

~Other Speakers S-Z: Albert Zehr:

Build up the highway
Remove the stones Isa 62:10

God is about to visit His church in a mighty move. However, many people are stumbled by offence and immobilized. How can we remove the stones so they can join the race?

DEALING WITH OFFENCE

One of the most beautiful and promising, potential kings lost everything -his calling and even his life, because he couldn't deal with an offence. His name was Absalom. Only the Lord knows how many believers are locked into ineffectiveness and robbed of the joy of the Lord due to offence. Many relationships that were once close and cherished have been devastated and others are fraught with suspicion because of an underlying offence. This should not surprise us since Jesus foretold in Matt. 24:10, that in the end times many will be offended, and even further that this state of offence will make them susceptible to false prophets. Even more shocking is the fact that many are stumbled and fall away because they are offended with the Lord! (Matt. 11:6; 13:57; Luke 7:23.)

I believe, however, that those who have been offended, and who of us hasn't -can be restored. This is the time of restoration! This message on understanding the subtlety of offence and the way to deal with it has been shared in various countries. Each time God has used it to bring health and healing to many. I have been urged to put it in writing, since it is proving to be a timely message. May it remove many stones on God's highway.

Taking the bait

Much insight can be gained just from understanding the meaning of the Greek word skandalon, from which the English word offence is derived. This word skandalon was used to describe the part of a trap where the bait was attached. If the prey took the bait, it would set off the trap and the "taker" became the victim. Once entrapped, the victim becomes subject to the intention of the trapper.

From this it becomes clear that offence is one of the primary baits which Satan uses to entrap believers. Once in his trap he can easily subject them to anger, resentment and criticism -bringing division and rebellion. This of course also robs them of joy and spiritual usefulness. So, we must learn to recognize the bait and not take it; and if we do, learn how to deal with it.

Those useful to God needed to overcome offense

While offences are inevitable and often prove to be negative, we find that the Lord's most useful servants had to learn to overcome offences and eventually these experiences perfected them for greater usefulness. The reader may wish to study these and other examples in detail -we will only take the time to refer briefly to a few.

Joseph had numerous occasions to be offended -by his brothers, by Potiphar's wife, by the cupbearer and others. Had he taken the bait he would have become a bitter revengeful man. But somehow he overcame and rose to a higher perspective so he could say, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish (His purpose)" Gen. 50:20.

Moses tried his best to address his people's wrongs but it backfired, and no doubt he was offended at the Lord. But the forty years in the wilderness it took him to overcome this offence prepared him so he could overcome the offence of the murmuring of the Israelites.

David was left until last to be asked to appear before Samuel. Before he fought Goliath his brothers mocked him, Saul misjudged him, but he did not take the bait of offense and remained useful to the Lord.

David had at least one narrow escape from offence. He was saved from the trap of offence by Abigail. In 1 Sam. 25, he was offended by Nabal and was on the way to take revenge. Only the humble, gracious entreaty by Abigail rescued him. There is a possibility that David would have forfeited his future if he had fully swallowed the bait in this case. Sometimes our spouses or caring friends can save us from offence (taking the bait) if we are open and willing to hear.

This story also shows that there is a need for those who can gently restrain others from taking the bait, or even guide them out of the trap. Peace makers (Matt. 5:9) are needed not only in the United Nations but also in the body of Christ. Abigail interceded for her guilty husband and even bore his reproach, willing to make up his lack. Many times offence could be defused or even avoided if there were more Abigails in the church.

Dealing with offences critical in these days.

Consider why Jesus said that offences would become more common in these last days (Matt. 24:10). When the intensity of God's move is accelerating there is a greater tendency for misunderstanding. One of the

scripture passages that seems to describe today is Josh. 3:4-5, "we have never gone this way before." When we are called to moving beyond the range of our understanding the offence potential rises.

2 Tim 3:13; Rev. 12:12; 1 Peter 5:8-9 and other scriptures indicate that the enemy's attacks will be increasing, and certainly offence will always be one of his primary tools.

