

## The Blessedness of the Unoffended

*"Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me"* (Matthew 11:6).

*"These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended"* (John 16:1).

One of the greatest perils of the Christian life lurks in the common pathway of discipleship. It is the peril of being offended in Christ. The fellowship to which the Gospel summons us inevitably brings a constant new and humiliating discovery of self; an unvarying disturbance of established order in our lives, as His will corrects and opposes our own; and a ceaseless effort to attain to the ideal; that is, to make our lives as followers increasingly correspond with His as Forerunner. And the danger is that we are apt to break down under the test and training of it all, to go back and walk no more with Him, to become, in fact, offended in Him. It is always possible, despite every sincere profession of the soul, that what God meant for blessing should become blight to us by our misconceptions. It is always perilously possible that the light of today may become deep and impenetrable darkness tomorrow, by our failure to obey and keep step with Him, by our lagging behind or turning aside from the compelling guidances of Christ's companionship. Men have, in this way, unconsciously and imperceptibly put themselves far out of the range of Christ's ordinary influences; and have become, like the derelicts of the ocean, occasions of danger and disaster to countless other lives.

But Christ, with that absolute frankness which is a large part of His attractiveness to men, cannot be held to blame for such pitiful defections. For He never disguises the otherwise unthought-of possibility. In His Evangel He combines welcome with warning as none other has ever done. His Word, while it opens the very heart of God to our consciousness, opens also our own hearts to us. By Him we come to know the Father, and by Him also we come to know ourselves. He reveals the entire faithfulness of God to us, but He reveals also the instability of our own wills, and the untrustworthiness of our own emotions. He treats us not as ideal but as real men; and forewarns us of the destruction that wasteth at noonday, as well as of the pestilence that walketh in the darkness. Hence it is that to the most earnest and self-convinced of us all He says: *"Blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in Me."* The implicate is obvious and ominous. But the reality and richness of His grace is the sufficient and silencing answer to every one of our fears. The blessedness of the unoffended, despite all the danger without and the weakness within, is the possible acquisition of each one. And it is blessedness indeed.

Now it is necessary to remember the meaning of the word "offend." In its original form, it is the very word we frequently use – scandalize, and has the force of causing to stumble. So we may translate and expand this saying of Christ as being: 'Blessed is he who does not find in Me any cause of stumbling; who can keep his feet in My ways; who is not tripped by any obstacles in the path into which I have directed him.' He uses the word quite frequently in this sense; as, for instance, when He speaks of a man's hand or eye being a cause of stumbling to him, when He

denounces those who cause little ones to be offended, and when He declares that in the day of His glory all things that offend shall be rooted out of His Kingdom.

But He never uses it as surprisingly as when He declares the possibility of men finding occasion of stumbling in Him. We are prepared to find it in the world, in the opposition of the devil, in the proven insincerity of others – but in Him! This is surely the most startling of all His warnings. For in Him we have already found life and salvation, guidance and peace, inspiration and satisfaction. And now to contemplate finding in Him also any cause of offense fairly staggers us. Had this word been applicable to men of the world, it would have occasioned little, if any, surprise. For instance, we are not greatly taken aback when those who knew Him so familiarly should treat Him so contemptuously and say: “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” Nor are we entirely unprepared to find that the Pharisees were offended in Him when He spoken to them of the evil thoughts, adulteries, murders, and the like, which proceed from the hearts of men; for His words convicted them of sin. We are not much surprised that He should be a rock of offence to those who are avowedly disobedient to His demands. But that His own friends, those who really know Him, and have been admitted into the intimacies of fellowship with Him, should find cause of offence in Him is passing strange. And its very mystery warns us to take heed to ourselves.

The setting of the first of these gives us the key to their significance. John the Baptist was languishing in prison on the shores of the Dead Sea as the outcome of a life of the utmost faithfulness. He had been tremendously loyal to Christ, splendidly in earnest concerning his mission, wonderfully courageous in giving forth the message committed to him, and yet it had all ended in a dungeon.

What a test for such a man!

It seemed as though his faith, his self-restriction, his willingness to decrease that Christ might increase, had all been unrecognized and unvalued. His experience so entirely contradicted God’s assurance, that it is easy to understand the perplexity of mind which led him to send his disciples to Christ with the pathetic query: “Art thou He that should come?” For here is One who has avowedly come to deliver captives, and yet He does not deliver the man who, more than all others, seemed to have claims upon Him. He has proclaimed His own mission in terms of sympathy and love for the heartbroken, and yet here is a crushed and heartbroken man of whom He apparently takes no notice.

