

# "The Devil's Favorites"

Text: Matthew 18:1-9

In the Name of Jesus Christ, our Gate to Life Eternal and our Friend as we journey along the path.

Dear Fellow Christians:

It is very likely something that only parents can really understand – how you can love your children all the same, and none more than another, but still love them differently. Not better or worse, just differently. It's to be expected really, since no two human beings are alike. All have different gifts, different strengths and weaknesses. Only one can be the oldest, only one can be the youngest, and the rest are just the poor, neglected middle children. Good parents don't "play favorites."

But the devil does. Satan is the father of all sins, but he clearly has two favorites. It's understandable that they would be his favorites. Not only were they his firstborn twins, they have labored tirelessly for him since the moment he brought them to life.

Our text for this morning shows these two miscreants at work, but also instructs us as to just how God's children can render them powerless. The text that will form the basis of our study this morning is found in Matthew's Gospel, the 18<sup>th</sup> Chapter:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 18:1-9** *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" <sup>2</sup> And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them <sup>3</sup> and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup> ¶ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, <sup>6</sup> but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. <sup>7</sup> ¶ "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! <sup>8</sup> And 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 crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. <sup>9</sup> And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.*

These are the words of our God. We know the source and therefore we trust these words to speak always and only that which is true. In humble acceptance of these facts, so we pray: "**Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

Before we can put names to the devil's favorite children, we need to examine their handiwork. We need to learn something about what they do. Our text began with the disciples asking Jesus a wholly misguided and inappropriate question: **At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"** The question itself was bad because the hearts of those who asked it were, at best, misguided and wrongly motivated. Apparently Jesus' own disciples still hadn't figured out that power and influence here on earth were not at all what Jesus came to give them. At this point in their Christian training, Jesus' disciples didn't yet understand what Jesus meant by "**My kingdom is not of this world.**" They seemed to see themselves as fortunate individuals who, having joined the "Jesus Movement" at its inception, might be in line to enjoy great power and prestige whenever the "kingdom" that Jesus was promising came to fruition. They were thinking along the normal lines of human logic, and such reasoning more often than not conflicts with God's divine truth and wisdom.

There are in fact *many* questions that identify evil in the heart of the asker. Some just identify a lack of intelligence or tact, as in "*Are you gaining weight?*" when asked of any woman, or "*Are your children always this bratty?*" when asked of any parent. Asking questions can actually *provide* much more information than can be gained by an answer. Some can be just downright offensive.

Speaking of "offensive," how did we ever get to be so overly sensitive in our society? We have actually been conditioned to take offense where none even exists, and thereby have successfully created for ourselves an entire universe of unnecessary pain. This is probably a natural byproduct of any society with too few *real* life-or-death problems and therefore too much time to be bothered by the little things. Many of you remember a former member here at St Paul who would often put a senseless debate or minor dispute in its proper perspective by saying, "*You know, if this is the worst problem we've got, we've got it pretty good.*"

Yet the propensity to be easily offended is like a wrecking ball in Christian churches. Congregations in virtually every American community have been ripped apart by imagined offense. Ask a pastor

sometime why the last dozen or so members left his church and my guess very few would say, "*For doctrinal reasons.*" Most would tell you that members left either because of relatively trivial things – like the color chosen to repaint the walls of the sanctuary, or because they "took offense" that the church condemned their sinful actions.

As a society we have become conditioned to take offense. It's almost as if we *want* to feel offended, maybe just so we can have something to complain about. In fact my sense is that most are not really offended (even in the secular sense of the word) by most things that our society has declared to be offensive; they have just learned to play the game. We have allowed ourselves to be conditioned or programmed to react in a certain politically correct way in certain situations. Folks, for example, have been calling each other names since time began and, until rather recently, it was no big deal. The devil uses this new hypersensitivity in minor things to his great advantage. How? By causing not only division and discord but by focusing attention away from that which is truly important in life – away from Christ crucified. Satan loves this stuff because it serves to confuse human beings as to what truly is and is not important and what really *is* right and wrong in God's eyes. Anything, in the devil's opinion, is better than talking about Christ crucified.

Our text takes us once again to that higher, divinely ordained plane and teaches us something about both real and imagined "offense."

