

If I should Stumble

Luke 17:1-10, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11

Brothers and sisters, have you ever unknowingly stumbled into the middle of a conflict?

For example, two people in your office are at odds with each other, and you unwittingly did something that looked like you were siding with one of them and because of that – the other one now has you in their line of fire and has it out for you...

Or you are the new kid at school, and two rival groups of students that each want you to join their group and take their side, you've become caught in the middle of their conflict.

And, there are certain neighborhoods in our large cities in North America where if you wear certain colors, or logos, or sportswear from certain teams you might accidentally be identifying yourself with a particular street gang...

And you could end up being targeted in a drive by shooting by a rival gang; you are caught in the middle of gang violence.

Now I don't know if you've actually stumbled into any of these experiences, but I can tell you that all of us, our whole church actually, is caught smack dab in the middle of a spiritual conflict.

We have stumbled into the age-old fight that is going on between the Devil and God and simply by virtue of being followers of Jesus Christ - we become the targets for the devil and his demons.

They want to destroy whatever good things Jesus Christ is doing in our lives and in our community, and if they can - they would like to see us destroyed.

So, as a result of their manipulative, lying, destructive evil influence we see broken lives, broken families, broken communities and false teachings promoted all around us.

And the Kingdom of Darkness wants to avoid being detected in their operations, they want to make it look like something or someone else is to blame for their actions.

So if they can frame us, or even better – involve us and make us complicit in their schemes – they can turn us against each other and trick us into thinking that it’s our fellow Christians who are the enemy and so we end up fighting against each other instead of the real enemy.

And there are many churches which have been prevented from reaching their potential because of this, and many people have and walked away from the Church become skeptical about their faith because of this – and that is exactly what the Devil is after.

That’s why the apostle Peter writes *“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”* (1 Peter 5:8)

And Peter would know, Jesus had alerted him to the fact that he, and the rest of the disciples were personally being targeted in this battle. At the last supper Jesus says to Peter *“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat.”* (Luke 22:31)

In other words Satan wanted to grind Peter down, and see what he was made of in order to try and destroy his faith.

Now I understand that the whole idea of the Devil and spiritual forces of darkness that oppose the Church and work against us as Christians might seem a little fantastic, over the top, and a bit out of our everyday experience. But I’m not making this stuff up.

Presbyterians always say the Scripture is the only rule for faith and life - and the scriptures take the spiritual battle that we are involved in quite seriously, and we ought to as well.

Ephesians 6:11-12 says *“Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.”*¹² *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”*

So this isn’t fantastical thinking or fantasy – the spiritual battle the bible describes is real and we are in the middle of it – and

it is important that we are aware that, so we don't become a casualty of war.

Now, what is ironic about spiritual warfare is that it often takes place in a way that looks and feels like normal life, not the freaky head-spinning type of exorcist stuff – as I mentioned the most effective attacks the devil can launch against us are in ways that seem to be normal.

You see brothers and sisters if the devil were to come at us in a full-on frontal attack - as terrible and terrifying as that would be - we would recognize him immediately, and then turn to God for help.

But that's exactly what the devil doesn't want us to do – to call upon Jesus Christ and resist the devil and defeat him. So he operates in far more insidious, subtle ways, to prevent us from turning to God, and keep us from growing.

Fortunately as we study the scriptures and learn from them we become equipped and enabled to discern these sneaky

ways and since we are aware of them we can resist them and advance God's kingdom instead of being defeated, as Paul says in 2 Cor 2:11 *"in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes."*

So in this series is about Things we need to Hear – we need to hear that the scripture warns us about one of the most effective ways the Devil uses to attack us and side track us and undermine our effectiveness for Jesus Christ – Offense.

Stop and think about it for a moment – how many people get offended? We've all been offended haven't we.

And how many people get offended in church, by something someone does or says, or by a decision that was made, or how a decision was made, or because someone gossiped, spread rumors or did something immoral...the list can go on and on.

That's why Offense is such an effective tool for the devil to use. Not everyone gets drunk, not everyone loves fame and

money, not everyone has a weakness for lust...but we can **all** get offended and we can **all** offend others.

When people get offended their guard goes up, they retreat away from you, cut you off and any attempts to try to communicate with them to sort things out and apologize or persuade them that they maybe you didn't mean to offend them, it's a futile – they're not interested, they are **offended**.

