

## **THE MESSIAH WILL OFFEND YOU**

**ISAIAH 53:1-3**

Have you ever thought of Jesus as being offensive? When you read the Gospels, you discover that He was always stepping on someone's toes. He called the religious leaders of His day hypocrites and compared them to snakes and graves full of rotting bones right to their faces. Jesus went to parties with people who had really bad reputations which invited proper folk to question his morality. Then there was the time Jesus introduced Himself to the folk who had turned the Temple grounds into a giant flea market. Tables and chairs got overturned. All the stuff on sale got tossed on the floor or thrown out the door. At times, people who thought they were real intellectuals tried to trap Him into saying something stupid. Jesus would trump them every time. Jesus could be annoying, irritating and down right offensive.

Dorothy Sayers, a Christian author, made this statement about Jesus: "The people who hanged Christ never accused him of being a bore – on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left to later generations to muggle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him 'meek and mild' and recommended Him as a fitting household pet for pale pastors and pious old ladies... (In contrast, the) officialdom (of His day) felt that the established order of things would be more secure without Him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness." The leaders of Jesus' day were so deeply offended by Him that they killed Him.

This morning I want to continue a series of messages I'm calling "A Portrait of Jesus... Before He Came." It's based on some verses in the Old Testament book of Isaiah which were written some 700 years before Jesus was born. No, this passage doesn't identify Jesus by name or give us a physical description. Instead, it does something far more important. In explicit detail, it tells us why Jesus died on the cross. It's a portrait that depicts the significance of what Jesus did and why. So, as we did last Sunday, let's read the entire passage, but then focus on 53:1-3. Those three verses predict – 700 years before it actually occurred – that Jesus was going to be rejected by the very people to whom He had been sent. Why? Because they found Jesus deeply offensive! There's a lot of reasons why Jesus offended people back then and why He still offends people today. I want you to think with me about two big reasons today.

### **JESUS OFFENDS YOUR PREJUDICES.**

In the New Testament, both Jesus and His follower, Paul, quote Isaiah 53:1 (MSG), "Who believes what we've heard and seen? Who would have thought God's saving power would look like this?" They both quoted this verse when it became apparent that most of the Jewish people would not accept Jesus as their true Messiah. Now last week I said that the word or title "Messiah" means basically the same thing as the title "Christ." The Old Testament prophets had said that one day God was going to send a very special deliverer. He was the Messiah which means "the anointed one." God sent Jesus as the fulfillment of His promise, but most of the Jewish people in Jesus' day rejected Him as being the true Messiah. That's why He was crucified. Both Jesus and

Paul point out that this was exactly what Isaiah predicted would happen some 700 years before the actual events took place. Isaiah predicts that the Jewish people, by in large, would despise and reject Jesus of Nazareth. It reminds me of what the Bible says about Jesus, “He came to his own people, but they didn't want him.” (John 1:11 MSG)

Why didn't the majority of the Jewish people believe in Jesus? The first followers of Jesus were predominately ethnic Jews, but very quickly they discovered that non-Jews (the Bible calls them Gentiles) responded to the good news about Jesus much more readily than their fellow Jews did. What was that about? Very simply, Jesus offended Jewish preconceptions and prejudices. Most of them expected a very different kind of Messiah than Jesus turned out to be. They didn't believe Jesus was born of a virgin. Instead, they believed Jesus was simply illegitimate. Moreover, being born illegitimate back then meant that you had no real chance at dignity or honor in life. Then, again, Jesus was born into a very average, humble, working-class family and he was raised in a very insignificant town – Nazareth. Many people thought God's deliverer – the Messiah – should be from a very noble family and a distinguished community.

Even the people who grew up with Jesus couldn't believe that He was the Messiah. There's a scene in the Bible where Jesus returns to Nazareth and the people there say, “ ‘Where does he get this wisdom and the power to do miracles?.... He's just the carpenter's son, and we know Mary, his mother, and his brothers.... All his sisters live right here among us. Where did he learn all these things?’ And they were deeply offended and refused to believe in him.” (Matthew 13:54-57 NLT) Isaiah says there in v. 2 that the Messiah's background and pedigree would appear to be so much “dry ground” from which nothing important, memorable or life changing would ever sprout.

