



Offend Not These Little Ones ¹

If we look to the Gospels seeking to find a code of education expressly laid down by Christ, all we can find is summed up in three commandments:

Take heed that ye OFFEND not—DESPISE not—HINDER not—one of these little ones.

Note that all three have a negative character, as if the chief thing required of grown-up people is that they should do no injury to children. Of course, if we are to do no harm to children, we will be bound to take many proactive steps; for certain omissions can be as destructive as certain commissions.

The first of these three commandments is found in Matthew 18:6 (KJV):

But 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.

The Greek word, translated in the King James Version as “offend”, is *skandalizo*. This word’s literal meaning is to place a trap or a snare in someone’s path. Thus, the New American Standard more accurately renders it as “causes to stumble.” An offense is literally a stumbling-block, which trips up the walker and causes him to fall. Mothers know what it is to clear the floor of every obstacle when a baby takes his unsteady little runs from chair to chair, from one pair of loving arms to another. She does this to ensure that the baby does not come to physical harm. Parents and teachers must be equally diligent to “clear the floor” of any obstacles that might cause a child any intellectual, moral, or spiritual harm. As Jesus points out in the very next verse, the world is full of stumbling blocks and many stumbling blocks will come, but “Woe to him through whom the stumbling block comes.”

Every child is born law abiding. This is not to imply that any child always abides by the law, but rather that every child has a sense of *may* and *must not*, of right and wrong. This is how children are sent into the world, yet still we find girls and boys who do not know what *must* means, who are not moved by *ought*, whose hearts feel no stir at the solemn name of *Duty*, who know no higher rule of life than ‘I want,’ and ‘I don’t want,’ ‘I like,’ and ‘I don’t like.’ Such are the children of seemingly good parents, but parents who are in danger of catastrophic failure, for they have not taken seriously the warning, “Take heed that ye offend not one of these little ones.”

How is it that a child comes to have little or no sense of “I must,” living only by “I want”? Generally, by slow degrees, here a little and there a little, as all that is good or bad in character comes to pass. “No!” says the mother, once again, when a little hand is thrust into the sugar bowl; and when a pair of roguish eyes seek hers furtively, to measure, as they do unerringly, how

far the little pilferer may go. It is very amusing; the mother “cannot help laughing;” and the little trespass is allowed to pass. Completely unaware, the poor mother has provided an offense. A cause of stumbling has been cast into the path of her two-year-old child. He has now learned that despite “No,” that which he “wants” may be done with some impunity, and he goes on increasing this knowledge.

Everybody knows the steps by which the mother’s ‘no’ comes to be disregarded, as her refusal is consistently teased into consent. The child learns to believe that he has nothing to overcome but his mother’s initial resistance. If it is merely her choice to let him do this and that, there is no reason why she should not allow him to do what he wants. The child learns that, with the right kind of persistence, he can make her choose to let him do even what she says he ought not to do.

The next step in the argument is not too great for childish wits: if his mother does what she chooses, of course he will do what he chooses, if he can. Henceforth, the child’s life becomes an endless struggle to get his own way; a struggle in which a parent is pretty sure to be worsted, having many things to think of, while the child sticks persistently to the thing which has his fancy for the moment.

It is for this reason that children must discover a background of “must” behind every mother’s, father’s, and teacher’s decision. It is essential that each child knows that mother, father, teacher “must” not let him break another’s things, gorge himself with cake, spoil the pleasure of other people, give little effort to a lesson, because these things are not right. Let the child perceive that his parents and teachers are law-compelled as well as him, that they simply cannot allow him to do the things which have been forbidden, and he submits with the sweet meekness which belongs to his age. As a rule, children only fight long and hard when they have had the significant experience of winning.

To attempt to cajole or convince a child to do what is right is usually out of place and is a sacrifice of parental and teacher authority. But a child is quick enough to read in a parent’s or teacher’s face the must, the ought, and the peaceful resolution which rules her. Children almost always submit when they encounter the peacefully resolute “you must” and “I must hold you to it, for it is a matter of right and wrong.”

While failure to maintain, both personally and from the children, a life of peaceful submission to “must,” is the foremost stumbling block parents and teachers lay before children; it is somewhat generic. There are very concrete ways in which parents and teachers may offend or cause those entrusted to their care to stumble. Parents and teachers offend children when they allow a child to live in disregard of laws of physical health, laws of intellectual health, or the laws of moral health. Parents and teachers may not allow children to violate these laws through either ignorance or weakness:

Laws of physical health – Children must eat a nutritional diet, have vigorous daily exercise, and get sufficient sleep. They must be appropriately dressed for the season. These things are not optional, but a matter of the essential stewardship of our bodies.

Laws of the Intellectual Life – A child’s intellectual life may be wrecked at its outset by a round of dreary, dawdling lessons in which definite progress is the last thing made or expected, and which, so far from educating in any true sense, stultify his wits in a way he never gets over. Many a little girl, especially, leaves the classroom with a distaste for all manners of learning, an aversion to mental effort, which lasts her lifetime, and that is why she grows up to read little but trashy novels, and to talk all day about her clothes.

Children must be given opportunities to develop many relations with ideas, people, and things; be provided with living books and assigned meaningful work. And it is essential that they be held to a high standard. Diligence is a “must.” To allow sloth, shoddy work, or the escaping of one’s duty is not “to give grace” but rather to place a terrible stumbling block before a child.

Laws of Moral Health – Failures in kindness, base humor, disrespect for persons, lack of submission to appropriate authority, there is to be zero tolerance for these or any other moral failing. Zero tolerance does not mean that such acts never occur, but that they are never indulged. When such failures do occur, they are dealt with lovingly but firmly.

This leads to a final and horrible stumbling block which too many children find placed before them. It is a terrible thing when a child’s love finds no natural outlets within her closest circle, when she is the plain or the dull child and is left out in the cold, while the parents’ or the teacher’s affection is lavished on the rest. Of course such a child does not love her peers, who monopolize the affection that should have been hers too. And how is she to love the adult who is supposed to care for her but withholds affection? Nobody knows the real anguish which many children suffer from this cause, nor how many lives are embittered and spoiled through the suppression of these childish affections.

One woman told Charlotte Mason the following:

My childhood was made miserable by my mother’s doting fondness for my little brother; there was not a day when she did not make me wretched by coming into the nursery to fondle and play with him, and all the time she had not a word nor a look nor a smile for me, any more than if I had not been in the room. I have never got over it; she is very kind to me now, but I never feel quite natural with her. And how can we two, brother and sister, feel for each other as we should if we had grown up together in love in the nursery?

We do a great evil if we prefer the bright, outgoing, diligent child over the struggling, introverted, disorganized child. If we love the former above the latter, both will know it, and we will place a great stumbling block before both.

¹ Derived from Charlotte Mason’s Home Education, 12-17.