

An Offensive Message

Matthew 5

June 5, 2011 – Rev. Chris Kurtz, Hampton Baptist Church

When it comes to Jesus, there are couple of things we know for sure. The first thing is that he was not boring. As a matter of fact the people back then found Jesus to be dynamic and had such a compelling and charismatic personality that individuals left their jobs and families to follow him. Crowds greeted him as he entered towns and villages and gathered to hear him speak and witness his acts of healings and other miracles. Religious leaders felt that this Jesus, with his powerful personality and powerful message was dangerous. No Jesus was not boring, but somehow over the generations his radical message and rebellious personality with its razor sharp edge was replaced with a calm, reserved and even boring person with the edge of a butter knife.

The second thing we know is that the man knew how to communicate. His use of stories or parables to illustrate and demonstrate an unmistakable message of who God is and his amazing love captivated those that heard him.

A woman made an appointment to see her pastor and when she sat down in his office she told him flat out, "I want to divorce my husband." To this the pastor replied, "Well, do you have any grounds?" She answered, "Why yes, we have almost 10 acres." "I'm sorry you misunderstood me," the pastor said, "what I want to know is do you and your husband have a grudge?" The woman replied, "Actually we don't, but we do have a nice carport." With growing frustration and shaking his head the pastor asked, "Does your husband beat you up?" "Absolutely not," she said, "I get out of bed before he does every morning." Finally the pastor asks, "Why do you want to divorce your husband?" To which she replies, "The man just doesn't know how to communicate!"

Jesus knew how to communicate in clear and precise ways. Another thing we know for sure is that Jesus was not afraid to speak his mind and that tact and diplomacy were not always his first priority. Sure it is true that Jesus was tender to the unfortunate, patient with those that honestly inquired, and humble before heaven. But he also insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites and a pit of vipers. He referred to King Herod as "the fox," and went to parties with sinners and undesirables. Jesus became enraged by the unethical practices of local businessmen and threw them and their goods out of the Temple. It has been said that tact is the art of making a point without making enemies. That was not a motto that Jesus lived by.

Jesus was wild and dangerous to those in power because he did not water down the truth. The officials of the church and society felt that their way of life, with its power and influence, was threatened by Jesus and his radical message. So they did away with Jesus in the name of protecting God and God's people.

Jesus was offensive, His teachings and attitude went against those of the day. This is demonstrated most clearly in the Sermon on the Mount. Think about the command Jesus gave in Matthew 5:48. "Be perfect, even as God in heaven is perfect." WOW, what a command! Jesus is so extreme, but if we notice, this isn't anything new. For example:

- When a rich man asked Jesus what he needed to do to ensure eternal life, Jesus told him give away his money. Not 10%, not half, but ALL of it. JESUS IS EXTREME!
- When a disciple asked if he should forgive his brother 7 times, Jesus said, "Not 7 times but 7 X 70 times." JESUS IS EXTREME!
- Other religions taught variations of the "Golden Rule" but it was in the negative, "Do not do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you." Jesus said it this way. "In EVERYTHING do to others what you would have them do to you." JESUS IS EXTREME!

For people back then and for us today the question remains, "Is this possible? Can we really do what Jesus is asking and commanding us to do? Is Jesus expecting way too much of us?"

An English professor at Texas A&M assigned her class the task of writing an short essay on the Sermon on the Mount. Thinking that since the Bible Belt stretched across Texas, she expected her students to have a basic respect for the text. Her students proved her wrong in her thinking. One student wrote, "In my opinion religion is one big hoax." Others wrote:

- The stuff that churches preach is extremely strict and allows for almost no fun without thinking it is a sin.
- Another I did not like the essay "Sermon on the Mount." It was hard to read and made me feel like I had to be perfect and no one is.

- A male student wrote, the things asked in the sermon are absurd. To look at woman is adultery. Really? That is the most extreme, stupid and inhuman statement that I have ever heard.

The same reasons the words of this message were offensive when Jesus first spoke them still pertain today. For instance think of a possible backdrop in which his teaching took place; it was not uncommon for Roman soldiers to invade small villages to take so called revenge for some small trespass against the empire. The soldiers would string up men, beat their hysterical wives, and even spear children just to teach a lesson.

What if there were a person in the crowd that had just had this type of experience and Jesus began a teaching such as, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?"

Can you imagine their response to these words? What if on the night of the September 11th attack someone was on the television and said that we need to love the very people that caused such pain, suffering and death. Love the ones that took the lives of our loved ones. It would have infuriated us, how dare someone ask that of us, let alone command it.

