

Free Grace Broadcaster

ISSUE 262

STUMBLING BLOCKS

*But judge this rather, that no man
put a stumblingblock or an
occasion to fall in his
brother's way.*

Romans 14:13

Our Purpose

*"To humble the pride of man,
to exalt the grace of God in salvation,
and to promote real holiness in heart and life."*

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262

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THE IMPORTANCE AND MEANING OF STUMBLING BLOCKS

James Durham (1622-1658)

WHY IS THE ISSUE OF STUMBLING IMPORTANT?

Causing stumbling is condemned by Christ. There is no sin that has more woes pronounced against it. The Lord Himself denounces it and doubles a woe against it in Matthew 18:7. The apostle confirms this in Romans 14:20, where he describes it as literally evil to do something that will make a brother stumble. The Lord takes special notice of how people walk in reference to causing stumbling in others and is highly provoked where He sees anyone guilty of it (Rev 2:6). He shows this by comparing it with what Balaam did (Rev 2:14).

Causing stumbling is condemned by the New Testament. Whole chapters in the New Testament are devoted to the subject of scandal¹ (Mat 18; Act 15; Rom 14; 1Co 8). No duty is more extensively commanded than the duty of giving no offense, nor is any sin more fully condemned than insensitivity and carelessness about giving offense. Indeed, in Acts 15 the apostles and elders thought that regulating indifferent things so as to prevent scandal was worthy to be enacted in the very first synod and church council.

Causing stumbling is intrinsically hateful. The hatefulfulness of offense is apparent in its origins: (1) it is an evident sign of disrespect to God and a lack of the impression of His dread; (2) it is a sign of inward pride and self-conceitedness; and (3) it is a sign of uncharitableness,² showing disregard for others and belittling them, as we can see from Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. Can there be anything more to be shunned than

¹ **scandal** – In the modern sense, *scandal* means “a disgraceful event” or “malicious talk, especially gossip about the private lives of others.” However, in the Bible, a scandal is a stumbling block. “In the NT, two Greek words are used: *proskomma* (*tou lithou*), ‘stone of stumbling’ (Rom 9:32-33; 14:13; 1Co 8:9; 1Pe 2:8) is used of any form of barrier; *skandalon* (Rom 11:9; 1Co 1:23; Rev 2:14), originally the trigger stick of a trap, is used in LXX to translate Hebrew *mīšōl*, but also *mōqēš*, ‘a snare’, ‘a trap’ (cf. Psa 69:22; 140:5). Cf. also Mat 16:23, ‘you are a hindrance (*skandalon*; AV ‘offence’) to me.’” (J. B. Taylor, “Stumbling-Block,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Wood et al. [Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996], 1136.) Note: Throughout the articles of this issue, then, the words *scandal* and *scandalize* mean “stumbling block” and “stumble another into sin.” *Offense* means “causing or making opportunity for another to sin.”

² **uncharitableness** – lack of love.

these? And you will find that people are tenderhearted and conscientious in the matter of offense and the use of their Christian liberty in the same proportion that they are tender or untender in all the material duties of religion toward God and others.

Causing stumbling brings dreadful consequences. There can be no worse effects than those that follow from causing others to stumble. It brings a woe to the world, and Christ reckons it a most grievous plague when it abounds, for it brings destruction with it to many souls (Rom 14:20). It brings reproach on the profession of Christianity, it cools love among brethren, it begets and fosters contention and strife, it mars the progress of the gospel, and in a word, it makes iniquity to abound. Often, in particular, it ushers error into the church, as we can see from the passages of Scripture already cited and from Matthew 24:10-12, where, because many are offended and stumble, many false prophets arise. When we analyze it, we will find that lack of sensitivity in the matter of stumbling has been every bit as damaging to the church of Christ with respect to her outward beauty and peace, and the inward thriving of her members, as either error or profanity, which have been only the *product* of causing stumbling.

Causing stumbling hardens us in sin. Lack of sensitivity and carelessness in giving offense opens the door to all kinds of carelessness in the person who gives offense. This is because that person's conscience³ becomes less sensitive to challenges, so they have greater boldness to do things that are materially evil. By this they also become habitually unconcerned and dismissive of others. And although respect to others is not a good principle when it is our single predominant principle, yet it often has a powerful, positive influence in restraining people from looseness, and in its own place it ought to have weight. Experience itself teaches us that once you take liberty in giving offense, things that are materially sinful often follow.

Causing stumbling harms the reputation of the gospel. Sensitivity about giving offense adorns the gospel exceedingly. It convinces those around us of the reality of the gospel. It encourages charity and warms

³ **conscience** – The human soul has two principal faculties: the understanding and the will. The understanding uses reason, which is the human ability to think, understand, and form judgments by a logical process. When we consider how Scripture uses the word *conscience*, we may say that the conscience is “that ability of our understanding by which we are internally aware of what we believe is right and wrong.” Your conscience can weigh what is true and false, and therefore it can and does judge your actions. Not only does it weigh what is true or false, it passes judgment on how we act upon that information. In other words, your conscience as an image-bearer of God is an internal judge that considers your every thought, word, and deed and pronounces it right or wrong, good or evil, well done or wrongly done. See FGB 261, *Conscience*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

love. By contrast, carelessness about giving offense opens people's mouths to criticize the gospel and makes both Christianity and Christians a reproach.⁴

Causing stumbling saps Christian fellowship. Lack of sensitivity about offenses strikes at the root of Christian communion.⁵ There can be no freedom in admonitions, little freedom in discussions, and, it may be, no great fervor in prayers with and for others, where offenses abound. And is it possible that religion can be in a healthy condition where we find these problems? From these problems alone it should be obvious why Christ said, "Woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" (Mat 18:7).

2. WHAT IS A STUMBLING BLOCK?

What becoming a stumbling block is not. To clarify this, let us consider what is *not* meant by offense.

Offense is *not always something actually displeasing to the person who is offended*. Thus, we cannot establish if someone has been offended simply on the basis of whether they are pleased or displeased.

Offense is *not always to be judged by simply considering what has been said or done*. Offense may arise in a matter that is lawful, which cannot be straightforwardly condemned, such as eating and drinking or taking wages for preaching (2Co 11:8).

Offense is *not always to be determined by the effect*. Sometimes someone may be offended when no offense was given. Or offense may be given, and someone is guilty of giving offense, when no actual stumbling has followed, but what they did was of itself conducive to making someone stumble.

Offense is *not always to be judged by the person's intention*. [Some people] may be without all intention of hurting, yet they may nevertheless really wound and offend someone else. They might cause someone to stumble by rashness,⁶ omission, too much love in sparing their faults, inconsiderate zeal, imprudence,⁷ or failing in something. Or they might cause stumbling by unfaithfulness, for it is very difficult to rebuke faithfully someone whom we love. Any of these defects is like a dead fly in ointment (Ecc 10:1), which makes many things that are profitable to become off-putting.⁸

⁴ **reproach** – disgrace.

⁵ **communion** – sharing of joy and fellowship among those united by some particular bond.

⁶ **rashness** – acting without consideration or thought; recklessness.

⁷ **imprudence** – lack of caution in practical affairs.

⁸ **off-putting** – creating an unfavorable impression or feeling of disgust; unpleasant.

What becoming a stumbling block is. Here is a definition of offense or scandal that we will go on to explain in more detail: A scandal, or offense, is literally a stumbling block. It is caused when something is said or done in a way that leads someone to sin or hinders their spiritual life. The deed or word is not sinful in and of itself, but it makes someone to stumble in their spiritual life because of its circumstances; namely, it was done at such a time, in such a place, or by such a person. It is a scandal irrespective of whether anyone is actually caused to stumble or whether the person actually intended to offend.

When inducing⁹ someone to sin or impeding¹⁰ someone's holiness flows from a sinful act, it is not so difficult to discern. All actions that are evil in and of themselves are clearly offensive. But when the action is *lawful or indifferent in itself*, or when it shares the manner and other circumstances of a lawful or necessary duty, the difficulty then is to discern when the matter becomes scandalous, and accordingly to decide whether to do or to abstain in the matter and whether to do it in this or some other manner, so as to avoid giving offense. This properly and strictly is what is called *offense*, and this is where the utmost wisdom is to be exercised in ordering and regulating ourselves in the use of Christian liberty.

To be clear, here are some further definitions of technical terms. Something *lawful* is something required by the law of God, such as praying. Something *indifferent* is something neither good nor bad in itself, such as eating and drinking. A *necessary* duty is a duty we cannot omit without sinning, such as any of the duties required in the Ten Commandments.

This kind of offense—offense that arises from the surrounding circumstances when the matter is lawful or indifferent in itself—is what the great debates are about in Scripture. People need to understand that it is not only a question of looking at the Ten Commandments to know whether an act itself is lawful. Nor is it only that we have to consider how clear our own sense of duty is, so that we do nothing doubtingly. But it is also that we have to consider others too, so that others are not wronged or hurt in their spiritual state by what we do. We must do, or abstain from doing, for the sake of conscience—not our own, but the conscience of him that sits with us (1Co 10:24, 28). For if charity and love are the end of the law, such that we ought not to seek only our own things but the things of one another, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, then we ought to seek our neighbor's edification as much as our own, and to

⁹ **inducing** – persuading; influencing.

¹⁰ **impeding** – being a hindrance to; standing in the way of.

actively avoid doing things that are harmful to their spiritual well-being.

Scandal is therefore the opposite of the charity and love we ought to have to our brother, and also to the respect we ought to have to him (Rom 14:10, 15). Indeed, something is a scandal and offense to the extent that it is opposite to and inconsistent with love to our brother's spiritual well-being. And so, in a word, *whatever may impede and hinder our brother's spiritual growth and advancement is an offense and scandal* (Rom 14:21).

In this way, incidentally, a scandal differs from an injury, for an injury hurts someone's person, name, estate, or some outward thing, while a scandal hurts the spiritual condition by harming someone's spiritual liveliness, activity, comfort, and so on. Although an injury is often also an offense, not all offenses are injuries.

From *The Scandal of Stumbling Blocks: Avoiding Spiritual Harm*, ed. Matthew Vogan & Catherine Hyde, pp. 1-3; published by Reformation Heritage Books, www.heritagebooks.org. Used by permission.

James Durham (1622-1658): Influential Scottish Covenanter and Presbyterian minister; born and died in Scotland, UK.



Scandal, being a murdering of souls, is a violation of the general law of charity [*love*] and of the Sixth Commandment in particular...I shall not need to stand upon the etymology¹¹ of the word *scandal*...As for the sense of the word, it is past doubt that the ordinary use of it in Scripture is for a *stumbling block* for a man to fall upon or a trap to ensnare a man. In the Old Testament, it is often used for a stumbling stone on which a man may fall into any corporal calamity¹² or a snare to hurt or ruin a man in the world. But in the New Testament, which speaketh more of *spiritual* hurts, it is taken for a stumbling block or temptation, by which a man is in danger of falling into sin, spiritual loss, ruin, dislike of godliness, or any way to be turned from God or hindered in a religious holy way. And if sometimes it be taken for grieving or troubling, it is as it hereby thus hindereth or ensnareth, so that to *scandalize* is sometimes taken for the doing of a blameless action from which another unjustly taketh occasion to fall, sin, or be perverted. But when it signifieth a sin, then to *scandalize* is by something unlawful of itself or at least unnecessary, which may occasion the spiritual hurt or ruin of another.—*Richard Baxter*

What are scandals and offenses? "Scandals" literally signifieth temptations or inducements to sin, any stumbling block or hindrance laid in a man's way by which the passenger is detained or diverted, or at which, if he be not careful, he is apt to stumble or fall. Spiritually it signifieth *anything* that may discourage or divert us from our duty to God or may occasion us to fall to the great loss or ruin of our souls.

—*Thomas Manton*

¹¹ **etymology** – history of a word.

¹² **corporal calamity** – bodily injury or misery.

JESUS AVOIDED STUMBLING OTHERS

Octavius Winslow (1808-1878)

Lest we should offend them.—Matthew 17:27

HOW truly was our Lord Jesus “harmless” because He was “undefiled” (Heb 7:26). In Him was no sin (1Jo 3:5). That His gospel should have been an offense to the scribes and Pharisees and that His cross was an offense to the world is no marvel. It was so then, it is so now, and it will be so to the end. But our Lord never, in any one instance, gave needless offense. His heart was too tender, His disposition too kind, His nature too holy to wound the feelings maliciously and thoughtlessly or offend the “innocent sentiments” of others. Maligned by His enemies, misunderstood and neglected by His friends, yet on no occasion did He retort, revile, or wound; but, with the harmlessness of the dove and the innocence of the lamb, He opened not His mouth (Isa 53:7). Let us learn of Him in this holy feature of His character, study it closely, and imitate it faithfully.

