

Grace to you and peace from Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood and has made us kings and priests to God. To Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. It is certain.

Mark 9:38–50 (NKJV, et al.) — 38 Now John answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.” **39** But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. **40** For he who is not against us is on our side. **41** For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. **42** “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. **43** If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched— **44** where ‘Their worm does not die And the fire is not quenched.’ **45** And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched— **46** where ‘Their worm does not die And the fire is not quenched.’ **47** And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire— **48** where ‘Their worm does not die And the fire is not quenched.’ **49** “For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. **50** Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another.”
(Parallel: Matt. 18:6ff; Luke 9:49ff)

Free from Stumbling to Serve Our Savior

Lord, Sanctify us by your truth, YOUR WORD IS TRUTH. Amen.

In Jesus name, fellow redeemed,

During the three years I went to Seminary, it was my job to transport residents to and from doctors appointments. If you’ve ever cared for an elderly parent or grandparent, you know the danger of any little obstacle that stands in their way. In Wisconsin there was even a law that care facilities could not have any cracks or obstructions that were greater than one inch. Paths must be clear and smooth.

The word translated “stumble” in verse 42 has the basic sense of setting a trap. It would be better that you were drowned in the depths of the sea than to create an obstacle for someone to spiritually stumble over. Likewise, it would be better that your hand, your foot, your eye were removed than you be caught in a spiritual death trap. Whatever or whoever would lay an obstacle to cause a believer to be stumble into a sin needs to be removed. Clear the path. Remove the obstructions. We are SET FREE FROM STUMBLING TO SERVE OUR SAVIOR.

1. Obstacles within Yourself

Working in a nursing home, there were always some who insisted on doing things their way. There were those that would insist on walking even when they just didn't have the strength. They knew they needed a wheelchair, but something was just getting in the way of accepting this.

Sometimes what stands in opposition is not the cracks in the sidewalk or the wet floor or the cord someone has carelessly left across the floor. Sometime the obstacles are right inside of us. After all, who of us are any different?

(v.38) The verses leading into our text set the stage for this question. The disciples have just engaged in a debate over who is greatest in the kingdom of God. This was an ongoing struggle for the disciples and for us too. On more than one occasion the disciples are found discussing this issue of greatness.

We see how our culture is colored by greatness. While I was gone for Pastoral Conference in Michigan, the pastors took a field trip to the College Football hall of fame in South Bend. You see names like Jim Thorpe ... Glenn Scobey "Pop" Warner ... Archie Manning. However, you won't see the names of all the players that needed to be beat in order for these players to win.

Jesus responds to his disciples, **"If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."** As Jesus says this, John is reminded how they had forbid this man from casting out demons. "... because he does not follow us" – meaning, he was not one of them. He was not an apostle. He was not known among their group. The issue of greatness is at stake. If just anyone can do gospel works in Jesus name then what is so special about being an apostle? It seems they were trusting in their own greatness as apostles rather than in the power of the Word to accomplish these things.

Pride and jealousy were the root issue.

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. ... if your foot, cut it off ... if your eye, poke it out ... Why is it that so many of us are walking around with two hands, two feet, to eyes? The mainstream teaching of the religious leaders of Jesus day was mere externalism. All their teachings cared about was what things looked like on the outside. Yet Jesus' ministry was a search within. What are the real obstacles that cause us to stumble? What is directing your hand to take something it shouldn't ... directing your foot to be stuck out and trip the other student so everyone will laugh ... directing your eye to look at what you know is not God pleasing? **(v.43b)** The question is at what point do we become so attached to a particular sin, to our pride, that we will cling to it until we are drug away from God's presence forever?

It is Jesus alone who sets us free from these obstacles. Without the Word of God visiting us and sending the Spirit into our hearts we would be left with these two sinful hands, these two crooked feet, these two blind eyes; ultimately, our one sinful heart leaves us spiritual stumblers. Jesus removes these obstacles by taking your pride, taking my pride, by taking your sin and mine to the cross.

He has cut off those sins which we cling to – chopped them right at the root. For we do indeed enter life maimed. We do enter the kingdom broken, lame, and ill. We cannot

walk this path of righteousness. We see how much help we need. Greatness comes not by being first, but by being last. It is not ours to achieve; it is Christ's to give.

1 Peter 2:23–24 – who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness— by whose stripes you were healed.

Jesus has set you free from sin. You are free on account of His greatness. The greatness of Christ has come by His complete humility, being last of all, putting you first. **Philippians 2:5 – Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus ... 8 – ... who humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. ... 9 – Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name.**

Free from stumbling over the obstacles within ourselves, we receive the gifts of God that come through faith. We serve our Savior in humility.

2. Obstacles to the Gospel

The essence of my job in medical transport service, was to get the resident from home to the doctor and back home safely. That was about it. I was concerned above all with removing any obstacle that would prevent the resident from getting the medical care he needed.

