

Servants Retreat 2023

The Servant an Icon or an Offense

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Bible Study Reference: 2 Corinthians 6:3-8

- St. Paul started by saying that we give no offense in anything that our ministry may not be blamed. If our service is a stumbling block, then our ministry will be blamed.
- St. Paul said that we commend ourselves as ministers of God. How we present ourselves will help us be an icon. There are 18 things that help us be an icon.
- The absence of one of those 18 elements is an offense but the presence allows us to be an icon.

1. Patience:

Any ministry has challenges.

Sirach chapter 2: My son if you offer yourself in service to the Lord then expect many tribulations.

Serving teenagers & the lost sheep pose many challenges.

If we (servants) don't have patience, then we don't have faith in God who qualified us who are called to the service.

Joshua was nervous about starting his ministry. However, the Lord told him that He will be with him. Similarly, Nehemiah.

"For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life."
(2 Corinthians 1:8)

We have the sentence of death in the service. Thus, we have no hope in ourselves, but the only hope is in the One who raises the dead, God.

a. We need to examine ourselves. Patience allows us as icons. If we don't endure and become tempered and aggressive then we are an offense.

2. Tribulations:

Tribulations are different than the challenges in the ministry.

When we serve with the power of God are snatching people from Satan. Thus, Satan will attach us in different ways.

Satan may put doubts in your mind. He may make you lose your peace and joy and thus, become weak. Satan will drift you from your goal and just let you focus on activities.

Pope Shenouda: "A servant who does not have a spiritual goal, Satan will serve him."

If there's a line that divides between living according to the world and to God; many people want to live according to the bare minimum to barely cross the line on the side of living with God. Whenever we're laid back in our service and not zealous then we will be an offense. Rather when we take St. Paul as our role model then we will serve with zeal and love and become an icon.

"My brethren, be strong in the Lord.... Put on the whole armor of God." (Ephesians 6:10-11).

3. Needs:

Needs are those that are necessary for our survival; natural, financial, and physical.

- a. Some people when it's too cold or it's too hot, they wouldn't go to church or do visitations. This would be an offense. Same thing for those skipping the service because of exams. God blesses our times even when coming before an exam. Service is always the priority.
 - b. Many people are scared especially when they're consecrated, but the Lord told the disciples not to carry anything with them. Sometimes when we're scared or worried because of our financial needs like when working overtime instead of serving then this would be an offense. We are not to not work but rather keep the service as our priority.
 - c. Some people may skip the service because of physical tiredness.
 - d. Sometimes even things like the world cup may be used as an excuse to skip the service.
4. Distresses:
 Losing a loved one or failing an exam. So, what does he turn to? He quits the service. Where is our trust in God?
 The message we give to our children is how we conduct ourselves and not just in what we teach. We ought to conduct ourselves as ministers of God.
5. Stripes:
 In the old age, there were physical stripes like in Acts chapter 5 as has been done with St. Paul. Nowadays, Satan allows psychological stripes like attacks on social media.
 Remembering the resurrection helps us in stripes because if we suffer with Him then we will be resurrected with Him. After enduring stripes then there will be glory.
6. Imprisonments:
 If we have the choice to be imprisoned for Christ or to forsake our Lord?
 Are we presenting ourselves as an offense or as an icon.
 Anba Tadros is an American citizen and when the Sadat put many bishops were imprisoned. He was in the US at the time and had a choice to escape, but he chose to go to Egypt and they arrested him in the airport and when they did that, he kissed the chains. He chose here to be imprisoned for our Lord Christ instead of escaping. Even though he didn't know what was to happen to him, he still chose to be imprisoned for our Lord.
7. Tumults:
 Examples: divisions within he churches, social media attacks, etc.
 Some people would rather quit the service or even just quit going to the church. This results in becoming part of the problem and not of the solution.
 It is time to carry the weapon of God. We are to fight the good fight.
 The good shepherd doesn't run away when he sees a wolf coming.
8. Labors:
 When we choose to rest instead of toil and labor in the ministry.
 To search for the lost sheep & to preach to non-believers need labor.
 Some people just are satisfied with the minimal only.
 Some people would choose to rest instead of going with the kids on camps.
 "Those who are wise should shine light..."
 If God uses us to turn others to righteousness, then we will shine as stars forever and ever to bring glory unto our God.
9. Sleeplessness:
- a. Are we watchful in prayer?
 How much time do we spend in praying and praying for our classes, each kid by name?

- b. Are we watchful for our spiritual life?
When falling, we should rise again and offer repentance.
- c. Are we watchful over the flock? Will you realize if one wolf snatched a kid from your class?
Do you know how many kids are in your class?

10. Fasting:

Servants should even add fasts to the fasts because the wolves may snatch kids from us.
We could even be encouraging our kids to not keep fasting rules (e.g., eating cheese pizza).
Not keeping the fasts of the church means we don't have self-discipline.
St. Paul said: "I discipline my body and bring it to subjection..."

11. Purity:

If we are impure then we are offenses to the service.
1 Timothy chapter 5: "Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity."
The key to purity is my eye. If it is not pure then the rest will be defiled.
Watching pornography results in impurity as it affects how we deal with each other. Satan also, starts putting imaginations in our minds which turn into impure touching.

12. Knowledge:

- a. Spiritual knowledge of God & for the word of God. St. Peter said that we should be ready to answer all who ask us about our faith. We as Sunday school servants will be asked questions by our children and sometimes, we don't know the answers, and this will be a stumbling block. Also, giving our opinion regardless of church practices, traditions, and biblical teachings. When we're asked, they ask us to tell them what the Biblical teachings are. We don't preach ourselves. We preach what the church is telling us the correct thing is even we're still confused until God enlightens our minds.
- b. The law of knowledge and the law of love which is in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. St. Paul said that knowledge puffs and love edifies.
Because of our knowledge we could be wounding those whom our Lord Christ died for.
Drinking and dancing are examples that could be stumbling blocks. There could be knowledge-based arguments that drinking itself is not bad but rather getting drunk. This is knowledge that puffs up. If a video gets posted on social media, then we're offending our children. Here we're using knowledge to result in an offense.
- c. Knowledge based on science and not on our Bible.

13. Longsuffering:

St Paul said that his heart is wide open in 2 Corinthians 6:11-13.

14. Kindness:

To be sensitive to one another.

In the story of Lazarus and the rich man, the rich man didn't have any sympathy of Lazarus. Rather, the dog had sympathy for Lazarus. Here, the rich man was worse than the dog since he didn't have any kindness or a sensitive heart.

Another example is of Balaam and his donkey. The donkey was very kind, and Balaam was very rough with him as he struck the donkey with his staff and the donkey kindly questioned gently the reason of why he struck her three times and also, reminded him that she has been his donkey (Numbers 22:27-30).

15. The Holy Spirit:

Are we praying that God may speak on our tongue before giving lessons and before going on visitations?

16. Sincere love:

Love without hypocrisy.

Is our love based on our role as Sunday school servants or based on loving God's children?

17. The word of truth:

Are we saying the politically correct words or the truth?

Especially when it comes to LGBTQ and abortion issues.

But Peter and Jogn answered and said to them, Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heart." (Acts 4:19-20).

18. The power of God:

Our strength comes from God and not from ourselves.

The power of God comes from putting on the armor of God as described in Ephesians 6.

God gave us the spirit of strength and not that of fear.

We are strong to defend and not to abuse.

We are strong to strengthen others and prepare the next generation of servants.

- Are we an icon of our Lord or an offense?
- Are we keeping those 18 elements that allow us to be an icon of our Lord?