

"Offense and Defense"

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:

The saying is attributed to everyone from George Washington and Mao Zedong to Vince Lombardi and Captain James T. Kirk of the Star Ship Enterprise: *"The best defense is a good offense."* In war and sports, it makes sense. If you can't stop your opponent, keep him busy trying to stop you. Politicians also use it. If you can't defend your own position, attack your opponent's. Today's society is using the expression a bit differently by changing the accent from OF-fense to of-FENSE. In other words, if you cannot defend the outcome of your positions and policies, create an offense (of-FENCE), or even just the perception of an offense, to distract your constituents. Human beings naturally defend against what we perceive to be the most obvious and imminent threat. That means that no one will talk about financial and foreign policies when they are busy protecting their children against lewd acts performed by men pretending to be women.

Christians need to recognize the hand of Satan in all of this – not just the perversion but the whole master plan. The devil is the master of distraction, diversion, and sleight-of-hand. He focuses our attention on the two-headed frog he holds in one hand while he slips the scorpion into our back pocket with the other. One of the more common evils that escapes our notice today is the sin of offense (which, in God's Word, is always pronounced of-FENSE). English translations have exacerbated the problem. While the King James Version used a form of the word "offend" 79 times, modern translations have opted for translations like *"hindrance," "cause to sin"* and *"cause to lose faith."* Understand that these are not necessarily bad translations, they just tend to mask the seriousness of giving offense. Last week, for example, when we heard how Peter tried to prevent Jesus from going to Jerusalem (where he would pay the world's sin debt), the KJV translated Jesus' rebuke as **"*thou art an offense to me.*"** The ESV: **"*You are a hindrance to me.*"** Jesus wasn't upset with Peter for some social infraction. He publicly reprimanded Peter because Peter was promoting sin. He was tempting Jesus to disobey his Father by avoiding his own crucifixion. The Greek verb the translations are trying to put into English (skandalizo) refers to the act of putting a stumbling block in someone's path. The resulting "stumble" is first sin, and then a loss of saving faith. In other words, we don't just sin by disobeying God. We also

sin by causing someone else to sin – with the obvious result that those who give themselves over to sin will eventually lose their faith and spend their eternity in hell.

Though because of our translation it may be a challenge to identify, our text for this morning provides another example of offense, together with its terrible consequences, and finally its antidote. That text is found in Matthew's Gospel, the 18th Chapter:

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:1-9** *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ ¶ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ 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. ⁷ ¶ "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! ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.*

This is God's Word. We know the source and therefore we trust these words to speak always and only that which is true and beneficial. In humble acceptance of the divine origin of these words, together with their power and authority, so we pray: **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

Our text began with the disciples asking Jesus a wholly misguided and inappropriate question: **"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, should naturally 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 that sort of reasoning nearly always 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?*" or "*Are you intentionally dressing like a prostitute?*" or "*Are your children always this insufferable?*" Asking questions can actually *provide* much more information than can be gained by an answer. Some can be just downright offensive.

Ah but there's that modern spin on "offense" that the devil uses to distract and deceive. We live in a world where "offend" has become so convoluted that we don't even know what it means any more. Christians are being conditioned by the devil's nonsense to discount all giving of offense, including that which is very real.

It's hard to believe that individual members of our society are truly, personally offended as often as they pretend to be. They are just reacting according to how they have been conditioned to react. It's all just a game we've been taught to play. The devil uses this new hypersensitivity in innocuous things not only to create division and discord but to distract us from that which is truly important in life – away from what truly is sinful and 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 revealing God's actual will for our lives and talking about Christ crucified.

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

When we bear in mind that "offense," as it is used in the Bible, refers to anything that in some way harms the Christian faith of someone else, not only will we avoid drifting into the devil's lane of silliness, our focus will remain on the actual threat. Our Savior identified the real and present danger of Biblical offense in our text with these words: "***but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin...***" The sin of offense is more easily identified by the King James translation: "***whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me...***" Clearly Jesus is not talking here about playing some sort of silly game. He is talking that which could not possibly be any more serious – the eternal future of human souls. Faith in Jesus Christ is all. Anything and everything that weakens that faith could not be more serious.