Is it to be wondered at that at last doubt overcomes faith, so that he sends the messengers to Christ in the hope that He will declare Himself plainly, and interpret such utterly inexplicable and contradictory experience to the one who had at immense cost to himself maintained a devoted loyalty to the Son of God? Christ’s only answer to these messengers is an exhibition of His sovereign power over the forces of destruction and death, and an injunction that they should tell John what they had seen, and give to him this message which calls for a new triumphant trust

on his part: *"Blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in Me."* For it means that in the pathway of blessing the providence of testing will always be experienced. Its implication is that there is true peace only for that man who will trust Christ when he has no external aids to faith, who believes Him when he sees only the seeming denial of his confidence, and who holds to his loyalty without stumbling when His treatment tests his endurance to the uttermost.

The second of these words of Christ helps us to understand how His message to John applies to ourselves: *"These things have I spoke unto you, that ye should not be offended."* Spoken as they were on the eve of His departure, when the fierce tests of discipleship were about to be experienced by His followers, they imply that they will need to stay their souls on the things He has told them concerning His purpose and power, if they are to avoid the peril of stumbling and going back from Him. For they are bound to come into experiences of test and strain as they carry out their consecration vows; and "in those days," says Christ, "be true to your own best experience of Me. Rest on that which no man can take from you – the personal knowledge you have of My grace. Hold to those things I have spoken and shown to you. Be loyal to Me. Trust Me entirely, despite every unexplained mystery and seemingly unnecessary tribulation. And you shall not be stumbled but strengthened by these very things which are all of My ordering."

Now it is not disloyal to Christ to say this: that He not only masters men but mystifies them also. While He blesses them, He bewilders them too; so incomparably higher are His ways and thoughts than ours. He persuades us to love and loyalty, but He puzzles us too, often to the point of distraction. He certainly answers the questions of our hearts; but at the same time He arouses even more than He answers. And in the life of every true follower of Him, there will always be, as there was in His own, some great unanswered, "Why?" None of us will ever be exempt from the need of acquiring by faith and patience the blessedness of the unoffended.

For think of an ordinary and typical instance of offence. It is not commonly a matter of open backsliding, of heartless renunciation of the truth, or of bitter denial of past experience. Rather does it begin with the disappointment of some hope, the failure of an expectation, the weariness of an unanswered prayer, or the ache of a heart which seems to evoke no sympathetic answer from God. All this generates an unspoken and almost unspeakable distrust; and as we brood over it, a sense of injustice grows, a feeling that we have not been treated quite fairly by Christ, which becomes positive resentment. Until, after a while, His yoke becomes irksome; we challenge His right to control our lives so; and it all ends in a secret repudiation of His mastership, and often in an outward renunciation also of all spiritual interests and aims. This is a typical cause of offense in Christ. And how many there are all around us of whose lives it is a true description! From small beginnings of distrust the largest disasters grow. If two parallel lines are produced into infinity, there will never be any variation of the distance between them. But let them diverge at any point by only a hair's breadth. Then the farther they are produced, the wider the

divergence becomes, until at length there is a universe of distance between them. So with our fellowship with Christ. The smallest distrust or disobedience is charged with the potentiality of the infinite; and if undiscovered and unchecked, will eventually put an eternity of distance between the soul and the Saviour. If, therefore, we can estimate some of the unchanging certainties of discipleship; explore some, at least, of the perilous causes of offence in Christ; and at the same time also establish a new relationship of implicit trust with our Lord, we shall be saved from this threatening peril. And this is surely the aim of His forewarning Word.

There is first of all the severity of His requirements. When we first come to Christ the pathway seems to be strewn with roses, and the air seems filled with sweet and soothing perfumes. For while Christ is absolutely frank with us, and veils nothing of the hardships and conflicts we must endure, our own powers of apprehension are limited that we see but one thing at a time, and that one thing is that Christ meets all the need of which we are then immediately conscious. Hence we march to a glad strain with which our hearts are in tune. But before long we discover that the conditions of companionship are severe. For instance, we find that a real separation from the world in spirit and purpose is entirely necessary to the maintaining of fellowship. We find that we cannot march to two tunes at once – and the world's strains are seductive indeed. We learn that we cannot keep step at the same time with Him and with popular opinion, with Him and the world, nor always with Him and the outward professing Church.