A desire to avoid offense does not demand a compromise of our Christian faith or profession. On no occasion did it in the life of Jesus. When He might have avoided a snare, warded off a thrust, or escaped a wound by concession, conciliation,¹ or compromise, He stood firm to His own truth and His Father’s honor, unswerving and unswerved. Yet the “sword” with which He fenced and foiled His foes was “bathed in heaven” (Isa 34:5). Thus, O my soul, learn of Him. Let this be your guiding precept, as it was Christ’s: “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). Offenses will come. For, since the offense of the cross is not ceased, we cannot maintain its great distinctive and essential doctrines purely, faithfully, manfully, and not evoke animosity against us or the hostility and offense of the world. And yet the Christian law, “Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God” (1Co 10:32) is unrepealed;² and the Christian precept, “that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ” (Phi 1:10), is still binding upon all true followers of the meek and harmless Savior. The mind dwelling in us “which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phi 2:5) will lead us to respect the convictions, to be tender towards the feelings, to be charitable towards the infirmities, and to honor the consciences of other

¹ **concession, conciliation** – yielding to a demand or argument to win favor.

² **unrepealed** – not officially canceled.

Christians differing from us in things not essential to salvation. “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak” (Rom 14:21).

“Lest we should offend.” What instructive words, O my soul, are these! How much evil in the world, dissension in the Christian church, and alienation in families would be avoided and averted were the holy precept taught in these words of Jesus more fully observed. Let us, then, pray and watch against every least violation. Let us be careful of our words, our motives, and our actions, lest, wounding and offending one of Christ’s little ones, we offend and wound Christ Himself. Oh, never give needless cause of offense to a weak believer, to a conscientious Christian, to a tried, tempted child of God—to one who, in his own way and sphere, is seeking to serve his Lord and Master. Let us deny ourselves any and every gratification and allow any and every loss involving not disloyalty to Christ and compromise of His truth—rather than hurt the feelings, wound the conscience, or put a stumbling block in the way of one who loves Jesus and for whom the Savior died. Oh, how seldom we remember, how faintly we recognize, the perfect oneness of Christ with His people! That it is utterly impossible to do an injury to or confer a favor upon a true believer in Jesus and not be brought into personal contact with Jesus Himself—“he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye” (Zec 2:8). “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Mat 25:40). Lord, help me more and more clearly to see You in Your saints; and in conferring upon them a kindness, or in inflicting on them an injury, to see Jesus only!

From “Consider Jesus” in *The Works of Octavius Winslow* (Kindle Locations 4435-4457); Monergism Books; Kindle Edition.

Octavius Winslow (1808-1878): Baptist pastor and prolific author; later an Anglican priest; born in Pentonville, England, UK.



There is offense *taken* where none is given. Christ Himself, in His person, sufferings, and doctrine may be an offense to the carnal and unbelieving world. In His person, as He is said to be, “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed”

(1Pe 2:8). He that is to the believer a cornerstone, elect and precious (1Pe 2:6),
 is to the obstinate, prejudiced unbeliever, with allusion to those
 that travel by land, “a stone of stumbling,” to those
 that travel by sea, “a rock of offence.”

—David Clarkson

KINDS OF STUMBLING BLOCKS

James Durham (1622-1658)

IN order to explain what we mean by *scandal*, we must draw some very careful distinctions: what scandal is and is not, and what *this* kind of scandal looks like as distinct from *that* kind of scandal. By patiently working through these distinctions, we will end up with greater clarity and precision in how exactly we should understand scandal.

1. Offending is not the same as displeasing. We need to be clear that scandal, or offense, does not always actually displease or grieve someone. There is a great difference between displeasing someone and offending him, just as there is also a great difference between pleasing someone and edifying him. Someone may be displeased and yet edified and, on the other hand, well satisfied and yet spiritually offended.

Offense is in contrast not to being pleased but to being edified. So scandal, offense, or stumbling is something that may or does impair someone's spiritual edification, regardless of whether they are pleased or displeased. This is clear from comparing Romans 14:13 with Romans 14:20-21. Paul explains that a "stumbling block" or an "offense" is anything that may be the occasion of a fall to someone—anything that may make him stumble or weaken or halt in the course of holiness—just as a block would hinder a runner or put him at risk of falling as he runs a race (which is what the similitude is drawn from in this phrase).

2. You can give offense, take offense, or both. To *give* scandal or offense is when you lay something in front of someone else that is apt to cause that person to fall or sin, even supposing they do not actually fall when they encounter it. If it induces to sin of its own nature, it is an offense or stumbling block. Christ said to Peter, "Thou art an offence unto me" (Mat 16:23). Though nothing could cause Christ to fall into sin, yet the advice Peter had given Him was in its own nature something that gave offense. This is known as *active offense*.

To *take* scandal or offense, when no offense is given, is when somebody does what is not only lawful but necessary, and yet others, simply from their own corruption, carp¹ at it and stumble over it. In this way, the Pharisees took offense at Christ (Mat 15:12), even though Christ never gave anyone cause to be spiritually harmed. It is a feature of the wicked that they stumble where there is no stumbling block, and as it is

¹ **carp** – complain or find fault continually about trivial matters.

said, “They know not at what they stumble” (Pro 4:19). This is called *passive offense*.

Offense is *both given and taken* when there is something active on the one side that is apt to draw someone else to sin, and that something is yielded to on the other side (the bait is accepted). This was in the stumbling block that Balaam laid before Israel (Num 22:5-24:25; 31:8, 16; Rev 2:14). This is how it is ordinarily when sinners, having corruption, are soon inflamed to some extent or another with every incitement. For example, Peter gave Barnabas something to stumble over when he dissembled by refusing to eat with the Gentiles, and Barnabas went and stumbled when he was also carried away to dissemble (Gal 2:11-16).

It is *active offense* or *active scandal* that we are really looking at here. It is, in short, any deed or word that in itself is apt to make someone else sin, or to weaken him in his spiritual course, either in respect of life or comfort, irrespective of whether the person actually stumbles or whether the speaker or doer actually intends offense. In all this, we are to understand that one act may be offensive in many considerations, just as one deed may be sinful in many ways.

3. Some offenses are in doctrine; others are in practice. There are doctrinal offenses, and there are practical offenses. *Doctrinal* offenses are such as flow from matters of opinion in which people vent² some untruth and so lay a stumbling block before others. This is to break a commandment (the commandment against falsehood) and to teach others to do so (Mat 5:19). Sometimes this also overlaps with matters of practice—that is, when a corrupt practice is defended by false doctrine, as the Nicolaitans³ attempted to do.

Scandal in *practice*, without any doctrinal defense, is when doctrine is kept pure, yet a person falls into some practice that, of itself, without any verbal expression, induces others to sin. David’s adultery was a scandal in this way (see 2Sa 11; 12:14), and so also was the fault of the priests who made the people to stumble at the law (Mal 2:7-8). In this way, every public or known irregular action is offensive because it gives a bad example to others or otherwise influences them in a way that provokes them to some sin.

4. Some things are inherently offensive; others are offensive because of their circumstances. We may distinguish offenses according to their matter.

² **vent** – give expression or utterance to.

³ **Nicolaitans** – heretical sect in the early church that is mentioned by name twice in the book of Revelation (Rev 2:6, 15).

Some offenses are in matters that are *simply sinful in themselves* and also have sins following on them. All errors and public sinful practices are offensive in this way.

Some matters are sinful not simply in themselves, yet *they have the appearance of evil*. Dangerous and doubtful expressions in doctrine that have been or often are abused, and also practices not in keeping with the honesty and good report that a Christian ought to study (Phi 4:8-9), are offensive in this way. David would not take the name of idols in his mouth (Psa 16:4) because others paid them reverence. In this way, he avoided giving offense through the appearance of evil in the theological language he used. However, Peter's dissimulation⁴ and withdrawing from the Gentiles (Gal 2) was an example of practices that are out of harmony with holiness; his actions appeared to strengthen the opinion of those who insisted on keeping up the difference between Jew and Gentile. For the same reason, Paul would not circumcise Titus (Gal 2:3), and he condemned eating in temples devoted to idols.

Some offenses are in matters that are *otherwise lawful and indifferent*, though not necessary. For example, in the early church, eating or abstaining from specific foods or from what was offered to idols was indifferent when it was done in the house of a heathen, and so was sometimes lawful. But it was not indifferent when it was done in the temple of an idol because that gave the appearance of condoning evil, as if the person who ate the food had some respect for the idol. Nor was it indifferent if any weak brother was at the table in the house because it would grieve him (1Co 8:10). It is these last two, and more especially the third, that are directly to do with the doctrine of offenses, as the offense arises from circumstances to do with the thing (such as time, place, person, and manner) rather than from the deed considered in itself.

5. Some offenses are unintentional; some are caused despite intending to do good. We may distinguish offenses in respect of the intention of the person who acts. Some things that may be offensive given the circumstances may yet not be perceived to be offensive by the person who gives offense by them. This was the case with the offense that Peter laid before Christ (Mat 16:21-23).

Alternatively, sometimes the person may intend to do good to someone else yet may offend and cause him to stumble. For example, Eli intended his sons good; but really, by his too gentle reproof, he caused them to stumble by confirming them in their wickedness (1Sa 2:22-25, 29; 3:13). Similarly, some, by untimely reproofs or censures, and indeed

⁴ **dissimulation** – hypocrisy.

also by misplaced commendations, may in fact make other people worse, even though they intend the opposite.

6. Offense is caused not so much by acts themselves as by the manner in which they are done. This leads us to another distinction—namely, between the practice itself and the manner of performing it or the circumstances of doing it. If you think about it, even acts that are good in themselves will not be edifying unless they are done in the right manner. Thus, a good act will not keep off offense if it is not done tenderly, wisely, and so on. We often find that circumstances of times, persons, places, manner, and so on have a huge influence on offense. It is not offensive to pray or to preach, for example, but at some times (such as before an idol or on a “holy day”) praying or preaching may well be offensive.

7. There are offenses of omission and offenses of commission.⁵ Just as we can distinguish sins of omission and sins of commission, so we can also distinguish offenses in the same way. For example, some people give offense when they take an oath but do it lightly or pray but do it irreverently. Others give offense when they do not pray at all, for neglecting prayer fosters profanity just as irreverence in prayer does. Presumably for this reason, Daniel wanted to open his window in case he would be thought to have stopped praying (Dan 6:1-10).

Note that you do not guard against an offense of omission only by doing what is your duty, unless you are also doing it appropriately, in a way that is fitting. This is called the holding of the testimony (Rev 6:9). It is mainly this that is edifying to others when the light of holiness shines. When the light of holiness is veiled to any extent, to that extent our neighbors have darkness to walk in; and in that way, it is to them an occasion to stumble because we are not holding out the light to them. But still, this holding of the testimony has to be done without affectation⁶ or ostentation,⁷ lest a new offense follows on it.

8. Some offenses are upsetting; others are flattering. Some offenses contradict and oppose the graces of God’s people, and these make them sad. Some offenses foster corruptions, and these are too pleasing. In this way, soft reproofs, corrupt advice, and flatteries provide many people with things to stumble and fall on.

⁵ **offenses of omission...commission** – one commits an offense of omission whenever not performing that which is commanded, while one commits an offense of commission whenever doing that which is forbidden, or whenever performing that which is good in and of itself in an evil manner or with an ulterior motive.

⁶ **affectation** – pretentious behavior, speech, or writing designed to impress.

⁷ **ostentation** – display intended to attract notice or admiration.

9. Some offenses are indirect; others are direct. Some offenses may be called indirect—for example, when a person commits them in their own private life (such as in their way of eating, drinking, and living). Because this person lives quietly and out of the public eye and is not involved with anyone who stumbles due to his behavior, the offense they cause is indirect. However, some offenses are more direct. That is, they flow from how people act in their public behavior or in the way they interact with others, where the inducement to offend is more direct.

10. Offenses differ in the manner of causing hurt. Offenses may be distinguished as they hurt people either by pleasing them in their corruptions and strengthening them in what is sinful or, on the other hand, when they hurt them by irritating and stirring up their corruptions.

Too much gentleness in admonitions, or rashness or imprudence⁸ in commending what is good, or extenuating⁹ what is evil, or corrupt advice, and such like, offend by strengthening people in what is sinful. In this way, Jonadab caused Amnon to stumble (2Sa 13), and Eli caused his sons to stumble (1Sa 2-3).