At the same time, the Lord wants to prepare and refine us for our work in the final harvest (Heb. 12:5-6). As we will see later, offence brings to the surface untransformed aspects of our inner being. This allows offence to be a way the Lord can discipline and refine us. If we will allow His light to shine and His hand to work, the experience of offence can actually speed up our growth and transformation.

The nature of offence

Let us look more carefully at the nature of offence. We find that the foundational aspect of offence lies in the fact that another person, or perhaps God Himself, took action or made a statement which is contrary to our desires or expectation. While we generally assume that the action was wrong or unwarranted, the basic truth is that our expectations or interests were not met, or we felt that our integrity was affronted.

Even Jesus had to deal with offence. In Matt. 15:12 the disciples advised Jesus that the Pharisees were offended by what He had said. When Jesus didn't show up immediately when Lazarus was sick, Martha was offended (John 11:21). His disciples were also offended by Jesus, e.g. John 6: 61 and Matt. 26:31.

When in a state of offence we presume that since the offender did us wrong they owe us something. At the very least they owe us an apology, or some kind of recompense. Thus we make them indebted to us.

We easily become consumed with our case against the offender. It is easy to become what I call a "night time lawyer." As we toss and turn on our beds we turn the case over and over, gaining evidence to vindicate our grievance. By morning we have assigned to ourselves the role of judge and are demanding vindication. In this way we can have our own private lawsuit, which is actually the basis of many actual lawsuits (1 Cor. 6: 1-8).

We must be aware that the potential for offence is much greater with those we love and are close to. The man on the street will rarely offend us because we don't expect anything from him. When someone speaks very highly of me I tend to become just a little uneasy because this person unknowingly may be developing too high expectations for my continuing performance. What will happen if I do something wrong or contrary to those expectations?

Downward steps of offence

Perhaps the classic example of offence, which shows its full course, is seen in the life of Absalom when his sister was defiled. He wanted revenge and seemed to have "good" reasons for his vengeance. After he took the bait his entrapment developed (2 Sam. 13). At first he was deeply offended by Amnon who defiled his sister. Since his father the King did not execute judgment, Absalom became offended with the authority figure.

Many are offended at leaders because they do not take a certain action which to them seems appropriate. They perceive the leader as being political or indecisive. Absalom finds a way to kill Amnon. He flees, is allowed to come back and is eventually received by the king but kept under restriction. But he still could not deal with the offence.

When one has an offence toward a leader, even if that leader was highly regarded, the perspective changes. After the offence, only the weakness or failures of the leader are now noticed and so it was with Absalom. When in offence mode, the next step is to begin to negatively affect others. Gradually Absalom turned people against the King and "stole their hearts" (2 Sam 15:6). The next step, if offence is allowed to grow, is rebellion.

In this rebellion, Absalom lost his calling, his potential kingship and eventually his life. All this resulting from an offence. How many of God's servants have lost their calling and usefulness due to offence?

The dangerous state of offence

Assuming we were actually done wrong and the other party is at fault, what shall we do? We have a choice -hold them to account, or forgive. But we need to realize that when we do not forgive, we place ourselves in a state of unforgiveness. This can become very serious. We must be aware that in a state of unforgiveness we shut ourselves off from God's forgiveness (Matt. 6:14; 18:35). When we are unforgiving we become unforgiven, and when we are unforgiven we cannot find the grace to forgive. Only when this cycle is broken can we regain our joy and the sense of God's presence.

When we are offended with someone, our eyes no longer see their positive qualities and our hearing becomes filtered with our critical thoughts. This is why some persons who once spoke and thought highly of each other can now only judge and criticize each other.

Furthermore, this state of offence yields a harvest of frustration, anger, suspicion, ineffectiveness, and falling away (Matt.13:21). This is why many who have been useful and effective are no longer productive. Consider yourself -when you are offended, are you still overflowing with life and usefulness?