To rightly understand what Biblical offense is, it is helpful to know that the Greek word translated in our text as "**offend**" is the same word translated in verse 5 as "**cause to sin.**" It is also the word carried almost directly into English as "scandal" and its basic original meaning was to "set a death-trap." "Offense" therefore, as it is used in the Bible, refers to anything that in some way harms the Christian faith of someone else. Others define offense as anything that causes your neighbor to sin, which is essentially the same definition since sin always either damages or destroys Christian faith. You may recall, for example, the sermon text from last week where Jesus himself used this same word when he said to Peter: "**Get behind me, Satan! You are an offense to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.**" Jesus wasn't upset with Peter for some social infraction; he was upset because Peter was unknowingly tempting him to fail in his mission to redeem the world. He was tempting Jesus to disobey his Father by avoiding his own crucifixion.

This is why the devil seeks confusion and misunderstanding in the area of offense. He couldn't be more pleased when human beings think first and

foremost of obnoxious or unacceptable *social behavior* (political correctness) when they think of offense. Anything to keep human beings distracted and off-message. His plan is that Christians in particular get bogged down in the little things so that what is truly important is ignored. His plan is for Christians to "take offense" where none was even intended. With time, such slights (real or imagined) always degenerate into resentment, bitterness, alienation, and division – all of which are tried and true weapons that Satan uses against those souls Jesus died to save.

But why are we talking about "offense" when we began by talking about the devil's favorite children? Offense, by God's definition, is all about sin, and sin itself is not at all complex. In fact virtually all sin can be traced back or boiled down to two simple root sins: pride and greed. These are the devil's favorite twin sons. Pick a sin and you will probably find that it has its root or foundation in pride or greed or both. The problems displayed by the disciples in our text, for example, were born of both pride and greed. Sinful pride is always tied closely to taking offense, and greed is the insatiable craving for personal gain of every sort.

This is the level Jesus was on (the true understanding of what "offense" really is) when he said what he did in our text. Note the transition Jesus made from prideful superiority (what the disciples were displaying), to humility (as exemplified by a little child), to offense (the real Biblical kind), to temptation (which is what causes true offense.) This progression is more than just coincidence.

This gives us insight into just how important humility is. Humility is the antidote to the two great "root sins" – pride and greed. True humility is the divine armor that petty, worldly offense cannot penetrate. It is also the father of thankfulness, since a truly humble person believes himself worthy of nothing, and therefore tends to be thankful for all that he is given. So also we hear Jesus in our text saying, "**Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**" The *prideful* heart thinks in terms of "*I deserve!*" and "*I'm entitled!*" and "*How dare you!*" The humble heart quietly thanks God for his on-going undeserved grace and blessing.

By the way, did you notice when and where our text makes the transition from *taking* offense to *giving* offense. While the humble Christian is supposed to be slow to take offense – especially in the minor things of life – the thought of *giving offense* is and should be

absolutely repulsive and terrifying. It is something to be avoided at all costs.

Remember, the Biblical definition for offense is *"to cause someone to sin, even to the point of losing their Christian faith."* There is simply no greater damage that one human being can do to another than to damage or destroy the only hope he has to enter God's eternity. Nothing. That's why Jesus said in connection with offense that it would be better never to have been born than to damage or destroy another's faith.

How is something like that possible? How can one human being destroy the faith of another? By knowingly or carelessly bringing temptation. Jesus alluded to this in our text when he said, ***"Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!"*** That's how offense, true offense, is given. No human being is an island; no one is an independent operator – especially when you are member of a Christian congregation. A church is a living organism and each member is a living part of that organism. Rupture just one disk in your neck or lower back and see if the rest of the body pays attention. Break an arm or leg or rib and see if the body just brushes it off with a "No big deal, we've got another one just like it" attitude. So it is with individual members of God's Church. Everything that we do has an effect, and that effect can be either good or bad – everything from how you dress yourself to how you spend your time and money to how often you come to church or read your Bible has a powerful effect on those around you.

At the end of our text Jesus offers proof at just how terrible it is to truly, Biblically offend someone, and the lengths to go to avoid such spiritual catastrophe: ***"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 crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire."*** <sup>9</sup> ***And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire."*** If that is how far Christ would have us go to avoid offense, then he obviously considers offense itself as serious indeed.

All, once again, goes back to Christ Jesus, doesn't it? Faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior is the one path to eternal life, the one way by which man can be saved. Jesus is quite naturally then jealous in the extreme when it comes to guarding saving faith. Offense – true offense – is real, and it can mean the difference between heaven and hell for human souls – our own and our neighbor's. God help us to recognize therefore that nothing on

earth is worth compromising or destroying the sacred truth that Jesus Christ paid the debt for our sins when he offered his life on the cross. Pride and greed are the great sins that work to destroy this truth, and the greatest antidote to such evil is Godly humility. Heavenly Father, fill us then with true humility, that we may effectively resist the work of our great adversary. Amen.