On the other hand, putting people down, wronging them and not taking the trouble to remove a wrong or to explain ourselves if people think we have done wrong, grieves and offends by stirring up people's corruptions. So do unfair criticisms, thoughtless admonitions that are not seasoned with love, hard reports, and so on.

11. Offenses differ according to who is offended. We may consider offenses with respect to who is offended.

We offend *friends*—those whom we do not desire to grieve. Inadvertently,¹⁰ we cause them to stumble and hurt their spiritual condition by dealing with them unfaithfully: by worldliness in conversing with them, by siding with their infirmities, and in many similar ways.

We offend *enemies*, or at any rate those who we do not regard as friends. We cause these people to stumble when they are provoked through the carnality of our ways to judge us harshly (or to judge religion¹¹ harshly because of us), or to use some worldly-wise scheme to oppose something we have done in a worldly-wise way when we irritate them, provoke their anger, and so on. People in debates are often guilty of giving offense in this way, whether their controversy is in civil, ecclesiastical, or academic things. Even when they are in the right, they do

⁸ **imprudence** – lack of caution.

⁹ **extenuating** – lessening the guilt of an offense by pleading excuses.

¹⁰ **inadvertently** – carelessly.

¹¹ **religion** – in the author's time, "religion" meant biblical Christianity, not simply belief and worship of supernatural power or powers considered to be divine.

not act tenderly and persuasively toward their opponents in the debate, so as to make it apparent that they seek the good of their soul and their edification, even when they differ from them.

We offend those who are *wicked or profane*, possibly heathens, whether Jews or Gentiles. They are offended when they are hardened in their impiety by the insensitivity and uncharitableness of those who are professedly tender. In this way, it is a fault to give offense either to Jews or Gentiles, just as it is a fault to give offense to the church of God (1Co 10:32).

We offend *weaker brethren and stronger brethren*. Weaker brethren often stumble where there is no real reason to stumble (as in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8), and their stumbling vents itself readily by rashly judging and censuring others who are stronger than themselves, for going beyond their light, or because they seem to despise them. This also shows how the stronger brethren give offense—by despising the weaker and inviting the weaker brethren to come to hasty, censorious conclusions about them. This is why these two are put together, “Let not him that eateth [that is, him that is strong] despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not [that is, the weak] judge him that eateth” (Rom 14:3).

12. Some offenses tempt people to sin; others weaken their holiness.

We can distinguish between offenses that directly incline or tempt people to sin, either in doctrine or practice, and offenses that more indirectly scare people away from holiness and either divert them from it or make them fainter and weaker in pursuing it, either in truth or practice. For example, a blemish in the character or reputation of someone who professes to be a Christian can make Christianity to be abhorred in one way or another. This happens especially when ministers and professing believers who are eminent become offensive. That is like a dead fly in the box of the apothecary’s ointment, which makes it all stink (Ecc 10:1). In this way, the priests made the people stumble at the law (Mal 1:7-14), as also did the sons of Eli (1Sa 2:12-17). This is what David was accused of, that by his fall he made the heathen blaspheme (2Sa 12:14). Similarly, contention and division among ministers and disciples is said to stand in the way of the world believing in Christ (Joh 17:21).

13. Offenses can be caused either in worship or in everyday life.

Sometimes scandal is given in immediate duties of religious worship, such as praying, preaching, conferring, speaking, and judging (for example, in church courts), either by saying something that is wrong or by an irreverent, light, or impassioned manner.

Other times, scandal is given by our ordinary and everyday way of behaving, such as our eating and drinking, the way we dress, our manner of living, and our buying and selling. We give scandal when something about our manner in these things gives evidence of pride, vanity, inconstancy, covetousness, being addicted to pleasure, having a worldly attitude, or some other thing by which our neighbor is wronged. A husband may offend his wife, and a wife her husband, by conversing together in an irreligious manner so that one strengthens the other to think that exactness in religion is not so necessary after all. In the same way, an employee who professes to be a Christian may cause an employer to stumble if they are not faithful and diligent in their work.

14. Sometimes offense is not given until it is taken. Sometimes offense is given from the doing of the action in the first place (for example, where there is any appearance of evil). Alternatively, offense may at first only be taken without being given, and yet afterward become given, and make the person guilty of giving offense, even though they had not been guilty of giving offense to start with.

For example, imagine a man eating without respect to “difference of meats,” as he is allowed to do, seeing this matter is in itself indifferent. Now imagine that someone tells him that this food had been offered to an idol, and therefore in his judgment it is not lawful to eat it. Then, although to start with, offense was not given but only taken (because the man who ate the food did not know that there was anyone present who would be offended by his eating), yet if he continued after that to do the same thing, it would then be an offense given on his side.

Alternatively, imagine you know that someone has taken offense at you or your behavior in a thing indifferent (even though you have given no real reason to take offense). If you then do not endeavor to remove the offense as far as you are able, in that case the offense becomes given also, not only taken, because you are not removing the stumbling block out of your brother’s way.

15. Some offenses happen by accident; others come from bad habits. Some offenses may be said to be given from infirmity—that is, when they proceed from a particular slip up by the person who offends, when the person does not continue in that behavior (or stick to it or defend it), or when they fall into this behavior, not knowing that it would be offensive. Yet once they know it is offensive, they endeavor to remove the offense. On the other hand, other offenses are more rooted and confirmed, such as when a person does them as their habitual behavior, does not take much care to prevent them or remove them, is not much

weighed down by a burden for them but rather minimizes them or defends them.

This way of distinguishing offenses corresponds to the distinction that is sometimes made between “sins of infirmity” and “sins of malice.” As long as we remember that *malice* does not refer to the person’s intent but to the nature of the act, we can use the same distinction here for offenses.

16. Some scandals are private; some are public. We can distinguish between scandals in private and scandals in public. Both of these may further be understood in two ways: either in respect of the witnesses or in respect of their own nature (and must therefore be dealt with publicly or privately).

In Respect of Witnesses: A scandal that is *private in respect of witnesses* is one that offends few because it is not known to many people. On the other hand, a scandal that is *public in respect of witnesses* is known to many. This means that the same offense may be a private offense to one person at one time and in one place, and a public offense to the same person at a different time and place.

In Respect of Its Own Nature: A scandal that is *private in respect of its own nature* is one that possibly causes many people to stumble yet is not of such a nature as publicly, legally, or judicially it might be shown to be scandalous in a way that would convince either the person offending or others, although it may make a great impression on the hearts of those who know it. Someone could be exceedingly offensive in the general course of their way and behavior, even though they are civil, legal, and fair in all particulars, because their way of life displays to the consciences, even of those who are most charitable to them, a great deal of vanity, pride, earthly-mindedness, a lack of tenderness, lack of love and respect, and the like. These things say in the heart of the beholders that there are many things wrong with that person, when yet no specific instances can be given where the person would not have valid legal answers.

Offenses of this sort include starting to ask questions at an inappropriate time or “doubtful disputations” (Rom 14:1). Possibly the person may assert something that is true, yet by raising such issues at such times and in such expressions, all they do is confuse and shake the weak. These offenses especially arise from the impression you have that the person is not aiming at an honorable goal, or that they are being extreme in the way they are going about it, or trying to punch above their

weight,¹² and such like. You can be quite convinced, from observing the person's way of acting, that something like this is their problem, yet this is not a "public" offense in the sense spoken of here, because you could never demonstrate these faults in a court of law or prove it to an unconvinced observer.

An example of this would be Absalom's insinuating, self-seeking way, which gave evidence of pride. Another example would be those of whom Paul speaks. Some preached out of envy, and others sought their own things (Phi 1:15; 2:21). Paul was convinced of this by what he could discern himself, yet these characteristics did not form the basis of any sentence that could be passed on them.

On the other hand, offenses that are *public in respect of their own nature* are those that can be substantiated¹³ with evidence before others or which can be shown to be against God's law. Examples would include drunkenness or swearing. These may be called ecclesiastical¹⁴ offenses because they bring you under church discipline. Those that are private in respect of their own nature may be called conscience-wounds or charity-wounding offenses because you have to deal with them with conscience and charity, and they wound conscience and charity, and are judged by conscience and charity. These offenses may call for a private Christian admonition,¹⁵ but they cannot call for public reproof in a church court.

17. Some scandals are firsthand; others are secondhand. Some scandals are *immediate*¹⁶—that is, when we hear or see what is offensive firsthand from the person himself. Other scandals are *mediate* or secondhand. The very reporting of something that is true may be offensive to those to whom it is reported. For example, it may alienate them from or stir them up against another person. Or it may prompt some sinful bad temper or incite them to some corrupt course of action, or any way provoke them to carnality.

In this way offense differs from slander, for slander affects and wrongs the person who is spoken of, who may be absent when the slander is spoken, while offense causes those who are present to stumble. Nevertheless, the same act in a person may be both a slander and an offense on different considerations. Ziba slandered Mephibosheth; but

¹² **punch above their weight** – performing, achieving, or doing something at a level that is considered beyond one's abilities, talents, or personal attributes.

¹³ **substantiated** – proven to be true.

¹⁴ **ecclesiastical** – associated with a Christian church.

¹⁵ **admonition** – authoritative warning.

¹⁶ **immediate** – direct; firsthand.

at the same time, he offended David and caused him to stumble (2Sa 16), although David was not so displeased with him as Mephibosheth was. So also, Doeg slandered David and the priests in a thing that was actually true, but at the same time offended Saul (1Sa 21-22).

18. Some offenses are explicit; some are implicit. Some things offend others explicitly, as when a minister fails in giving an admonition prudently or seasonably. Again, some things offend implicitly; for example, a minister gives his judgment seasonably but in an area he has not entered into formerly, so he does not have such capacity to edify his hearers with his admonition. In this way, Paul prevented offense when, by becoming all things to all, he laid the groundwork for people to find his teaching acceptable.

19. Some offenses are harmful; some hold people back. Some offenses may be outright harmful and hurtful to people's spiritual welfare. Others may still be damaging, but only comparatively, in the sense that they keep people from the growth and edification they would otherwise have enjoyed. It is a stumbling block by being a comparative loss to their spiritual well-being.

From *The Scandal of Stumbling Blocks: Avoiding Spiritual Harm*, ed. Matthew Vogan & Catherine Hyde, pp. 9-23; published by Reformation Heritage Books, www.heritagebooks.org. Used by permission.

James Durham (1622-1658): Influential Scottish Covenanter and Presbyterian minister; born and died in Scotland, UK.



Many persons stumble at Christ...Indeed, my dear friends, when sinners are resolved to object to Christ, it is the easiest thing in the world to find something to object to. I have met with some who stumble at *Christ's people*. They will say, "Well, I would believe in Christ, but look at professors: see how inconsistent they are! See many church members, in what an unholy way they walk—even some ministers!" Oh, wilt thou send thy soul to hell because another man is not all he should be?...To quote the defects of others as a reason why thou shouldst continue in the error of thy ways is a fool's method of reasoning! Take heed, lest thou find out thy folly in the flames of hell. The real objection of the natural man is not, however, to God's people nor to the plan of salvation in itself considered, so much as to Christ. The rock of offense is *Christ*—the person of Christ. You will not have this man to reign over you. You are not willing that He should wear the crown and have all the honor of your salvation. You had rather perish in your sin than that Jesus Christ should be magnified in your salvation. This is a severe charge, you will tell me. If it be not true, *I pray thee prove it false by believing in Jesus*...Since Christ can save thee with an eternal salvation, thou wilt certainly grasp Him unless there be some objection in the way...I tell thee there is some hindrance in thy sinful heart, an offense at Christ, which will be thy ruin unless God deliver thee from it.—*Charles H. Spurgeon*

DO NOT STUMBLE A BELIEVER

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981)

*Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather,
that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall
in his brother's way.—Romans 14:13*

THIS is very interesting—the apostle here makes a play on the word *judge*. He has already done this earlier in the chapter, using exactly the same word in different senses. We ourselves do the same thing, of course. We use the same word in slightly different senses, relying on the context to make our meaning and purpose clear. In other words, you might very loosely paraphrase what Paul is saying here like this: “Let us not therefore judge one another anymore, but if you want to judge, then judge like this...” And then Paul says, “That no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way.”

The Greek word translated here by *judge* is, as we have seen, a word that is used very commonly in the New Testament. For instance, we find it in 1 Corinthians 2:2—the famous statement: “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” So *determined* might be translated, “I judged,” “I came to the verdict,” “I came to the conclusion.” That is the sense in which Paul is using the word in verse 13. In effect, he says, “As you seem to be anxious to express your opinions and to be judges, then come to this verdict, come to this conclusion, express this judgment. Here is a judgment that is always valid, so hold on to this. This must be the rule of your lives with respect to all questions, no matter what the question may be.” And so, Paul says that we must arrive at a solemn decision never to judge one another and act invariably on the principle that we will never do anything that will be a hindrance to our brother or sister. That is always a right decision—there is no question about it.