And when this discovery is made, it often means that men are offended in Him. For His demands involves a costly disturbance in the regulation of home and business and social life, according to His order. It means possibly for some the relinquishing of a kind of popularity which exists only because of shameful silence regarding Him. It involves others in the severance of ties which have become a large part of their life, and the sacrifice of material prosperities which partake of the nature of unrighteousness. It means for all the end of self-indulgence, a crucifixion in order to a coronation, a dethronement in order to an enthronement.

And when all this comes to be clearly apprehended, then it is that men are offended in Christ. When He says: "Cut off thy right hand; pluck out thy right eye; forsake all that you have; take up the cross and follow Me," then comes the test which determines everything. Then too often men go back to walk no more with Him. Not because they do not understand Him, but because they have come to know Him too well! When He comes to be recognized, not only as the Christ of the sympathetic heart, but also as the Christ of the steadfastly set face, then great is the blessedness of the unoffended.

Then there is the mystery of His contradictions. It often seems as though Christ were unsympathetic with our best desires, with those desires which have originated in our fellowship with Himself. You want, for instance, to do some great service and to fill some great sphere; but Christ's answer to your longing is to set you down to face the difficulties of a small work in a place where there is little, if any, recognition of

your toil. You ask for spiritual service, and all that has been granted is a monotonous round of secular duty. And you are in danger of being offended in Him, just because there seems so little justification for His treatment of your high aim.

Or, you have asked the gift of rest, and claimed His great promises on this head; but the answer has come in the necessity for stern and continuous conflict. The fires of temptation blaze around you, not less, but far more fiercely than ever; and you are both puzzled and provoked at such a fulfillment of the Word upon which you have hoped. Or, you have desired to have a life less burdened and strained, but His only response has been to impose other and heavier burdens upon you. And you are well-nigh offended in Him. The mystery of it all baffles every serious purpose, and the temptation to distrust is at times almost too much.

Now it will help us if we remember the simple fact that He knows and does just what is best both for the development and progression of our lives. In reality, He is only unsympathetic with our egotisms. He only seeks to destroy within us anything savouring of self-love, self-pride and self-sufficiency, and to reproduce in us something of the beauty of His own character. In His contradictions rightly apprehended we may always see the expression of His perfect wisdom with regard to our own highest interests, and the interests also of the Kingdom in which He has given us a share. Then *"blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended;"* who accepts the direction of Christ as His love, and trusts Him, 'when to simply trust Him seems the hardest thing of all.'

Beyond these causes is yet another in the slowness of His methods. We come to Him and put our lives under His control, expectant of immediate realization of a deliverance which shall lift us beyond all concern regarding temptation and opposing forces. But how disappointingly slow is this realization; and how hardly won are our victories even when we are re-enforced by His Spirit.

Quite early we find that life is not a song, but rather a strife; that the grace of Christ is not mere ecstasy but rather an energy which works painfully for righteousness in us; and that it takes all the watchfulness of which we are capable to occupy the ground already conquered, as well as to conquer fresh territory. And the slowness of Christ in this matter of our own spiritual conflicts is often the cause of offence to us. For it disappoints our hopes, and contradicts our misconceptions as to anything like a passive and easy victory over our strong enmities. But in reality, this method, slow though it may seem to us, is the only one He could possibly pursue, having in view the greatness of His purpose and the contrariety of our nature. And every experience of victory, however small and insignificant, is prophetic of an ultimately complete triumph.

If you go into the Observatory at Greenwich you will see there a delicate instrument, by means of which the astronomers measure the distances of the stars, as well as their magnitude. Upon a sensitive mirror is reflected the light of the star points; and a measurement of the angles at which any two of the rays meet furnishes sufficient

data for all the astounding calculations of millions of miles. And so it is in our lives. By estimating what Christ has already done, we are assured of His unvarying purpose. Every bit of experience of His power to sanctify, to cleanse, to redeem, to deliver, is prophetic of the whole – “that He Who hath begun the good work will perfect it.” And if we cling to this fact, we shall find it an inspiration to the steady continuance of faith, and shall not be offended because He works so slowly – and surely.