Isaiah says, “There was nothing attractive about him, nothing to cause us to take a second look.” (Isaiah 53:2 MSG) How many of you are interested in what Jesus actually looked like physically? I know I am! That would be very interesting to know. Hollywood has depicted Jesus in a variety of ways. More often than not Jesus gets portrayed as a very handsome, rugged, physically imposing man with beautiful, soulful eyes and a winning smile. I don't think Isaiah is saying that Jesus was ugly, but he does imply that Jesus was pretty average in physical appearance. Apparently there was nothing in the way Jesus looked that in and of itself attracted folk to Him. Back then people wanted someone who acted and looked like a king. In our day and age, Jesus would have needed to look and act like a celebrity.

When it says there, “He was looked down on and passed over....” (Isaiah 53:3 MSG), Isaiah wasn't talking about just everyone and everybody. He's talking about the movers and shakers of the community. In other words, Jesus was despised and rejected by the intelligentsia – the educated, the wealthy and the powerful. They just dismissed Jesus. They wrote Him off. At first, they just shook their heads, raised their eyebrows and smiled smugly at this poor carpenter from Nazareth. But, at the end, they shook their fists, spit curses at Him and arranged His death. Jesus offended their prejudices.

Do you think that we'd react differently to Jesus than the people of His day? I doubt it. People are people wherever you go. Let's do a little creative updating this morning. Let's suppose Jesus was born in the Franklinton area of Columbus – sometimes called the “bottoms”. I can just hear someone say, “Can any good thing come out of that part of Columbus?” Let's suppose there were some questions about what happened first – His parents' marriage or his birth. A virgin birth, you say? Yeah... sure. Jesus' dad died while Jesus was in high school which meant Jesus couldn't go to Ohio State. He was very bright, did well in school, but college was simply out of the question. Since He was the oldest of several children, He had to work construction in order to make sure His mom and siblings had enough food to eat and had a roof over their heads.

Now our Columbus Jesus and His family were very active in the little storefront church down the street from their home and some folk there thought Jesus would make a fine pastor someday. But there was no Bible college much less a theological seminary in His future. No, His style was to jump into His old, beat up, “on its last leg” pick up truck and head out into the countryside with His Bible. Out there He spent hours reading, meditating and praying to His Father. Our updated Jesus was likeable but not impressive. He preferred jeans to tailored suits. He couldn't afford suits anyway. He looked a lot like His friends who were – how shall we say it – nice enough, but a little lower class, if you know what I mean.

Let's suppose this Columbus Jesus began to make audacious claims about Himself around town and supposedly performed some miracles. After awhile, almost every political, social, educational and religious leader in Columbus thought that this Jesus from Columbus' least desirable neighborhood was a joke. And Columbus Jesus went out of His way to get on their good side by calling them “a bunch of snakes” and “a bunch of graves filled with rotting corpses.” This Jesus became such a pain in the neck that He was set up by some of these leaders for a crime He didn't commit. Columbus Jesus was indicted, tried, convicted and ultimately executed in the electric chair down at the Lucasville state facility just like some terrible criminal. Would you really defend such a Jesus? Would you really accept that sort of Jesus as God in human flesh? The truth is that Jesus offends our prejudices as well.

How so? Because we still evaluate people by cultural rather than biblical values. We may not like to admit it, but the color of your skin still matters more than it should, your level of education matters, your family background matters, the size of your paycheck matters. Sadly, we even do this almost unconsciously with fellow believers. We size each other up. “Oh, he's too uneducated for God to use... she's too poor... he's black... she's Asian... he's too fat... she's from too dysfunctional a family... he's had too many issues in life for God to use him or for God to use her.” We forget what the Bible says. “Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of ‘the brightest and the best’ among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these ‘nobodies’ to expose the hollow pretensions of the ‘some bodies’?” (1 Corinthians 1:26-28 MSG)

Prejudice can creep into your attitudes when it comes to people who haven't yet trusted in Jesus. "He'd never listen to me tell him about Jesus.... She's just too messed up right now.... But he's got such a foul mouth.... Yeah, but, she's just too out there... But I'm just not comfortable around people who live like that." Jesus was never offended by people far from God. Jesus was never turned off by lost people. He came for them. He loved them. How strange that you or I should be prejudiced against someone for whom Jesus died! How odd that we should refuse to be His instrument of grace!

