



## **Matthew 18:8–9**

8 If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

## Reflection

The gospel of Matthew tells the story of Jesus. It begins with his ancestry in chapter one and then works chronologically through his life until, at age 33, Jesus is killed on the cross. When you take a closer look it's interesting what Matthew chooses to emphasise. His gospel is 28 chapters long. Only two chapters are about Jesus' childhood. 26 chapters are about the three year period that Jesus spent in public ministry. And the last eight chapters of Matthew's gospel, chapters 21–28, more than a quarter of the whole book, focus only on the last seven days of Jesus' life.

What's also interesting is that Matthew inserts five of Jesus' speeches (or discours-

es) into his story of Jesus' life. It's clear that Matthew views these five speeches as some of Jesus' most important teaching. We've already heard three of these speeches: the Sermon on the Mount (chps. 5–7), the Missionary Discourse (chp. 10) and Matthew Chapter 13 where Jesus taught us about the kingdom of God through seven parables in what has come to be known as the Parabolic Discourse. In beginning Matthew 18 this week, we've begun Jesus' fourth speech, the Discourse on the Church which will continue until Matthew 21. This teaching block, in the form of an extended speech by Jesus, is all about relationships within the church.

Jesus began by comparing members of the kingdom of God with little children. We enter the church in child-like humili-

ty, utterly dependent on our heavenly Father. In fact, Jesus goes on, humility, trust and obedience like this is also the path to greatness in the kingdom of God. But quite quickly Jesus has now moved on to how we relate to each other, and in particular, the evil of causing a brother or sister to sin; to stumble in a way that will lead them away from the faith.

In yesterday's passage, with his usual power of language and evocative imagery, Jesus' painted a picture of what would happen to the person, whether they be Christian or no, who leads one of the children of God away from him. In one of the more horrifying images in Scripture Jesus painted the picture of the guilty person having a millstone weighing hundreds of kilos tied around their neck. That per-

son then being taken out to the deepest part of the ocean and thrown overboard to drown. Jesus promises that this horrifying fate is better than what awaits the person who leads one of God's little children away from him.

In today's passage, Jesus looks squarely into the eyes of his disciples, and says to them: 'This includes you too.' A millstone around your neck, sinking to the deepest depths of the ocean – only far worse than that awaits you too if you cause any of my little ones to stumble in their faith. It's that serious. Sin that leads your brothers and sisters astray is that serious because it has eternal consequences for both you and them. Sin is deadly serious, and so, from verses 8 & 9 Jesus says to his disciples:

8 If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

Millstones and amputations. Jesus certainly has a way with words! But when it's a matter of life and death, eternal life and eternal death, only the strongest words will do. Or when you're at war (and there is a spiritual war going on), the decisions you make can mean life and death not

just for yourself but also for the people all around you. These drastic times call for drastic measures.

You may remember that Jesus has used these words before in the Sermon on the Mount when speaking about adultery. Perhaps he used these words often when trying to impress on people the seriousness of sin. Famously (or infamously), a founding church Father named Origen, a brilliant Christian theologian and scholar who lived about 150 years after Jesus, took these words literally and castrated himself so that he would no longer lust after women. Jesus never meant for us to take these words literally, harming yourself physically is a sin against God, but Jesus does mean for us to take these words very seriously because sin is far more deadly than we

ever allow ourselves to imagine.

## **Think**

So I'd like us to take longer than usual today to think very seriously over the ways in which we are living that fall short of who we are in Christ. I want us to think very deeply and seriously over our sin. The bible says,

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 1 John 1:8

We all sin. And sin is deadly serious. Unrepentant sin equates to eternal punishment in the fire of hell says our passage today. And one sin, leads to another, and leads to another. The first time your conscience



recoils like accidentally resting your hand on a hot stove. But the second time it's not so hot. Pretty soon you're numb to it, used to, addicted to it; it's easy to push down further and further that slight tinge of guilt. Soon you've convinced yourself it was never really wrong in the first place and that Christianity was never really for you. And for all eternity you will be filled with bitter, bitter regret. Sin is deadly serious.

Think about your sin. What sin do you need to cut off today? What sin do you need to deal radically with today? Are you crossing the line in your relationship with your secretary at work? Quit your job. It is better for you to quit your job than to be thrown into the fire of hell. Is it viewing pornography on your iPhone? Drop it in a bucket of

water. It's better to be cut off from the internet than to be cut off from God forever. Is it love of money? Do you find yourself checking your margin account intermittently throughout the day, every day. Sell your whole share portfolio and give that money to people in our world who need it far more than you do. People who may one day thank you into eternity for your gift that leads them to eternal life. What sin do you need to cut off today? What sin has been holding you back for years? What sin have you repented of again and again, and secretly continued to indulge in again and again? What might have you done with that prayer time if you weren't confessing that same sin over and over again?

Even more seriously, what sin in your life

might put you at risk of leading others away from Christ? Is it your pride? Pride in your career, pride in your recent holidays, pride in the restaurants that you frequent – all posted on Facebook to make everyone you care about less secure in Christ, and more envious of your success in the world. Is it the way you speak to your husband, a family member, your neighbour, or someone at work? Are your words driving them away from Christ instead of towards him? Jesus is teaching us today that we have to be so very careful not to put anything in the path of our brothers and sisters in Christ that might cause them to stumble. What do you need to remove? Out of deep love for them and out of your deep love for him what do you need to remove?

**Pray**

I don't know about you but after writing these words I need to repent of my sin. And ask God for the strength I'll need to make some radical changes in my life. Now that I've finished writing that's what I'll be doing. I hope you can too.