

“Come, follow Me!”
Feeling Offended

Passages: Isaiah 8:11-18
Matthew 15:1-20

Do you get **offended** easily?

Take a moment to remember the last time someone offended you. What happened? What did you feel? Perhaps you felt mistreated; perhaps you felt as if you weren't noticed or respected; perhaps you felt overlooked or put down; perhaps you felt as if your sense of worth was being crushed or diminished.

Whenever we feel offended, we react emotionally to what has been done to us; we take it personally. That's because we've attributed certain motives to the offender; as if what they did to us was deliberate; as if they could have (and should have) prevented the incident. Feeling offended involves a degree of blame. And that means that *feeling offended* is often combined with other emotions like anger, bitterness, rage..., even revenge! (It's highly possible, for example, that the 2009 brutal murder of a North Epping newsagent and his family may have been simply because someone was offended!)

Now, there's no brutal murder in today's Bible reading from Matthew 15, but, you and I know that **murder will eventually come**. Why? Because the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law will become increasingly offended by Jesus...until they finally take action!

So, how does Jesus offend them? Let's examine the situation in Matthew 15.

The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law in Jerusalem had heard various reports about Jesus: Here was a man who was not only healing the sick and casting out demons, *but He was doing these things on the Sabbath!* To make matters worse, when He had recently fed a vast multitude in the wilderness with only 5 loaves and 2 fish, *He failed to lead the crowd in the obligatory Jewish ritual of ablutions prior to eating.* (ie. He let them eat with unwashed hands!)

The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law had a very high regard for the Law of Moses. (They saw themselves as 'guardians' of the Law!) And so, although Jesus may have done many miracles, they were firmly convinced that He was,

in fact, a *Law-breaker*—a fact which literally nullified everything else! To them, He was a *bad Rabbi*...an *offensive Rabbi*! That's why these men decided to make the 4-day journey up to Galilee in order to publicly reprimand Jesus!

Matthew 15:1-2 *“Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”*

Jesus' response is interesting. He wasn't afraid of these high-flyers from Jerusalem. He obviously didn't care that they were Israel's powerbrokers and king-makers. He was, therefore, free to speak the truth to them, without fear!

Matthew 15:3-9 ³ *Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, ‘Honour your father and mother’^[a] and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’^[b] ⁵ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is ‘devoted to God,’ ⁶ they are not to ‘honour their father or mother’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.*

Let me try to summarise Jesus' argument. He says to the Pharisees, “You may think that, by breaking some of the finer details of the Law, I have nullified my religious duties, **but what you are doing is worse!** You are nullifying the very Word of God by placing your traditions above the Law.” Jesus was accusing the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law of losing sight of God's bigger Law of love by focusing on the inconsequential details of tradition.

According to Jesus, this was essentially a problem of the *heart*! And so, in verses 7-9, Jesus quotes from Isaiah-- ⁷ **You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ⁸ “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁹ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”**

It's at this point that Jesus turns to the crowd and, with the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law listening in, He explains to the uneducated Galileans how the tradition of ablutions (of *cleaning one's hands*) was, in fact, God's way of pointing to the bigger issue of having a *clean heart*.

Matthew 15:10-11 ¹⁰ *Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand.” ¹¹ (All these man-made rules about clean hands are, in*

themselves, quite silly!) ***What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.***"

Jesus is saying that, even though you may do all these hand-washing rituals, if your heart is *unclean*, your words and actions will be *unclean* for they will flow from *unclean* motives! But when your heart is *clean* (ie. connected to God), your words and actions will also be *clean*, for they will flow from motivations which originate in God.

Of course, these visitors from Jerusalem were furious when they heard Jesus' response. Jesus was insinuating that they were the ones who were unclean!

And that's what brings us to **the central part of the story**. Look at verse 12
¹² ***"Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"***

I call this the central part of the story because one of the key words throughout Matthew's Gospel is the Greek word, 'skandalon'/skandalizo', commonly translated in English as "offense", "offend", or "offended". In fact, this word is found 13 times in Matthew. Let's do a quick word study.

One of the first times the word appears is back in **chapter 11**, in a dialogue between Jesus and John the Baptist (who was in prison). When John the Baptist sent a messenger to ask Jesus whether He really was the Messiah, Jesus responded: ***"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble ('skandalon') on account of me."*** (A better translation would be; ***"Blessed is anyone who is not offended by me.***)

A second time we come across this word 'skandalon' is in the Parable of the Sower, in **Matthew 13**. When Jesus speaks about the seed which fell on rocky ground, He makes this comment: ***"When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away ('skandalon')."*** (Once again, a better translation would be, ***"When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly get offended."***)

A third occurrence of this word, 'skandalon', comes also in **chapter 13**, when Jesus goes to His hometown of Nazareth. In verses 55-57, *we hear the townspeople ask;*⁵⁵ ***"Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?"***⁵⁶ ***Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"***⁵⁷ ***And they took offense ('skandalon') at him."***

And that brings us back to today's passage from Matthew 15:12.¹² ***Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended ('skandalon') when they heard this?"***

What we see in today's story is just one of many occasions where people were offended by Jesus. Indeed, it seems that **being offended by Jesus** is a key theme of the Gospel!