Offense, by God's definition, is all about sin, and sin itself is not at all complex. Virtually every 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 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 kind.

This is the direction or instruction Jesus provided in our text to defend against the very real threat of offense. Note the transition Jesus made from prideful superiority (what the disciples were displaying), to humility (as exemplified by the little child), to offense (the real Biblical kind), to temptation (which is what causes true offense.) This progression is more than just coincidence. It provides insight into just how important humility is. Humility is the antidote to the two great "root sins" of 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 to be drowned than to damage or destroy another's faith.

Yet 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. All are affected by even just one. 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."* So it is with individual Christians. 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. Everything you do has a powerful effect on those around you.

With the most striking words, Jesus goes on in our text not only to teach us something about the seriousness of causing someone else to sin (and thereby damaging their faith) but the lengths to which we ought to be willing to go to avoid doing so: ***"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. ⁹ 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."***

Where does all of this leave you? Are you living in sin? Have you, or are you even now, causing true offense to those around you? Are your friends and precious loved ones weakened and tempted when they see what you are doing? What then is your best defense against such offense? First, humble yourself. Recognize and acknowledge your sin. Repent, and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. Jesus didn't come to earth to play some sort of game. He came to pay for real and ugly sins, including your own. Faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior is the one path to forgiveness and eternal life, the one means by which you can be healed and saved. *Of course* our Savior is jealous in the extreme when it comes to protecting and preserving saving faith. Christian faith is the sole difference between heaven and hell for human souls – our own and those around us. God grant each of you the clarity and humility to identify, repent of, and correct your own sinful offense. Ask him, every day, to enable you to recognize when and where your words and actions are weakening the faith of those around you, reminding you that nothing on earth is worth compromising or destroying saving faith in Jesus Christ as the One who paid the debt for our sins when he offered his life on the cross. And do not allow guilt, or Satan's baseless accusations, to draw you into despair or doubt. Your sin does not have the power to cancel Jesus' love for you. As sin is real, so is

the forgiveness that is yours, full and complete, through faith in Jesus Christ. Trust therefore that your Savior has also erased the stain of your own personal sins, and, freed from sin's slavery, let your heart be filled not with terror or apprehension, but with the joy of undeserved forgiveness and the certain expectation of the heaven your Savior has prepared for you. Jesus *sinner*s doth receive. Amen.

ESV **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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.

ESV **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. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ 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, ⁴ 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. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ 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. ⁸ ¶ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

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The 15th Sunday after Pentecost – September 10, 2023

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 5 (Red Hymnal)

"Lord, Open Thou My Heart to Hear"

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.

Psalm 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 – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 742 (Brown Hymnal)

"Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven"

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

"Offense and Defense"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Installation of the 2023-2024 Sunday School Teachers

The Prayers

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

"Jesus Sinner 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 – 792 (Brown Hymnal)

"Let All Things Now Living"

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 Holy Communion – In obedience to God's Word, we practice "Close Communion." This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting anyone 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 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, not in judgment of anyone's Christian faith.

Attendance – Sunday (22) Average (43)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Tues-Thurs	-9:00 a.m.	– West Central Pastoral Conference
Wednesday	-7:00 p.m.	– Joint Communion Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor David Pfeiffer is considering the call to Messiah of Eau Claire. Professor Mark Kranz has announced that he will retire at the end of the current ILC school year.

Conference Communion Service – The congregation is invited to the Conference Communion Service on Wednesday evening at 7:00pm.

Organist Needed – Since both Angela and Sandy are scheduled to attend the Women's Retreat in Valentine on September 24th, we need a volunteer to operate the recorded music function of our organ for the Sunday Service.

Sunday School Teachers – Our Sunday School teachers are scheduled to be installed during the service this morning. Peggy Lewis will teach the lower grades and Gary Miller will teach Bible History to the upper grades. Grace Loeb has volunteered to take over the upper grade class in 2024, and Tracy Kreitel is the designated substitute.