

## The Greatest in the Kingdom

“Have you heard Sister Audre sing?” asked Karah. “She sounds like CeCe Winans!”

The Bethany Peace women’s ministry had proposed a singing contest for the new church choir. Members would vote on the best voices, and those people would be considered for the choir, which would go into the community to build a reputation and help bring people to Bethany Peace.

“But I don’t know how I feel about a ‘talent contest’ at the church,” added Karah. “It can create stumbling blocks for people. Feelings can get hurt, pride can get involved, or other negative things you shouldn’t have in a church. People don’t like to lose or think they have no chance to win. Bitterness may break out and stay a long time.”

The two women stopped talking when Audre came into the church’s coffee shop. “Sister Audre,” Brianna called out.

“I hear you can really sing,” said Brianna smiling. “Are you going to be in the talent competition?”

“No,” Audre said. “I’m going to help with childcare.”

“Why, with your wonderful voice?” asked Brianna.

“I do love to sing,” Audre said, “but I also love helping with the nursery and children’s church.”

“You are good with children,” added Karah. “And we never have enough volunteers for the nursery. Besides, the list of contestants for the talent contest is very long.”

Audre said, “I do like helping with a great need.”

- 1.** *Describe what it means to stumble spiritually.*
- 2.** *What is your reaction when someone causes you to stumble spiritually? How do you handle that reaction?*
- 3.** *In what ways have you caused others to stumble spiritually—for example, setting a poor example to others?*

## Humbling Oneself

*Matthew 18:1-5, KJV*

1 At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

2 And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

3 And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

5 And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.

*Matthew 18:1-5, NIV*

<sup>1</sup>At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

<sup>2</sup>He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. <sup>3</sup>And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>5</sup>And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

Jesus' focus was increasingly on His upcoming crucifixion and resurrection (Matt. 17:23-24), but the disciples asked who He thought was the greatest in the Kingdom. In response, Jesus called a very small child and had him stand among the gathered group, which must have been larger than just the Twelve. In that day, children were an important part of the family. Even so, they were considered to be the property of their parents, had few legal rights, and their opinions were not sought out.

However, the children Jesus saw were humble, trusting, innocent, and lacking in any pretensions, as well as unconcerned with their status in society. Such children were naturally inclined to depend on and receive from others what they were unable to provide for themselves.

Jesus used the little child as an object lesson to stress the

eternal importance of being unassuming and unpretentious. His sacrificial death at Calvary became the ultimate demonstration of what He declared to the Twelve. Unless people “change” (vs. 3), become like a small child, Jesus said they would never enter God’s kingdom.

According to Jesus, those who were “lowly” (vs. 4) among the disciples were the “greatest.” Likewise, such a great person would not hesitate to welcome “one such child” (vs. 5) in Jesus’ “name.” He meant that anyone showing hospitality to such a seemingly insignificant person as a child did so on His behalf. In first-century culture, older people were revered, especially distinguished elders, rabbis, and scribes. In contrast, children were considered of lesser value than adults. Some might even consider daughters a disadvantage. Along with the dismissive attitude shown by Jesus’ disciples, the religious leaders called on Jesus to silence children who praised Him as He rode into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:15-16). Jesus repudiated such dismissive views toward children.

**4.** *What question did Jesus’ disciples ask Him?*

**5.** *What analogy did Jesus make from the “little child” (Matt. 18:2)?*

**6.** *How did Jesus describe the nature of greatness in the Kingdom?*

## Causing Others to Stumble

*Matthew 18:6-9, KJV*

6 But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

*Matthew 18:6-9, NIV*

<sup>6</sup>“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”<sup>7</sup>Woe to the world because of the things that cause

7 Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!

8 Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.

9 And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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."

Jesus pronounced judgment on anyone who offended any of the small children within the group as well as any "little ones" (any disciples). The focus of Jesus' observations was those who trusted in Him. So Jesus' words conveyed the idea of misleading others to compromise their faith and spiritually fall away.

Jesus vividly illustrated His point by referring to people having a huge "millstone" weighing hundreds of pounds to be placed around their "neck" and then be thrown in the sea. In Jesus' day, a mill used two extremely heavy stones to pulverize grain (such as wheat) into flour. A laborer would pour grain through a hole in the upper, rubbing stone (which was either flat or convex). Then, a donkey tethered to a wooden handle (on the stone's outer edge) would turn the object. In this way, the kernels were ground against the rough base stone. Jesus said it would be better for offenders to experience a premature death with the millstone than to live long enough to lure and entrap believers in wrongdoing.

Jesus used the interjection rendered “woe” (vs. 7) to draw attention to the sorrow that awaited anyone, such as the religious leaders, who tripped up His followers. Those who abuse God’s children will have to deal with Him. Unless they repent, their eternal doom is inevitable.

Next, Jesus talked about another kind of influence—that of the sinful nature on our spiritual welfare. The world system around us is filled with many stumbling blocks, so temptations are a fact of life, but He declared that unending sorrow awaits those who entice other people to sin.

Jesus used blunt language to emphasize His point. He said that if one part of our body—a hand, a foot, an eye—makes us fall into sin, we should eliminate that part. It would be far “better” to be “maimed” (vs. 8), “crippled,” or lose an eye in this life than to remain physically intact and suffer “the fire of hell” (vs. 9).

Regrettably, some have taken Jesus’ statements literally and mutilated themselves. Yet, doing so totally misunderstands Jesus’ use of hyperbole (intentional exaggeration). After all, cutting off one hand will not keep you from sinning with the other hand, and what one eye can see, the other eye can see as well. At issue were not body parts. Jesus taught that we must resist all forms of sinful enticements. These have less to do with external attractions than with our inner sinfulness.

Jesus was urging us to willingly deprive ourselves of any physical pleasure that might draw us away from wholehearted devotion to Him. Denying ourselves is not easy, but doing so is far better than to gratify illicit desires now and end up being an outcast from God’s kingdom.

**7.** *What did Jesus say about causing someone to stumble and millstones?*

**8.** *How did Jesus use intentional exaggeration to make His point?*

**9.** *What dire end awaited those who failed to heed Jesus’ warning?*

## From Stumbling to Recovering

The Bible is full of examples of people who stumble in their walk with God. Many people dedicated to the Lord slipped in their faith—from Abraham to David in the Old Testament, to Peter and Paul in the New Testament. Nevertheless, despite their failings, God's grace to them raised and steadied them in their spiritual journey.

One of the most startling descriptions of sin in God's Word is the account of the golden calf (see Exod. 32). Moses' brother Aaron succumbed to the demands of the rebellious Hebrews and molded a golden calf for them to worship while Moses was away receiving spiritual instructions from God. When Moses confronted Aaron for his sacrilege, Aaron tried to lay the blame on the people, but he recognized how he had failed God. So, he sided with Moses and the faithful, and the Lord spared him. Moreover, God Almighty continued to use Aaron in an exalted position among God's people.

Each of us will have moments when we stumble spiritually. Those moments may not be as shocking as Aaron's, but they still have a profound effect on our relationship with the Lord. And in our contrition and grief, God will always be present to embrace us with His love and compassion. Indeed, His grace will guide us to loftier peaks in our service to Christ. Therefore, "let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Heb. 12:1-2).

**10.** *How do you help your sisters and brothers in Christ not to stumble spiritually?*

**11.** *When they do stumble, how do you aid them to recover?*

**12.** *How do you keep yourself from stumbling spiritually?*

## A Confession or a Request

In this week's Scripture, Jesus tells the disciples that He wants His followers to be as innocent as the little child He called before them and to protect their fellow believers from stumbling. Such teaching is still applicable today.

► *Write a short prayer letter to God, asking Him to give you the wisdom and the strength not to stumble spiritually because of a particular problem that you are currently confronting. Or if you have stumbled, ask Him to help you recover to continue your walk with Jesus. Or if you know someone who is about to or has stumbled spiritually, ask Him if He wants you to help that person and, if so, ask for the grace required to fill that role. In any case, praise Jesus for His caring presence and constant willingness to forgive and restore.*

### KEY VERSE

Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. —Matthew 18:4, KJV

"Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." —Matthew 18:4, NIV

### DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSONS

#### Week of March 13 through March 19

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** John 7:37-43—Rivers of Living Water.
- Tues.** 2 Kings 17:24-34—Worship God Alone.
- Wed.** Ezra 4:1-8, 11b-16—Handling Opposition to God's Plans.
- Thurs.** Isaiah 44:1-8—Water on a Thirsty Land.
- Fri.** John 4:1-15—Jesus Offers Living Water.
- Sat.** John 4:16-26—Worship in Spirit and Truth.
- Sun.** John 4:27-29, 31-42—Jesus the Savior of the World.