

‘Shock and Offend’ Language

In Matt.23, Jesus used very strong language to condemn the Pharisees. He called them “*hypocrites*” (vv.13,23,27,29) and “*fools*” (v.17), repeatedly said they were spiritually “*blind*” (vv.16,17,19,24,26), indicted them as those who “*shut off the kingdom of heaven*” (v.13), “*devour widows’ houses*” (v.14), and making those whom they proselytized “*twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.*” Furthermore, He described them as being “*whitewashed tombs*” that were “*full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness*” and “*lawlessness*” (vv.27-28). Whew-wee, that’s very strong and graphic language indeed! And it is being meted out to those who were considered, and regarded themselves, as the religious elite and spiritual leaders of the day!

But this wasn’t the only occasion when the Son of God, or those inspired to speak for Him, used jarringly pejorative terms and phrases to identify and describe those who, by their decisions or actions, needed to be shocked and offended. Let’s consider a few examples of such, and note specifically why such language was employed...

- In Matt.5:13-16, Jesus begins by emphasizing the power and importance of the influence His disciples should exert. They are to be “*salt*” to *preserve/flavor* the world, and “*light*” to illumine it. However, those who become “*tasteless*” (lose or fail to properly exert the power of their influence) or “*hide their light*” (aka, “*closet Christians*”) are said to be “**good for nothing,**” except to be “*thrown out and trampled under foot by men,*” v.13. Adding insult to injury, Luke 14:35 says that such are “*useless either for the soil or the manure pile*” and is thus “*thrown out.*” When something/one has become so “*useless*” as to be impotent to improve a “*manure pile,*” that’s pretty pathetic! And yet, this shockingly offensive language is precisely how Jesus described His own disciples who refuse or fail to use their influence to *preserve* and *illumine* others. Ouch!
- Peter has made the profound confession that Jesus was (and still is!) “*the Christ, the Son of the living God*” in Matt.16:16. However, just a few verses later in the text, Jesus calls him “**Satan,**” and says he is a “**stumbling-block,**” Matt.16:23a. What happened in the interim? Though surely motivated by what he thought was loyalty, Peter basically sought to thwart God’s plan for his own desires. Let that sink in for a moment. Jesus put it this way, “*you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s,*” Matt.16:23b. Are we deserving of any better than to be called “*Satan*” and “*stumbling-blocks*” when we do the same? Paul likewise wrote that those who “*set their mind on earthly things*” are “*enemies of the cross of Christ,*” Phil.3:18-19. On what is your mind “*set*”- God’s interests or your own; spiritual or earthly things?
- In Luke 9:57-62, Jesus encounters three distinct but related types of would-be disciples: the ‘*Enthusiastically Naive*’ in v.57 who hasn’t really “*counted the cost*” of following Him; the ‘*Delayed Commitment*’ in v.59 who wants to follow, but has other things he prioritizes as more important “*right now*”; and the ‘*Compromised Commitment*’ in v.61 who also wants to follow, but seems to be worried about what his family might think (or do). Note carefully the response of Jesus to each of these would-be disciples. He basically says that **following Him: must come before material things**, v.58; **requires you love Him even more than family** (“*Allow the dead to bury their own dead*”), v.59; and that one is “**not fit for the kingdom**” if

worried about what others may think (“*looking back*” after “*putting his hand to the plow*”). Is this shocking and offensive language to you? It probably is if you fit into one of those categories of ‘would-be’ disciples.

- When the Jesus wrote through John “*to the angel of the church in Laodicea,*” He used some harsh, abusive, and surely offensive words. After condemning them for being “*lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold*” in Rev.3:15, He stated that because of such, He would “***spit you out of My mouth***” in v.16. If Laodicea had been in Texas rather than Asia Minor, the Lord might have said that they weren’t “worth spit” to Him in their present condition. And they would have understood completely! They may have been shocked and offended, but they would have understood exactly what He meant. In spiritual terms of congregational zeal and enthusiasm for the Lord and His Cause, “hot” is good and “cold” is bad but can be made “hot” again, but “lukewarm” has just enough warmth to be self-satisfied but not enough to do any good... and is therefore, “**not worth spit**” to God!

Both Col.3:8 and 1Tim.6:4 warn against “*abusive speech/language*” when motivated by *anger, wrath, or malice*, and produced from *ignorance, envy, or strife*. **But just because words are ‘shocking’ or ‘offensive’ to us doesn’t mean that they’re untrue, unneeded, or unnecessary.** As we’ve seen through these examples, would-be and faltering disciples alike sometimes need to be ‘shocked’ and ‘offended’ with TRUTH instead of being cajoled and comforted with lies. Surely it can’t have escaped our notice that all of these ‘harsh’ words were utilized toward those who weren’t what they should have been, or what they claimed to be... kind of like those Pharisees with whom we began. (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at southportcofc.org)