

Sermon: Beware the 4 stumbling block?

Reading: Matthew 16:21- end

Introduction

How frustrating it is to make mistakes! Whether it's something as simple as a crossword puzzle, or something a little more serious like a wrong decision or a word spoken out which we now regret, we all make them! There is a little consolation recognising we are not perfect and neither is anyone else, for no person born in this world (with the exception of Jesus) has never made mistakes nor sinned. There is an old saying which says to err is to be human.

When we reflect over our life, can we still see ghost shadows of past mistakes? Ghost shadows are like the shadows which remain when we try to rub out mistakes on a page or when we try to overwrite an answer on a puzzle book. No matter how hard we try, we can still see the shadow of the mistake underneath. Its like a ghost barely seen, but we know its there! We may be able to cover over some light mistakes but others seem to leave their imprint like a ghost shadow. Is there any hope for a person who errs in life?

Imagine if there was an app we could download to our phone, which warned us when we are about to make a bad decision or mistake! An app like this would have helped Peter immensely from the stinging rebuke Jesus gave him. One moment he receives a commendation from Jesus for his good confession of faith, then the next moment he hears some of the harshest words Jesus ever speaks to him as Jesus says, 'Get thee behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns' (**Matt 16:23**).

Neither we nor Peter have such technology available to help us avoid making calamitous mistakes on our Christian journey of faith, however I want to consider some potential stumbling blocks which we would do well to take heed of in our walk with Jesus to avoid us being crushed by them. After all no Christian ever wants to hear the rebuke Jesus gives to Peter,

Context

Chapter 16 marks a pivotal moment in Matthew's gospel for the disciples. Jesus asks the curious question, 'Who do people say I am?' and then asks the disciples, 'Who do you say I am?' The disciples eyes are opened, now they recognise the prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled amongst them, from the virgin will be born a Son and He will be called Immanuel, which means God is with us (**Isa 7:7**). From this point onwards Jesus begins sharing some hard lessons with the disciples which they are finding hard to understand.

The prophetic ministry is now being opened up to the disciple. When they hear Jesus speak of what is to come, their hearts become heavy and they are saddened. They still have much to learn, no matter how bleak things will become they must trust Jesus.

Peter is chastened by Jesus because he becomes a stumbling block. Not only was Peter getting in the way, but becoming an obstacle to the will of God, a stumbling block! Peter's heart was in the right place but his motivation was focussed on earthly things and not on the will of God, so Jesus rebukes him and saying, 'Get behind me Satan! This must have been so hard for Peter to hear these words from Jesus. Jesus then goes on to offer further challenges, this walk is not for the half hearted as Jesus says, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their own cross and follow me' (**Matt**

16:24). The words which follow are hopeful as well as sobering as Jesus tells us, '(He) will come in His Fathers glory with His angels and then He will reward each person according to what they have done' (**Matt 16:27-28**).

If we want to receive heavens rewards we may have to start thinking like Jesus and not worldly. I have heard some people say critically of others, 'They are so heavenly minded they are no earthly use'. I am not sure how true this is, but have often found the opposite to be true, for some people can be so worldly thinking they are no heavenly use! This was what Jesus was getting at with Peter. You only have worldly interests at heart, not those of God. Let us be careful of stumbling blocks lest we forfeit heavens reward. Here are 4 to consider.

1. Pride comes before a fall

The first stumbling block we need to be aware of is the spirit of pride. For the saying, 'Pride comes before a fall' is a well known one. Im sure many of us can testify to the truth of this statement. How often have we felt so sure of something or even been overly confident in our own ability, resources, strength etc, only to discover we were wrong! After starting off so overly confident we stumbled and how far we fell. Hurt pride is painful indeed.

