

BLESSED IS ANYONE WHO IS NOT OFFENDED BECAUSE OF ME**Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Advent, 2018****Luke 7:18-23**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 7:18-23, the first part of our Gospel read before, where John sends out two of his disciples to ask if Jesus is the One coming, and the reply He gives to them: ¹⁸ **The disciples of John reported to him about all these things.** ¹⁹ **Then John called two of his disciples and sent them to ask the Lord, “Are You the One who is coming or are we to expect someone else?”**

²⁰ **The men came to Jesus and said, “John the Baptist has sent us to ask You, ‘Are You the One who is coming or are we to expect someone else?’”**

²¹ **At that time Jesus had healed many people of their diseases, afflictions and evil spirits and had given sight to many who were blind.**

²² **Jesus answered, “Go and report to John what you have seen and heard! Blind people see, lame people are walking, lepers are made clean, deaf people hear, the dead are raised, and poor people are having the good news told them.** ²³ **Blessed is anyone who is not offended because of Me!”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

What does it take for someone or something to *offend you*? Can you remember the last time you were genuinely offended? Some people are easily offended. In fact, sometimes it appears you can't even have a proper conversation with someone without offending them in some way! Even the news often reports how we must stop using this word or that word because it offends some people. Don't use the phrase 'bringing home the bacon,' because it offends vegans. Don't use the terms 'mother or father' because that offends same-sex couples. Don't use the words 'he or she' because that offends the genderqueer people. Don't use the word 'black' to refer to someone who obviously has dark skin, and on it goes. It really can be quite ridiculous. But how do you feel when you are genuinely offended - when someone has done or not done something that really does offend you? How did it make you feel? Angry? Shocked? Vengeful? What was your response? Was it something like, “How dare you!”? “How dare you question my integrity!” “How dare you insult my intelligence!” “How dare you accuse me of wrongdoing!”

Our Lord Jesus was no stranger to “How dare you!” His earthly ministry lasted only a short three years, yet that was enough time to offend all sorts of people in all sorts of ways. Some, like the Pharisees, were offended by Jesus because He threatened their authority and positions of power. Others, even some of His own disciples, were offended because He disappointed them with the way He demonstrated His messianic calling. The Gospels record how, time and again, people were scandalised or offended by something Jesus said or did, or even by something He didn't do.

There were times when His words were just too hard to swallow. In chapter 6 of St. John's Gospel, Jesus proclaims to a crowd of fellow Jews that He is the *“Bread that has come down from heaven,”* (v 41). That was enough for many to begin grumbling and arguing among themselves. Then when Jesus eventually uses the language of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, *“many of His disciples went back and did not walk with Him anymore,”* (v 66). Later in John's Gospel, the words of our Lord once again create a scandal when He tells the Jews, *“Before Abraham was, I am,”* (8:58).

At other times it wasn't Jesus' words that caused offense; *it was what He was doing.* Jesus had the audacity to give sight to a blind man on the Sabbath. In response to this miraculous event, *“Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for He does not keep the Sabbath,’”* (John 9:16). And, of course, there were those times when Jesus was judged by the company He kept. Think how many of the culturally elite took offense as Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners or when He allowed Himself to be associated with prostitutes and Samaritans.

In the end, it wasn't only what Jesus said and did that caused so many to reject Him. For some, what Jesus *failed to do caused the greatest offense.* Consider all those who greeted the Saviour on Palm Sunday, laying down their palm branches and shouting their hosannas, believing that Jesus was the conquering hero who would lead them to political and military victory against their Roman oppressors. How disappointed, discouraged, and offended they were when

Jesus turned out to be a compassionate and forgiving Messiah, full of mercy and not vengeance. In other words, He wasn't exactly what they were expecting.

So it is, then, that John the Baptist, sitting in prison by order of Herod the tetrarch, sends two of his disciples to Jesus with the question, "**Are You the One who is coming or are we to expect someone else?**"

This was a strange question from John, considering the fact that he was well acquainted with Jesus and was present at the Baptism of Jesus when God the Father spoke from the clouds and proclaimed Jesus to be "*His Son, with whom [He was] well pleased,*" (Matt. 3:17). Again, in His first sermon, Jesus announced that He was present *to set the captives free*.¹ Who is more captive than John the Baptist as he sits in prison because of his ministry as the forerunner to Jesus? John was raised up to proclaim, "*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29), but the progress or manner of Jesus' ministry has not been what John expected. John was in prison, the Romans and other enemies of God were still in power, and nothing extraordinary seemed to be happening. If Jesus was the Coming One, He certainly wasn't living up to their expectations!