Howard Hendricks, a well known Christian author and educator, was – for a period of time – kind of like a chaplain for the Dallas Cowboys professional football team. One year Dallas made it to the Super Bowl and Hendricks and his wife went down to Miami to hang out with the team. They were invited to watch the Cowboys practice. Hendricks noticed an older man on the sidelines and said, "That looks like Woody Hayes." He found out it was Woody Hayes. Now this was a few weeks after Woody had struck an opposing player in a bowl game and had been fired as the head coach of the Ohio State Buckeyes. On Sunday morning – the day of the Super Bowl - Hendricks held a kind of chapel for the Cowboy players and attended their team breakfast. He was sitting next to then Cowboys' coach, Tom Landry. At the next table was Woody Hayes. Hendricks asked, "Coach, what's Woody doing here?" Landry said, "He's hurting. He needs help. I invited him to come down as my guest. Maybe the Lord will give me an opportunity to minister to him. You know, he's in football. That's my responsibility." At a time when most people wanted to hold Woody Hayes at arm's length, Tom Landry saw an opportunity for personal ministry in the name of Jesus. You probably would've never been in a position to reach Woody Hayes. There's a lot of people you might not be able to reach. The question is this – are you sensitive to the people that God does bring into your sphere of influence? But Jesus doesn't just offend your prejudices, my friend. Also, ...

## **JESUS OFFENDS YOUR PRIDE.**

Almost everyone today is complimentary of Jesus. "What a good man... what an incredible ethical example... what a gifted teacher... no doubt he was a prophet!" But many of those same people dismiss the fact that Jesus is God or that He died on the cross to pay for people's sins. Most people want to admire Jesus, on the one hand, but dismiss His claim to be the one and only way to a relationship with God, on the other hand. Lots of folk want to embrace the Christian faith, on the one hand, but make it something less than what it is, on the other hand. As a result, Jesus gets trivialized. Jesus becomes a way to teach good values to your kids. Jesus provides a religious veneer to your life but there's really no personal, spiritual impact going on.

A real encounter with Jesus produces something very different. It demands recognition that you're a broken, damaged version of what God wants and, as a result, you deserve eternal judgment. It demands recognition that you're just way beyond some kind of weekend self-help or positive thinking seminar. It demands recognition that you have precisely nothing to offer God in exchange for eternal life. You don't have enough good works or sincerity to ever pull it off. Jesus never claimed He was dying as a glorious

martyr for some noble cause. None of His followers made that claim either. Jesus died as your substitute. God took your sin and transferred its guilt to Jesus and then He allowed His Son to die for it which was the just penalty of your sin. Now, when you come face to face with that reality, you must put your trust in Jesus and what He's done for you and, thereby, receive eternal life as a gift. The fact is that you get eternal life as a gift or you just never get it!

Jesus' death on the cross was offensive to many people of His day. God's deliverer – the Messiah – died a criminal's death? That awful scene of crucifixion convinced them that Jesus just didn't qualify as the Messiah. How does Isaiah put it? "He was looked down on and passed over, a man who suffered, who knew pain firsthand. One look at him and people turned away. We looked down on him, thought he was scum." (Isaiah 53:3 MSG) The cross was the most humiliating form of execution out there. Imagine someone saying to you, "You know, friend, Jesus died in the electric chair for you!" Or, "Jesus was lethally injected for your sins." Our hymns would be a little different: "At the chair, at the chair, where I first saw the light.... There's room at the lethal injection table for you.... The old rugged chair, so despised by the world...."

