

Sermon Text for December 15, 2024

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Exodus 30:11-16 and Matthew 17:24-27

“Give no offense”

The title of the sermon is “give no offenses” and it derives from Jesus’ words in our Matthew Scripture. But it does seem that this command goes unnoticed these days as offending people is taken to a new high level in social media and in interactions in the media in general. Jesus commands us simply to give no offense so that as his followers we would not drive people away from him, but rather draw people to him.

When I was in college this was a principle that I tried to pursue. I have told you multiple times that I played basketball and I was on the far end of the bench and I was very good at waving towels. Once the game got out of hand, either in favor of us or in favor of the other team, I had a lot of friends who would come to the games and so they would start chanting We want Bob. Once I got in the game then they would chant Bob is nice. Which was very nice but left the other team very confused.

But I also stuck to my principles of not being a scandal to Jesus by not drinking any alcohol while I was in college and also making sure that I kept myself pure for my future wife. Both of those things were also known on campus and some derided those choices, most people didn’t care, but there were clear boundaries that people knew that I kept which for the most part was so that I would give no offense to those around me. The purpose was to draw people closer to Jesus and drive them away with our actions.

It seems like followers of Jesus today are less concerned about what others think about them and more concerned about their own freedoms and their own choices and their own decisions than whether or not how we live our life will draw people to Jesus or drive them away from him. Jesus tells us we have to think about this in our own lives.

If you are a parent is what happens in your home a scandal to your children and so they see the hypocrisy and want nothing to do with the God that you say you follow? Or simply do your neighbors see how you live your life and how you interact with them and it draws them to Jesus or drives them away. There is a clear difference between being free to do whatever we want, which is the freedom that all of us have, and the freedom to do what Jesus would want us to do which ought to draw people closer to Him.

True freedom is found in being willing to check your own freedom, even give up some of your freedom, so that we do not offend others. When we offend others we drive them away from the Gospel. We want to drive people to Jesus, not away, and so we must not offend. Let's listen.

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Let's turn to Exodus where we see the institution of this temple tax that Peter is approached about by the religious authorities. Keep in mind that this is in the time of Moses, so hundreds of years before Jesus walked on the face of the earth and hundreds of years before Peter has this conversation with the temple tax police. What is this temple tax? It is required for all males who are 20 and over to pay it. Deuteronomy calls it a ransom for the sake of atonement. It is to remind us that we are made right before God as a result of who we are as the people of Israel. This religious tradition to pay this tax began under Moses and continued all the way to Jesus' day.

Philo, who wrote in the 1st century so right around when Jesus was walking on the earth spoke about this temple tax and said that the people of Israel paid it joyfully. Keep in mind it is a religious tax, so something similar to our per capita where we as a church pay to our denomination a certain amount for every member that we have. This denominational tax is a reminder of our connectional system and that as Presbyterians we are connected to each other as we serve and love our Savior.

In Jesus' day if you were proud of being Jewish and loved your God and were loyal to your people, you paid this tax. Everyone paid the tax and this was not a source of grumbling, as opposed to the Roman tax which was levied that the people grumbled strongly about. Today when we talk about a tax there is almost an automatic negative connotation to that. This was not the case with the temple tax. If you did not pay this tax then you were disloyal and not a real Jew, that was the sense in Jesus' day.

So we get to our story in Matthew where we read that Jesus and his disciples arrive back home, they arrive in Capernaum. Remember Capernaum is Jesus' home town, we read that in Matthew. As he lives out his ministry it isn't Nazareth, it isn't Bethlehem, but it is Capernaum where he settles according to Matthew 9:1. So they get home and Peter is out by himself, maybe he's shopping, and he is approached by the collectors of the temple tax. They ask him a simple question, does your teacher, not rabbi, not Lord, not King, but does your teacher, didaskalon, pay the temple tax. Peter doesn't hesitate and answers right away with a one word answer and says yes. End of story, right?

Well, not really, we read in vs.25 that when Peter gets home Jesus is there waiting for him and apparently he knew all about the conversation that he had with the collectors of the temple tax. How did Jesus know? The same way that he knew what Nathaniel was up to in John 1, the same way that he knew all about the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus just knew and it seems like Matthew takes that for granted that Jesus knew these things.

He asks Peter a seemingly random question about a king and his children and if they children of the king every pay the tax of the king and the answer is, of course, no. Keep in mind we see numerous times that Jesus himself is called a king and considered a king. Remember his whole dialogue with Pontius Pilate, so you are king? Remember when Jesus was crucified and what was posted by Pilate himself, to the objection of the religious authorities, above the head of Jesus? This is the king of the Jews. So if Jesus is the king then it serves as common sense to know that the disciples are the children of the king.

Do the children have to pay the tax? No, they are exempt. I, as the king, am exempt. You as my followers are exempt. We do not have to pay the temple tax. But people are watching us. They are noticing all that we do. So let's go ahead and pay it, even though we don't have to, so that we don't offend anyone. That word offend is the Greek scandalizzo. Let's pay it so we don't scandalize anyone.

As followers of Jesus we have the freedom to do something that we don't have to do but we do it because we do not want to cause offense and we want to draw people to Jesus and not drive people away from Jesus. This is such a key concept in our 21st century because the messaging that we get outside of the church is that we are pursue our freedom as far as we are able because we deserve it. The Gospel, as we saw last week, is going to rub against society and culture automatically, and so there will already be enough scandal that we follow a crucified Jesus, there will be enough scandal that we serve one who told us to be servants of all in order to obey his commandments. Who gives us that messaging that we must decrease so that Jesus can increase. That's not what we hear in the world, and so it is already enough of an offense to follow one who rubs against society that we ought not look for other ways to give scandal to those around us.

I Corinthians 1:23 states...What we believe is already a stumbling block to people around us. It is already enough scandal to go around. Romans 12:18 tells us that as far as it depends on us we should live peaceably with all. We shouldn't go looking for conflict or to prove a point that doesn't need proving as if in some measure Jesus needs us to defend him. You know what

my favorite verse of all time is, you presented it to me, you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.

This is true, we are free in Jesus and he sets us free. But he also sets us free to do that which we don't have to do just in order not to scandalize, or offend those around us. We are called not to give offense on secondary issues where principle is not involved and compromise is possible. We are free but that freedom is subject to self-restriction for the sake of people both inside and outside the church. Christian who use alcohol moderately will restrain themselves for the sake of those who might be alcoholics in their midst or those who are teetotalers and are offended by drinking. We are free not to drink. Christians comfortable with traditional language may choose to use inclusive language so as not to drive a wedge with those who would be offended by the traditional.

We don't have to go through our life proving a point that we are right or that our way is better. That just causes offense. Our freedom entails obedience to love first and foremost. We have freedom, but we also should have a voluntary sacrifice of that freedom in practice. Paul Galatians 5:13 tells us ... We are called to freedom but not to self-indulge in it or use our freedom as a weapon or as a source of division.

Now, let's be clear. Jesus often offends the Pharisees and those around him. That does happen, again, that is part of the natural scandal and offense of the Gospel. But he doesn't offend for the fun of it or to prove himself right. He offends because the way he lived and the truth that he spoke was naturally offensive because it highlighted the difference between what God wanted and what the people were actually doing. His life highlighted that. At the end of the day we find love and concern for others rather than the insistence on one's rightful freedom. That's the way Jesus would want us to live. Amen.