That's why Proverbs 18:19 says *"An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city"*

And notice who is offended in this scripture passage. It's a brother, someone who is close to you.

Brothers and sisters, if some famous person does something vulgar, or a rap star releases an album full of swearing and controversial statements I might not like it, but its somewhat removed from me and I don't loose too much sleep over it. However if my brother in Christ, or a close friend spreads rumors about me I'm devastated, the relationship is ruined –

How could one so close to me do that. The closer they are, the deeper it hurts, the greater the offense.

So as we look at our scripture passage this morning, we realize that in a group that spent as much time together as the disciples did, there was potential for being greatly offended by each other and that's what why we see Jesus addressing the issue of offence in this passage.

Jesus says *"things that cause people to sin are bound to come..."* In other words it is inevitable that you will be offended. We need to hear this truth that there will be *"things which cause you to sin"* either in causing offense or taking it.

Now the Greek word for *"things which will cause you to sin"* in this passage is "scandalon" – and it can refer to something that made you stumble, like a rock, or the trigger on a trap, a trip-wire for a snare used for trapping and catching animals. So Jesus is being rather blunt in his teaching - scandalons, stumbling blocks, trip-wires, traps, they are bound to come.

So watch yourself He cautions – Why? Because you don't want to get trapped, and neither do you want to be helping the enemy trap others.

So be aware - we're in a war here and we need to take responsibility to know what is being used against us.

Notice that Jesus doesn't overtly link the traps with the enemy, and that's because our focus needs to be on taking our responsibility to avoid them – not blaming the enemy.

So becoming offended with our fellow Christians is one of those skandalons that we can stumble on, and we trigger the trap when we allow an offense to stay with us. We take the bait as it were.

So, if someone looks at us sideways on Sunday morning, takes our parking spot, if we are overlooked in volunteer appreciation, if a bad decision was made by session, if someone changed something we liked and we are offended...

Brothers and sisters we need to hear that if we hold on to that offense we will be caught in the trap of “retaliation” and then we will sin. And it doesn't matter if the offence was minor or major, if it was petty or if it was truly immoral...

A trap can be baited with junk food or a gourmet steak – its still bait for a trap. Offence is always a skandalon whether you are in the right or not.

That's why we need to be aware that we are in the middle of a battle – that the enemy is setting traps for us - and that he uses offences to try and bait us to step into those traps. And we need to hear that the more legitimate the offence is - the more difficult it is to resist that as bait.

Brother and sisters - if you take the bait you will be trapped by your desire to retaliate – and that desire can hold people captive for their entire lives.

When you are trapped by retaliation or revenge you are focused only on yourself, on how you were wronged, your

feelings, your rights, how you can get back at whoever offended you – even if it is simply vowing to withdraw from that person, or leaving that congregation because you were the done wrong.

But you're still trapped and it becomes much more difficult, if not impossible to stay focused on the Kingdom of God, the gospel, or what God can do in you and through you – and that of course is exactly what the Devil wants, you've been neutralized and you're not a threat to him any more.

And here is something else we need to hear – once you are trapped in revenge you'll probably do something that will cause offense to someone else! So now you've provided Satan with the bait he needs to set more traps!

It's a subtle, effective and very easy way to neutralize an entire church without them even knowing it!

That's why the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 14:13

"Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.

Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle (skandalon) in your brother's way."

The only way to do this, the only way out of the trap of revenge, the only way put up a defense against offense is through being willing to forgive each other – constantly.

And when Jesus explains this to his disciples they protest – *"Lord, increase our faith!"* which means Jesus that's too difficult, we're not spiritually mature enough yet, we need to be much better Christians before we're able to do that!

But Jesus says that if you have even the smallest amount of faith you can do something that seems impossible – like forgive the brother who has offended you.

And don't get proud about it! Jesus adds. He knows his disciples and us all too well doesn't he?

We're either despairing that we can't live up to the Christian faith and not trying or we're boasting about how well we've done.

We're like *"You know I forgave so and so seven times this week, and now I'm forgiving you...most Christians wouldn't do that you know"*

But then we're back in the cycle of offending someone again, the person who hears us saying that is thinking to themselves *"What a jerk, doesn't he realize how arrogant and self righteous he sounds? He's probably judging me – I'm so offended!"*

And then they are stumbling over the skandalon – they are offended by our arrogance and they are baited and trapped!