What does this decision mean in practice? Negatively, as I said, it means that we do not judge our brother or sister, but there is also a positive side. Paul says: Remember that this other Christian with whom you are disagreeing is your brother. The apostle has already brought that point out, you remember. We emphasized it when we looked at verse 10. But he repeats it because it is the very essence of his argument here. Remember, Paul says, that he is not a leader of some opposition party, he is not a rival, he is not a contender for something that you have:

you are brethren together. So, this is the positive teaching. And then the exhortation is that you must never say or do anything that will be a hindrance to your brother, and Paul uses two words to bring this out. The first is *stumblingblock*, the picture being of a rock or a stone or some obstacle in a man's way. Unaware that there is a stone in the way, he stumbles over it and falls.

Peter uses this same word in his first letter: "Unto you therefore which believe he is precious." Then he goes on to deal with other people: "But unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed" (1Pe 2:7-8). The word *stumbling* there is the same Greek word as *stumblingblock* here in Romans 14:13. And it is the same idea exactly. I believe that Paul uses the two terms, *stumblingblock* and *occasion to fall* for emphasis, to stress that we must never be guilty of causing our brother to fall. The expression *occasion to fall* is interesting. The Greek word is *skandalon* and our word *scandal* comes from it. The word really means a trap or a snare used to catch animals. A piece of material was placed in the trap, largely concealing it; and when the animal put its foot on this material, immediately the trap sprang, and the animal was caught. The idea that is implicit in this word is thus, "an occasion to be trapped and to be ensnared."

So, Paul is saying that we must not merely consider ourselves and our opinions; but before we make any statement and before we act upon what we believe, we must bear in mind the effect that our words and actions may have upon others. And these others, we must remember, are our brethren. They are as Christian as we are. Paul has already made that perfectly plain and clear in the third verse, where he says, "God hath received him." And he repeats it still more strongly in verse 9 by saying that Christ died for these people. The emphasis all along is that we do not consider ourselves only. The failure to think in this way is fatal in the church. I shall have to deal with this more fully later in the fifteenth verse; and there we shall see the very close parallel with the teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 8, but it is all implicit¹ here.

Paul repeats this teaching in 1 Corinthians 10 when he sums up his argument with these words: "Conscience,² I say, not thine own, but of the other" (1Co 10:29). That is what the apostle is really saying here in Romans 14. Obviously, this problem was found not only in Rome, but

¹ **implicit** – implied though not plainly expressed.

² See FGB 261, *Conscience*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

in Corinth also. Indeed, we have very good evidence from Acts that it probably caused trouble in all the churches. In dealing with these different churches or localities, the apostles had constantly to repeat this point that it is not sufficient for the Christian only to consider what is right for himself, but he must also consider his brother.

Now this, again, is a part of the great New Testament appeal. Our Lord said to His disciples at the very end, before His arrest: "This is my commandment, That ye love one another" (Joh 15:12). And He told them that it would be by their love for one another that the world would know that they were His people (Joh 13:35). This should *always* be the overruling and overriding consideration in the church. If we depart from this, we are almost certain to go wrong in our decisions. Whatever we are discussing in the church, we should always start with the consideration that we are to love one another because we are brethren together. Whatever differences of opinion may arise, more important than the particular decision is this spirit of love for one another; and I repeat that if we do not have that in the forefront of our minds, hearts, and spirits, we are bound to go astray.

From *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 14:1-17, Liberty and Conscience*, pp. 147-149; published by The Banner of Truth Trust, www.banneroftruth.org; used by permission.

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981): Welsh expository preacher and author; born in Cardiff, Wales, UK.



Keep up a special tenderness of the weak. So doth God Himself, and so must we. "He shall gather the lambs with his arm" (Isa 40:11). If His infants cry, He doth not therefore knock out their brains or turn them out of doors. Nor doth He say they are not His children for every ignorance or peevish passion of which they are guilty. Christ doth not turn men out of His school because they lack knowledge. For why then will He have little children come? And what do they come for but to learn? He doth not hate His newborn babes but feedeth and nurseth them with a special tenderness. He hath commanded and communicated the like tenderness to His ministers who must not be weak with the weak and froward with the froward, but in meekness and patience must bear with the weak and endure their most bitter censures and requitals. "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves" (2Ti 2:24-25). And if they are long learning before they come to a knowledge of the truth, they are not therefore to be cast off. He that can read Romans 14 and 15, 1 Corinthians 12:12-18, and Galatians 6 and yet can be so merciless and cruel as to cast men out of the ministry or church or ruin them for tolerable weakness, which God hath so earnestly charged us to bear with in our brethren, either he doth not understand what he readeth, or doth not believe it, or hath something else that he regardeth at his heart more than the authority or love of God.—*Richard Baxter*

THE DREADFUL SIN OF STUMBLING BELIEVERS

Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

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.—Matthew 18:6

THE humblest Christians are the best Christians, most like Christ, and highest in His favor. [They] are best disposed for the communications of divine grace, and fittest to serve God in this world and enjoy Him in another. They are great, for God overlooks heaven and earth to look on such. Certainly, those are to be most respected and honored in the church that are most humble and self-denying; for, though they least seek it, they best deserve it...

Whatever kindnesses are done to such, Christ takes as done to Himself. Whoso entertains a meek and humble Christian...takes him into his love and friendship, society and care, and studies to do him a kindness and doth this in Christ's name for His sake because he bears the image of Christ, serves Christ because Christ has received him. This shall be accepted and recompensed as an acceptable piece of respect to Christ...Note the tender regard Christ has to His church extends itself to every particular member, even the meanest...[Jesus] warns all people (18:6), for they will answer it at their utmost peril, not to offer *any* injury to one of Christ's little ones. This word makes a wall of fire about them. He that touches them touches the apple of God's eye.

Observe, first, the crime supposed (18:6): offending one of these little ones that believe in Christ. Their believing in Christ, though they be little ones, unites them to Him and interests Him in their cause, so that, as they partake of the benefit of His sufferings, He also partakes in the wrong of theirs. Even the little ones that believe have the same privileges with the great ones, for they have all obtained like precious faith. There are those that offend these little ones by drawing them to sin (1Co 8:10-11), grieving and vexing their righteous souls, discouraging them, taking occasion from their mildness to make a prey of them in their persons, families, goods, or good name. Thus, the best men have often met with the worst treatment in this world.

Secondly, the punishment of this crime. [It is] intimated in that word, “Better for him...that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” The sin is so heinous¹ and the ruin proportionably so great that he had better undergo the sorest punishments inflicted on the worst of malefactors,² which can only kill the body. Note: 1. Hell is worse than the depth of the sea, for it is a bottomless pit and a burning lake. The depth of the sea is only *killing*, but hell is *tormenting*. We meet with one that had comfort in the depth of the sea: it was Jonah (Jon 2:2, 4, 9); but never [has anyone] had the least grain or glimpse of comfort in hell, nor will [any] have to eternity. 2. The irresistible, irrevocable³ doom of the great Judge will sink sooner and surer and bind faster than a millstone hanged about the neck. It fixes a great gulf that can never be broken through (Luk 16:26). Offending Christ’s little ones, though by omission,⁴ is assigned as the reason of that dreadful sentence, “Depart from me, ye cursed” (Mat 25:41), which will at last be the doom of proud persecutors.

Our Savior here speaks of offenses or scandals in general (18:7). Having mentioned the offending of little ones, He takes occasion to speak more generally of offenses. That is an offense, 1. Which occasions guilt, which by enticement or affrightment⁵ tends to draw men from that which is good to that which is evil; 2. Which occasions grief, which makes the heart of the righteous sad. Now, concerning offenses, Christ here tells them,

(1) That they were *certain* things: “It must needs be, that offences come.” When we are sure there is danger, we should be the better armed. Not that Christ’s word necessitates any man to offend, but it is a prediction upon a view of the causes. Considering the subtlety and malice of Satan, the weakness and depravity of men’s hearts, and the foolishness that is found there, it is morally impossible but that there should be offenses. God has determined to permit them for wise and holy ends that both they which are perfect and they which are not may be made manifest (see 1Co 11:19; Dan 11:35). Being told before that there will be seducers, tempters, persecutors, and many bad examples, let us stand on our guard (Mat 24:24; Act 20:29-30).

(2) That they would be *woeful* things and the consequence of them fatal. Here is a double woe annexed to offenses: [1] A woe to the careless and unguarded, to whom the offense is given: “Woe to the world because

¹ **heinous** – extremely wicked; highly criminal.

² **malefactors** – criminals.

³ **irrevocable** – not able to be changed, reversed, or recovered.

⁴ **omission** – the act of not performing what is commanded.

⁵ **enticement or affrightment** – temptation or fear.

of offences” (18:7a). The obstructions and oppositions given to faith and holiness in all places are the bane⁶ and plague of mankind and the ruin of thousands. This present world is an evil world. It is so full of offenses, of sins, of snares and sorrows! [It is] a dangerous road we travel, full of stumblingblocks, precipices,⁷ and false guides. Woe to the world! As for those whom God hath chosen, called out of the world, and delivered from it, they are preserved by the power of God from the prejudice of these offenses and are helped over all these stones of stumbling. “Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them” (Psa 119:165). [2] A woe to the wicked who willfully give the offense: “But woe to that man by whom the offence cometh” (Mat 18:2). Though it must needs be that the offense will come, that will be no excuse for the offenders. Note, though God makes the sins of sinners to serve His purposes, that will not secure them from His wrath. The guilt will be laid at the door of those who give the offense, though they also fall under a woe who take it. Note, they who any way hinder the salvation of others will find their own condemnation the more intolerable, like “Jeroboam, who did sin, and who made Israel to sin” (1Ki 14:16). This woe is the moral of that judicial law (Exo 21:33-22:6), that he who opened the pit and kindled the fire was accountable for all the damage that ensued. The antichristian generation, by whom came the great offense, will fall under this woe for their delusion of sinners (2Th 2:11-12) and their persecutions of saints (Rev 17:1, 2, 6). For the righteous God will reckon with those who ruin the eternal interests of precious souls and the temporal interests of precious saints; for “*precious in the sight of the Lord is*” the blood of souls and the blood of saints (Psa 116:15). Men will be reckoned with, not only for their doings, but for the fruit of their doings, the mischief done by them.

Christ here speaks of offenses given in particular,

1. By us to ourselves, which is expressed by our hand or foot offending us. In such a case, it must be *cut off* (Mat 18:8-9). This Christ had said before (Mat 5:29-30), where it especially refers to seventh-commandment sins. Here it is taken more generally. Note, those hard sayings of Christ, which are displeasing to flesh and blood, need to be repeated to us again and again, and all little enough. Now observe,

(1) *What it is that is here enjoined.* We must part with an *eye*, a *hand*, or a *foot*, that is, whatever it is that is dear to us, when it proves unavoidably an occasion of sin to us. Note, [1] Many prevailing temptations to sin arise from within ourselves: our own eyes and hands offend us. If there

⁶ **bane** – cause of destruction or ruin; deadly poison.

⁷ **precipices** – very steep cliffs from which one might fall.

was never a devil to tempt us, we should be drawn away of our own lust. Nay, those things that in themselves are good and may be used as instruments of good, even those, through the corruptions of our hearts, prove snares to us, incline us to sin, and hinder us in duty. [2] In such a case, we must, as far as lawfully we may, part with that which we cannot keep without being entangled in sin by it. *First*, it is certain: the inward lust must be mortified, though it be dear to us as an eye or a hand. The flesh “with the affections and lusts” (Gal 5:24) must be mortified. “The body of sin [must] be destroyed” (Rom 6:6). Corrupt inclinations and appetites must be checked and crossed. The beloved lust that has been rolled under the tongue as a sweet morsel must be abandoned with abhorrence. *Secondly*, the outward occasions of sin must be avoided, though we thereby put as great a violence upon ourselves as it would be to cut off a hand or pluck out an eye. When Abraham quit his native country for fear of being ensnared in the idolatry of it, and when Moses quit Pharaoh’s court for fear of being entangled in the sinful pleasures of it, there was a right hand cut off. We must think nothing too dear to part with for the keeping of a good conscience.

