

# Offense

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Over the past several years, one of the things that I've noticed in the Bible-class discussions at Joliet is a preoccupation with not giving offense to outsiders. Whenever the subject arises, several people are likely to respond with comments about the time they saw such-and-such happen, and how awful it was that the rudeness of a brother or sister drove someone away from the gospel.

There's definitely a point to be made there. Certainly, Christians are not to be hypocrites. Christians are not to be jerks. We have to be careful to make sure that we don't unnecessarily give offense. However, what we don't talk about nearly as much is that there's a point to be made on the other side too. There are times when the gospel itself, no matter how carefully we present it, is going to offend. It is no more righteous for us to remain silent about the truth for fear of giving offense than it is for us to present that truth in an unnecessarily offensive way. This morning, then, let's ponder the subject of offense.

## Sources of Offense

Let's begin this morning by looking at what the Bible says about sources of offense. Once again, this is not about us being jerks or hypocrites. It's about the times when, speaking the truth in love, we offend anyway. Often, people will find reason to blame their stumbling on **THE MESSENGER**. Jesus Himself ran into this in Matthew 13:53-58. This is a longer reading, so let's look at it in our Bibles together. Jesus here comes to Nazareth and does no more than He has done everywhere else, proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. As is usually the case, His hearers are astonished by His words. However, this time, their astonishment leads them not to believe Him, but to dismiss Him. These are the people who knew Jesus best, who know His family, who watched Him grow up, and they simply cannot believe that He has been anointed by God. Jesus points out that this is nothing new. Prophets never get honor from the home folks. In Luke's account, this so enrages the Nazarenes that they try to throw him off a cliff.

Even if those closest to us aren't moved to homicide when we speak truth, they may well reject it simply because it's coming from us. Jesus didn't have any skeletons in His closet, but we all do, and many times, our loved ones will resent being corrected by someone they know isn't perfect either. The same thing can happen in situations where we aren't particularly close to our hearers. We speak truth, they don't like it, and so they try to turn the discussion personal instead of allowing it to be about the Scripture. If we haven't given them a reason in our conduct to dismiss us, they'll invent one and complain about that. The point is, when someone starts acting like we've been offensive jerks, maybe we have been, but maybe not, and it's just convenient for them to pretend that we have been so they can ignore the real issue. We need to be wary of attempts to deflect the conversation like this. We need to keep the focus on the Bible.

Second, offense often arises because of **THE LORD** Himself. Look at Romans 9:31-33. You know, it's funny. We sing lots of hymns that exalt the many names of Jesus. In fact, there's even one called "Jesus, Name above All Names." And yet, I can't think of a single hymn that calls Him, "Stone of Stumbling, Rock of Offense." However, those Biblical descriptions of Him are just as prominent as "Man of Sorrows" or "Lamb of God". Jesus, the real Jesus of the Bible, not the made-up Precious Moments Jesus of the wider religious world, was and is a deeply provocative, divisive, offensive figure.

Here, we see how it worked 2000 years ago. The Jews were confident that they could establish their own righteousness by faithfully keeping the works of the Law. Jesus comes along and tells them, "Not so! You have to believe in Me, in the power of My blood to save you from your sins." They didn't want to hear that. They didn't want to learn that they weren't right with God. They stumbled over the stumbling stone.

Jesus and His gospel are no less offensive today. Most of the time, the Bible isn't going to confirm what people already believe. Instead, it's going to challenge them. It's going to confront them with the areas in which they are in error. Most people aren't going to like that any better than the Jews did 2000 years ago. They're going to find some reason to keep doing what they're doing instead of obeying the gospel.

In both cases, whether the problem is personal or with Jesus, the result is that the offended ones never find **GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS**. Paul points out how tragic this can be in Romans 10:1-3, right on the other side of the chapter break from the last passage we read together. If we didn't know anything about

the wider religious world, we would figure that most people we offended would be bad people. They would be people who were dead-set upon a life of sin, and when we told them that they shouldn't go on sinning, they'd get really angry about it. In my experience, though, that's not the way it works. I can't think of a single worldly person who has argued with me or blown up at me because I approached him about Jesus. Instead, the normal reaction is apathy. They'll say, "OK," and dismiss the suggestion, or they'll say, "Yeah, I know I should," without doing anything to change their actions. They're not involved enough to get mad.

