

HOW TO BE UNOFFENDABLE IN AN OFFENSIVE WORLD

INTRODUCTION

Way back in 1985, Neil Postman wrote a book called, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. The book has been described as, “a prophetic look at what happens when politics, journalism, education, and even religion become subject to the demands of entertainment.” He was commenting on TV and news media. This was way before the internet, cell phones, and social media.

In the book, he talks about how we receive information has changed dramatically over the years. Until the telegraph was invented and utilized in the 1830s and 40s, all news was basically local. You knew what happened and who was involved. There was a context, and you participated in the news. It was real and affected you. For example, if a family’s house burned down, then you probably did something to help the situation—maybe provide food and clothing, or help them rebuild.

The telegraph changed everything. Samuel Morse, who developed Morse Code for telegraphs, seems to be prophetic in his first telegram on May 24, 1844. He quotes Numbers 23:23 from the King James Version, which says, “What hath God wrought,” meaning what has God done. This message was sent from the U.S. Capitol to Morse’s assistant in Baltimore.

“What has God done?” Maybe a better question is, “What have we done?” And maybe that’s what Morse meant. News could suddenly travel from one place to another very quickly, and, of course, this was just the beginning of information transmission and evolution that got us to where we are today.

So much news was no longer local. Suddenly, we weren’t living the news we were learning. There was no context. We didn’t know the people. We didn’t experience the situation firsthand. We didn’t know the whole story. We couldn’t help. We were detached. As spectators, news became a form of entertainment.

Fast forward to today where we have instant access to all kinds of things literally happening all over the world. Some of it’s helpful, but most of it, I think, is not. As a culture, we are amusing ourselves to death. We are not designed to take in so much information. No wonder anxiety is off the charts. It’s too much!

There’s another thing that goes on today in information that leads to anxiety, anger, conflict, provocation, and polarization. We’re all feeling it. It has a long history and is thriving today in social media. It’s intentional disinformation created by evil people sitting behind computers. It’s computer-generated artificial information designed intentionally to offend and divide real people. Real people see this computer-generated misinformation, get highly offended, and react in an offensive way. Then here come the shares, the likes, and the comments—full of passionate condescension, arrogance, anger, and hatred.

These computer generators are called social media bots. *Social media bots are automated social media accounts. . .used for malicious and manipulative purposes (show JPEG)*. There are billions of bots, and they appear to be real people. Many of them are from foreign countries and are fueling our division, especially political polarization.

In summary, with information, there’s a lot going on that we don’t see and don’t know, and there’s just too much of it. If we are not careful, we get sucked into a media culture where things lead to us being offended and then offensive. This is not the way of Jesus. Right? His way is to speak Good News into all of this, presenting ourselves as peaceful light in a dark world. Becoming aware of how this works, and becoming aware that there is a lot more going on than we can see is a helpful place to start.

DISCUSSION

A long time ago, Paul made the powerful and important point that there is a lot more going on than we can see, especially in conflict which leads to anger, hatred, and division. He says this in Ephesians 6:

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

—Ephesians 6:10-12 NLT

Our battles and conflicts are not really against people who have opposing ideas—all the way from matters of opinion to things that are simply evil and contrary to the will of God. Our battles are far less about people we oppose and are ultimately against Satan, the powers, and principalities of this dark world. There is a lot of mystery and a lot we do not know about Spiritual Warfare, but I know it's going on. I also know we can stand strong and firm against all.

*Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power
Stand firm against all strategies of the devil*

Jesus says in John 10 that Satan *comes only to steal and kill and destroy*. Satan wants to steal our joy; he wants to kill and destroy. One of his key strategies is to destroy us from within—to turn us against each other. He wants us to be offended and to be offensive.

He wants to engage in unhealthy conflict—throwing rocks, misjudging, and spreading information and misinformation. I think Satan wins not so much about the content of what we share—because sometimes what we share is true—but he wins often by the way we share it. He loves anger, outrage, arrogance, condescension, ranting and raving, and all that goes with it. He loves it when we lack humility and civility in conversations where disagreement is present. It's easy to be foolish, especially behind a keyboard.