When two of John's disciples asked Jesus if He was **the One who is coming**, Jesus answers, "**Go and report to John what you have seen and heard! Blind people see, lame people are walking, lepers are made clean, deaf people hear, the dead are raised, and poor people are having the good news told them.**"

The miracles Jesus performed are significant in that they point to the eschatological blessings of the Messiah that come when the new era of salvation breaks in, as Isaiah had prophesied many years before.² By highlighting the miracles, Luke affirms that the Old Testament is being fulfilled. Thus, the teaching of Jesus is certified as messianic. When John's disciples see the works of Jesus, they should interpret *messianically* both the Old Testament prophecies and the teaching and preaching of Jesus.

Jesus concludes His words to John's disciples by saying, "²³**Blessed is anyone who is not offended because of Me!**"

The words "²³**Blessed is anyone who is not offended because of Me!**" ring loud and clear even in our day. We live in a time and place where many are offended by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sure, in the days leading up to the Christmas celebration, it might seem like the world is less offended than at most other times, but there's no getting around the fact that for most, Jesus Christ is far too controversial to be included in our holidays - let alone the thought of including Him in every day of our lives.

The offense of the Gospel is understandable, if not regrettable, among unbelievers, after all, as Paul reminds us, "*an unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually,*" (1 Cor. 2:14). But the truth is, even those who profess themselves to be Christians can, at times, seem uncomfortable - even *embarrassed* - by the exclusive claims of Christianity.

We clearly see this happen when for example, sometimes a church leader will appear on the news or in a newspaper article and the question is posed to him, "Are believers in Christ the only ones going to heaven? What about devout Jews, Muslims, and others? Are these good and sincere people really going to hell just because they don't happen to believe that Jesus is their Saviour?" It's usually at this point that the church leader will say something like, "Well, it's not for me to judge," or "That's in God's hand, not mine." Even Pope Francis recently admitted that you don't have to believe in God to go to heaven!³ I guess that is to be expected. Our Lutheran Confessions on more than one occasion speak of the office of the pope as the antichrist.⁴

But putting "his holiness" aside, today we see many so-called leaders of Christian churches having the opportunity to confess the truth that Jesus is the only way to the Father but allowing their convictions to melt when put under the spotlight. We see this too when whole church bodies cave in to all kinds of demands from people and the world and begin to teach doctrines that are clearly against what God has revealed in His Word.

¹ Luke 4:18

² Isaiah 61:1-2

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/pope-francis-assures-atheists-you-don-t-have-to-believe-in-god-to-go-to-heaven-8810062.html>

⁴ Cf. Smalcald Articles, Triglot, p. 515, Paragraphs 39-41; p. 401, Paragraph 45; M. pp. 336, 258.) Hence we subscribe to the statement of our Confessions that the Pope is "the very Antichrist." (Smalcald Articles, Triglot, p. 475, Paragraph 10; M., p. 308.)

But, before we are too hasty to pass judgment, we too, sometimes, have a problem when it comes to speaking and living the truth about Jesus. We are all guilty of acting as though Jesus was offensive to us. Remember those times when we may have failed to speak a corrective word to an erring brother. Or those times when we were too squeamish to defend our Christian beliefs when confronted by a neighbour, a co-worker, or even a family member. Or what about those times, even now, when Jesus doesn't exactly live up to our expectations - when our lives seem to be coming apart at the seams and our hope for a brighter future is waning?

Why do we so often fail to let our Christian light shine before men? Why do we become so easily discouraged when it comes to matters of faith and Christian hope? Are we afraid? Are we worried about what other people will think of us? Or is it that deep down inside we wonder whether or not we have any faith, let alone a faith that we can speak about and share with others?

Jesus told those disciples of John to **“Go and report to John what you have seen and heard!”** Do we do the same to our fellowmen? Let me remind you: It's almost Christmas! It's almost time to celebrate again what God has done for all mankind in Jesus Christ. Which is to say, it's time for all mankind to confess his sins, to hand them over to Jesus, and then move on by the grace of God! God has become one of us, a physical, breathing human being, so that He could speak a word of benediction to us. *“Blessed are you. Blessed are you - not because of anything you have (or haven't) done, but because of what I've done for you.*

“I have created you to be My own, and I've given you everything you need to support you in life. I have redeemed you when you were a lost and condemned creature. I have purchased and won you from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil with My precious blood and My innocent suffering and death. I have called you by the Gospel. I have enlightened you with My gifts. And I have sanctified and kept you in the one true faith. All this I have done for you out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any required merit or worthiness on your part, so that on the Last Day I can raise you from the dead and give you eternal life.”⁵

As we ready ourselves once again this Advent season to hear and believe the message of the Christmas Gospel, blessed are those who are reminded of all their blessings. Rejoice! Blessed are you who have been washed clean in the waters of Holy Baptism. Rejoice! Blessed are you who hear the words of Absolution spoken to your troubled hearts. Rejoice! Blessed are you who receive the body and blood of our Lord for complete forgiveness. Rejoice!