Instead, the people who get mad, the people who argue with me, are the people who are religious, committed to the religion they already have, and not at all interested in hearing why they're wrong. Unlike the worldly, they are involved, and the last thing they want to consider is that they may be devoting their lives to a lie. It is our moral, churchgoing neighbors, not the immoral ones, who are most likely to be offended.

This is precisely what Paul is talking about in this passage. Like all of our religious friends and neighbors, the Jews of 2000 years ago had a zeal for God. Also like our religious friends and neighbors, their zeal for God was not based on a proper understanding of His will. They weren't pursuing God in the way He wanted. They were pursuing Him in the way they wanted.

Paul's reaction to this is similar to ours when we see it. People like this are so hard to watch because they're so sincere, so zealous, and so wrong. We want them to obey the gospel so badly because they'd make such great Christians. "They wouldn't have to change a thing," we often think to ourselves. Sadly, that's not true, because in order to change, they would have to stop pursuing their own righteousness and subject themselves to the righteousness of God. That's a huge change, and when we urge people to make it, they are every bit as likely, if not more, to become offended instead of choosing to repent.

## Jesus and Offense

During the second part of our study, before we partake of the Lord's Supper, let's take a longer look at a subject we've already broached, the subject of Jesus and offense. All of us who are Christians are disciples of Jesus. We claim to be dedicated to following Him. We need to consider, then, the Lord dealt with possibly offensive topics. In this portion of our time, let's look at one text, John 6:52-69.

The first section of this reading concerns the apparently gruesome topic of **EATING FLESH, DRINKING BLOOD**. In context, here's what's been going on. Jesus has just miraculously fed the 5000. Now He's thronged by people who want to be His disciples. He tells them, though, that if they really want eternal life, they have to learn to feed not on miraculous bread from heaven, but on His own flesh. This is not a popular statement. As is often the case, His audience here is too literally minded, so they start arguing and disputing about this apparent invitation to cannibalism.

If we were in Jesus' sandals, we might be tempted to try to calm things down, to explain away all the nasty disagreement. Jesus, though, ratchets up the provocative language. Now, it's not just a matter of eating Jesus' flesh. Now, they have to drink His blood too. Today, we don't have too much trouble understanding this. After all, we have the elements of the Lord's Supper to help us along the road to comprehension. We understand that we receive life only as we make the life of the Son of God a part of ourselves.

2000 years ago, though, this was a huge stumbling block. Drinking any kind of blood was every bit as sinful under the Law of Moses as it is for us, let alone drinking human blood. To a Jewish audience, this is an grotesque image. Don't think that Jesus chose it by accident, or because He felt He had to. Instead, He means for this to provoke, to divide, to separate the people who truly want to follow from those who don't.

Even today, His gospel serves the same function. There is going to be something in God's word that bothers everybody. It could be the Bible's teaching on baptism. It could be the Bible's teaching on homosexuality. Who knows? What matters is what we do with that provocative teaching.

We see how things are going when the crowd starts protesting about **HARD SAYINGS**. They're unhappy because they want Jesus to say only things that they easily understand. It's hard for us to see, but there's a subtle arrogance in this demand. We can't imagine that God has anything important to say that we aren't ready to grasp yet, so we insist that everything has to be down on the level where we can get it right now. This is certainly evident in reaction to the Bible teaching on baptism. Why should we have to get wet to get saved? What does water have to do with it? Because that doesn't make sense to many, they invent an alternative mode of salvation that isn't in the Scripture at all.

