

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Twelfth Sunday after Trinity, August 18, 2013

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 29, 416:4, 402, 408, 560.

Lessons: Psalm 119:153-165, Romans 14:14-15:3, Mark 9:33-48.

Sermon Text: Matthew 18:1-10.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Jesus is very sharp here with his warning *"But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!"* The King James Version of the Bible warns us: *"Woe unto the world because of offences!"* (verse 7)

The Bible uses the words offend and offense in a broad sense to refer to sin in general. But the Bible also uses the words offend and offense in a narrow sense in a way that is not commonly used today. When most people think of offending someone they think of merely displeasing someone or doing something that they don't like, but the Word of God and especially Jesus today in our text uses it in a very different sense, something that every Christian must be made aware of. As a result, Christians need to be very careful to explain whether they are using the words 'offend' and 'offense' in the scriptural sense or in the commonly used way most of our society uses the word.

Offense, that is, causing anyone to sin is an extremely serious matter. In last week's sermon Jesus pointed out the importance of child-like humility, trust, confidence, and faith. After Jesus talked about the importance of childlike faith, using children as examples, he now warns against causing anyone who believes in him to sin and especially against leading any simple believer into sin. Jesus speaks of the terrible punishment deserved by someone who causes someone else to sin. Today we talk about that Scriptural doctrine of offense.

DO NOT LEAD ANYONE INTO SIN!

- 1. What it means to 'cause offense' – to place a stumbling block in anyone's way.**
- 2. The terrible results of causing offense.**

What is really meant by the words 'offend' and 'offense' as described in Scripture? The very simplest definition is "to cause to sin", as you just heard from our sermon text. This is what Scripture speaks of as causing offense.

The Greek New Testament word used for offense is the root of the English word scandal. It was originally the trigger on a trap, and in the New Testament it is used to mean the trap itself, a stumbling block, something on which someone stumbles. It is the death trap, a stumbling or falling to destruction. We might think of the stone in the rough path that we stumble over and perhaps even fall. In its Biblical use it is always used in the figurative sense and is anything which causes the Christian to fall from faith or hinder him in his faith, or an obstacle that prevents a sinner from coming to faith. The King James Version consistently translates this word as an offense or a stumbling block or stone of offense. In addition to offense and stumbling block, the New International Version also translates it as 'obstacle', that which causes sin, that which causes one to fall.

And so the word "offend" is here not used in the more common or popular meaning of causing dislike, anger, displeasure, of hurting one's feelings, but in the sense of causing one to stumble in his faith, to fall into

sin. An offense is anything that is likely to lead a person into unbelief, misbelief, or sin, or anything which would encourage him or her to continue in sin.

Seducing others to sin the Scriptures call “giving offense,” Such offense in the Scriptural sense is given or caused in three broad areas.

1. First we list false teaching. We read in Romans 16:17 ***“I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.”*** This can happen when we teach anything contrary to the Word of God. This can also happen by twisting or distorting the Word of God in any way, by adding something to the Word of God, or by subtracting something from the Word of God.

2. Secondly we cause offense by setting a bad example. This very idea of ‘setting a bad example’ is something that even people of the world can understand, that is, if they even think anything is wrong with the idea of setting a bad example. We read in Romans 2:23-24 ***“You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: ‘God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’”***

3. The third cause of offense is by an inconsiderate use of our Christian liberty without due regard for the weak in faith. God says in Romans 14:13 ***“Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.”*** The Christian is free to do anything God does not forbid. But when the Christian does something which troubles the weak conscience of another, that may cause offense. Paul writes about eating meat purchased in a meat market which may get its meat from sacrifices in a pagan temple in 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 ***“‘Everything is permissible’--but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible’--but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.”*** We could find many other examples. As an adult I am free to drink alcoholic beverages. But for me to offer an alcoholic beverage to someone or even drink in front of someone who abuses alcohol is to risk causing offense, because it places a stumbling block in his way. Many uses of alcohol which are not sinful in themselves may cause offense. When we talk about such inconsiderate use of Christian liberty, we can find many things which God neither commands nor forbids which may become stumbling blocks, that is, offenses to others, both to our Christian brothers and sisters and to others in the world.