Here are some ancient words that are as fresh as this morning's social media feeds:

Fools have no interest in understanding; they only want to air their own opinions.

—Proverbs 18:2

Don't waste your breath on fools, for they will despise the wisest advice.

—Proverbs 23:9

Fools vent their anger, but the wise quietly hold it back.

—Proverbs 29:11

So what do we do? How do we become unoffendable in an offensive world? Short answer: We have the mind of Christ.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 2:5 NKJV

Paul reminds the Corinthians that the mind of Christ develops in us as we cooperate with the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is always wanting to form us (Spiritual Formation) into the image of Jesus—to be like Jesus, according to 2 Corinthians 3:18. That's His desire, but we must cooperate. When we cooperate, then we have a lens or a view that allows to see and align with the will of God, but when we don't cooperate, we create problems for ourselves. Paul reminds the Corinthians about this in 1 Corinthians 2 and concludes by saying (v.16), *But we have the mind of Christ.*

We have the mind of Christ! The mind—the attitude—of Jesus is God’s desire for each of us. When we have it, when we use it, then being offended and offensive becomes a rare thing. I don’t have anything to prove, but I have an example to set. I follow the example of Jesus, as the Spirit of God develops the mind of Christ in me. Peter, writing to people experiencing conflict and persecution says it like this:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

*“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”*

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

—1 Peter 2:21-23 NIV

Jesus, in the midst of extreme suffering and provocation—literally painful insults, painful threats—did not become offensive. Instead, he entrusted himself to his Father. Peter says, “He is your example about how to handle things, including provocation.”

The word *example* in the Greek (ὁπογραμμός) is interesting and instructive. In the first century, children in the Roman Empire learned how to write by tracing over the letters that were given to them. The word translated **example** refers to this idea of tracing the alphabet. Have you ever helped a child trace something? I’ve done it recently with some of the smaller grandchildren. I will take their sweet little hand and help them trace over a picture or a word. I gently help them follow the pattern before them.

As followers of Christ, we are called to trace over his life with ours by walking the road he walked—the road of self-denial, the road of service and submission, and we are called to walk that road the way he walked it. He walked with extreme humility and with the ability to not be offended. He did retaliate or make threats when it would have been easy to do so—even when we wanted him to.

Instead, he entrusted himself to the Father. Jesus knew who he was. He knew where he came from and where he was going. He knew how his story would end. He knew he was the Beloved Son of God. He had nothing to prove but an example to set, and he set it.

We are the beloved children of God. We know who we are, and if you know who you are, then you know what to do. We have the mind of Christ. We keep in step with the Spirit of God. He is constantly strengthening this mind and attitude of Jesus. When we cooperate, then He produces fruit, and aren’t these the characteristics of Jesus?

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

—Galatians 5:22-25 NIV

CONCLUSION

Again, how do we become unoffendable in an offensive world? We have the mind of Christ, and we embrace His attitude. How does that work practically? It’s important to control and curate what you consume. Be careful about your entertainment choices; be careful about news consumption. We are all being formed by something—by the things we consume. Our priority is Spiritual Formation—allowing the Spirit of God to form us through the Word of God and prayer. Let’s end with a couple of prayers I believe embody most of what we’ve said today. You should have received a card with two prayers on it.

Prayer for Serenity

God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace;
taking, as Jesus did,
this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it;
trusting that You will make all things right
if I surrender to Your will;
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.

—Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

Instrument of Peace

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

—St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

COMMUNION

As we enter into communion, these two prayers remind us of our opportunity and our responsibility to speak Good News into a world overwhelmed with false information and bad news. These prayers remind us how to position ourselves to be unoffendable and never to be offensive even in the face of provocation. These prayers are rooted in deep trust—trust that God will take care of everything. They are a reflection of Jesus who entrusted himself to His Father as He died on the Cross. He knew, He believed, He trusted that He would rise from the dead. Communion takes us back to the moment of the deepest trust. Pray.