Jesus' disciples are offended by what He has said, Jesus knows they're offended, but rather than trying to keep them around, He indicts them for a lack of faith. Indeed, lack of faith is really at the root of what we're talking about here. If we truly believe that Jesus is the Christ, we will follow Him no matter what He says and no matter what He does. If His words and actions don't make sense to us now, we figure that they'll start to make sense later, and if that doesn't work out, well, there's always heaven for things to make sense in. We don't care. We're going to follow Him anyway.

Only people who don't truly believe have the luxury of entertaining doubt. Perhaps more accurately, they're believers too. They just believe in something else more strongly than they believe in Jesus. Jesus' audience here believed that the true Messiah wouldn't say icky things about eating flesh and drinking blood, so they weren't prepared to handle Him when He did. Others are convinced that Mama and Papa and the pastor growing up couldn't have been wrong when they said to pray the sinner's prayer to be saved, so they will easily overlook half a dozen passages that teach baptism to go on believing what they've always believed. Because of Mama and Papa and the pastor, they stumble over Jesus. Jesus has lots of hard spiritual truths to tell. People who believe in Him will press on, but people who don't will be offended.

Finally, the text describes **TWO OUTCOMES**. What an apparent disaster this must have been! Jesus had a whole horde of followers, people who wanted to make Him king, even, but after a few short exchanges, all of these people abandon Him. One can imagine the twelve apostles looking around uneasily, wondering where everybody else went. In TV terms, Jesus' Nielsen ratings have plummeted to zero. This outcome probably frustrated Jesus, but it didn't surprise Him. His words were meant to test His disciples, and most of them flunked—as He knew they would.

In fact, Jesus next turns the test even on His apostles. He asks them if they want to follow the wisdom of the crowds and leave too. Peter answers Him. At a guess, Peter hasn't understood the flesh-and-blood stuff any better than the Jews did. Peter tends not to be big on spiritual understanding at this point of his career. However, Peter understands one thing—Jesus is the Holy One of God, he has the words of eternal life, so Peter and the rest are going to follow.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's think about two things. First, let's turn our attention to the act that the Jews found so repugnant—eating His flesh and drinking His blood. We understand what they did not. This is a spiritual rather than a physical feast before us, but it is no less real for that. As we eat the bread that is to us His body, and as we drink the cup that is to us His blood, let's remember that we have life only as we abide in Him, and as He abides in us.

Second, let's reflect on what it means for Jesus to abide in us. It means that His life must be evident in our lives, not only in the areas where we find following easy, but also when we find following difficult. Jesus is not merely the gentle Friend of sinners, but also the provocative tester of men's hearts, willing to offend the faithless to confirm the faithful. Does He abide in us in this? Or, instead, are we so unwilling to offend that we silence His gospel? Let's evaluate our walk in His footsteps now as we partake.

## **Handling Offense**

Finally, let's look at one last story that reveals more about Jesus handling offense. Let's read together from Matthew 15:1-14. This tale begins with a visit from **THE JERUSALEM PHARISEES**. At this point, Jesus is still in Galilee, but His teaching and miracles have kicked up such a fuss that the Pharisees and scribes in Jerusalem decide they need to hike down to confront Him. Now, Jesus is no longer dealing with the minor-league, backwoods Pharisees. Instead, these are the real experts, and they've got a problem.

They don't like that Jesus isn't teaching His disciples to follow the tradition of the elders in washing their hands before eating. Here's what had happened. Under the Law of Moses, God's people were supposed to wash anytime they touched something unclean. By the time of Jesus, this had morphed into washing just in case you had touched something unclean and didn't realize it. However, it wasn't in the Law, so Jesus felt no obligation to teach His disciples to do it. The Pharisees were upset about this because they put the traditions of their elders on the same level as God's word.