The sins we commit are harmful not only to ourselves, but also to those who are tempted to follow our example. We must remember that we are responsible for the influence we exert on others by our conduct. The influence of our lives should be a wholesome salt, and not a vicious poison.

We must not give offense

1. First to anyone. ***“Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God”*** (1 Corinthians 10:32)

2. We must especially not give offense to children, who are easily influenced by what they see or hear others do and say. Jesus is especially blunt and sharp about this in our text. ***“But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”*** (NIV) ***“But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.”*** (KJV) A millstone is a huge round, flat stone, typically with a hole in the middle which was used in a grain mill, in pairs, to grind the grain. If anyone were to have such a heavy stone tied around his neck, he would immediately sink to the bottom of the sea and be instantly drowned.

If anyone causes any simple believer in Christ, and especially children, to do wrong or to get an impression which will cause such a person to think less highly of Christ and of the Christian Church, this is an offense which the Lord cannot condemn too strongly. If the kingdom of God even can belong to little children, anyone who prevents their access to this Kingdom has separated them from something which God wants for them and thus this is an enormous sin.

3. We must not give offense to those who are weak in faith. We quote Romans 14:13 again: ***“Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.”***

4. And we must not give offense to the world. We read again from Romans 2:23-24 ***“You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: ‘God’s name is blasphemed among***

the Gentiles because of you.” When our actions mock and blaspheme God and his Word, we are causing offense. Even our neglect or indifference to preaching and the Word of God can do this.

In its effect on others, offense is murder of the soul and leads to eternal damnation. Thus Christ warns ***“Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!”***

The general rule to be observed is this: We must give up or waive the use of our Christian liberty unless the truth of the Gospel is at stake. And that is the case when the weak brother insists that his error be acknowledged as the true doctrine and condemns the one who has the correct knowledge, wrongly declaring him to be breaking God’s commandment. In this case the weak brother becomes a false teacher, and then Colossians 2:16 applies: ***“Let no man therefore judge you in meat or in drink or in respect of an holy day,”*** and Galatians 5:1: ***“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.”***

Scripture teaches that offense is given not only by doing evil, such as false doctrine and wicked living, but also through the inconsiderate use of permissible things, that is, things which are neither commanded nor forbidden by God. We read in Romans 14:21 ***“It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.”*** By our example, Christians who are weak in knowledge may be induced to do things which in their conscience they regard as wrong and thus endanger their faith. ***“If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.”*** (Romans 14:15)

But we must be willing to restrict our correct theological knowledge in practical use in every case where our use of the right knowledge would induce the brother who is weak in knowledge to act contrary to his erring conscience. So you can see that a great responsibility is placed upon all parents, teachers, and all whose life brings them into contact with children and with Christians who are weak in Christian knowledge. Christians have a solemn obligation to watch over our mouths that they do not speak damaging words and to watch over the members of our body so that they do not commit deeds that will cause harm and offense. Constant watchfulness is necessary, lest the sin which it commits, the offense which it gives, become a part of the accumulated guilt which will bring upon such a person the punishment of hell-fire.

Jesus gives a drastic example: ***“If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.”*** It is not the hand or foot or eye that causes you to sin. It is the heart. The sinful heart of all humans leads all their words and actions.

And so Jesus ends this section with the almost pleading words ***“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”***

Only the one who, through the power of the Holy Ghost within him, keeps his body in subjection and does not permit sin to gain control, only he will retain faith and a good conscience, only he will save his body and soul unto everlasting life.

So although the sin of offense is a real, powerful, and daily temptation, with the power of God we can fight our sinful flesh, and repent and receive the blessing of the eternal life won for us by Jesus Christ’s perfect obedience to the Law of God. Through Christ our sins are forgiven. With the hymn writer we can rejoice:

“My Jesus is my Splendor, My Sun, my Light, alone; Were He not my Defender Before God’s awe-full throne, I never should find favor And mercy in His sight, But be destroyed forever” [the power of sin and death]. “He canceled my offenses, Delivered me from death; He is the Lord who cleanses My soul from sin through faith. In Him I can be cheerful, Bold, and undaunted, [yes]; In Him I am not fearful Of God’s great Judgment Day.” (TLH 528:4-5 adapted)

Lord, by your Word, lead us sinners to be penitent sinners. Amen.