(2) *Upon what inducement this is required*: “It is better for thee to enter into life...maimed, rather than having two hands...to be cast into” hell (Mat 18:8). The argument is taken from the future state, from heaven and hell; thence are fetched the most cogent dissuasives⁸ from sin. The argument is the same with that of the apostle: [1] “If we live after the flesh, we shall die” (Rom 8:13), having two eyes, no breaches made upon the body of sin, inbred corruption like Adonijah never displeased (1Ki 1:6), we shall “be cast into hell-fire” (18:9). [2] “If we through the Spirit mortify the deeds of the body, we shall live” (see Rom 8:13). That is meant by our *entering into life maimed*, that is, the body of sin maimed. And it is but maimed at best while we are in this world. If the right hand of the old man be cut off and its right eye be plucked out, its chief policies blasted and powers broken, it is well. But there is still an eye and a hand remaining with which it will struggle. They that are Christ’s have nailed the flesh to the cross, but it is not yet dead. Its life is prolonged, but its *dominion taken away* (Dan 7:12), and the deadly wound given it that shall not be healed.

2. Concerning offenses given by us to others, especially Christ’s little ones, which we are here charged to take heed of... (18:6). Observe,

(1) *The caution itself*: Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones. This is spoken to the disciples. As Christ will be displeased with enemies of His church if they wrong any of the members of it, even the

⁸ **cogent dissuasives** – logical and convincing persuasions not to do something.

least, so He will be displeased with the great ones of the church if they despise the little ones of it. “You that are striving who shall be greatest, take heed lest in this contest you despise the little ones.” We may understand...figuratively; true but weak believers are these little ones, who in their outward condition, or the frame of their spirits, are like little children, the lambs of Christ’s flock. [1] We must not despise them, not think meanly of them, as lambs despised (Job 12:5). We must not make a jest of their infirmities, not look upon them with contempt, not conduct ourselves scornfully or disdainfully toward them, as if we cared not what became of them; we must not say, “Though they be offended, grieved, and stumbled, what is that to us?” Nor should we make a slight matter of doing that which will entangle and perplex them. This despising of the little ones is what we are largely cautioned against (Rom 14:3, 10, 15, 20-21). We must not impose upon the consciences of others, nor bring them into subjection to our humors, as they do who say to men’s souls, “Bow down, that we may go over” (Isa 51:23). There is a respect owing to the conscience of every man who appears conscientious. [2] We must take heed that we do not despise them. We must be afraid of the sin and be very cautious what we say and do, lest we should through inadvertency give offense to Christ’s little ones, lest we put contempt upon them without being aware of it. There were those that hated them, cast them out, and yet said, “Let the Lord be glorified” (Isa 66:5). And we must be afraid of the punishment: Take heed of despising them, for it is at your peril if you do.

(2) *The reasons to enforce the caution:* We must not look upon these little ones as contemptible because really they are considerable. Let not earth despise those whom heaven respects; let those be looked upon by us with respect as His favorites.

From *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*; in the public domain.

Matthew Henry (1662-1714): Presbyterian preacher, author, and commentator; born at Broad Oak, Flintshire, Wales, UK.



The need to limit the expression of our liberty out of love for God and fellow believers is the key principle in this chapter (Romans 14). Our culture insists on rights, and it is easy for Christians to bring that attitude into the church. But the spiritual health of the body is far more important than our rights. The freedom God has purchased for us through His Son is a precious gift, but it is a freedom to live as God wants, not as we want. Luther put it well in his famous comment on Christian liberty: “A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”—*Douglas Moo*

ABUSING CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

John Calvin (1509-1564)

WE must carefully note that Christian freedom is, in all its parts, a spiritual thing. Its whole force consists in quieting frightened consciences before God—that are perhaps disturbed and troubled over forgiveness of sins, or anxious whether unfinished works, corrupted by the faults of our flesh, are pleasing to God, or tormented about the use of things indifferent. Accordingly, it is perversely interpreted both by those who allege it as an excuse for their desires that they may abuse God’s good gifts to their own lust and by those who think that freedom does not exist unless it is used before men, and consequently, in using it have no regard for weaker brethren.

Today men sin to a greater degree in the first way. There is almost no one whose resources permit him to be extravagant who does not delight in lavish and ostentatious¹ banquets, bodily apparel, and domestic architecture; who does not wish to outstrip his neighbors in all sorts of elegance; who does not wonderfully flatter himself in his opulence.² And all these things are defended under the pretext of Christian freedom. They say that these are things indifferent. I admit it, provided they are used indifferently. But when they are coveted too greedily, when they are proudly boasted of, when they are lavishly squandered, things that were of themselves otherwise lawful are certainly defiled by these vices.

Paul’s statement best distinguishes among things indifferent: “To the clean all things are clean, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is clean, inasmuch as their minds and consciences are corrupted” (Ti 1:15, cf.³ Vg.⁴). For why are the rich cursed, who have their consolation, who are full, who laugh now (Luk 6:24-25), who sleep on ivory couches (Amo 6:4), who “join...field to field” (Isa 5:8), whose feasts have harp, lyre, timbrel,⁵ and wine (Isa 5:12)? Surely ivory and gold and riches are good creations of God, permitted, indeed appointed, for men’s use by God’s providence. And we have never been forbidden to laugh, or to be filled, or to join new possessions to old or ancestral ones, or to delight in musical harmony, or to drink wine. True indeed. But where there is plenty

¹ **ostentatious** – extravagant; intended to impress others.

² **opulence** – wealth as evidenced by luxurious living.

³ **cf.** – compare.

⁴ **Vg.** – late fourth-century Latin translation of the Bible referred to as the Vulgate.

⁵ **timbrel** – tambourine.

to wallow in delights, to gorge oneself, to intoxicate mind and heart with present pleasures and be always panting after new ones—such are very far removed from a lawful use of God’s gifts.

Away, then, with uncontrolled desire, away with immoderate prodigality,⁶ away with vanity and arrogance—in order that men may with a clean conscience cleanly use God’s gifts. Where the heart is tempered to this soberness, they will have a rule for lawful use of such blessings. But should this moderation be lacking, even base and common pleasures are too much. It is a true saying that under coarse and rude attire there often dwells a heart of purple,⁷ while sometimes under silk and purple is hid a simple humility. Thus, let every man live in his station, whether slenderly,⁸ moderately, or plentifully, so that all may remember God nourishes them to live, not to luxuriate. And let them regard this as the law of Christian freedom: to have learned with Paul, in whatever state they are, to be content; to know how to be humble and exalted; to have been taught, in any and all circumstances, to be filled and to hunger, to abound and to suffer want (Phi 4:11-12).

Against the abuse of Christian freedom to the injury of the weak! In this respect also many err. They use their freedom indiscriminately and unwisely, as though it were not sound and safe if men did not witness it. By this heedless use, they very often offend weak brothers. You can see some persons today who reckon their freedom does not exist unless they take possession of it by eating meat on Fridays.⁹ I do not blame them for eating meat, but this false notion must be driven from their minds. For they ought to think that from their freedom they obtain nothing new in men’s sight but before God, and that it consists as much in abstaining as in using. If they understand that it makes no difference in God’s sight whether they eat meat or eggs, wear red or black clothes, this is enough and more. The conscience, to which the benefit of such freedom was due, is now set free. Consequently, even if men thereafter abstain from meat throughout life and ever¹⁰ wear clothes of one color, they are not less free. Indeed, because they are free, they abstain with a free conscience. But in having no regard for their brothers’ weakness,

⁶ **immoderate prodigality** – excessive, extravagant, and wasteful spending of money.

⁷ The source of this saying has not been identified; it means that under common, rough clothing, there may be a heart that deserves to wear costly royal clothing.

⁸ **slenderly** – poorly.

⁹ In 1522, some Zurich citizens, to celebrate their scriptural liberty, held meat dinners on Fridays; and on Ash Wednesday, the printer Christopher Froschauer and others, in Zwingli’s presence, ate “two dried sausages” (Kidd, *Documents*, p. 390). These or similar incidents may have been remembered here.

¹⁰ **ever** – always.

they slip most disastrously, for we ought so to bear with it that we do not heedlessly allow what would do them the slightest harm.

But it is sometimes important for our freedom to be declared before men. This I admit. Yet *we must with the greatest caution* hold to this limitation, that we do not abandon the care of the weak, whom the Lord has so strongly commended to us.

On offenses: Here, then, I shall say something about offenses¹¹—how they are to be distinguished, which ones avoided, which overlooked. From this we may afterward be able to determine what place there is for our freedom among men. Now, I like that common distinction between an offense given and one received, inasmuch as it has the clear support of Scripture and properly expresses what is meant.

If you do anything with unseemly levity,¹² or wantonness,¹³ or rashness out of its proper order or place so as to cause the ignorant and the simple to stumble, such will be called an offense given by you, since by your fault it came about that this sort of offense arose. And to be sure, one speaks of an offense as given in some matter when its fault arises from the doer of the thing itself.

An offense is spoken of as received when something, otherwise not wickedly or unseasonably committed, is by ill will or malicious intent of mind wrenched into occasion for offense.¹⁴ Here is no “given” offense, but those wicked interpreters baselessly so understand it. None but the weak is made to stumble by the first kind of offense, but the second gives offense to persons of bitter disposition and pharisaical pride. Accordingly, we shall call the one the offense of the weak, the other that of the Pharisees. Thus, we shall so temper the use of our freedom as to allow for the ignorance of our weak brothers, but for the rigor of the Pharisees, not at all!

For Paul fully shows us in many passages what must be yielded to weakness. “Receive,” he says, “him that is weak in the faith” (Rom 14:1). Also: “Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way” (Rom 14:13), and many passages with the same meaning, which are more suitably sought in their place than referred to here. The

¹¹ Calvin treats the topic of giving offense in religious practices in his treatise *Concerning Scandals* (1550) (OS II. 162-240; CR VIII. 1-84; tr. A. Golding, *A Little Booke Concernyng Offences*, 1567). Cf. Melancthon, *Loci communes* (1521) at end; ed. Engelland, *op. cit.*, pp. 161 ff.; tr. Hill, *op. cit.*, pp. 265 ff.

¹² **unseemly levity** – unbecoming lightness.

¹³ **wantonness** – moral looseness; unrestrained behavior.

¹⁴ Cf. Melancthon: “A scandal is an offense by which either faith or charity is injured in a neighbor” (ed. Engelland, *op. cit.*, p. 161; tr. Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 265f).

sum is: “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification” (Rom 15:1-2; for v. 2, cf. Vg.). In another place: “But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak” (1Co 8:9). Likewise: “Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience sake” (1Co 10:25). “Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other... Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God” (1Co 10:29, 32). Also, in another passage: “Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another” (Gal 5:13). So indeed it is. Our freedom is not given against our feeble neighbors, for love makes us their servants in all things; rather it is given that, having peace with God in our hearts, we may also live at peace with men.

We learn from the Lord’s words how much we ought to regard the offense of the Pharisees. He bids us let them alone because they are blind leaders of the blind (Mat 15:14). His disciples had warned Him that the Pharisees had been offended by His talk (Mat 15:12). He answered that they were to be ignored and their offense disregarded.

On the right use of Christian freedom and the right renunciation of it: Still the matter will remain in doubt unless we grasp whom we are to consider weak [and] whom [we are to consider] Pharisees. If this distinction is removed, I do not see what use for freedom really remains in relation to offenses, for it will always be in the greatest danger. But Paul seems to me most clearly to have defined, both by teaching and by example, how far our freedom must either be moderated or purchased at the cost of offenses.¹⁵ When Paul took Timothy into his company, he circumcised him (Act 16:3). But he could not be brought to circumcise Titus (Gal 2:3). Here was a diversity of acts but no change of purpose or mind. That is, in circumcising Timothy, although he was “free from all,” he made himself a slave to all; and “unto the Jews” he “became as a Jew” in order to win Jews; to those under the law he became as one under the law that he “might gain them that are under the law” (1Co 9:19-20); “all things to all men that” he “might...save some” (1Co 9:22), as he elsewhere writes. We have due control over our freedom if it makes no difference to us to restrict it when it is fruitful to do so.

What he had in view when he strongly refused to circumcise Titus he testifies when he thus writes: “But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: And that because of false

¹⁵ The answer lies in care for love and the neighbor’s good, but this principle is to be guarded from hypocritical pretense.

brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you” (Gal 2:3-5). We have need also to assert our freedom if through the unjust demands of false apostles it be endangered in weak consciences.