But why? Why would people be offended by such a good man; a healer and a prophet? **Let's review the facts that Matthew lays out for us!** From the start of the Gospel, Jesus is revealed as God's Son who came down from heaven, was born of the Virgin Mary in extraordinary circumstances, **in order that He might bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth.** As **the Sower**, Jesus begins to sow *the Word of the Kingdom* into the various soils of people's hearts; as **the Gardener**, He plants the tiny Mustard Seed of the Kingdom on this earth; as **the Baker**, He begins to mix the yeast of the Kingdom into the dough of this world; as the Treasure-hunter, He starts looking for fellow Jews who will rise up and join Him; as the Pearl-merchant, He goes off in search of Gentiles who will break away from their false idols and follow Him.

This is the Jesus of Matthew's Gospel...a man unlike all the others, who has come **to challenge and to change the status quo** by bringing *His Kingdom to bear on the human race; a Kingdom that, if allowed to enter our hearts and produce its fruit, will bring serious changes and challenges to our lives!* **It's an upside-down Kingdom**, where God's power is made perfect in weakness and where freedom is perfected through service; where inexpressible joy takes place amidst grief and trials; where treasure in heaven is found by giving to the poor. It's a Kingdom where rest comes to those who take on Jesus' yoke, and where the poor in spirit, and not the rich, receive the kingdom of heaven, and the meek, not the self-asserting, inherit the earth.

*That's why Jesus repeatedly exhorts His hearers **not to be offended** by what He says and does. Instead, He encourages them to **weigh up the evidence**; to look*

at the miracles; to reflect on His teaching; to examine the results of His ministry. **If you do this**, you will conclude that, in this man from Galilee, **the God of the universe has come near... and you will let His Kingdom touch you and rearrange your life!**

Now, in light of this, the widespread theme of ‘feeling offended’ by Jesus makes a lot of sense! Those who are offended are offended because they have trouble accepting the fundamental revelation of **who Jesus is!** They get offended by Him because they can’t believe that He has the right to come and make changes! They get offended by Him because they don’t want to change; don’t see the need for change. They get offended because they are quite content the way they are.

Indeed, what I find quite interesting in today’s passage is there are, in fact, **two groups of people who were feeling offended by Jesus**: Of course, *the Pharisees* were feeling offended—that’s obvious! But, notice how *the disciples* were also feeling offended! I mean, *they didn’t need to come and tell Jesus that the Pharisees were offended!* But they did! **Why?** As I understand it, they didn’t like getting caught in the middle of this argument. It made them feel uncomfortable. Not only would they be ‘tarred with the same brush’ by the Pharisees and labelled as ‘Law-breakers’, but as Jesus became an *enemy of the Pharisees*, they would also be forced into a potentially life-threatening situation! Surely, in their minds, Jesus was to blame for this! That’s why they went to Jesus and told Him that **“the Pharisees were offended”**—they were hoping that Jesus might ‘give it a rest’... ‘stop being so obsessive’!

I said to you that **‘feeling offended’** was a key theme in Matthew’s Gospel. Let me point out two more incidents that reinforce this idea:

In *Matthew 24:10*, Jesus speaks about the signs which point to the end of the age. The Greek literally says, **“And then many will be offended and will betray and hate each other...”**

Then, in *Matthew 26:33*, in a painful discussion with Peter, it is Peter who makes the foolish promise (which he will break only hours later); **“Even if all are offended by you, I will never be offended.”**

But, I guess the most striking verse of all which speaks about the way people were offended by Jesus is not even found in Matthew’s Gospel, but in the 8th chapter of Isaiah, verse 14. It’s funny, because Matthew quotes from Isaiah 9

times, but this verse is not one of them. Maybe Matthew expected that his readers would already know this verse by heart, for, in speaking of the coming Messiah, Isaiah writes;

¹⁴ *He will be... a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence...* ¹⁵ *And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken.*

Isn't this exactly what we see throughout Matthew's Gospel? Don't we see Jesus constantly calling the world to make a choice...and that is why we are offended! He puts pressure on us to say whether we're with Him, or against Him? Are we willing to let him cleanse our hearts, or do we prefer to simply play with rituals? Are we open to the dynamic, transforming love of His Father, or are we shut down and content in our self-made world?