Let us join in with the heavenly angels and all those saints who have gone before us, in singing our praises to the One who is faithful, because He has been, is, and always will be! Rejoice! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

O God, Shepherd of Your people, You have led Your flock in mercy throughout long years of promise. You have sustained them, and given them hope through Your Son Jesus Christ. Give us all steadfast faith in Your mercy, that we may rejoice and give thanks each passing day, and be ready for Jesus' second coming.

In Your presence, we offer You our prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving. Forgive us our sins and wipe out our many transgressions. By Your Holy Spirit renew us with Your gracious gifts.

Open the eyes of those who are spiritually blind. Guide those who are lame and stumbling. Heal those who are diseased in their thoughts, words, and deeds. Lead all people to believe in Him whom You have sent, and to follow the things that are good, true, and lasting, and pleasing to Your Son Jesus Christ.

We pray for Your Church throughout the world. Bless all who preach and teach Your Word, that many more may come to know You as the only true God and Saviour of mankind. Rule over the hearts of all people. Guide the decisions of those in authority, and sit in the councils of the nations, that peace and justice may prevail everywhere.

Bless all who have gathered here today in Your house. Be with those of our congregation who are sick or afflicted in any way in body, mind, or spirit. Grant that in their trials they may learn of Your gracious power, and of Your readiness to help in every time of need.

⁵ The First Article of the Apostles' Creed

Pour out Your grace on us all, that we may be enabled each day to show forth the glory of Your name, and to witness to Your saving truth in Jesus Christ our Lord. Give us these things, and whatever else You know we need, in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴ Cry out in jubilation, daughter Zion! Shout, Israel! Rejoice and triumph with all your heart, daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you. He has turned away your enemy. The King of Israel, the LORD, is among you. You will not fear calamity any longer. ¹⁶ On that day Jerusalem will be told, "Do not be afraid, Zion! Do not let your hands hang limp!" ¹⁷ The LORD, your God, is among you. He is a Warrior, who saves. He will rejoice happily over you. He will reduce you to silence in His love. He will exult over you with shouts of joy."

¹⁸ "I shall gather those who are grieving because of the festival. They have been absent from you. The burden on Zion has been disgrace. ¹⁹ Look! At that time, I shall deal with all who are oppressing you. I shall save those who are lame. I shall gather those who have been scattered. I shall change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰ At that time I shall bring you in, yes, at the time when I gather you together. For I shall make you famous and praised among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your eyes." This is what the LORD has said.

Philippians 4:4-7

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all people! The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything but in everything make your requests known to God by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving! ⁷ The peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will also guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 7:18-35

¹⁸ The disciples of John reported to him about all these things. ¹⁹ Then John called two of his disciples and sent them to ask the Lord, "Are You the One who is coming or are we to expect someone else?"

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²² Jesus answered, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard! Blind people see, lame people are walking, lepers are made clean, deaf people hear, the

dead are raised, and poor people are having the good news told them. ²³ Blessed is anyone who is not offended because of Me!"

²⁴ After the messengers of John had left, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind?"

²⁵ What, then, did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft robes? No, those who wear splendid clothing and live in luxury are found in kings' palaces. ²⁶ What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is the one about whom Scripture has said: 'Look! I am sending My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way before You.' ²⁸ I tell you, among those born to women no one is greater than John; but the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

²⁹ When all the people, even the tax-collectors, heard John, they acknowledged that God was right when they were baptised with the baptism of John. ³⁰ However, when the Pharisees and the lawyers were not baptised by John, they rejected God's purpose for themselves.

³¹ "Therefore, to what shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling out to one another. They say: 'We have played the flute for you, but you have not danced. We have sung a funeral song, but you have not wept.' ³³ For John the Baptist has come, neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' ³⁴ The Son of Man has come, eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!' ³⁵ Nevertheless, wisdom is proved right by all her children."