We must at all times seek after love and look toward the edification of our neighbor. “All things,” he says elsewhere, “are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth” (1Co 10:23-24). Nothing is plainer than this rule: that we should use our freedom if it results in the edification of our neighbor, but if it does not help our neighbor, then we should forgo it. There are those who pretend a Pauline prudence in abstaining from freedom, while there is nothing to which they apply it less than to the duties of love. To protect their own repose, they wish all mention of freedom to be buried; when it is no less important sometimes to use our neighbors’ freedom for their good and edification than on occasion to restrain it for their own benefit. But it is the part of a godly man to realize that free power in outward matters has been given him in order that he may be the more ready for all the duties of love.

From *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, Vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 840-845; used by permission.

John Calvin (1509-1564): French Reformer; born in Noyon, Picardie, France.



Observe the aggravations of this sin, which briefly are such as these: 1. Scandal is a murdering of souls. It is a hindering of men’s salvation and an enticing or driving them towards hell. Therefore, in some respects, [it is] worse than murder, as the soul is better than the body. 2. Scandal is a fighting against Jesus Christ in His work of man’s salvation. He came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luk 19:10), and the scandalizer seeketh to lose and destroy that which Christ would seek and save. 3. Scandal robbeth God of the hearts and service of His creatures; for it is a raising in them a distaste of His people, Word, ways, and Himself; and a turning from Him the hearts of those that should adhere unto Him. 4. Scandal is a serving of the devil, in his proper work of enmity to Christ and perdition of souls; scandalizers do his work in the world and propagate his cause and kingdom.—*Richard Baxter*

To the proud and unbelieving Jews, [Jesus] was a stone of stumbling and rock of offense; but to us who believe, He is precious.

—*Octavius Winslow*

STRONG SAINTS, WEAK SAINTS

Thomas Brooks (1608-1680)

*We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak,
and not to please ourselves.—Romans 15:1*

THOSE that are strong ought to bear with the infirmities of the weak. “We then that are strong” (Rom 15:1), saith the apostle, “ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” The word that is rendered to *bear* signifies to bear as pillars do bear the weight and burden of the house, to bear as porters do bear their burdens, as the bones do bear the flesh, or rather as parents bear their babes in their arms.

“*Bear the infirmities.*” Mark, he doth not say the enormities,¹ but the infirmities; he doth not say the wickedness, but the weakness. The strong ought to bear with the infirmities of the weak. The Lord bears with the weakness of His children: Peter is weak—and sinful through weakness; he will not let the Lord Jesus wash his feet (Joh 13:6-10). But the Lord Jesus, knowing that this was from weakness and not from wickedness, passes it over, and notwithstanding Peter’s unkind refusal, the Lord washes his feet. Thomas is very weak: “I will not believe,” says he, “except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails...and thrust my hand into his side” (Joh 20:25). Now this Christ bears with much tenderness and sweetness, as you may see in verse 27: “Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.” The Lord Jesus doth, as it were, open His wounds afresh; He overlooks Thomas’s weakness. “Well,” saith He, “seeing it is so that thou wilt not believe, I will rather bleed afresh than thou shalt die in thy unbelief.” So, the three disciples that Christ had singled out to watch with Him one hour (Mat 26:36-46) showed a great deal of weakness to be sleeping when their Lord was sorrowing, to be snoring when their Savior was sighing, etc. Yet Christ bears this, carries it sweetly towards them, and excuses their weakness: “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mat 26:41). Oh, how sweetly doth the Lord carry it! Every new man is two men; he hath a contrary principle in him: the flesh and the spirit. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak and wayward.

¹ enormities – extreme evils.

Now, shall the Lord thus bear with His weak ones, and shall not strong saints bear also? Remember, strong Christians, there was a day when you were as weak as others, as apt to fall as others, as easily conquered as others; and if then the Lord carried it sweetly towards you, let the same spirit be in you towards those that are weak. It will be no grief of heart to you if in this you act like your Lord and Savior.

If you do not bear with the infirmities of the weak, who shall? Who will? This wicked world cannot, nor will not. The world will make them transgressors for a word and watch for their halting; therefore, you had need to bear with them so much the more (Isa 29:21; Jer 20:10). The world's cruelty should stir up your compassions.

It is the duty of strong saints to deny themselves in things indifferent, to please the weak. "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend" (1Co 8:13). Strong saints must stand unchangeably resolved neither to give offense carelessly nor to take offense causelessly. Says the apostle, I will not stand to dispute my Christian liberty but will lay it down at my weak brother's feet; I will [not] use it to offend one for whom Christ hath died. "To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1Co 9:22). That is, I condescended and went to the uttermost that I possibly could, without sin, to win and gain upon the weak; I displeased myself in things that were of an indifferent nature to please them. Thou oughtest not, O strong Christian, by the use of thy Christian liberty, put a stumbling block before thy weak brother. "We then that are strong, ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification" (Rom 15:1-2). He doth not say, "Let every one of us please the lust of his neighbor," but, "Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification." Let us in things of an indifferent nature so yield as to please our neighbor. There were some [who] thought that they might observe days; others thought they might not. Some thought they might eat meat; others thought they might only eat herbs. "Why," saith the apostle, "in these things that are of an indifferent nature, I will rather displease and deny myself to profit my neighbor, than I will, by the use of my liberty, occasion my neighbor to offend." Ay, this is true Christian love indeed, for a man to cross himself to please his neighbor, so it may be for his soul's edification. But this heavenly love is driven almost out of the world, which causeth men to dislike those things in others which they flatter in themselves.

[Another] duty incumbent upon strong saints is to support the weak. “Support the weak, be patient toward all men” (1Th 5:14). Look, what the crutch is to the lame and the beam of the house is to the ruined house, strong saints ought to be that to the weak. Strong saints are to be crutches to the weak; they are to be, as it were, beams to bear up the weak. Strong saints are to set to their shoulder, to shore up the weak by their counsels, prayers, tears, and examples. Strong saints must not deal by the weak as the herd of deer do by the wounded deer: they forsake it and push it away. Oh, no! When a poor weak saint is wounded by a temptation or by the power of some corruption, then they that are strong ought to succor and support such a one, lest he be swallowed up of sorrow. When you that are strong see a weak saint staggering and reeling under a temptation or affliction, oh, know it is then your duty to put both your hands underneath, to support him that he faints not, that he miscarries not in such an hour. “Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees” (Isa 35:3).

“Strengthen...the weak hands,” that is, hands that hang down; “and confirm the feeble knees,” that is, such knees that by reason of feebleness are ready to fall. Strengthen such, that is, encourage them, by casting in a promise, by casting in thy experiences, or by casting in the experiences of other saints, that so they may be supported. It may be his case was once thine: if so, then tell him what promises did support thee, what discoveries of God did uphold thee. Tell him what tastes, what sights, and what incomes thou hadst, and how bravely thou didst bear up by the strength of His everlasting arms that were under thee, etc.

[Another] duty that is incumbent upon strong saints is to take heed of making weak saints halt and go lame in a way of holiness, or of keeping them off from the ways of God, or of turning them out of the ways of God. That is the meaning of the Scripture [in] Luke 17:2, as I conceive, and, “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for...their angels do always behold the face of my Father” (Mat 18:10). You are apt to slight them because they are weak in grace and holiness, and so you are apt to cause them to halt. But take heed of this: they have glistering courtiers that do attend them. Therefore, take heed that you do not offend them, for their angels, as so many champions, stand ready to right them and fight for them. A man was better [to] offend and anger all the devils in hell and all the witches in the world than to anger and offend the least of Christ’s little ones. If Cain do but lower upon² Abel, God will arraign him for it: “Why is thy countenance fallen?” (Gen 4:6). If Miriam does but mutter against Moses, God will spit in her face for it

² **lower upon** – look on with anger or displeasure.

(Num 12:14). That is a very dreadful word: Take heed how ye offend one of these little ones (Mat 18:6). You make nothing of it, but, saith Christ, take heed, for “it were better...that a millstone were hanged about [your] neck,” a huge millstone, as the Greek word signifies, such a one as an ass can but turn about (Jerome³ saith the greatest malefactors among the Jews were put to this kind of punishment in those days), and cast into the middle of the sea. So it is word for word in the Greek, the middle being deepest and furthest off from the shore, rendering his estate most miserable and irrecoverable.

It is your duty to labor to strengthen weak saints against sin and to draw them to holiness argumentatively. When a strong saint comes to deal with one that is weak and would strengthen him against sin, he must do it argumentatively; and when he would draw to holiness, he must do it argumentatively. First John 2:1-2 compared with 1 John 1:7, 9: “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.” What things were those he wrote? Mark 1 John 1:7: “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth from all sin.” Here he fenceth them against sin by one of the strongest and choicest arguments that the whole book of God affords: by an argument that is drawn from the soul’s communion with God. And then, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness...If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father” (1Jo 1:9; 2:1). Here the apostle labors to strengthen weak saints argumentatively, even by the strongest arguments that the whole book of God affords. So verses 12-13, “I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name’s sake,” etc. So in verse 18, “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.” So verse 28, “And now, little children, abide in him, that when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming. If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doth righteousness is born of him.” You see in all these Scriptures how the apostle labors to strengthen weak saints in a way of holiness and to fence them against ways of wickedness argumentatively, and so must you. This [is] the ready way to convince them and to make a conquest upon them, etc.

[Another] duty that lies upon strong saints is to cast a mantle over the infirmities of the weak. Now there is a three-fold mantle that should be

³ **Jerome** (ca. 347-420) – Biblical scholar and translator of the Latin translation of Scripture known as the Vulgate.

cast over the infirmities of the weak. There is a mantle of wisdom, a mantle of faithfulness, and a mantle of compassion, which is to be cast over all the infirmities of weak saints.

First, strong saints are to cast a mantle of wisdom over the infirmities of weak saints. They are not to present their sins in that ugliness and with such aggravations as may terrify, as may sink, as may make a weak saint to despair, as may drive him from the mercy-seat, as may keep him and Christ asunder, or as may unfit him for the discharge of religious duties. It is more a weakness than a virtue in strong Christians, when a weak saint is fallen to aggravate his fall to the uttermost and to present his sins in such a dreadful dress as shall amaze him, etc. It often proves very prejudicial and dangerous to weak saints when their infirmities are aggravated beyond Scripture grounds and beyond what they are able to bear. He that shall lay the same strength to the rubbing of an earthen dish as he does to the rubbing of a pewter platter, instead of clearing it shall surely break it all to pieces. The application is easy, etc.

Secondly, there is a mantle of faithfulness that is to be cast over the infirmities of weak saints. A man should never discover the infirmities of a weak saint, especially to such that have neither skill nor will to heal and bury them. The world will but blaspheme and blaze them abroad to the dishonor of God, to the reproach of religion, and to the grief and scandal of the weak, etc. They will with Ham call upon others to scoff at them than to bring a mantle to cover them, etc. Ham was cursed for that he did discover his father's nakedness to his brethren, when it was in his power to have covered it. He saw it and might have drawn a curtain over it, but would not; and for this, by a spirit of prophecy, he was cursed by his father (Gen 9:22). This age is full of such monsters that rejoice to blaze abroad the infirmities of the saints, and justice hath or will certainly curse these.

Thirdly, there is a mantle of compassion that must be cast over the weaknesses and infirmities of weak saints. When a weak man comes to see his sin, and the Lord gives him to lie down in the dust and to take shame and confusion to himself that he hath dishonored God, and caused Christ to bleed afresh, and grieved the Spirit, oh, now thou must draw a covering and cast a mantle of love and compassion over his soul that he may not be swallowed up with sorrow. Now thou must confirm thy love to him and carry it with as great tenderness and sweetness after his fall as if he had never fallen. This the apostle presses (2Co 2:7). "Love," says the wise man, "covereth all sins" (Pro 10:12). Love's mantle is very large. Love claps a plaster⁴ upon every sore; love hath two hands

⁴ plaster – bandage or dressing spread to cover and close wounds.

and makes use of both to hide the scars of weak saints. Christ, O strong saints, casts the mantle of His righteousness over your weaknesses, and will not you cast the mantle of love over your brother's infirmities?

It is the duty of strong saints to sympathize with the weak, to rejoice with them when they rejoice and to mourn with them when they mourn. "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is *σκανδαλίζεται* = scandalized, offended, and I *πυροῦμαι* = am not on fire, burn not?" (2Co 11:29). Thuanus⁵ reports of Lodovicus Marsacus, a knight of France, when he was led with other martyrs that were bound with cords, going to execution, and he for his dignity was not bound, he cried, "Give me my chains too, let me be a knight of the same order."⁶

It should be between a strong saint and a weak as it is between two lute-strings that are tuned one to another: no sooner is one struck, but the other trembles. No sooner should a weak saint be struck, but the strong should tremble. "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them" (Heb 13:3)...