Offence may also lie behind much sickness -mental and physical (James 5:16). When we are offended, our nervous system, our appetite, our sleep and entire well-being is affected.

In Matt. 24 Jesus follows His word about offence with a warning that many false prophets would arise and deceive many. When we hold an offence we immediately become more subject to being deceived by a false prophet. Suppose I have a grievance toward a brother or a church, or am offended by the action of a leader. Then someone offers a critical word about that person or church. My ability to objectively discern that word will be greatly diminished. In this state many will be easily deceived.

Some time ago a brother was given a word of correction by the elders of his church. He was offended by their word. A few weeks later in a nearby town he was praying with some believers. As they prayed for him, one of them said he felt the Lord saying that there was a wrong spirit in this brother's church. Immediately the brother felt vindicated.

It later became clear that the "prophet" himself had a habit of resisting any correction or limitation. At that point the first brother returned to his elders, dealt with his offense, and was rescued from the potential deception of a misguided prophet.

We must be aware that when we are offended we tend to become subjectively attached to our pain and our discernment becomes clouded by the self vindication and anger in our heart. Surely this should cause an urgency in all of us to deal with offence.

The purpose and value of offence

While offence appears to be a negative experience, God in His sovereignty can use it for great gain. When we are working through an offence we learn access to a much deeper experience of His love, forgiveness and sovereignty (Rom. 2:4). Just as unforgiveness shuts us off from God's forgiveness, so forgiveness brings renewed and deeper accesses to God's forgiveness. The more forgiven the greater and deeper the love (Luke 7: 43).

Offence is useful to expose the inner nature of our hearts and to bring cleansing through the washing that comes from repentance (Rom. 9:33; 1 Peter 2:8; Matt. 15:13).

Job came to realize that God's intention in testing (often done through offences) is to purify and refine until we come forth as gold (Job 23:10).

If things go our way and everyone agrees with us, we do not realize our pride and self reliance. When we react in anger toward another person, we tend to use the childish excuse, "Look what you made me do!" But we must realize that what they said or did, didn't create our anger. It simply brought to the surface what is already in us. If we take ownership for that anger, confess it, and ask the Holy Spirit to root it out of our inner being, letting the flesh be crucified, the next time our reaction will be quite different.

At times we invite the Lord to deal with and expose us and show us what is in us that is not of Him. Little do we realize that one of the most effective ways for Him to do this is through offence. How else can I learn how self-centered I am and how much anger and ego is still in me? When they hurled insults at Jesus He did not retaliate; when He suffered He made no threats. Instead He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly (1 Peter 2: 23). Am I there yet? The following verses show how God needs to expose our real inward condition: 2 Sam. 12:7 -9; Prov. 20:27; Heb. 12:6.

Let us grasp the fact that when we are in a state of offence, the primary value lies not in what is wrong with the other person or what they should do or change. The greater value for me is to learn what my response is saying about me. What can I learn about the Lord and about myself in this experience? When I allow the Holy Spirit to reveal my condition and the need in my life, He can show me how far I am from His unconditional love and forgiveness. When I ask and receive His all sufficient grace, I gain the unsearchable riches of Christ.

How to limit potential offence

No doubt the primary way to deal with offences is to avoid them Hebrews 12: 14 advises that we should make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy. But Jesus Himself told us that it is inevitable that offences will come (Mat. 18: 7). So, how do we deal with them when they do come?

Knowing and believing the Sovereignty of God

The secret of Joseph's ability to deal with offence was in his knowing and trusting the sovereignty of God. This is why he could say, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." If we really see that He is GOD, He is just, and His purposes will prevail, we can relax and let Him be the adjudicator and judge. If this becomes our experience, then even though potential offence may approach us, we will not take the bait.