There are many obstacles which confront our mission as Christians. God needs to get sinners from the place of stumbling opposition to the spiritual surgery needed and then take them home to be with Him forever. Think of all the things that get in the way of the gospel.

(v.39-40) It is not about who but about what. The issue the apostles were struggling with was whether they could allow those outside of their 12 to cast out demons. It was as if this gentlemen was to be thought of as a lesser Christian. The point Jesus makes is that when it comes to the works of the gospel – we should not be concerned with who is doing it, but what is being done. The work of the gospel can be done by a small child, it can be done by the elderly folks I visit at the nursing home. The power is in the truth. And with the truth of God's word is at work, let us remove all obstacles. The word is effective when God works through you, when God works through those outside of our congregation, when God works through those outside of the CLC, and when God works through those outside of Lutheranism. As God declares in Isaiah, "My Word will not return to me void." The point is, such a miracle if it is truly done in Jesus name will have the Word of truth attached to it. As Jesus says, if he is not speaking evil against Me, than we rejoice that the gospel is being proclaimed. The credit therefore goes not to the man or the congregation to which the person belongs. The credit goes to Christ.

On the other hand, when those who claim to represent Jesus' name do speak evil of Him ... more obstacles are placed before the gospel. He who is not against us is on our side, that is true. However Jesus also said, **Matthew 12:30 – He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad.** Those

teachings which contradict the truth of God's Word, set up obstacles to the truth of the gospel. There is not one word of Scripture that does not relate to the gospel. This becomes a cause for stumbling. (v.42) Those "little ones" who have a simple trust in those who teach the word are so easily led to stumble. And all of us are "little ones" when it comes to faith and our ability to stay faithful. Only the Word can set us free from our stumbling selves.

Getting sinners to their doctor's appointment safely, that is our mission – or perhaps more so – getting the Great Physician to sinners. Only the grace of God will remove these obstacles so that the gospel can shine forth and the "little" ones – namely, every one of us, are set free to serve our Savior.

3. At Peace with One Another

If you've ever been in a nursing home, you'll see how the smallest tripping hazard can cause a great danger. Often it is someone's carelessness that leaves these dangers. Peace is the absence of all obstacles. Peace is the absence of stumbling as we relate to each other.

As the apostles saw it, this miracle worker was relatively unproven, not as high in the chain of command. To look at this ministry of the gospel as something that is reserved only for the clergy or to think that interpreting the Bible is only for the well trained theologian is to bring divisions among us. There is no chain of command. **Galatians 3:28 – There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**

We are all one. (v.41) It is the least of all services that Jesus honors as greatest. The smallest deed, a cup of water even, done because of this shared fellowship, is great in the kingdom of God. As soon as we think there is one good deed that is greater than another we are creating obstacles to the peace we share in this fellowship. As soon as we think my idea is greater than his or hers – the carpet should be red, this music is better than that, or "this is the way we've always done it" – even if we might have a point, the way we express ourselves can become a cause for others to stumble.

(v.42) Maybe we do know the right answer. Maybe we do have more experience. Maybe that other person is dead wrong on how they are applying God's Word to their life. But how often do we tear others down only because we want build ourselves up? **Romans 14:19 – Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.** Christ has won us back from these obstacles to bring us together in peace and love.

(v.49) This reference dates back to an Old Covenant Law. In Leviticus 2 there is the directive for grain offerings. The priest takes a portion of the baked grain and offers it by fire to the LORD. This was "an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the LORD" (2:9). Every offering shall be seasoned with salt. This seasoning they applied to the grain was a sweet smelling aroma rising to God in heaven. It was offered as a memorial – in memory and honor of all the wonderful works of God.

Our seasoned sacrifice is that we have peace among us. (v.50). Literally, have salt among yourselves. Our flesh will always let disputes come between us and our

brothers and sisters in Christ. Our flesh will never want to submit to someone else's opinion. Our flesh will always reason why I am right and my spouse, my sibling, my friend, or my fellow Christian is wrong. These obstacles are going to be showing up among us until the day we die. **Ephesians 5:2 – And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.** Christ is the salt that seasons our sacrifice. The peace we have with each other is only possible by His presence among us through the forgiveness of sins. Only Christ removes these obstacles. He has offered a completely selfless sacrifice for our selfish hearts. You are set free from anything that would stand between you and your fellow brother. You are all one. Rather than my opinions first, in Christ we are last – last to speak, first to listen. We are sprinkled with the salt of peace in Christ.

Our weaknesses leave us all elderly residents of a nursing home. We need aid. Receive the gospel care of Christ where all obstacles are removed. The love of Christ has set us free ... free from obstacles of pride within. ... free from the obstacles of that hinder the gospel. ... free from the obstacles of among us. We are SET FREE TO SERVE OUR SAVIOR. Amen.