Jesus, though, responds to their charge not with conciliation, but with a **CRITIQUE OF TRADITION**. Jesus is right, He knows He's right, and He isn't about to back down. He counterattacks with the charge that the problem here isn't His disciples' practice of eating with unwashed hands, but the system of tradition that has led the Pharisees to wrongly accuse them. The problem isn't only that the

Pharisees put their tradition on the same level as Scripture. It's that they put it on a higher level. Jesus illustrates this with one example. According to the Law, children were supposed to provide and care for their parents when those parents could no longer support themselves. However, the Pharisees' tradition allowed them to get around this commandment by vowing their possessions to God and then, when their parents needed help, saying, "Sorry, Mom; it's been given to God already". The Pharisees, who were so upset about the violation of tradition, weren't even keeping the actual Law, and Jesus calls them a bunch of hypocrites.

What's interesting to me about this text is that Jesus shows much less regard for the sincerely held, though false, beliefs of others than we commonly do. He doesn't start off with a bunch of crawfishing about how all Jews really serve the same God and how He appreciated the Pharisees' dedication in coming to talk to Him about their concerns. He doesn't pretend that a spade is actually a heart or a diamond because pointing out that it's a spade would be rude. Instead, He bluntly exposes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees' position and isn't afraid to give them the label they've earned. If our notion of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus doesn't include that kind of forthright talk, we need to re-evaluate.

Now, this isn't to say that Jesus behaved this way all the time. He could be very gentle with people who needed physical or spiritual healing. However, Jesus did behave this way some of the time, probably a lot more frequently than is easy for us to acknowledge. If we aren't willing to imitate this side of Him too when the situation requires it, our code of ethics may owe more to the culture of our age than to Him.

What's more, Jesus continues His attack in His subsequent **PUBLIC TEACHING**. Having told the Pharisees off to their faces, He summons the crowd to Him and continues in the same vein. Sure, it's possible to touch something unclean and eat with unclean hands without realizing it. However, that's not important. What is important is what is in the heart and the evil behavior that an evil heart produces.

This was an attack on everything that the Pharisees stood for. They were all about rituals and doing everything external just so. They didn't have much concern for the heart, and that was the fatal flaw of their religion. There were righteous Pharisees, but there were plenty of wicked ones too, and the wicked Pharisees used all the traditions and backdoors and loopholes to do as they pleased while maintaining a façade of righteousness. They thought they were getting away with something, but God knew exactly what they were up to, and here, Jesus exposes the flaw in their reasoning that allowed such unrighteousness to flourish. This is every bit as direct as His words before.

Unsurprisingly, this plain talk produces **OFFENSE** in the Pharisees. In fact, they're mad enough about it to complain to Jesus' disciples, who then come and tell Jesus. Once more, Jesus is not in the least concerned that the Pharisees have a problem with Him. Instead, He tells His disciples to ignore the angry religious leaders, because if they keep listening to them, Pharisee and follower alike are going to end up in spiritual disaster. As it so often is, Jesus' mode of teaching here is confrontational. He points out what the Pharisees are doing wrong as plainly as He can. If they mull it over and decide they need to change some things, great. If not, and this is apparently what happened, well, that's too bad. Jesus isn't going to be deterred from teaching truth by the hurt feelings of people who refuse to listen. Certainly, this bothers Him on a personal level. A little later, we see Him weeping over Jerusalem because of the hardness of its inhabitants' hearts. However, it doesn't change His content or His conduct, and that's the important thing.

Let's think about this the next time we have one of those openings in a conversation. Let's say a co-worker is talking about having her infant granddaughter baptized. If there's a key topic to discuss with an outsider, it's that one—people who do not understand or practice baptism for the forgiveness of sins cannot be saved. What's more, in a circumstance like that, we don't have to bring the topic up, because it's been brought up. In that situation, we can nod and smile politely and allow our co-worker to remain ignorant. Or, we can speak up and point her to the truth, even though we run the risk of offending her by doing so.

I think the "What would Jesus do?" question is overused, all the more so because it is often asked by people who don't know what the Bible says and therefore don't have the first idea what Jesus was like. In this case, though, I believe it's worth asking. We know what Jesus would do in that situation. We've just seen what He did in situations like it. We know what Paul and the first disciples would have done. Whether we do the same and prove that we are genuinely following Jesus too is up to us.