So, forgiveness is important – it's the only way out - but Jesus reminds us that in our defense against offense we can't leave out humility and He drives home the point with an analogy about simply being a servant.

You don't give your servant the employee of the month award for simply doing what is expected of them right?

The point for us is to remember, that when we've forgiven our brother and overlooked the offense we're not heroes or super Christians – we only are meeting the basic requirements of the Christian faith.

So we stay humble in this matter, and we won't play into Satan's traps and we can stay focused on the Kingdom of God and what Jesus and the Holy Spirit want to do in us, and through us, as we fight the battle to advance His Kingdom.

So, now you know – and perhaps you are wondering have I been affected by this, have I been trapped, has our church been neutralized by this?

Yes, yes and yes – we are all affected by this and unless we are aware of it – and watch for it when it happens - we'll continue to play right into it.

So we need to hear the warning to watch out for Offense, and when we see or experience Offense happening – that we respond to it in a way that sets us and others free from it.

So how do we do that? Well firstly, in being aware of this we need to rely on the Spiritual fruit of self-control when we are confronted by a situation where we are being offended.

This is important because we often respond to being offended by saying or doing something that multiplies the offense back to the other person – or those who may be watching us.

So it's important that watch how we respond – as Proverbs 19:11 says *“Sensible people control their temper; they earn respect by overlooking wrongs.”*

Now – the challenge with offense is that even if you overlook it, the offense will often stay with you and it keeps bothering you.

So I understand why withdrawing and pulling back from Christian fellowship can seem wise - because we don't want to be around others when we have a lingering offence irritating and making us susceptible to saying or doing something regrettable when are around the offender...

But, brothers and sisters – we need to hear that even if we have overlooked an offence, it's still been used as a fiery dart from the enemy and we need to put out the fire that it spreads in our mind and heart and soul.

And scripture is clear on this matter – we use the Shield of Faith to put out those fiery darts. Paul's analogy uses the Roman shield that was covered in leather – and soaked in water so that it could be used to smother flaming arrows and put them out – rendering them ineffective.

So in the same way we go back to the basics of the Christian faith and pray them over and into whatever that offence has hit in us – so that it becomes ineffective in turning us against our brother and sisters.

So here are some scriptural basics of the faith that we can pray, by ourselves, or even better - with others...

Ephesians 4:32: *“Be kind and tender-hearted to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you.”*

Matthew 5:44 *“But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”*

Colossians 3:13: *“Bear with each other and forgive any complaint you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”*

Brothers and sisters, once we give the Holy Spirit some room to gently remind us of our own faults and failings and the forgiveness that we have needed – we are able to not only overlook the offense... but to forgive it – and end it.

Now – most often these offenses are merely misunderstandings and miscommunications between us – nothing too serious, though if we are not aware of how the enemy uses them they can become quite serious.

However – there are times when someone has deliberately said something or done something offensive which is much more than a misunderstanding or miscommunication.

And in those instances brothers and sisters, even if we have overlooked it, even if we have forgiven it, there still needs to be a further step of reconciliation and communicating that reconciliation.

Proverbs 17:9 says *“Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.”*

And the Apostles Peter takes this bit of wisdom and turns it into a command for us in 1 Peter 4:8 saying *“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”*

And so when we have been sinned against brothers and sisters – don’t be surprised, because Jesus told us that would happen to us – instead be committed to OBEYING Jesus.

Jesus is very clear to his disciples and to us in Matthew 18:15 where he says *“If your brother or sister sins (against you) go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.”*

So in being obedient to Jesus Christ – we have the responsibility to make sure that when it is required, we take the initiative to reconcile with our brothers and sisters over an offense...

In this way brothers and sisters we do as Hebrews 12:15 says *“See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*

So we will have not only overlooked offense, but we have forgiven it, and we have also reconciled against it – and thus effectively shut down the enemies attempt to trap us and neutralize us.

So brothers and sisters, if I should stumble, if you should stumble, if we should stumble – resist the bait, don’t spring the trap. Ask for God’s grace; and continue to forgive each other in humility.

This is how we fight the good fight – and it’s our best defense against offence and it’s what we need hear. Amen