

Relationships Series: Offense . . . p. 1

I wonder how many of you are familiar with the “Racial Slurs Database”. The number of slurs recorded in this database numbers over 2100 and continues to grow in leaps and bounds. Some examples are in order, beginning with that terribly undignified slur, “Ants” to refer to people living in Antarctica. I didn’t know that there were enough people living in Antarctica to justify that a slur be invented to describe them, but apparently it does. One that might surprise you is the term “eskimo”, which is okay pretty much everywhere but in Canada. It means “raw meat eater” but is offensive to the Inuit, despite the fact that they eat raw meat. Some other offensive slurs that you should know about, because they refer to us, to Canadians:

“frostback” a play on “wetback” altered to fit people from the frozen northland

“dryback”, because Canadians tend to cross the US border on land, rather than swim the Rio Grande.

“cheeser” or “cheesehead”, refers to Canadians who cross the border into Washington State to buy big blocks of American cheese.

“Canyadas” or “51st-staters” - referring to Canada as an unimportant, second-rate sort of country

“Canucklehead” - diminutive of Canuck

“Angie” - English-speaking Canadians, used in Quebec also “anglo”

“Cube” refers to eskimos who supposedly live in igloos made of large cubes of ice -- although when Jeremy was in the Arctic last March he reported that nobody lives in igloos up there.

“Hoser” refers to a beer-drinking, white, Canadian hockey fan

“Pepper” or “Pepsi” is considered quite insulting; it refers to Quebec being the only place in NA where Pepsi has outsold Coke. “Empty from the neck up”

“Poutine” and “Frozen Frogs” are disparaging slurs used to refer to the same ethnic group in Canada.

A great many slurs seem harmless, are actually some-what descriptive, and are used in a light-hearted way. A few are crude and intended to be hurtful. The greatest number of slurs in the database are for blacks, whites, hispanics and asians, with Arab people groups also in the running. If you don’t take these things too seriously, some are quite funny. If you do take these things too seriously, there’s nothing funny about them and they should be banned from the English language.

Now, I know I picked on some of the mildest ones out there, but how did you feel as I read those stereotypes of people? Do you think you felt a little more sensitive to them than you would have ten or fifteen years ago? We are being trained, and there’s nothing subtle about it - we’re being trained to be as neutral as possible in our comments, so as not to offend anyone. And the hardest part of it is we can never know for sure what some people will find offensive. Maybe you didn’t like one or more of the examples I just gave. Maybe you cringe when people use certain words in conversation that seem to be putting down one group of people. Or maybe you’ve been so conditioned by the attention given to this topic by the media that you’ve become very sensitive to transgressions. An article I was reading began like this:

“Rugs are oriental. Restaurants are oriental,” one of the boys corrected us over Christmas.

“People from the Orient are Asian.”

“And by the way,” he continued, “using the word ‘retard’ is politically incorrect, too. It’s regarded as insensitive.”

Later on, he writes:

“‘Eskimo’ is supposed to be a bad word. We don’t know why. Nor do we know why ‘gypsy’ is derogatory. Or why in Britain it is supposed to be offensive to refer to someone from Scotland as a ‘jock’.”

He then questions whether one person or group should have the right to determine how everyone else on the planet should talk about him, or them. If that’s the case, the writer concludes, I want to always be referred to as “the handsome one” or the “really smart man”. Everything else will be regarded as offensive. Of course, he says that tongue in cheek, but his point is actually a good one: who decides what is truly offensive? Can the phrase, “You have offended me” mean anything beyond an expression of someone’s emotional state or relative degree of personal maturity?

And yet, that is becoming a standard that is supposed to determine our relational practices - we’re okay as long as we don’t offend anyone. Needless to say, there has been some reaction to the new rules:

1. Some people think the list of potential offenses is a bit too long, that it may be getting overdone.
2. Some think that political correctness is tending to lower the emotional maturity expected of people in general.
3. Some people think that we should take p.c. thinking head on and actually try to offend people.
4. Some people think that, if we are easily offended, we have a problem, a problem that we need to address.