Lastly, it is the duty of the strong to give to the weak the honor that is due unto them (1Pe 3:7). They have the same name, the same baptism, the same profession, the same faith, the same hope, the same Christ, the same promises, the same dignity, and the same glory with you. Therefore, speak honorably of them and carry it honorably towards them. Let not them be under your feet that Christ has laid near His heart.

From *The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks*, ed. A. B. Grosart, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1866), 95-102; in the public domain.

Thomas Brooks (1608-1680): English Nonconformist Puritan preacher and advocate of Congregationalism; buried in Bunhill Fields, Greater London, UK.



By keeping our hearts diligently, we should the soonest remove the scandals and stumbling blocks out of the way of the world. How the worthy name of our Lord is blasphemed because of the wicked conduct of many who bear His name! What prejudice has been created against the gospel by the inconsistent lives of those who preach it! But if we keep *our* hearts, we shall not add to the scandals caused by the ways of loose professors. Nay, those with whom we come in contact will see that we have "been with Jesus" (Act 4:13). When the majestic beams of holiness shine from a heavenly walk, the world will be awed, and respect will again be commanded by the followers of the Lamb.

—A. W. Pink

⁵ **Jacques Auguste de Thou** (1553-1617) – French historian and president of the Parliament of Paris; author of *Historia sui temporis* (*History of His Own Times*).

⁶ Thuanus, *Historia*.

STUMBLING OVER FALSE DOCTRINE

William Perkins (1558-1602)

I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.—Revelation 2:14

BALAAAM, the false prophet, taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel to cause them to eat of things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication, so this church maintained among them Nicolaitans, who taught it was lawful to eat things sacrificed to idols at idols' feasts and to commit fornication. The first part of this similitude¹ is in the end of verse 14: "who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block," etc. The second part is in verse 15.

Touching the doctrine of Balaam, we are to observe three points: first, what a stumbling block or an offense is; secondly, what it is to cast or put a stumbling block; and, thirdly, by what means Balak did cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel.

Point 1. For the first, a stumbling block is properly anything, as wood or stone or such like, that is cast in a man's way to hinder him in his gate² and to cause him to trip or fall. And by resemblance in this place, an offense is anything that causes a man to sin against God and so to slip or fall or to go out of his way that leads to life. Further, an offense is twofold—either given or taken. An offense given is any speech or deed whereby a man is provoked to sin. And so was Peter an offense unto Christ, though He took it not (Mat 16:23). An offense taken is when any man takes occasion to fall and sin by that which is well done by others. So were the Pharisees offended at the sacred teaching of our Savior Christ.

Point 2. The casting or putting of a stumbling block or giving an offense is the doing or saying of anything whereby a man is occasioned to sin. And this is done either about things evil in themselves or in things indifferent. Evil things are such as God's Word forbids, and they are twofold: either persuasions or examples. Bad persuasions are false doctrine and evil counsel. Bad example is also a giving of offense because it does embolden evil men in their sin and draw the godly to evil. Again,

¹ **similitude** – comparison drawn between two things.

² **gate** – path.

in things indifferent, as meat, drink, apparel, etc., offense may be given when as they are used unreasonably, not in fit time and place and before fit persons. And of this Paul speaks, saying, “If I knew my eating did offend my brother, I would not eat flesh while the world standeth” (see 1 Co 8:13). The offense here spoken of was an offense given in evil things, for it was an evil act done by Balaam and accordingly received and taken of the Israelites; for he used outward provocations to allure them unto sin.

Point 3. The means whereby King Balak did cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel is set down in the end of the verse: by provoking them to eat of things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication. That we may understand this fully, read Numbers 25. The sum of the history is this: when Balaam had assayed³ sundry ways to curse the children of Israel and could not, he gave Balak counsel to use means to cause them to sin. At his counsel, Balak sent forth the most beautiful women in his kingdom into the camp of Israel to entice them to the service of their idols and to banquet with them at their idol feasts, so that they might draw them to fornication, whereunto the Israelites condescended and so sinned against God.

Thus much [for this section on] the meaning of the words.

Use 1. First, here observe a special property of false teachers: namely, to cast offenses before men to cause them to fall in the way that leads to salvation. By this, Christ intends to make known unto this church the false doctrine of Balaam. Paul in his epistles calls the doctrine of the gospel a truth “according to godliness” (1Ti 6:3), because the intent of the gospel is to lead men to true godliness (Ti 1:1). On the contrary, the doctrine of antichrist is called “the mystery of iniquity” (2Th 2:7) because the scope thereof is to draw men to all iniquity and abomination. Here, then, we have a rule whereby we may judge between true and false doctrine, even by looking into the end and scope thereof. If it aims at true piety and sincere obedience, we may judge it to be good. But if it tends to draw men to idolatry and sin, then it is a false doctrine.

Now, whereas some do charge the doctrine of our religion to be sundry ways scandalous, they may be easily answered.

Charge 1. They say it is a doctrine of desperation because it imports that God created men so as He will save but a few, making them for this end: to cast the greatest number to hell. *Answer.* To this I answer two things. First, touching the number of them that are to be saved, of which little is said in Scripture, and therefore I will not say much, yet this may

³ **assayed** – attempted.

be averred:⁴ the number of the elect in itself is a great company (Rev 7:9). But, being compared with them that shall be damned, it is but small. Second, touching the end of man's creation, our doctrine is not that God created men for this end to cast them to hell, but this we teach: that God created all men to manifest His glory in them, in some by their just and deserved damnation for sin. We teach not that men are other ways condemned than for their sins, and therefore he that is condemned has his just reward.

Charge 2. They say further that our doctrine is a doctrine of blasphemy, for we teach God to have decreed the Fall of man and so make God the author of man's sin. *Answer.* We teach indeed that God decreed Adam's fall, but thence it follows not that He is the author of man's sins. For God's will is twofold: general and special. God's general will is to permit that which is evil, not simply, but because with God evil has some respect of good. And in this respect, we say God decreed Adam's fall. God's special will is His approving will, whereby He takes pleasure and delight in that which is good; and in this regard God nilled⁵ Adam's fall and man's sins, and yet in some respect He may be said to will them. A magistrate, though he takes no comfort or delight at the death and execution of a malefactor, yet he does decree and appoint it and so may be said to will it. Even so, God, Who can bring light out of darkness, permits evil because with Him [it] has some respect of good, and so He may be said to will it.

Charge 3. They say also that the doctrine of our church is a doctrine of security because we teach that a man may be certain of his salvation and of perseverance in the faith to the end. *Answer.* This is not a doctrine of carnal security because we do not impose necessarily the use of means to them that would be certain of their salvation and perseverance unto the end—as, namely, denial of themselves and humbling themselves in continual prayer, with hearing and meditating in the Word of God and receiving the sacraments for the increase of faith and renewing of their repentance—all which will rather make a man fearful and careful than secure. For with the means is certainty of salvation, both attained and preserved, so that our doctrine is not a doctrine of offenses but a true doctrine that beats out the plain way that leads unto life.

Use 2. Secondly, Christ's detestation of this doctrine of Balaam must admonish us to be careful of our behavior every way, so that we give no offense unto any; for if we do, we are Balaam's scholars. This is a point of special observation. We must look to our communication, that it be

⁴ **averred** – asserted as fact; stated positively.

⁵ **nilled** – rejected.

void of railing and bad speeches, and to our conversation, that it be holy and blameless. In everything, we must have care not to hinder others in the way of life. “Woe be to them,” says Christ, “that give offences: it were better that a huge millstone”—such as an ass can but turn about, as the word imports—“were tied all about his neck, and that he were cast into the sea” (see Mat 18:6). The reason is because when a man by any means gives his brother offense, he does as much as in him lies to plunge his brother’s soul into the pit of destruction. Therefore, we must flee [from] offenses as hell itself. Yea, rather, on the contrary, we must help our brethren forward in the way of salvation and remove from them all stumbling blocks that cause them to fall. If this duty were practiced, our church would abound with grace and godliness. But this duty is wanting—and hence becomes, for example, that we have so small increase after much labor in preaching; evil counsel does quench the graces of the Spirit in men’s hearts.

Use 3. Thirdly, hereby we must learn to have special care against offenses given by evil counsel or bad example. For if it is the property of the false prophet to cast stumbling blocks before others, then it is a dangerous thing to fall upon them when they are laid before us. While we live in this world, we shall see many offenses given; but we must take heed we take them not. Therefore, Christ bids us, “If thy foot offend thee, or thine hand, cut it off; or thine eye, pluck it out” (see Mat 18:8-9), teaching us to forgo the dearest thing that can be unto us if it would cause us to sin against God.

From *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. J. S. Yuille, J. R. Beeke, and D. W. H. Thomas, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 483-484, 486-488; www.heritagebooks.com; used by permission.

William Perkins (1558-1602): Influential English Puritan preacher and theologian; born in Marston Jabbett, Bulkington, Warwickshire, England, UK.



We put offenses or stumblingblocks in the way of men’s souls whenever we do anything to keep them back from Christ, to turn them out of the way of salvation, or to disgust them with true religion. We may do it directly by persecuting, ridiculing, opposing, or dissuading them from decided service of Christ. We may do it indirectly by living a life inconsistent with our religious profession and by making Christianity loathsome and distasteful by our own conduct. Whenever we do anything of the kind, it is clear from our Lord’s words that we commit a great sin. There is something very fearful in the doctrine here laid down. It ought to stir up within us great searchings of heart. It is not enough that we wish to do good in this world. Are we quite sure that we are not doing harm?—*J. C. Ryle*

A BAG OF POISON CAST BY SATAN

John Flavel (c. 1630-1691)

But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not.—2 Corinthians 4:3-4

THEY whose eyes are not opened graciously in this world to see their disease and remedy in Christ shall have their eyes opened judicially in the world to come to see their disease without any remedy. If God open them now, it is by way of prevention. If they be not opened until then, it will produce desperation.

The horrible nature of this judgment further appears from the exceeding difficulty of curing it, especially in men of excellent natural endowments and accomplishments. “And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also? Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth” (Joh 9:40-41), q. d.,¹ the pride and conceitedness of your heart and obstinacy and incurableness to your blindness. These are “the blind people that have eyes” (Isa 43:8). In seeing, they see not (see Mat 13:13). The conviction of such men is next to an impossibility.

The design and end of this blindness under the gospel is most dreadful. So saith my text: “The god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.” Answerable whereunto are those words: “Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed” (Isa 6:10). So that it is plain [that] this blinding is a prelude to damnation, as the covering of Haman’s face was to his destruction (Est 7:8-10). When the Lord hath no purpose of grace and mercy to a man’s soul, then, to bring about the damnation of that man by a righteous permission, many occasions of blindness befall him, which Satan improves² effectually unto his eternal ruin. Among [those] fatal occasions, blind guides and scandalous professors are none of the least. They shall be

¹ q. d. – Latin: *quasi dicat*; “as if one should say.”

² improves – uses.

fitted with ministers suitably to their humors,³ which shall speak smooth things. “If a man walking in the spirit and falsehood [i.e., by a spirit of falsehood] do lie, saying, I will prophesy unto thee of wine and of strong drink; he shall even be the prophet of this people” (Mic 2:11). And the slips and falls of professors shall do the devil not a little service in this his fatal design. “Woe unto the world because of offences” (Mat 18:7). This shall blind them and harden them to purpose.

Thus, you see what a dreadful judgment this is—a stroke of God upon the soul that cuts off all the present comforts of Christ and religion from it, takes away the bridle of restraint from sin, and makes way for the final ruin of the soul. A far greater judgment it is than the greatest calamity or affliction that can befall us in this world. If our names suffer by the greatest reproaches, our bodies by the most painful diseases, our estates by the greatest losses—if God strike every comfort we have in this world dead by affliction—all this is nothing compared with this blinding judgment of God upon the soul. For they [afflictions] may come from the tender love of God to *us*, but this is the effect of His wrath. They may cleanse sin (Heb 12:6; Isa 27:9), but this [blindness] increases it. They often prove occasions of conversion (Job 36:8-9), but this [blindness] is the great obstruction to it. In a word, they only wound the flesh, and that with a curable wound; but this stabs the soul, and that with a mortal wound.

If this is the case of the unbelieving world—to be so blinded by the god of this world—how little should we value the censures and slanders of this blind world? Certainly, they should move no other affection but pity in our soul. If their eyes were opened, their mouths would be shut! They would never traduce⁴ religion and the sincere profession of it as they do if Satan had not blinded their minds. They speak evil of the things they know not...Beware, Christians, that you give them no occasion to blaspheme the name of your God. Then never trouble yourselves, however they use your names. If they tread it in the dirt now, God (as one speaks) will take it up, wash off all the dirt, and deliver it to you again clear and shining. Should such men speak well of us, we might justly suspect ourselves of some iniquity that administers to them the occasions of it.