When I was fourteen, my seventeen year old brother was killed instantly in a traffic accident. David was the most godly young man I knew. I was a relatively new believer and he was my hero and my model. I was confused, shocked and offended. Why would God not take one of those young people who had no heart or care for spiritual things? It just was not right and I was hurt and offended.

About twenty years later I was speaking at a youth retreat in California. The Lord's presence was strong as I encouraged the young people to trust and fear the Lord. Like a lightening bolt the Lord spoke to my heart, "For twenty years you have pointed your finger of judgment at Me condemning Me, for taking your brother.

How do you expect to have authority in telling people to trust Me?â€•

I broke down and wept uncontrollably. Before I could regain my composure, every person in the camp was weeping in repentance. Numerous young lives were permanently turned from rebellion to a trust and fear of our Sovereign God.

Then the Lord spoke to me again, â€œMany live to age seventy and never have an eternal effect on anyone. Your brother only lived to seventeen but today, twenty years later, his life is making an eternal impression on every life in this place, and on all the lives they will touch.â€•

I wept again and said, â€œOh my God, You are Sovereign and I am blind and selfish. Forgive and cleanse me and open my eyes to see You and to trust You in every circumstance in my life.â€• Since then, I have learned to trust Him, but still pray, Oh for Grace to trust Him more! Once I truly learn the truth of the chorus, â€œYou are God, and I am not!â€• my chances of being offended by Him are greatly diminished.

By being saturated in the Word and worship Psa 1:2-3; 119:165

Our capacity to resist taking offence can also be greatly increased if we are saturated in the Word and worship. David knew this and expressed it so well in Psa 119:165 when he said, â€œGreat peace have they that love Thy law and nothing shall offend them.â€• The Apostle John tells us that if we live in light there is no tendency to stumble (1 John 2: 10).

As we saw earlier, offence involves a challenge or threat to the self. Jesus touched on this matter in Matt. 16:24 ff. â€œIf anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up His cross and follow Me.â€• A particular way in which we can deny ourselves is by not taking offense, or by forgiving the person who offended us, whether they apologize or not.

1 Peter 1:6-7 tells us that trials can effect and refine our faith as gold so that we may be proved genuine. If we parallel this with Rev. 3:18 where we are told to buy gold, we see that denying self, not avenging ourselves and freely forgiving, can be a way of buying gold. Once our self and ego has been crucified, the tendency of offence is greatly diminished.

Exercising to avoid offence Acts 24:16; Rom. 14:19; Heb. 12:14

Besides others offending us, we also need to exercise ourselves not to cause offence. In Acts 24:16, Paul declared that he always endeavored to keep his conscience clear and to avoid offending others. In Romans 14, Paul shared how he would rather forego his own liberties and privileges than to offend others. Heb. 12:14, â€œMake every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy without which no one will see the Lordâ€• provides an excellent recipe for avoiding offending others.

Dealing with existing offences

No matter how much we try to avoid them, offences will come and at times we will take the bait. Then even though we wish it had not happened, we must deal with the matter. Rather than focus on the other party, we had best deal with ourselves first.

No choice if we want Life and peace

In the Old Testament one offering which was required to be offered by everyone was the trespass offering. This is what Jesus was referring to in Matt. 5:24 when He indicated that any other offering is of no consequence if there is an unresolved offence. How many dear believers bring their tithes and offerings diligently week after week, and then wonder why the promised blessing is not on their lives? The principle stands - first go and be reconciled to your brother and THEN come and offer your gift.

Some years ago, I was deeply offended when I felt I was grossly cheated in a business transaction. After some time I told the Lord that I had forgiven the other party, but I did not yet sense a real release in my heart. One day after about a year I felt I was fully released. The Lord then asked me to write a letter to the other party and to confess my strong reaction at that time. I was also to offer forgiveness and renewed friendship. I had not seen this man during that year. I wrote the letter and decided to set it aside for a few days so as not to act too quickly.