Who was the most offensive person in the Bible? Which person is described as offending people more than any other? Jesus. Who did He offend? Let’s look:

Jesus returned to Nazareth, His hometown. When He taught there in the synagogue, everyone was astonished and said, “Where does He get His wisdom and His miracles? He’s just a carpenter’s son, and we know Mary, his mother, and his brothers - James, Joseph, Simon and Judas. All his sisters live right here among us. What makes him so great?” And they were deeply offended and refused to believe in Him. (Matt. 13:54-57)

Who was offended? The people who watched Jesus grow up, who thought they knew him as well as anyone. Why were they offended? Because Jesus was doing some amazing miracles and was teaching with authority, and they couldn’t figure out why He should be any more important than any of them were. Does that strike you as a mature and thoughtful response to Jesus’ teaching? “All his sisters live right here among us. What makes him so great?” No, it’s not a mature and thoughtful response, but, when we feel offended, it’s actually quite rare that our feeling comes from a mature and reasoned place. It is much more likely that our pride is hurt, that someone else is

considered more important than we are, and that we feel threatened in some way, belittled in some way, maybe a bit insecure in relation to the person or issue that we are reacting to.

It's interesting to look at Jesus' response to these people. He doesn't feel insecure and isn't offended by them, but He is limited by their unbelief:

Then Jesus told them, "A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his relatives and his own family." And because of their unbelief, He couldn't do any mighty miracles among them except to place His hands on a few sick people and heal them. And He was amazed at their unbelief.

(Mark 6:4-6)

Jesus didn't take people's weakness or struggle or immaturity or prejudice personally -- He recognized that these issues were their issues, not His -- but He was amazed at them. When someone rejects your advice or refuses to take your opinions seriously, you don't need to be offended or threatened in any way -- you can just look at their attitude and be amazed that they are so rooted in their own opinions or ideas that they can't listen and learn from others.

There was another group of people who were offended by Jesus - the Pharisees:

Then Jesus called to the crowds and said, "Listen to what I say and try to understand. You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do."

Then the disciples came to Him and asked, "Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?"

Jesus replied, "Every plant not planted by My heavenly Father will be rooted up, so ignore them. They are blind guides leading the blind, and if one blind person guides another, they will both fall into a ditch." (Matthew 15:10-14)

The Pharisees were offended because Jesus disagreed with a principle that they had long taught as being an important part of pleasing God, avoiding certain kinds of foods. Their pride was hurt, both because Jesus had disagreed with their teaching and because He substituted another teaching in its place, one that they hadn't been teaching; it wasn't part of their book.

Again, notice how Jesus responded to the people who were offended by Him. He simply told His disciples to ignore them, to not take them seriously. He didn't want His followers to get into a confrontation with people who were offended -- there's no point in that -- but He wanted them to know that their teaching was not a planting of His Father. The Pharisees' rules about eating would be like the weeds in your garden that are pulled up and allowed to wither and die. And then He tells His disciples that these teachers of the law, these Pharisees, weren't going anywhere, they were lacking positive direction. Because they couldn't see into the law of God with understanding and with wisdom, they were unable to even lead each other to a greater knowledge of the Father's will.

Jesus is the best model we have for learning how to be in relationships because He is the most secure and confident person ever. He is motivated by love for the people He encounters and that love is evident even when He has to say hard things to them.

But Jesus isn't the only Bible personality who talked about being offended. The writer of Proverbs also has some important things to say about it:

A man's wisdom gives him patience

It is his glory to overlook an offense (19:11)

Wisdom produces a patient outlook. The person who shows mercy, who forgives an offense, is demonstrating a noble or glorious character trait. This is high praise and presents us with an element of a mature person's character that we can aspire to ... and work on. "A person's wisdom gives them patience."

The writer also points out the negative side of taking offense, or being offended. In 18:19 we read:

It's harder to make amends with an offended friend than to capture a fortified city. Arguments separate friends like a gate locked with iron bars.

That's an image I want us to think about for a bit. It's harder to make amends with an offended friend than to capture a fortified city. Notice that Solomon is talking about a friend, someone who knows you and cares for you. The friend is offended by something -- maybe it's something you said or did; just as likely it's something you didn't say or didn't do. How do you get over the relational breakdown and restore the friendship? Good luck; you'd be better off trying to capture a fortified city. In other words, when you're dealing with the pride and defensiveness that come with being offended by something, you're not in control, you're trying to overcome something that is stronger than you are.

