sin, Jesus tells His followers to get rid of—*cut it off* and *pluck it out*—the parts of their body that tempt them and makes them *stumble*. He says this figuratively, as is shown by what follows.

The comparisons are between two losses. It is a comparison between losing part of your body now, but entering the kingdom, versus keeping the whole of your worldly life now, but missing the kingdom. Jesus expresses this comparison two ways: *it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire; and it is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell*.

No one naturally desires *to lose* any part of their body. Jesus understands this. And so, He draws a comparison, saying *it is better for you to do these drastic measures and lose a hand or foot, or eye than to keep them and miss His kingdom*. 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 *stumble* and 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.

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 or the eternal fire*. 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.

As we saw in the last section, entering God’s kingdom did not refer to being of God’s chosen family. That is a gift given by grace, and received through faith. Rather, it referred to gaining the rewards or benefits of the grace that was granted. Entering Jesus’s kingdom was like the Israelites possessing the Promised Land; it required faith to possess what had been granted by God (Genesis 15:7).

This entrance into His kingdom could apply to rewards for faithfulness in 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 before Christ’s return 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 references to *the eternal fire* and/or Gehenna, which translators translated as *hell*?

They are different expressions for the same thought. *Eternal fire* is a description of a place. And the place was *Gehenna*. In Mark, Jesus described *Gehenna* to His disciples as a place where “their worm does not die, and *the fire* is not quenched” (Mark 9:44; 9:46; 9:48).

Gehenna was what is today called the Valley of Hinnom (“Gehenna” in Greek) outside Jerusalem’s walls. The Hinnom Valley (Ge = valley and henna = Hinnom) is just south of Jerusalem’s city wall. It functioned as the ancient city’s garbage dump. *Gehenna* and its description as a place of *eternal fire* contrasts life within the city. Jesus refers to being in this smoldering trash heap 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 what Jesus taught 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 pluck 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 a hand or foot* 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 (Matthew 16:24; 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 for the pleasures of this world, 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 commands to take up our cross are a consistent theme throughout scripture.

The theme is this: Do not give in to 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 in to sin we will regret it when we find ourselves dwelling 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 also apply in the next life, losing rewards at the Judgement Seat of Christ.

Biblical Text

“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell.