

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*What Are Examples of Stumbling Blocks in the Bible?*"<sup>i</sup>

On Sunday mornings we're working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse, and we find ourselves at **Luke 17**.

You have probably heard me say before that all sins are not the same, despite what some people say.

If I asked you what the worse sins are, what would you say?

- Maybe idolatry, because it removes God from the throne He should occupy in our hearts?
- Maybe murder, because it ends someone's life, there's no way to undo it, and the Bible says even causes the ground cries out for vengeance?
- Maybe adultery, because it violates the most important earthly covenant we make?

The list could go on, but I'm guessing it would have to become pretty long before we would come up with the sin in this morning's verses: the sin of stumbling others.

But based on what Jesus said should happen to people who commit this sin it should probably be toward the top of the list, because I can't think of many things worse than being thrown into the sea with a huge weight tied around my neck.

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So this morning, we are going to talk about the sin of putting stumbling blocks before others and look at examples in the Bible, so we can avoid committing this sin ourselves.

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Look with me at verse 1...

**Luke 17:1 And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!"**

The ESV says **temptations to sin**, but you can probably see a footnote that says it means, "Stumbling blocks."

- The NKJV translates this as "offenses," and has a footnote that says it mean "stumbling blocks"
- The NIV says "cause people to stumble"
- The NASB says "stumbling blocks," and has a footnote that says it means "temptations to sin"
- The Amplified Bible says "stumbling blocks" and then amplifies it, "Temptations and traps set to lure one to sin."

You get the idea that stumbling people, or putting a stumbling block before people, is tempting people to sin.

And this brings us to lesson one...

**Lesson One: A stumbling block is often the sin of tempting someone to sin.**

There are lots of words for sin in the Bible, such as transgress, trespass, abomination, and iniquity. All the words are meaningful because they describe different ways of sinning.

Stumbling is the sin of tempting someone to sin.

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The Greek word for **temptations to sin**, or **stumbling blocks**, is *skandalon* (pronounced skon-duh-lon), related to our word scandal. It comes from the word for a bent stick that springs a trap or sets the bait.

This is fitting because stumbling is setting a trap for someone else.

Scripture often uses the language of walking or running to describe the Christian life. Picture that imagery.

Stumbling is when someone stumbles or trips another believer...not physically, but spiritually in their relationship with the Lord.

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Jesus said **temptations to sin are sure to come.**

Temptation is inevitable because we live in a sinful fallen world, but don't be the person who introduces temptation into someone else's life.

How bad is it to do so?

Jesus provides one of the most unique and terrifying warnings in Scripture. Look at **verse 2**...

**Luke 17:2 It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin (or stumble).**

Just as Jesus is not talking about physically stumbling or tripping someone, so too He is not talking about physical **little ones**, or babies, but spiritual **little ones**, or new believers or baby Christians.

Can you see why Jesus would mention new believers or baby Christians?

They are the most vulnerable:

- They would be the easiest to stumble or tempt to sin
- They might not know better

The Pulpit Commentary said, *“The reference is clearly to disciples whose faith was only as yet weak and wavering - to men and women who would be easily influenced either for good or evil.”*

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Essentially, Jesus said: *“People are going to take the bait, but woe to you if you offer the hook. People are going to trip up, but woe to you if you set the stumbling block in their way.”*

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A **millstone** was a large stone for grinding grain. It was so large it took a donkey to turn it. If someone was thrown into the sea with this around their neck they would certainly drown.

Gentiles used this form of execution, which made it more offensive to the Jews.

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Did Jesus literally mean that tempting someone to sin is so bad it would be better to have this happen?

No, I don't think He meant it literally.

As we have talked about before, Jesus spoke with hyperbole or exaggeration to make a point, and this is another example.

He wants to drive home how bad it is to tempt someone to sin, so He makes it sound like a horrible death would be better.

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Now let's look at some examples of stumbling blocks in the Bible so we can learn what it looks like to avoid doing this ourselves.

Turn two books to the right to **Romans 2**.

Almost three years ago when COVID began I preached some sermons on knowledge and wisdom to help us walk through that season together. I'm revisiting a few of the same places, but quickly to keep this to one sermon.

Here's the context so this makes sense...

Paul is discussing two groups of people, the Gentiles and Jews, and they both think they're sinless or free from judgment for different reasons.

The Jews think they're free from judgment – or sinless – because have the law. They thought having the law made them good.

The Gentiles think they're sinless or free from judgment because they didn't receive the law. So they think they aren't accountable because they didn't know better!

Paul wants to convince both groups they're sinners so they see their need for the Savior.

Look at **verse 12**...

**Romans 2:12a For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law,**

These are Gentiles and Paul says they'll **perish** because they're sinners. He'll elaborate on this in **verses 14 and 15**.

**Romans 2:12b and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.**

These are Jews who have the law, and they'll be judged because...

**Romans 2:13 For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.**

It's not enough to simply have the law. You must obey it perfectly, which they didn't do.

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The Gentiles didn't have the law telling them right from wrong, but they did have something else. Look at **verse 14**...

**Romans 2:14 For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.**

When Gentiles obey parts of the law without having the law, they're showing they recognize certain things – lying, stealing, and murder – are wrong.

They're able to choose between right and wrong, but they still choose wrong.

Notice it says **they are a law to themselves**. Their conscience serves as a law for them.

Look at **verse 15**...

**Romans 2:15a They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while THEIR CONSCIENCE ALSO BEARS WITNESS, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.**

These are the two things our consciences do:

- **Accuse** us when we do something wrong.
- **Excuse** us when we do something right.

Gentiles don't have the Mosaic law but they have a conscience which serves as a law telling them not to do certain things, and when they do those things anyway, they are breaking the law and are as guilty as Jews breaking the Mosaic law.

And this brings us to lesson two...

### Lesson Two: Violating our conscience is sin.

Here's a quote I like...

*"A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."*

If you convince someone to do something against his will – or conscience – but he isn't really convinced – he's of the same opinion – he ends up sinning against his conscience...because he broke that law

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If a conscience serve as a law, then it's a serious thing for people to violate their conscience, because they're breaking the law and sinning.

But do you know what's even worse?

When you tempt someone else to violate their conscience. Doing so is putting a stumbling block before them.

Go ahead and turn to **Romans 14**.

Here's the context for this chapter because we are jumping into the middle of it.

The Romans were arguing about food and days of the week. The important thing to know is these are nonessentials that are amoral – not moral or immoral – so it doesn't matter how people feel about them. Nobody is right or wrong.

If Paul was talking about moral issues, it would absolutely matter how people felt. Then there would be right and wrong.

But because these issues are amoral, look what Paul says in **verse 13**...

**Romans 14:13 Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to PUT A STUMBLING BLOCK or hindrance in the way of a brother.**

Paul says two things not to do:

1. First, don't **pass judgment** or look down on others over these nonessentials
2. Second, don't **put a stumbling block** before anyone that could cause them to violate their conscience.

And this brings us to lesson three...

### Lesson Three: There are primarily three ways to put stumbling blocks before others (Part One) encouraging them to violate their conscience.

Look at verse 14...

**Romans 14:14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but IT IS UNCLEAN FOR ANYONE WHO THINKS IT UNCLEAN.**

This is interesting. We know from many verses that Paul thought all food was clean.

But he also said clean food is **unclean for people who think it's unclean**...or whose conscience forbids them from eating it.

That means people shouldn't eat food that is permissible to eat if their conscience forbids it.

Skip to **verse 20**...

**Romans 14:20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to MAKE ANOTHER STUMBLE by what he eats.**

It is wrong to stumble people by encouraging them to eat food they think is unclean, or whose conscience forbids them.

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To say a brother is **destroyed** is strong language.

What does it mean?

It's not speaking physically. It's speaking spiritually.

Because people can't lose their salvation, it doesn't mean they go to hell, but it does mean serious detriment to their spiritual growth.

**Romans 14:21 It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. 22a The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.**

When Paul uses the word **faith** he means liberties. We should keep them between ourselves and God, so as not to lead others who don't have the same liberties to violate their conscience.

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Look at the rest of the verse...

**Romans 14:22b Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves (or on himself for what he thinks is acceptable).**

This is interesting...

If we cause others to violate their conscience that should violate our conscience too. We should feel bad about causing others to sin.

So we're **blessed** if we keep our liberties to ourselves, because then we [**have no**] **reason to pass judgment** on ourselves – or condemn ourselves – for causing others to sin.

This is a great reason not to cause others to violate their conscience: so our conscience is clear too.

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Look at **verse 23**...

**Romans 14:23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.**

When it says **is condemned**, it doesn't mean God condemns him. It means his conscience condemns him. Later he has **doubts** about what he did and condemns himself.

Up to this point maybe you've wondered: *"When people violate their conscience is it really sin?"*

This verse answers that question for us. It's the first verse we've seen saying it **is sin**, because it's not done in faith, or with a clear conscience.

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Turn to the right to the next book to **1 Corinthians 8**.

Some of you probably know **1 Corinthians 8** is like **Romans 14**:

- In **Romans 14** they were arguing about food and days of the week
- In **1 Corinthians 8** they were arguing about meat sacrificed to idols

Here's how this predicament developed...

The Greeks and Romans were polytheistic, which means they believed in many gods, and they were polydemonistic, which means they believed in many demons and evil spirits.

They believed evil spirits would try to invade human bodies by attaching themselves to food before it was eaten, and the only way the evil spirits could be removed was to sacrifice it to idols.

So sacrificing food to idols served two purposes:

1. First, to gain favor with the idol it was sacrificed to
2. Second, to cleanse it from demonic contamination.

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When the animal was sacrificed, some of it was burned on the altar. The meat that was not burned was served at wicked, pagan feasts.

But sometimes all the meat wasn't consumed, so the rest of it was sold in the temple.

Because there was no refrigeration in those days the meat had to be consumed quickly, which meant it went right from being used in the worship of an idol to possibly sitting on the plate of a believer.

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And here's something else...

Because the meat sacrificed to idols wasn't as attractive as meat that was NOT sacrificed to idols, it was offered at a lower price.

Believers found themselves in two groups.

The first group is in **verses 4-6**. Look there with me...

**1 Corinthians 8:4** Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." **5** For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"— **6** yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Paul used the words **we** and **us** because he was in this first group. He knew better than anyone that idols aren't real, and there's only one God.

One group said...

*“Demons don’t inhabit food, and idols aren’t real – there’s no being named Zeus, or Hermes, or Mars – so whatever is offered to idols isn’t offered to anything. I can go in an idol’s temple to buy meat, because it’s no different than other meat except that it’s cheaper, which means I’m being a good steward by buying it.”*

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The second group is in **verse 7**...

**1 Corinthians 8:7** However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

There were Jews and Gentiles in this second group:

- The Jews thought idolatry was the worst sin, so they would have nothing to do with meat that had anything to do with idols. Plus, to buy it they’d have to go into an idol’s temple, and what godly Jew could do that with a clear conscience?
- There were Gentiles who were new believers, and some of them had been worshiping idols at these temples recently; therefore, they wanted to stay far away from the meat because it reminded them of their previous idolatry.

This second group would say...

*“I don’t want anything to do with meat sacrificed to idols, and no believer should have anything to do with it. You could give it to me for free and I wouldn’t take it, and anyone who would is sinning.”*

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Now in **verse 7** notice the words **being weak**, so I can explain something important...

The word **weak** sounds negative, but it’s not, because we’re talking about nonessentials, or amoral issues, so it doesn’t matter how people feel about them.

To be perfectly clear, believers aren’t better or worse if their conscience is strong or weak.

- Weak or strong isn’t a compliment or a criticism
  - People aren’t more or less mature if they’re weak or strong regarding nonessentials.
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So who is right?

Look at **verse 9**...

**1 Corinthians 8:9** But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. **10** For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?

Paul didn’t say which group was right. He said the people who wouldn’t put a stumbling block before others were right.

You could be in either group and be right or wrong based on whether you tempted others to violate their conscience.

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Now we have reached the most difficult part of the sermon: providing present-day examples.

The reason this is so difficult is people don’t agree on nonessentials. What is nonessential to one person is viewed as an essential to someone else:

- For people who feel comfortable eating meat sacrificed to idols it is a nonessential to them, but for people who think it is sinful to eat meat sacrificed to idols it is essential to them.
- For people who view all days the same it is a nonessential issue to them, but for people who esteem one day better than another it is an essential to them.

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So, I have no doubt that whatever list I come up with, some people might disagree with some of the items while others might feel like some items are missing.

With that in mind, here are items I think can serve as stumbling blocks to others:

- Television
- Movies
- Video games
- Music
- Alcohol
- Clothing styles
- Dancing

My point in sharing this list isn't to say all these are bad, as I don't think they're all bad. If they were all bad:

- They wouldn't be nonessentials
- They wouldn't be amoral

They would be essential issues of morality

My point is to be aware that these are areas I think have the greatest variety of convictions, so we want to be careful not to lead people to violate their conscience.

Why?

Because we love Jesus and others.

Jesus loves His bride and we want to do our best to love His bride well.

When we put our brothers and sisters in Christ before ourselves we put Christ first. It is a simple way to obey **Philippians 2...**

**Philippians 2:3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.**

Does this mean:

- We can never listen to music we feel we have the liberty to listen to?
- Or watch shows we have a clear conscience about?

No, that's not what it means, but it means when we won't do those things around our brother and sisters in Christ whose consciences forbid them.

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Look at **verse 11...**

**1 Corinthians 8:11 And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.**

Here's the word **destroyed** again, showing just how serious of a matter this is.

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Notice the words **the brother for whom Christ died.**

This is about value. Because Christ died for this brother, there must be concern for him.

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Listen to this verse...

**1 John 2:10 Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him THERE IS NO CAUSE FOR STUMBLING.**

John's point is that if you love someone you would not tempt them to sin, because it is unloving.

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For our last example of stumbling blocks in the Bible, turn to **Revelation 2**.

We are looking at Pergamum, one of the seven churches Jesus wrote a letter to.

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Five of the churches received commendations from Jesus. Look at the commendation to Pergamum in **verse 13**...

**Revelation 2:13** “I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

Talk about a horrible place to have a church: **where Satan's throne is** and **where [he] dwells**.

Because Satan is not omnipresent like God, but is relegated to one place, this could literally mean that of all the places he could be, he was in Pergamum. We tend to think we live in a liberal area, but it's nothing compared to where this church was located.

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One of the real credits to this church is that despite this they still held fast to Christ.

**Antipas** was probably the pastor of the church and apparently, he'd been martyred. Tradition says he was burned to death inside a brass bull.

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Five of the seven churches received rebukes. Look at the rebuke in **verse 14**...

**Revelation 2:14** **But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who TAUGHT BALAK TO PUT A STUMBLING BLOCK BEFORE THE SONS OF ISRAEL, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.**

Balaam is probably the best example in Scripture of the other way to put stumbling blocks before people and that is by encouraging them to sin.

And this brings us to the next part of lesson three...

**Lesson Three: There are primarily three ways to put stumbling blocks before others (Part Two) encouraging them to sin.**

It says Balaam **put a stumbling block before Israel**. He did this by encouraging them to sin in two ways:

1. First, he did what we just read about in **1 Corinthians 8** and tempted them to violate their conscience and **[eat] food sacrificed to idols**
2. Second, he tempted them to straight sinning by **practicing sexual immorality**

Let me tell you how Balaam did this. You probably know part of the story, but you might not know all of it.

The part you probably know is Balak, king of Moab, saw the Israelites heading toward him. He was terrified they were going to wipe him out. He knew he couldn't defeat them physically, so he decided to try to defeat them spiritually, by hiring Balaam to curse them.

But this didn't go the way Balak wanted, because every time Balaam opened his mouth to curse Israel he blessings spilled out.

Balak kept moving Balaam around to different locations hoping this would allow Balaam to curse, but he continued to bless. It went so badly Balak finally fired Balaam.

But Balaam really wanted the money so he told Balak...

*"If you want to see Israel cursed, here's what you can do: March your Moabite prostitutes through Israel's camp to entice the men. When the men engage with the prostitutes they will also join in their idolatry. This will anger their God and then He will punish them."*

Balaam's plan worked. God became angry and sent a plague among the nation. Listen to this verse...

**Numbers 31:16 Behold...Balaam's advice caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor (this is where the prostitutes marched through the camp), and so THE PLAGUE CAME AMONG THE CONGREGATION OF THE LORD.**

One of the Israelite men joined himself with one of the prostitutes right in front of the entrance of the tent of meeting...which is to say in front of God's presence...which is to say in a very high-handed-in-God's-face-kind-of-way. The plague finally stopped when Phinehas threw a spear through this man.

Listen to this part in particular...

**Numbers 31:16 Balaam's advice caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord.**

This is exactly what it means to stumble people: give them advice that leads them to act treacherously against God.

Present-day examples of this is easy: any time we do something that encourages people to do something forbidden in God's Word: lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery.

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Now the title of this sermon is, *"What Are Examples of Stumbling Blocks in the Bible?"*

The main point of the sermon is to identify stumbling blocks, so we can avoid putting them before others.

But there is one more example of a stumbling block in the Bible that we are SUPPOSED TO PUT BEFORE OTHERS.

Any guesses?

Jesus Christ...and this brings us to the last part of lesson three...

**Lesson Three: There are primarily three ways to put stumbling blocks before others (Part Three) preaching Christ.**

I had to change lesson one. It previously said, *"A stumbling block is the sin of tempting someone to sin,"* but I had to add the word "often." Preaching Christ is putting a stumbling block before others, because Christ is a stumbling block:

- **1 Corinthians 1:23 but we preach Christ crucified, A STUMBLING BLOCK to Jews and folly to Gentiles**
- **Romans 9:33 as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion A STONE OF STUMBLING, AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."**

- **1 Peter 2:8 and “A STONE OF STUMBLING, AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.**

Why is Jesus a stumbling block and rock of offense?

Because people stumble over Christ. They reject Him.

And because the gospel is offensive. It tells people:

- They are sinners
- They are not good enough to go to heaven
- They deserve to go to hell

This offends people...but it is a stumbling block that should be put before them.

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Service is going to conclude a little differently with Jake’s ordination.

After that I will be up front if you have any questions or I can pray for you. Let’s pray.

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<sup>i</sup> Done:

- EW
- Ellicot on BH
- Pulpit Commentary on BH
- JM
- Wiersbe