And the second half of the verse just confirms that interpretation: "Arguments separate friends like a gate with iron bars." Again, we're looking at people who are, or at least have been, friends. Again, there is a difference of opinion, a lack of agreement about some issue, and the gate slams shut and is locked with iron bars. In both pictures, there is a finality about the result. There doesn't seem to be any possibility of resolution, which is a good description of offense - there is no way out for the person whose feelings are hurt and who won't forgive, who refuses to move past that hurt.

Now, back to Jesus' example to find the way through. In the verse we just read and in the world around us, being offended typically means that a relationship is broken. But notice how Jesus deals with even the possibility of someone taking offense over a small thing:

On their arrival in Capernaum, the tax collectors for the temple tax came to Peter and asked him, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?"

"Of course he does," Peter replied. Then he went into the house to talk to Jesus about it.

But before he had a chance to speak, Jesus asked him, "What do you think, Peter? Do kings tax their own people or the foreigners they have conquered?"

"They tax the foreigners," Peter replied.

"Well, then," Jesus said, "the citizens are free! However, we don't want to offend them, so go down to the lake and throw in a line. Open the mouth of the first fish you catch, and you will find a coin. Take the coin and pay the tax for both us us."

(Matt. 17:24-27)

First, Jesus explains that they are exempt from having to pay the tax because they belong to the Father, they are children of the Kingdom, not foreigners from the world. Then, He says that they should pay in order not to offend.

Jesus knew the power of offense; on other occasions He had no choice but to offend the religious leaders and others who supported them. But He chose not to offend when it was a matter that He could be flexible about. He chose not to offend when the decision was over something trivial, something He could deal with without causing a barrier in the relationship.

In the world today, it's actually hard not to get offended. You've got bloggers doing their very best to insult the God of Christian faith. You've got major corporations in Canada, led by the Bank of Montreal, discriminating against graduates of a Christian university, Trinity, and you've got city councils and other levels of government trying to appear "fair to all" by limiting the rights of Christian believers to express our faith.

So, how do we imitate Jesus in this age of opposition to Him and to His people?

1. We don't gain our confidence from people, because we know that they're no better and no different from us. They have their human shortcomings, their limited knowledge, their long-held biases and prejudices. They may sound very persuasive, or very intense, or highly educated (they use long words) or very confident, but so did the people who opposed Jesus in His day - that didn't make them right and it didn't make Jesus back down from His mission on earth nor from His love for people. Our role in dealing with things that might offend us, is to make sure that our confidence is well-placed, that we are convinced of who Jesus is and what He did for us, and that no one else's opinion on those things is somehow more important than ours.
2. Jesus loved people, all sorts of people, including people who chose not to believe in Him or follow Him. Do you remember the story of the rich young ruler? The gospel writer tells us that Jesus loved him, and told him to sell his stuff, give the money to the poor and then come and follow Him, but he didn't want to get rid of his stuff, so he didn't become a follower. If we could be more focused on loving people and less worried if they hurt our feelings, we would soon be able to look past ignorant or uncaring words and actions and see the deeper need within.
3. Tied in with loving people, is living sacrificially. If we can see our purpose in life as doing more than living for ourselves, more than getting what we want out of our time here on earth, then our perspective on others and their failings will be changed. Again, I think of Jesus on the cross and His words, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." He was able to see through His pain and into the confusion and false values of those who were putting Him to death ... and He cared

about them. Because He was giving His life for the world, He was able to forgive offenses.

4. Finally, let's take a step back and look at the big picture. Allowing an offense to become a part of us is a kind of unforgiveness. It binds a part of our emotional life to the words or deeds that caused the offense and we can't be free to live for the glory of God if we allow ourselves to be bound to bitterness, resentment, anger or even the self-pity that rises up in us when we're hurt. Forgiveness is the way that we can move forward from any kind of offense, large or small, and forgiveness is the way that Jesus taught us to follow. If we can truly release people from our judgments, from our desire to see them punished for what they've done, from our looking down on them or criticizing them in front of others, and we can choose instead to pray for them and to bless them in peace, then we are truly children of a loving Father who has forgiven us so much.