

Stumbling blocks everywhere

By [Karoline M. Lewis](#)

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According to Jesus, chances are good that there's not going to be much left of us once we've admitted to just how often stumbling blocks stand in our way. Whether others put them there or we find ways to place them ourselves, they trip us up, keep us from moving forward, get us off track.

Stumbling blocks have many manifestations when it comes to faith: excuses, blame, doubt, rejection, disbelief. They thrive on rules and stipulations, adjudications and manipulations, judgment and expectation. Whose faith is greater; who seems to believe more. Who follows the rules better than I do. As if Jesus came to set up a competition.

Then there are the stumbling blocks that come in binaries. Spiritual but not religious, or religious but not spiritual. Liturgical or contemporary. Biblical or not.

Yet these words from Jesus call our bluff: we would rather find ways to block our own faith, and the faith of others, than find ways forward. We seem far more inclined toward obstruction than edification. Let's face it: stumbling blocks are easier. You just throw them down. You don't have to think about them, and they have only one purpose.

So Jesus' take on the ramifications of such behavior might sound a little drastic. Good thing we don't have to take Jesus literally here. (Funny how we are so comfortable treating select words of the Bible as literal claims, but when it comes to dismemberment of our own limbs, well, that's different.)

Why is Jesus so over the top here? What's the point of such exaggeration? Surely Jesus jests. But how often have we stood in the way of belief, either our own or that of another? This is a passage of unmitigated honesty when it comes to following Jesus. You can't be secure in your own belief system while at the same time taking down someone else's. You can't have it both ways. You can't frame your understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus is about at the expense of someone else's. That's a stumbling block, placed in the way of someone else who is trying to follow Jesus.

In this passage, Jesus is telling us just how hard faith is. And there's no time to be wasted--Jerusalem is just around the bend. Hence the overstatement. Just don't block people's faith. It's not right; it's not fair; it's not what Jesus has in mind. Just stop it, now.

What's the opposite of a stumbling block? It's making paths so straight, so clear, that John the Baptist's cry rings in our minds. Maybe making the paths straight for Jesus starts with making them straight for our neighbor. Maybe it requires a determination to resist stumbling blocks and to remove them when we see them. Clearing the paths is a true mark of discipleship.