How absurd and dangerous must it be for Christians to follow the examples of the blind world? Let the blind follow the blind; but let not those whom God hath enlightened do so. Christians, never let those lead you who are themselves led blindfolded by the devil. The holiness and

³ **humors** – whims; desires.

⁴ **traduce** – speak evil of, especially falsely or maliciously.

heavenliness of Christians was wont to set the world a wondering that they would not run with them into “the same excess of riot” (1Pe 4:4). But sure[ly], since God hath opened your eyes and showed you the dangerous courses they walk in, it would be the greatest wonder of all that you should be the companions of such men and tread in the steps of their examples. Christian, as humble and lowly thoughts as thou hast of thyself, yet I would have thee understand thyself to be too good to be the associate of such men. If they will walk with you in the way of duty and holiness, let them come and welcome; receive them with both arms and be glad of their company. But beware that you walk not in their paths, lest they be a snare unto you...

If this be so, let Christians be exact and circumspect⁵ in their walking, lest they lay a stumbling block before the blind. It is a great sin to do so in a proper sense: “Thou shalt not...put a stumblingblock before the blind” (Lev 19:14). And a far greater [sin] to do it in a metaphorical sense: it is the express will of God “that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way” (Rom 14:13). It is an argument of little regard to the honor of Christ or the souls of men so to do. O professors, look to your steps. The devil desires to make use of you for such purposes. The sins of thousands of others, who make no profession of godliness, will never so fit his purpose for the blinding of those men’s eyes as the least slip or failing of yours will do. It is the living bird that makes the best stale⁶ to draw others into the net. The grossest wickedness of profane sinners passeth away in silence, but all the neighborhood shall ring with your miscarriages.⁷ “A righteous man falling down before the wicked is as a troubled fountain, and a corrupt spring” (Pro 25:26). The scandalous falls of good men are like a bag of poison cast by Satan into the spring from whence the whole town is supplied with water. You little know what mischief you do and how many blind sinners may fall into hell by your occasion.

From *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel*, Vol. 2, 466-469;
in the public domain.

John Flavel (c. 1630-1691): English Presbyterian minister; born at Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, England, UK.



Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.—*Paul*

⁵ **exact and circumspect** – careful and watchful.

⁶ **stale** – person or thing acting as a decoy.

⁷ **miscarriages** – ill conduct; evil or improper behavior.

STUMBLING OURSELVES

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.—1 Corinthians 8:9

SEEING we are to pray [that] we may not be led into temptation, certainly we ought not to run ourselves into it. This is one request that Christ directs us to make to God in that form of prayer, which He taught His disciples: “Lead us not into temptation” (Mat 6:13). And how inconsistent shall we be with ourselves if we pray to God that we should not be led into temptation, and at the same time, we are not careful to avoid temptation—but bring ourselves into it by doing those things that lead and expose to sin. What self-contradiction is it for a man to pray to God that he may be kept from that which he takes no care to avoid! By praying that we may be kept from temptation, we profess to God that being in temptation is a thing to be avoided; but by running into it we show that we choose the contrary, *viz.*,¹ not to avoid it.

The apostle directs us to avoid those things that are in themselves lawful but tend to lead others into sin. Surely, then, we should avoid what tends to lead ourselves into sin. The apostle directs, “Take heed lest...this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak” (1Co 8:9); “That no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way” (Rom 14:13). “But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat” (Rom 14:15). “For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offense. It is good neither to eat flesh nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak” (Rom 14:20-21). Now if this rule of the apostle be agreeable to the word of Christ, as we must suppose (or expunge² what he says out of the canon of the Scripture), then a like rule obliges more strongly in those things that tend to lead *ourselves* into sin.

There are many precepts of Scripture which directly and positively imply that we ought to avoid those things that tend to sin.

This very thing is commanded by Christ, where He directs us to watch lest we “enter into temptation” (Mat 26:41). But, certainly, running

¹ *viz.* – from Latin *videlicet*: that is to say; namely.

² *expunge* – erase or remove completely.

ourselves into temptation is the reverse of watching against it. We are commanded to “abstain from all *appearance* of evil” (1Th 5:22), *i.e.*, do by sin as a man does by a thing, the sight or appearance of which he hates and therefore will avoid anything that looks like it and will not come near or in sight of it.

Again, Christ commanded to separate from us those things that are stumbling blocks or occasions of sin, however dear they are to us. “If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee” (Mat 5:29). “And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off” (Mat 5:30). By the right hand offending us is not meant its pain³ing us; but the word in the original signifies being a stumbling block: if thy right hand proves to be a stumbling block or occasion to fall, *i.e.*, an occasion to sin. Those things are called offenses or stumbling blocks in the New Testament, which are the occasions of falling into sin. Yea, Christ tells us that we must avoid them, however dear they are to us, though as dear as our right hand or right eye. If there be any practice that naturally tends and exposes us to sin, we must be done with it, though we love it never so well and are never so loth³ to part with it, though it be as contrary to our inclination as to cut off our own right hand or pluck out our own right eye, and that upon pain of damnation. For it is intimated that if we do not, we must go with two hands and two eyes into hell fire.

From “Temptation and Deliverance; or, Joseph’s Great Temptation and Gracious Deliverance” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 2, 229,
in the public domain.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758): American Congregational preacher and theologian; born in East Windsor, Connecticut Colony, USA.



Without Christ crucified in her pulpits, a church is little better than a cumberer [*obstruction*] of the ground, a dead carcass, a well without water, a barren fig tree, a sleeping watchman, a silent trumpet, a dumb witness, an ambassador without terms of peace, a messenger without tidings, a lighthouse without fire, a stumbling block to weak believers, a comfort to infidels, a hotbed for formalism, a joy to the devil, and an offense to God.—*J. C. Ryle*

The very heaviest conceivable doom [is] better than to be a stumbling block in the way of the very least of God’s people. Yet I have known some say, “Well, the thing is lawful; and if a weak brother does not like it, I cannot help it. He should not be weak.” No, my dear brother; but that is not the way Christ would have you talk.

You must consider the weakness of your brother...If meat make your brother to offend, eat no meat while the world standeth.

—*Charles H. Spurgeon*

³ loth – unwilling.

CHRIST PLEASED NOT HIMSELF

Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

For even Christ pleased not himself.—Romans 15:3

We must “bear the infirmities of the weak” (15:1). We all have our infirmities, but the weak are more subject to them than others—the weak in knowledge or grace, the bruised reed and the smoking flax (Mat 12:20). We must consider these, not trample upon them but encourage them and bear with their infirmities. If through weakness they judge, censure, and speak evil of us, we must bear with them, pity them, and not have our affections alienated from them. Alas! It is their weakness; they cannot help it. Thus, Christ bore with His weak disciples and apologized for them. But there is more in it. We must also bear their infirmities by sympathizing with them, concerning ourselves for them, ministering strength to them as there is occasion. This is bearing one another’s burdens (Gal 6:1).

We must not please ourselves, but our neighbor (15:1-2). We must deny our own humor¹ in consideration of our brethren’s weakness and infirmity.

1. Christians must not please themselves. We must not make it our business to gratify all the little appetites and desires of our own heart. It is good for us to cross ourselves sometimes, and then we shall the better bear others’ crossing of us...The first lesson we have to learn is to deny ourselves (Mat 16:24).

2. Christians must please their brethren. The design of Christianity is to soften and meek the spirit, to teach us the art of obliging and true complaisance;² not to be servants to the lust of any, but to the necessities and infirmities of our brethren—to comply with all that we have to do with as far as we can with a good conscience. Christians should *study* to be pleasing. As we must not please ourselves in the use of our Christian liberty (which was allowed us, not for our own pleasure, but *for the glory of God and the profit and edification of others*), so we must please our neighbor. How amiable and comfortable a society would the church of Christ be if Christians would study to please one another, as now we see them commonly industrious to cross, thwart, and contradict

¹ **humor** – inclination; liking.

² **obliging...complaisance** – cheerful willingness...willingness to please others.

one another! “Please his neighbour”—not in everything, for it is not an unlimited rule—but “for his good,” especially for the good of his soul (Rom 15:2). [We must] not please him by serving his wicked wills, humoring him in a sinful way, consenting to his enticements, or suffering sin upon him. This is a base way of pleasing our neighbor to the ruin of his soul: if we thus please men, we are not the servants of Christ. But please him for his good, not for our own *secular* good or to make a prey of him but for his *spiritual* good. “To edification,” that is, not only for his profit, but for the profit of others to edify the body of Christ by *studying* to oblige one another. The closer the stones lie and the better they are squared to fit one another, the stronger the building is. Now observe the reason why Christians must please one another: “For even Christ pleased not himself.” The self-denial of our Lord Jesus is the best argument against the selfishness of Christians. Observe,

(1) **That “Christ pleased not Himself.”** He did not consult His own worldly credit, ease, safety, nor pleasure. He had not where to lay His head, lived upon alms, would not be made a king, detested no proposal with greater abhorrence than that [of] “Master, spare thyself.” He did not seek His own will (Joh 5:30), washed His disciples’ feet, endured the contradiction of sinners against Himself, troubled Himself (Joh 11:33), did not consult His own honor, and, in a word, emptied Himself, and made Himself of no reputation (Phi 2:5-8)—and all this for our sakes, to bring in a righteousness for us, and to set us an example. His whole life was a self-denying, self-displeasing life. He bore the infirmities of the weak (Heb 4:15).

(2) **That herein the Scripture was fulfilled.** “As it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me” (Rom 15:3). This is quoted out of Psalm 69:9, the former part of which verse is applied to Christ, “The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up” (Joh 2:17), and the latter part here. For David was a type of Christ, and his sufferings [a type] of Christ’s sufferings. It is quoted to show that Christ was so far from pleasing Himself that He did in the highest degree displease Himself. Not as if His undertaking, considered on the whole, was a task and grievance to Him, for He was very willing to it and very cheerful in it; but in His humiliation the content and satisfaction of natural inclination were altogether crossed and denied. He preferred our benefit before His own ease and pleasure. This the apostle chooses to express in Scripture language; for how can the things of the Spirit of God be better spoken of than in the Spirit’s own words? And this Scripture he alleges, “The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me” (Rom 15:3).

[1] The shame of those reproaches that Christ underwent: whatever dishonor was done to God was a trouble to the Lord Jesus. He was grieved for the hardness of people's hearts, beheld a sinful place with sorrow and tears. When the saints were persecuted, Christ so far displeased Himself as to take what was done to them as done against Himself: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Act 9:4). Christ also did Himself endure the greatest indignities. There was much reproach in His sufferings.

[2] The sin of those reproaches that Christ undertook to satisfy—so many understand it. Every sin is a kind of reproach to God, especially presumptuous³ sins. Now the guilt of these fell upon Christ when He was made sin, that is, a sacrifice, a sin-offering for us. When the Lord laid upon Him the iniquity of us all (Isa 53:6), and He bore our sins in His own body upon the tree (1Pe 2:24), they fell upon Him as upon our surety (Heb 7:22). "Upon me be the curse" (Gen 27:13). This was the greatest piece of self-displacency⁴ that could be: considering His infinite, spotless purity and holiness, the infinite love of the Father to Him, and His eternal concern for His Father's glory, nothing could be more contrary to Him nor more against Him than to be made sin and a curse for us, and to have the reproaches of God fall upon Him, especially considering for whom He thus displeased Himself—for strangers, enemies, and traitors, "the just for the unjust" (1Pe 3:18). This seems to come in as a reason why we should bear the infirmities of the weak. We must not please ourselves, for Christ pleased not Himself. We must bear the infirmities of the weak, for Christ bore the reproaches of those that reproached God. He bore the guilt of sin and the curse for it; we are only called to bear a little of the trouble of it. He bore the presumptuous sins of the wicked; we are called only to bear the infirmities of the weak.

"Even Christ"—even He Who was infinitely happy in the enjoyment of Himself, Who needed not us nor our services—even He Who thought it no robbery to be equal with God (Phi 2:6), Who had reason enough to please Himself and no reason to be concerned, much less to be crossed, for us—even He pleased not Himself, even He bore our sins. And should not we be humble, self-denying, and ready to consider one another, who are members one of another?

From *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, in the public domain.



This is my commandment, That ye love one another,
as I have loved you.—*Jesus*

³ **presumptuous** – excessively bold.

⁴ **self-displacency** – self-displeasing.