Almost a year later I found the unmailed letter in a file. I told the Lord I was sorry I had not mailed it. He said to me that it was no problem because the other party was not yet ready; the Lord was really after me. Since I forgave this other party, the Lord has opened the windows of blessing and I have gained far more than I had lost.

Forgive in your heart Matt. 7:1-5; 18:21,35; Rom. 3:23

There is something about us that we always want to pick the speck out of another's eye, but ignore the plank in our own. Matt. 7:1-5 tells us to first deal with our side of the problem. Practically, this means to forgive from our heart (Matt. 18: 35), even if there is no apology. It may mean to forgive seventy times seven times (Matt. 18:21). This is much easier when we truly see that all have sinned and come short (and always will) of the glory

of God (Rom. 3:23).

Many times we would like to bypass offences and just try to forget it. But in our inner heart, we know that it is still there and not fully dealt with. If we ignore this inner feeling our conscience will become weaker and our fellowship with the Lord more distant, so we must be honest and ask the Lord to work in us until the matter is fully gone and we are free.

Drop it Prov. 20:22; Eph. 4:26; Rom. 12:19

Take the illustration of the African way to trap a monkey. They simply place a sweetened stick inside a cage. The monkey reaches through between the narrow bars and grabs the stick. Now he is not able to pull his hand back through the bars while holding the stick. Refusing to let go of the stick, the monkey keeps himself captive and is easily captured.

As we hear this story we want to shout, "Drop the stick!" While this sounds unbelievable, many people refusing to drop an offense are keeping themselves in captivity and subject to the enemy's entrapment just because they won't drop the stick!!!

Prov. 20:22 says, "Do not say, 'I'll pay you back for this wrong!' Wait for the Lord and He will deliver you." Eph. 4:26 tells us, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."

How can I know when a matter is fully dealt with? When I can drop it having no more interest or need to nurse it or revive it. When seeing the other person no longer evokes any feelings of strain or animosity. When a wound festers, there is still some infection there which must be dealt with.

Another evidence is that I can trust the Lord fully when He says that if there is any need to avenge, He will look after it (Rom. 12:19).

Clear it Matt. 5:21-24

In some cases there is a need to clear a matter, and this applies especially if I sense that a brother has something against me. How? Go to him and attempt to be reconciled. Don't go to prove him wrong; go with a heart willing to confess the wrong feelings, judgmental attitude or anger you have felt. Rather, go to die to your own rights.

What if the other person has clearly wronged you? Take the pattern of Jesus. He took upon Himself our sin. In the ultimate moment of wrong, from the cross He declared, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing!"

After hearing about this message, a couple who we did not know asked for some counsel. The case involved a dispute over the conducting of a youth ministry in a church. Feelings were running high and there was at least some potential to cause a split in the church. Their ministry was eroding to the point of ineffectiveness. They spent much time analyzing the case and presented all the points to me. They tried to be fair and objective and see the matter from the other person's view, but it seemed clear to them that logic and truth favored them.

When they had fully presented their case they waited for my views, wondering who I would think was in the right, and what should be done, so the errant ones could see their error. Hopefully then, things could be brought to order and the problem resolved.

I proposed that we begin by considering how the Lord feels about this whole situation? First, since He hates division, He would no doubt be deeply grieved if this matter produced a split in the church. They agreed. Next, I pointed out that He would be provoked if any of the children were stumbled because of all the tension. They also agreed with this point.

The immediate question then becomes, "What must be done in order to avoid these two possibilities?" Once we see this as preeminent then who is more or less right becomes far less urgent. Suppose I am right and my determination to prove it splits the church, causes children to stumble, and I lose my peace and joy because of it all - what has been gained?

So what is the alternative? Suppose I allow my self, my view and my ego to be sacrificed. It's called dying to the self, or laying down my life for the sake of my brothers. But, you reason, that the children would be deprived because we did not stand for their highest interest. What if we surrender them to the Lord's sovereign hand? They may in fact gain tremendously by seeing someone letting go of their rights, and responding in love. This may set an example that they may need to practice in later life.