This statement finds its root in Scripture and the actual proverb says this, 'Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall' (**Prov 16:18**). Pride doesn't lead to a fall but leads to destruction, that is even more serious. Its true, no one can tell those full of pride they are wrong, no one can speak against the spirit of pride for it is arrogant and boastful. Pride therefore leads to destruction. It's the haughty spirit what causes the fall! The haughty spirit is arrogance, a superior attitude, no one else can do it better, vain, and conceitedness - all of these attitudes lead to a fall, but its pride that leads to destruction. Pride is a spirit we need to guard against if we want to avoid destruction and Jesus provides us with the best antedate to pride, He tells us its humility. Jesus says, 'Blessed are the humble (meek) for they will inherit the earth' (**Matt 5:5**). God has much to say about pride in scriptures and none of it is good. When God brings down the proud the call often heard is, 'How the mighty have fallen'. Pride finds itself opposing God, (**2 Samuel 1:19**). 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble' (**James 4:6**). So our first stumbling block is the spirit of pride, for this stumbling block will inevitably crush us as the Scripture tells us pride leads to destruction.

Peter felt confident enough after his commendation to take Jesus aside and confront Him about what He was telling them about His future. Never Lord, we will not let this happen was Peter's response. We may think Jesus response was harsh, after all Peter meant well. This is a classic example of human thinking, but when we consider it in the light of eternity, Peter could have scuppered the whole plan of eternal redemption (if he was given the power to do so)! Jesus saw it as a stumbling block! This is serious.

Jesus was sharp and denounced this spirit of pride, cutting it down immediately before it could take root. This was crushing to Peter and how deep the pain must have been. The surgeons knife cuts deep and true, painful is the surgery but great the healing. The Lord didn't offer sympathy or gentleness with this spirit but cut it out immediately. Peter's pride would have become a stumbling block to Jesus and getting in the way of His Church.

There are other stumbling blocks we need to be aware of which can be just as treacherous and we need the wisdom of Solomon and the discernment of Paul to be aware of the next three if we are to avoid being crushed by these stumbling blocks.

2. Authority of Scripture

God's word says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' (**Ps119:105**). If we hold a high view of Scripture as authoritative we will maintain a straight path, however if we hold to a low view of Scripture, thinking it's not that important to follow, it will indeed become a stumbling block to us in our walk of faith. Remember Jesus held a high view of the Scriptures and the only Scriptures Jesus referred to is the Old Testament! Jesus didn't have any of the issues many in the church have today with Genesis origins, with Noah and Jonah being real prophets. He did not dismiss Isaiah's prophetic words or Daniels end time writings. Jesus says the Scriptures are written about Him. Jesus the Second Person of the Divine Godhead we must remember He is responsible for all the laws in Scriptures. Would Jesus change the laws today? Certainly not! For Hebrews reminds us Jesus is the same today and forever (**Heb 13:8**). Jesus also says, 'Not one jot or line will be dismissed from the law (**Matt 5:18**). So if we have problems with Laws of Scripture, this is not a cultural issue which requiring more study or greater hermeneutics, but more obedience.

Do we hold a high view of Scripture considering them to be the inerrant, inspired, authority of God, handed down to us? Or do we find ourselves having a lower view of God's word making statements like these.....

The scriptures were written in a different time and for a different culture not for us today.

The Scriptures have been altered and contain many mistakes"

The Scriptures need to be reinterpreted for our culture today

The Scriptures are just a helpful guide really, a human book written by man"

Once we lower our view of Scripture thinking it no more inspired than any other creative writings like Shakespeare or poetry, we turn the Bible into a manmade book and we will stumble over much of its contents. The natural conclusion for those who hold a low view of Scripture will eventually be to reinterpret or dismiss the challenging bits because it no longer fits with our world view. Paul's view of Scripture was correct for he writes, "All Scripture is God-breathed" and 'All scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking correcting and training in righteousness' for the servants of God to be "thoroughly equipped for every good work." (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**). The fact that God "breathed" Scripture, insures the Bible's infallibility, for God cannot breathe out error! The Bible is the sole objective source of all God has given to us about Himself and His plan for humanity. As God's infallible Word, the Bible is inerrant, authoritative, reliable, and sufficient to meet our needs. To avoid being crushed by this stone we must hold a high view of God's word.

3. Social Gospel

A third stumbling block which causes many to lose focus and to stumble is when we change the focus of the gospel. There has been in recent years a change of understanding on how we interpret the gospel. The shift is subtle and yet blatant and most miss it!