Even though Jesus spoke words that were so offensive and went against the grain of culture and human nature, there were still the questions that everyone was asking, "Was Jesus, this rebel the one that was to overthrow the Roman government and restore the Throne of David? Was he really the Messiah or was he just another Jewish prophet, or could he even be a false prophet like the Pharisees claimed?"

Listen to Matthew 5: 17 & 20 and understand their confusion. "Don't suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures— either God's Law or the Prophets. I'm not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. God's Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God's Law will be alive and working. "Trivialize even the smallest item in God's Law and you will only have trivialized yourself. But take it seriously, show the way for others, and you will find honor in the kingdom. Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in the matters of right living, you won't know the first thing about entering the kingdom."

Verse 20 is really what got the people to sit up and listen. How could Jesus fulfill the Law any better than the Scribes and Pharisees and how can he expect the common people to surpass their devotion? Scribes and Pharisees were in a kind of competition to see who could be the most strict and adhere the closest to the Law. They had taken God's law and condensed it down to 613 rules, 248 commands and 365 prohibitions. On top of all of this they added 1521 amendments to these rules, commands and prohibitions.

For instance, to avoid breaking the 3rd commandment & not to misuse the name of the Lord- they refused to say the name of God at all. That way they could not misuse it. To avoid sexual temptations they lowered their heads and didn't even look at a woman if one came near them. To avoid defiling the Sabbath they outlawed 39 activities that might be mistaken as work.

So when Jesus told the common people that the only way they could go to heaven was to be better than the Scribes and Pharisees. They thought it impossible, they had no chance. Jesus took the law and made it impossible to keep.

When we encounter the impossibility and unrealistic expectations of Jesus' teachings it is easy to see why people feel that Christianity and the institutional church are disconnected and irrelevant to common, everyday people in society. Most people say "I'm not even gonna try." In the words of Billy Joel they say, "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints."

So what are we suppose to do with this unrealistic and offensive message? How can we resolve this tension and disconnect between the high standards of God and the reality of who we are?

A brand new lawyer in his brand new office on his first day in practice sees a prospective client walk in the door. He decides that he should look busy, so he picks up the phone and starts talking: "Look counselor, about the Jones settlement, I'm not happy with the direction this is going. I'm not going to let your client get away that nonsense I'd slap an injunction on him so fast it will make his head spin. No, I don't think 3 million will get it done. That's a good idea, you

talk to your client and call me back.ö He hangs up the phone and looks up at the visitor and says, öGood morning, how may I help you?ö The prospective client says, öYou can't help me at all. I'm here to hook up your phone.ö

God knows exactly who we are, and how we are. We cannot pretend to be something we are not with God. God knows us intimately and sees through our pretense. God sees our strengths and character flaws. God knows what we are and what we are not capable of.

What God desires most from us is that we acknowledge the two main characteristics of God, holiness and righteousness. God desires that we admit our inability to measure up to these absolutes and then accept the realization that because of Jesus we do not have to live up to these high standards. God knows we are sinners and that we will always fall short of these expectations, yet still loves and embraces us based on the righteousness of Christ that lives within us.

Jesus shared these absolute ideas in His teachings to show us the character, nature and personality of God. Jesus' teachings show God's purity, greatness and majesty, compared against our lowliness and sinfulness. But these teachings also show the need for something to bridge the gap between the two absolutes of God's holiness and our sinfulness. Just as the absolute holiness of God is necessary so is the absolute grace that is offered through Jesus.

Jesus taught standards that Mother Teresa could not have lived up to. But God offered grace to her, and to the woman caught in adultery, to a thief on his cross, the disciple that denied him, to the very ones that nailed him to the cross and to us.

In response to the unrealistic message of the Sermon on the Mount and the high standards of God we should feel inadequate and unworthy. But in reality Jesus didn't share them to make us feel that way; he wanted us to see what God was like and to realize our need for God in our lives.

Why should we love our enemies? Because God loves them, and causes the sun to rise and fall on both the good and evil. Why store up treasures in heaven? Because God lives there and wants to lavishly reward us. Why live without fear and worry? Because God who clothes the lilies of the field has promised to take care of us.

The offensive and unrealistic message of the Sermon on the Mount forces us to see the great gulf between us and God. Maybe you feel unworthy and unacceptable in comparison to the high standards of God? We all should, however, it is because of Jesus who bridged that gap with his life, death and resurrection that makes absolute grace available so that we all can be found acceptable in God's eyes.

Amen