**Reaction Paragraph -**

| September 26, 2021 |
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| **Millstones and Stumbling Blocks** 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time |
| **Reading from Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48** |

38John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.”39Jesus replied, “Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me.40For whoever is not against us is for us.41Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.

### **Temptations to Sin**

42 “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe [in me] to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.43If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire.45And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. 47And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna,48where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’

Other Readings: [Numbers 11:25-29](https://www2.americanbible.org/e/369561/search-Numbers/jkgzp/581596638?h=o_-Xzv-0RzsDwmstiFQwBdWW7ZJNnCe8IkfhoUYqtt0%2011:25-29/eng-NABRE), [James 5:1-6](https://www2.americanbible.org/e/369561/search-James/jkgzr/581596638?h=o_-Xzv-0RzsDwmstiFQwBdWW7ZJNnCe8IkfhoUYqtt0%205:1-6/eng-NABRE)

## **Lectio**

In this Gospel reading the youngest apostle (John, the brother of James) has the loudest voice. Jesus called these two the “Sons of Thunder” (see Mark 3:17) and here John seems to be motivated by a holy zeal to stop others who are doing good without the disciples’ authorization. John tells Jesus that he came across a man casting out demons in the name of Jesus—but he is “not one of us” and John thinks he should be silenced. Exorcists of this sort were common in antiquity. Recall that in the book of Acts the seven sons of a Jewish priest named Sceva have a rude surprise when they try to cast out demons in the name of “Jesus whom Paul preaches” (Acts 19:11-20).

Jesus will have none of this. As their leader he is certainly aware of the demands on loyalty needed to keep a group of Middle Eastern men together. But Jesus wants to expand the boundaries of these bonds of loyalty and include those working toward the same goals—in this case to free a person from the oppression of the devil. Good work done in service of others should not be stopped. This volunteer is on their side and will not be inclined to speak against Jesus and his ministry.

The scene shifts. Now Jesus is with the disciples in a private setting. He addresses the apostles and warns them that they are responsible for the “little ones who believe” in him. “Little ones” is not a reference to children but rather to grown men and women who have responded to the preaching of Jesus and are beginning to grow in their newfound faith. In Mark 10:24, Jesus refers to the apostolic group as his “children” when he teaches them how hard it will be for those caught up in the entanglements of wealth to enter the kingdom of God. Here Jesus wants the disciples to know that the way they live as his followers will be an example for newcomers to follow. They need to take to heart the seriousness of being a good witness and avoiding any activity that would lead someone into sin.

The punishment threatened for misleading the little ones is called worse than being drowned in the Sea of Galilee by a millstone. Punishment by drowning was known during this period, and abhorrent to Jews. A millstone—a donut-shaped stone used to grind grain—eventually wears out, and many were repurposed as boat anchors. This graphic image would not be lost on the apostles, many of whom were commercial fishermen. Jesus is giving them a serious warning.

The teaching that follows helps us appreciate the difference between the literal and the literary meaning of a biblical text. Does Jesus literally mean us to cut off a hand if it causes us to sin? Or to pluck out an eye that is leading us to sinful activity? The answer is an emphatic no! The literary style of this teaching—hyperbole—reveals the seriousness of any activity that a follower of Jesus engages in that might drive people away from faith. Eternal destinies are in the balance. Better to err on the side of caution and the pastoral concern for others than face the fires of hell. The choice is ours. The better choice is clear.

## **Meditatio**

What is a “stumbling block” (NRSV), and how could the disciples place one before a new follower, a “little one” in Jesus’s company? Other English translations of this passage reveal that a “stumbling block” is anything that causes these little ones to sin. The Bible defines sin as a condition of alienation and separation from God. The Bible teaches that sinful activity typically starts small and then works to distort our judgment. One might wonder why any sinful activity is harmful in the long run or why a loving God would not give us a pass for small transgressions. The problem is that sin grows. Left unchecked (not acknowledged and repented) it always gets bigger and will lead to spiritual death. Patterns of habitual sin can actually cascade down through generations and affect our children and grandchildren who are more likely to follow the sinful example set before them. The echoes of our sinful actions can last long beyond our own lives. That is why Jesus is so adamant in his teaching about the subject.

How do we place a “stumbling block” in the way of a believer? When we are not aware that our actions speak louder than our words. The witness of the works of our hands, the places our feet take us, the things that our eyes take in (and thus that our minds dwell on)—all these speak to others about the way we love and follow the Lord. Our hands need to stop doing anything that would bring shame to Jesus. Our feet must not take us down paths that lead to destruction. We have to do our best, with the help of God’s grace, to be faith-filled stewards of our eyes since they are the window to our soul. People, potential “little ones” who are just beginning their journey of faith, are watching us and will follow our example. Jesus uses us to reveal who he is to the world. Let’s take this commission seriously this week.

## **Oratio**

Lord Jesus, my hands, my feet, and my eyes are each a gift from the Father. Give me the grace to use them in your service so that I can be a light that shines in the darkness, a lamp set on a stand that gives light to all in the room. Amen.

## **Contemplatio**

This week be especially aware of how our outward actions reveal the inner life of faith that we have in the Lord. As I have written to you before and want to remind you once again, in many circumstances you may be the only Bible that the people you encounter may ever read. We learn in the letter to the Hebrews that the written Word of God is living and active (Hebrews 4:12). It should be just as alive and active in the way that we live in the world. The way that we live our faith, the way that we express our faith, and how that faith is “read” by others is our unique call as followers of Jesus.

We are also challenged this week to keep our eyes on the prize and not on the allure of our popular culture or the news media, to resist the siren call of the world and its many bedazzlements. Pray for the grace you will need to keep your eyes, your hands, your feet, and your heart only on Jesus. This will not be easy and will require diligence on your part, but the effort becomes its own reward.