As we come to the end of today's passage, can we now discern how it applies to us, today? Let me lay out four simple truths:

First-- It's OK to get offended... if the chief offender is Jesus! Do you remember how, at the beginning of this sermon, I asked you if *you got offended easily?* Well, let me tell you that it's OK to get offended... **if we recognise that the chief offender is Jesus!** After all, He's **the Rock of Offense!** He's come to get up our noses; to challenge us with His Kingdom... with a new way of living. That's because He's not satisfied with our sin-stained, immature lives! As it was with the disciples, He puts us in difficult places; He forces us to make difficult choices; He challenges us with difficult consequences! That's His job! I could even go so far as to say that **if he's not offending you** at some level...in some hidden area of your life..., **then perhaps you're not really letting Him get close to you!** Although He's **the God of love**, His love for us also means that He is **'the rock of offense'!**

A second truth follows on from the first: In the light of Jesus and His *'offensive'* Kingdom, all other offenses against us pale into insignificance! For example, do you get offended when someone bumps into you and spills your coffee?... , or butts in ahead of you in a queue?, or someone who accidentally rings you in the middle of the night?, or who says something that is unkind to you? If you do, then stop and think about it: **What's the big deal, in comparison to the offense of Jesus?** By bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to earth, **Jesus has ruined our ordinary lives!** He has begun a good work in us, by giving us a taste of something bigger and far more essential to life than the petty things for which we so easily get upset.

So, let's start putting everything into perspective! **Let Jesus be the real offense in your life**, and not your colleagues or neighbours; or your husband or your wife; or your children, or your dog! **Let Jesus** be the only One who offends you, as He calls you to give up everything and follow Him. **He, alone, is the Rock of Offense**-- everyone else pales in comparison!

This idea leads us to a third truth that, I believe, flows out of today's text: **Only when we see that the *real offender* is Jesus...only then will we be able to forgive all the other people who offend us by seeing that their offence is part of the much larger offense of Jesus who "*causes all things to work together for good*", that "*we might be conformed into His image*".**

To put it another way, **all the personal offenses that you have ever experienced (or will ever experience) are fused together by the cross.** I mean, isn't that why Jesus died for us... to take away the sin (the offense) of the world and cause reconciliation to flow between people? Didn't He die so that the transforming power of the Kingdom of Heaven might be released into every human offense by the Spirit of forgiveness and grace? Didn't Jesus die so that the power of the Holy Spirit might be "*poured out on all flesh*", so that every human being might join together in this cosmic journey of transformation and change (as Jesus brings all things into subjection to the Father)? If that is true, then it's by fixing our eyes on the cross that we will more easily recognise that **the person who has offended me is, in fact, very much like me**; that we all share a common bond of sin and that we all have such a long way to go in being perfected by Jesus and His Kingdom.

In a book entitled, "**Wrecked**", Jeff Goins writes; "*Life, I'm learning, is full of moments of discomfort. And in these moments, we have a choice; we can step into the opportunity they provide for us to grow, or we can shrink back and avoid the pain. I'm trying to do the former, without too many complaints. (For it's) only when I've submitted to a plan bigger than my own—when I've given myself to a cause beyond myself—have I found some piece of true fulfilment.*"

That's the only reason why we can forgive those who mock us, or ignore us, or mistreat us! This is the reason why Jesus taught us to forgive our offenders, even as we have been forgiven. Someone once said, "*We cannot always choose our circumstances, but we can always choose our response.*" Yes, we can choose to become angry, offended and bitter, focused on our momentary troubles and believing the worst about people..., **or** we can choose to forgive in the context of a far bigger picture of life.

There's one final truth that flows from this subject of '*feeling offended*': **If you're going to get offended, first, get offended by Jesus. Then, learn to get offended with Jesus!** When you align yourself with Jesus and His Kingdom, you gradually learn to lift your eyes and get offended by the things that really matter...like injustice and hypocrisy; like war, cruelty and abuse.

This past Friday, I received a *Facebook* message from Canon Andrew White, vicar of St George's Anglican Church in Baghdad. In referring to the recent massacre of Christians in Mosul, Iraq, this is what he wrote: "*You know how I love to show photos; but the photo I was sent today was the most awful I have ever seen. A family of eight all shot through the face, lying in a pool of blood with their Bible open on the couch. They would not convert; it cost them their life. I thought of asking if anybody wanted to see the picture, but it is just too awful to show to anybody. This is Iraq today.*" Tell me, are you offended by this? If so, what are you going to do about it? (Archbishop's appeal!)

I got an email this week from Open Doors in which they spoke about Iranian Christians who were put in prison for their faith. Does this offend you? If so, what are you going to do about it? Open Doors has started a letter writing campaign to support them.

Closer to home, I'm a member of two social media groups: GetUp and Causes. Last week, I signed a petition for a family from Beverley Hills who were having trouble being compensated for a car accident. The father was injured in the accident, and he's the principle carer of their two intellectually disabled children. Their insurance company (AAMI) said their claim was too late. Many people got offended by this-- We fought and won!

And let's get offended by the corruption, lies and deceit that have invaded our politicians... as well as the growing callousness of our government towards the poor, the needy, and those seeking refuge in our country!

After all, this is what it means to follow Jesus! It means that **we must get offended by the evil that has entered our world, for that is what offends Jesus. We must get offended by the way Satan has stolen the lives of so many through false ideologies and religions. We must even get offended by death itself, for it has no place in the Kingdom of Heaven!**

That's why God's Kingdom has come in Jesus Christ—so that everything might be changed, starting with you and me! Let's pray.