The same is true also in regard to the progress of the Kingdom whose interests we are called to serve. How often we find in the slowness with which spiritual results are achieved a cause of offence in Christ. We begin by expecting that when we lift up Christ we shall immediately see crowds flocking to Him. We imagine that we have but to work faithfully in the service of God and man, and results are certain to be apparent. But how different is the realization! How hardly souls are wooed and won! How true it is that tares grow up with the wheat! How certain that he who goes forth bearing precious seeds must needs weep as he goes!

And the difficulty of believing that God is on the field when He is most invisible is too much for many who commence to work for Him with high hopes and valiant beliefs which seem all unjustified. Like the disciples, they think that “the Kingdom of God should immediately appear;” and in the discipline of their enthusiasm, and the conversion of their consecration into continuance, they are apt to be “offended.” Now it would not be difficult to bring instance upon instance to prove that, in spiritual work, when results are least visible they are often most real. The worker who will go on without the stimulus of outward success, who will continue His witness even when he is met by cold indifference, who will carry out Christ’s work in the unflinching inspiration of knowing that it is His work, is the one who gets the blessedness of the unoffended. And part of it is in the certain harvest of all his sowing, and the sure reward of all his service.

But perhaps over and above these suggested causes of offence in Christ is the unreasonableness of His silences. I have every sympathy with John the Baptist in his perplexity: ‘If this is really the Christ, why does He not act as Christ? Why does He do nothing to deliver His captive herald, or to bring peace to his troubled heart?’ One visit from the Christ would have changed his prison to a palace. One hand-clasp from Him would have transmuted his gloom into glory. But He did not give it. Just so was it also at Bethany, when He left Martha and Mary to their sorrow for two long and weary days. I sympathize with them in their utter inability to understand His delay in the light of His love; and in the implied protest of the word with which they at length greeted Him: “If Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.” His silence seemed so entirely unreasonable. And still does it seem unreasonable when He apparently pays no heed to our prayers, and we cry as to a silent heaven. Who does not know this bitter experience and the subtle temptation lurking there? You have prayed for the conversion of loved ones, but they are apparently today as unyielding and impenitent as ever. You have prayed for temporal things which seem entirely necessary, and no answer has come. You have sought relief from some

pressing burden, but no lightening of the load has been given; and today it is heavier than ever. And the thought that Christ's silence is unreasonable is never very far away. Loyalty to Him is strained sorely, almost to breaking-point. It is almost excusable to be "offended" in Him. But as with John in prison, and the sisters at Bethany, and hosts of others in all ages, He is not unmindful, however His silence may seem to point to it. He is training them, and us, to undaunted faith, to live in the realm of the unseen and eternal; to walk in His own steps. Sometimes what we call unanswered prayer proves beyond question a greater blessing than the desired answer could possibly have been. When Christ responds to our requests in the negative, we may be certain that the positive would have been for our undoing. He withholds secondary mercies to teach us the importance and value of the primary. His denials are our enrichments, not our impoverishments. For His purposes are vastly bigger than our prayers; and while His speech may be as silver, His silence is as gold. *"Blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in Me."*

'These things have I spoken unto you; that, despite the severity of My requirements, the mystery of My contradictions, the slowness of My methods, the unreasonableness of My silences, ye should not be offended.' What things were these? What will secure His people against the peril of defection? What are the permanent securities of our faith? In a word, the sureness of His way before us – "I came from the Father," "I go unto the Father," "I am the way." Then the certainty of His love towards us – "The Father Himself loveth you." And the constancy of His union with us – "Ye in Me and I in you." These are the germ-truths of all His forewarnings. And their expansion is in the lives of His people. Blessed is he who, resting upon these facts of God, makes them the factors of his own life; and goes on unoffending and unoffended, always radiant with "the peace that passeth all understanding," and increasingly becoming part of the world's illumination as he reflects his Lord.

But let us beware of putting any undue value upon our mere perception of this truth. Let us beware of over-estimating the strength of our own resolves and resources. Let us beware of saying anything like: "Though all men should be offended because of Thee, yet will I never be offended." Rather, in a sensitive, humble dependence on Christ, which always expresses itself in iron devotion and loyalty to His Word, let us seek to live as men of manifested faith. For this is the condition which governs all the blessedness of the unoffended.