The shift has been a move away from the emphasis from sin and redemption through Jesus Christ's substitutionary atoning sacrifice of the cross in order to reconcile us back to God, to a gospel which promotes a church to a gospel of social action and social justice and serving our community and meeting their needs.

Ever heard a preacher say something like this, 'We must preach the gospel and only use words when we have to?' This quote is often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Oh how he must glow red with frustration every time he hears it quoted in pulpits because he never actually said it and it's not biblical!

Moving away from the gospel of God's redeeming grace by the forgiveness of sins leading to eternal life to a message which has a focus of liberation theology, social justice and social action, is to err and to proclaim a different gospel. Now before you start getting angry with me, I am not saying these issues are not important and many of the social action programmes are worthy causes, but it is not the gospel which Jesus gave His life

for, not the gospel Paul preached nor the gospel the disciples preached from the day of Pentecost.

The logical conclusion for those who change the gospel away from proclaiming salvation through the cross of Christ to social gospel leads us to 'Universalism'. This teaching promotes the idea, there is no judgment and no hell. Proponents of this way of thinking will say things like, 'We are all God's children and generally nice and good people. God would not send anyone to hell because He is a God of love'. 'We don't need to preach the gospel with words, we show the gospel by how we live and our good works'. 'We to be more inclusive and accepting of other people's life styles and how they want to interpret the Scriptures to meet their needs. These all sound biblical but they are not. Jesus is the only way to salvation (**John 14**), we only become children of God when we repent and turn to Jesus in faith are we then adopted as God's children (**Gal 4:5**). The Scriptures tell us we are destined to die and then stand before God as judge, (**Heb 9:27**). Jesus actually spoke more about hell than he did about heaven! There is no forgiveness of sin without repentance. (**Luke 13:3**). We cannot build God's Kingdom on earth by social justice means alone, this is worldly thinking! Whenever there has been great awakenings and revivals, it's the gospel of Christ what is preached, the atoning work of Jesus our substitute who redeems us. We don't live the gospel, we speak the Gospel as Jesus Christ says, as Paul did and the disciples preached.

4. Emotionalism trumps doctrines

The fourth stumbling block in the Christian faith is emotionalism or feelings. This is the most subtle of them all. When feelings and emotions are given a greater weight of importance then the stumbling block becomes a crushing one indeed to our faith, especially when feelings are valued more important than objective truth. My opinion, my feelings, my experiences are more important than the doctrines and teachings of the true Church. Its dangerous when we begin interpreting scripture through our feelings and emotions for assessing truth! This makes our feelings the ultimate authority. Comments you may hear may sound like..... 'Thats not the God I worship, He wouldn't send anyone to hell.' 'I just cant believe that in Scripture', 'Paul was a bigot.' etc. We must never let our feelings override truth as many have already stumbled on this crooked path when truth becomes feeling focussed.

Summary

There is so much more to say on these stumbling blocks. A haughty spirit leads to a fall and pride inevitably crushes. Jesus did not spare Peter's feelings when He cut out pride from his heart immediately with a stinging rebuke. Jesus loves Peter too much to watch this small stone, a pebble become a stone which would grow into a rock on which would eventually crush him. Peter was to become a rock on which his confession of faith would become the foundation stone of the church, not pride! If we have a spirit of pride, we fall to destruction. A low view of scripture we will eventually become a stumbling block on our path and our walk will no longer be straight but crooked. Change the gospel from salvation and redemption, sanctification and reconciliation to social programmes and community service simply turns the church into an NGO (Non Government office) where very few will be saved. Finally emotionalism and feelings have to be held in check, for our heart is deceitful above all things says Jeremiah (**Jer 17:9**). It was Alexander Pope in his 'Essay on Criticism' writes, 'To err is human; to forgive is divine'. God can wipe out our mistakes without leaving any ghost shadows and that is good news. We have a great gospel to proclaim, let us not water down the gospel, thinking we have a better one today than Jesus and Paul preached. Let us stand true and firm and avoid the blocks which cause many to stumble. The Gospel is a true liberating gospel and needs to be preached. **Amen**