## **Scripture Readings**

<sup>ESV</sup> **Ezekiel 33:7-9** "So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. <sup>8</sup> If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. <sup>9</sup> But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 13:1-10** Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. <sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, <sup>4</sup> for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. <sup>6</sup> For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. <sup>8</sup> ¶ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>10</sup> Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

# ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

2510 E. Divide Ave. Bismarck, ND 58501

Parsonage and Office: (701) 223-4885 Cell: (701) 425-5483

Website: [www.bismarcklutheran.org](http://www.bismarcklutheran.org)

Mark Johnson, President Eileen McEnroe, Head Organist

Michael Roehl, Pastor Today's Organist: Eileen McEnroe

**The 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – September 10, 2017**

**The Opening Hymn** – 793 *(Brown Hymnal)*

"Sing to the Lord of Harvest"

**The Order of Service** – Supplement page 12ff. *(Brown Hymnal)*

**The Scripture Lessons:** *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

**The Old Testament Lesson:** (Ezekiel 33:7-9) After reading our Old Testament lesson for this morning, many pastors have rightly come to the conclusion that the greatest example of God's grace is that any pastor can be saved. Spiritual shepherds are charged by God with counseling those who have fallen into sin or who are straying from the truth. This is not just the pastor's calling. God's Word tells us it is the responsibility of all Christians. While this is a vital function and an important part of the Great Commission, it is becoming increasingly difficult. Our society lacks the humility to be disciplined, even by those charged by God to do so.

**Psalms 121** (Supplement page 42) *(Brown Hymnal)*

**The New Testament Lesson** (Romans 13:1-10) Our second reading advances the thought of our Old Testament lesson. God places others in authority over us in order to bless us. Those blessings include both protection and instruction. Man destroys God's plan whenever he rebels against or despises God's appointed authority.

**The Confession of Faith** -

The Nicene Creed *(Supplement page 5)*

**The Pre-Sermon Hymn** – 406 *(Red Hymnal)*

"Lord, as Thou Wilt"

**The Sermon** – Text: Matthew 18:1-9 *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

**"The Devil's Favorites"**

**The Offertory** – (Supplement page 16 insert)

**The Offering followed by the Prayers**

**The Pre-Communion Hymn** – 324 (Stanzas 1-2) *(Red Hymnal)*

"Jesus Sinners Doth Receive"

**The Preparation for Holy Communion** *(Brown Hymnal page 17)*

**The Distribution**

**The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving** *(Brown Hymnal page 20)*

**The Benediction**

**The Closing Hymn** – 401 *(Red Hymnal)*

"Praise to Thee and Adoration"

**Silent Prayer**

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

**Attendance** - Sunday (39) Average (43) August Mortgage Balance (\$36,792)

**This Week at St. Paul:**

<b>Today</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service w/ Holy Communion
	<b>-11:15 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship and coffee time
<b>Monday</b>	<b>-6:00 p.m.</b>	– Women's Fellowship Salad Supper
<b>Tues-Thurs</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– WCPC in Loveland, CO
<b>Next Sunday</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship and coffee time

**CLC News** – Pastor Mark Weiss is considering the call to St. Luke's of Lemmon. Immanuel of Mankato has called Pastor David Schaller. The West Central Pastoral Conference is scheduled to meet this week in Loveland, CO. Please remember in your prayers those in Hurricane Irma's path – especially our fellow Christians in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina.

**Flower Order** – Ready or not it is time to place our annual Christmas flower order. The sign-up sheet is on the mailbox table. Please see Eileen if you have any questions.

**Confirmation and Mid-Week Bible Study** – Parents and students please note that there is no Confirmation class scheduled for this Wednesday or next. Pastor Roehl is scheduled to attend meetings both this week and next in Loveland and Eau Claire, respectively. Both Confirmation Class and Midweek Bible Study are scheduled to resume on Wednesday Sep. 27.

**Women's Fellowship** – The annual Salad Supper of the Women's Fellowship has been scheduled for Monday, September 11 (tomorrow) at 6pm. Those attending should bring a salad to share. A business meeting will follow the supper. For further information please contact Cindy Ollenburger.