Why don't more people believe in Jesus and become His followers? Is it really because they just don't understand Jesus? Perhaps they understand Jesus only too well. At the end of the day, Jesus offends your pride. How is that? The cross, for instance, offends your self-respect. Maybe you believe you're really a rather decent person who means well, but the Bible says that from God's perspective you're a moral basket case. The cross offends your self-reliance. If you believe that if you just try hard enough to be good, to be thoughtful, to be sincere, to do religious things, then God will open the doors of heaven to you, you're self-reliant. The Bible says no amount of religiosity or spiritual effort will earn you a place in heaven. The cross offends your self-righteousness. If you believe your goodness or your sincerity will somehow impress an infinitely holy God, you are hopelessly self-righteous. God insists on Jesus' righteousness applied to your life and mine. Your righteousness is worthless when it comes to getting into heaven.

I must say something hard but true. Some people who go to church will not be in heaven. I'm all for going to church, but going to church isn't a substitute for needing a personal Savior. I don't know who David Rhodes is, but I like what he said: "Pride is the dandelion of the soul. Its root goes deep; only a little left behind sprouts again. Its seeds lodge deep in the tiniest encouraging cracks. And it flourishes in good soil. The danger of pride is that it feeds on goodness." Jesus offends people's pride in their own goodness. Your only hope is to throw yourself upon God's mercy and grace, ask for His forgiveness of your sins, transfer your trust from yourself and place it in Jesus.

Now, I realize that most everyone here has made that all important decision, but are there additional ways these verses in Isaiah 53 might apply to you? I think so. First, learn to despise your sin not Jesus. Every time you and I sin – little, biddy sins or great big, black sins – we despise Jesus. No, God doesn't kick us out of His family as a result. But remember that every time you do or say something outside of God's will, it's like shaking your fist in God's face or driving the nails deeper into Jesus' hands.

Instead, learn to despise your sin by growing in obedience to Jesus. Second, allow your pride to get offended regularly. I'm convinced that if Jesus is doing any kind of real, effective spiritual work in your life, your pride is getting regularly shot down. Your self-reliance is always taking a hit. Your self-sufficiency is always getting smacked around. Your self-righteousness is always getting exposed as hopelessly inadequate. You need your pride offended regularly and so do I. It keeps you from thinking you can run your own life or that you really don't need God as desperately as you do. Here's something I know. If you are a true follower of Jesus, He will offend you often.

When Pastor Wayne Cordeiro's daughter, Amy, was three years old, her preschool held a Christmas concert for the parents. You've been at one of those, right? Every chair filled with eager parents. Every parent equipped with a camera and the latest electronic hardware. About 30 kids came out and filled up the risers. One teacher led them in Joy to the World. Her little guitar was seriously out of tune. Again, these kids were only three years old. They could barely speak in complete sentences, let alone sing full measures of music. Undaunted, the teacher began her solo rendition of Joy to the World while the kids were more interested in locating their parents: "Hi, Daddy! Hi, Mom!" The teacher kept singing. Then Amy saw her dad and he took a picture of her. Just then one of the boys in the back of the risers began to fall backwards. He managed to take four others with him. Bang! She kept singing, "Joy to the world!" It was absolute chaos. When the song was done, the parents gave the kids a standing ovation. They took more pictures. They were so proud. After it was over, Wayne went outside to get some air. He was chuckling to himself. He thought, "We just gave a standing ovation to the worst concert we've ever heard. I just took pictures of the worst concert I've ever heard. But wasn't Amy good? She's cool." Why in the world did Wayne and those parents applaud? It wasn't because of their kids' performance. It was because his little girl – or her little boy - was up there. They applauded not because of performance but rather because of relationship.

Does God love you? Oh, yes, more than you will ever know. Is God proud of you? Yes, just like any parent. But it has nothing to do with your performance. Instead, it has everything to do with the fact that you have a relationship with Him and you're His kid. Does that hurt your pride? Good. Jesus loves to offend your prejudices and your pride. He'll keep doing it until you get to heaven. If you want to be His follower, get used to it!