

TO OFFEND OR NOT TO OFFEND

A Defense of Biblical Satire that Is Intended to Offend

I've said this before and I'm sure I'll say it again...and again, *Christians are often nicer than God*. In fact, we're such a nice bunch that we sometimes look askance at the behavior of Christ in the Gospels and think it's unchristian. Where did we ever get the naïve notion that the world would bow before the Lordship of Jesus Christ, if we irenic Christians were just a little nicer? It's as though the Great Commission is, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations by being as nice as you can possibly be without ever giving offence." Please do not misunderstand, I'm not for a minute suggesting that we be mean-spirited or unloving. That certainly will not adorn the gospel.

However, it seems as though Christians will go a thousand miles out of their way in order not to offend an unbeliever. It's as though offending an unbeliever would make one guilty of the unpardonable sin in evangelism: causing an uncomfortable offensive. I know this will be a new thought for some—although it's prominent in the Scriptures—but there are times when Christians should use satire for the very purpose of giving offense. "Satire is the exposure of human vice or folly through rebuke or ridicule... It might consist of an entire book (e.g., Amos), or it can be as small as an individual 'proverb'" (Douglas Wilson, *A Serrated Edge*, p. 12).

So Christians don't overreact and fall off the other side, let me clarify. On one side we have the mushy-gushy, nicey-nice folks, while on the other side there are the rude, crude, obnoxious types. We want balance. As Martin Luther noted, "The devil doesn't care which side of the horse we fall off of, so long as we don't stay in the saddle."

To borrow a locution from Ecclesiastes: There is a time to offend and a time not to offend. In Matthew 17, "collectors of the half-shekel tax went to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the tax?'" (vs. 24). Jesus told Peter, "[so as] not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself" (vs. 27). In this situation Jesus avoids giving offense, but in many others He gives offense—and does so deliberately.

Case and point, Matthew 15: The Pharisees and scribes sharply rebuke Jesus, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat" (vs. 2). Jesus responds, not with a polite defense, but with biting satire that is intentionally designed to offend: "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition... So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites!" (vv. 3, 6-7). As a side note, if you lean toward the nicey-nice side of the spectrum, and have difficulty offending people, try calling them hypocrites, that usually gets the job done.

You'll have to read verses 1-11 to follow the whole argument, but let me draw your attention to the response of the disciples. They said to Jesus, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" (vs. 12). Imagine Jesus looking apologetically at His disciples as if to say, "Oh no, really? I didn't mean to offend anybody. I hope I didn't hurt their fragile feelings. Do you think they will ever be able to find it within their hearts to forgive me?" Ludicrous, right? Don't you want to yell at the disciples, "Of course Jesus knows they were offended. What did you think Jesus was trying to do by calling them *hypocrites*—win friends and influence people?"

Jesus isn't finished though. He employs more satire to teach His disciples: "Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a pit" (vs. 14). This is a hilarious picture. When I was a student in college I literally saw a blind man leading a blind man. As one walked the other held his elbow and followed him. You couldn't help but smile when you saw them—and think of this saying by Jesus. Sometimes a little satire will go a whole lot further than a boat-load of slick, sophisticated arguments.

What should Christians say to Atheists and the ACLU (Anti-Christian Liberties Union) when they oppose posting the Ten Commandments in government schools or our courthouses? We can use sound reason, which they could care less about, or we could try satire to get our point across: "Oh, I see your consternation about posting the Ten Commandments in the schools. The students might read them, think about them, maybe even follow them, and became the kind of kids who respect their parents, don't gun down their classmates or steal from them or sleep around or spread lies or covet. What would become of the next generation with the proliferation of such values?"

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