What if you would call those involved together and tell them that you are sorry that this matter has become such a disturbing issue? Humbly ask them for forgiveness where you may have generated misunderstanding, and fear or offense. Then, offer to do whatever would be necessary to clear the offense. Offer to resign if the leadership and others feel this would be the best way to resolve the impasse. If the Lord wants you to have this ministry, He will protect your place. If they ask you to resign, the Lord will find a way to reinstate you or find a higher service for you where you can be much more effective.

As the Lord's presence enveloped us, their hearts were touched and our fellowship ended with a sweet time of prayer. We parted with our hearts deeply joined in Spirit. Sometime later we heard that when they asked forgiveness, many others followed suit and reconciliation resulted.

Receive cleansing 1 Peter 1:22; 1 Cor. 6:11

1 Peter 1: 22, "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart" takes on new meaning. Obedience brings a cleansing. When I am cleansed, suddenly I have a new level of love even toward those by whom I was offended. Not only is my heart washed so that love can flow again, it seems that my eyes are also washed and I see others in a new light so love again comes naturally.

It is interesting to note that another reference to washing and being sanctified, 1 Cor. 6:11, comes in the middle of a chapter about dealing with offences. When in a state of offence, I feel that there is something bitter and unclean plaguing my heart. When I deal with it, I feel clean, pure and free.

Walking and living in true wisdom

The Apostles, Paul, James and Peter each talk about the manner of life we ought to live to avoid offence. Paul says that he exercised himself to keep his conscience free of offence (Acts 24:16; 2 Cor. 6:3). An awesome recipe for offence free living comes from James. "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow a harvest of righteousness" (James 3: 17).

The writings of the Apostle Peter, who learned to overcome offences and misunderstandings, are interwoven with precious jewels of advice. See esp. 1 Peter 1 -5. Be self controlled, set your hope fully on the grace -not on others. If you set your hope on others you will be disappointed and sooner or later you will be offended. Be holy in all that you do, have sincere love for the brothers, rid yourselves of malice, abstain from sinful desires and gentle advice for family life, all of these points produce a desire and the strength to arise above offences.

Lord, grant that it may be our determination and desire to live in such a way that we can honestly say that we do not have a problem in our heart with anyone! May You be glorified in our lives, Amen.

Please see the powerful story on page 12. Used by permission of Richard A. Nelson.

An actual story of forgiveness when it's impossible.

The following is a true story which is taken from a tract written by my close friend Richard A. Nelson. The father referred to in the story is also a personal acquaintance.

It all started about 8:40 p.m. when we received a call that the son of a neighbor and dear friend was missing. Police helicopters were there as we went to the complex where the boy had last been seen.

The boy's bicycle and some clothes were found. The tears and the panic increased as the father, my son and I searched relentlessly. The part that staggered me as much as the apparent tragedy was that the father prayed as we walked. Amid his fear he yielded to God.

Amid the terror of the situation, he pleaded to God to forgive the perpetrator. He prayed for his son, yes, but he asked the Lord to save the kidnapper from his lost condition into the kingdom of God. He really wanted his son's attacker to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

To forgive in certain situations may be imaginable. But even as a fellow-believer, I was astonished by the love for God and man without condition, which I realized through my dear Christian brother in this tragic moment.

I can still hear the shrieks in the middle of the night when the detectives came to disclose the horrible circumstances under which this innocent child was destroyed. But even through the tears of pain for his child,

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this father also cried and prayed for the murderer.

I saw the express embodiment of the love of God in this father in a circumstance where human love would certainly fail. He freely forgave even as he had realized the forgiveness of God for his own sin and fallen life in earlier years.

The loss of his only son took place close to twenty years ago. This father could be a bitter, remorseful and angry man. But he is still loving God and still forgiving and blessing others. What a testimony of the practical genuineness and experience of dealing with offence.

Truly, as John Bevere says, "Our response to offence determines our future."