

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It seems we have become a society that is hypersensitive about offending anyone about anything. Especially offensive is to suggest that someone has done something morally wrong. We are not allowed to make moral judgments in our society today. And so sin is no longer sin, we relabel it as something less offensives:

- The word “sin” has largely passed out of common English usage. Sins are called mistakes or oversights
- Making a fool of yourself is called a faux pa.
- Getting drunk is called relaxing, having fun or letting loose.
- Someone who breaks the law by speeding is instead said to have a lead foot.
- Living in sin outside of marriage is called co-habitation or friends with benefits.
- Homosexuality is called an alternate lifestyle.
- The murder of an unborn child is called terminating a pregnancy.

We have bent over backwards to rename sin as something kinder and gentler. And we as individuals tend to do the same thing. Repenting of sin is difficult. Recategorizing sin as something that’s not so bad is much easier.

Today we are going to read a story about Jesus where Jesus called a spade a spade. Where he saw sin, he identified it as such. And the response he got was violent. God wants us to come face to face today with the serious nature of sin, and to call it what it is. Because until we do, we will never see God’s beautiful solution for sin that he provides in his Son.

Our reading continues from last week...

Luke 4:20-32 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.

Jesus is here talking to the people of his home town...people that he knew... people he grew up with. Although Jesus was a great communicator and they recognized this, and they saw that he taught with authority. Ultimately, they didn’t respect him because they were so familiar with him. Nazareth was a small town, surely under 1,000 people, probably closer to 500. They saw him grow up. They saw him go through puberty. They knew the family well. When they asked, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they were expressing unbelief. It didn’t matter what Jesus said or did in Nazareth, they thought they had already figured out who Jesus was.

Yet Jesus tells them clearly that he is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. He is the promised Messiah. He is the world’s healer and Savior.

Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’ ” “I tell you the truth,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.

The people weren't interested in who Jesus was or why he came. They thought they knew Jesus. They just wanted to see some miracles. Jesus knew that he would not be accepted by them.

Let's pause there and examine that phrase in more detail. Jesus identifies himself as a prophet. In Old Testament times, God often sent prophets. He would put his word in their mouths and they would speak what God said. A person did not become a prophet because of heritage, but by a special calling of God. The job of the prophet was simple: to speak forth the message God gave. In English, the word prophet is one we associate with foretelling the future. But Old Testament prophets were more precisely ones who spoke forth God's Word. Sometimes that message from God concerned the future, but often it concerned the present.

Prophets were frequently not loved. It was not a prestigious profession. Prophets were not well-liked. Prophets often had words of warning and judgment from God because people were living in sin, or worshipping false gods, or were indifferent about God altogether. Prophets had a hard job: tell the people what they didn't want to hear, then suffer the consequences. Many prophets were abused and persecuted. They were often exiled or killed. We have the phrase, "Don't shoot the messenger." The prophet was God's messenger and their hatred of God's message often meant the prophet was shot.

Jesus is the Prophet with a capital P. He doesn't just related the revealed Word of God... he IS the revealed Word of God in human flesh. When Jesus spoke it was God talking. But the people didn't want to hear what he had to say. They rejected him.

I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

We heard about this story in the Old Testament text for today. The widow in Zarephath lived outside of the nation of Israel. She lived in a place that served other gods... the most prominent one was Baal. She was at the absolute bottom of the socio-economic scale. She was a widow with no income who could only survive on charity from others. And has we've seen in the U.S. in recent years, when people have little... or more accurately, feel like they have little... they help others much less. Famine for 3 ½ years meant she

Lowest of the low, pagan, worships false god, in the wrong nation, on the wrong team. She has nothing going for her, but God loved her and was gracious.

But here is what was unique about her. An able-bodied man, a foreigner, who had a different God and belief system came to her and asked for food. Every other person in the world would have said, "No. The tiny bit I have left is for my son and I. Go find a job, and when you do, bring some food for me." But when Elijah was asking for food, he was inviting her to faith. He was asking her to trust... in his God. When Elijah asked her for bread, she agreed to bring it, even though this was the last meal she could eat. In fact she said they would eat the food and die. Faith is obeying God. She did not reject the request of God's prophet. She did not kick him to the street. She believed in the prophet's God, and she of all the people in Palestine area, was blessed by God. The jar of flour and the jug of oil did not run out. God miraculously kept them full as many loaves as she could make. She began to put on weight and so did her son.

He was telling them that God's Old Testament prophet Elijah was rejected by the people. The message of God that he carried was dismissed and refused and hated and scorned by those who heard it. So God took his Word and his prophet somewhere where it would be received and believed. He took his Word and his prophet out of Israel to a lowest of the low for a Jew: a

widow, a non-Israelite, a pagan, an idolater, and person forsaken by all others... and she received the word and prophet and favor of God. Israel, because of her unbelief did not. *People of Nazareth, you're situation is just the same.*

Religious people don't like to hear that they are worse than a pagan, idolatrous, porr, widow from the gentiles. They were insulted.

But Jesus wasn't done:

And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

Commander of the Syrian army. A man in authority. Enemies of God's people. Even today, Syrians are not real friendly toward Israelites. The man had an Israelite girl as a slave. So he had inflicted serious damage on the people of Israel. But he was a leper... not a rare skin condition of the day. Many in Israel would have had the disease. But they were not healed by the prophet Elijah. Naaman was. He was told to wash himself 7 times in the Jordan River. At first he balked, but was soon convinced. Naaman was cleansed. He learned that God is a God of grace.

Because the people of Israel at Elisha's time had rejected God's prophet, *they* did not receive God's washing or cleansing or renewal. They remained in their sins as they refused God's Word through God's prophet. But this heathen commander of enemy forces that had inflicted harm on Israel and took captive some of their kids... HE heard the word of God through his prophet, believed it, and received the grace and healing and cleansing and purification of God.

Jesus was telling the people of Nazareth: You are just like your ancestors. Before you is God's Prophet, the promised Messiah not just speaking God's Word, but who is God's Word. He stands before you to bring grace and healing and to meet your needs and forgive your sins... but you reject him and his word and his grace. You are cutting yourselves off from God and the life and forgiveness he brings!

Jesus loved these people, so Jesus called a spade a spade. He called their sin a sin. He warned them of the danger they were in. And what was their reaction?

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority.

So what was their reaction? As Jesus shined a bright spotlight on their sin, and warned them of their rejection of God's Word and God's Prophet... they were furious. And rather than confess their sin, and be sorrowful over their rejection of God' Son, and repent of their evil hearts, they grew more polarized in their hatred of Jesus. Rather than bow before the Christ, they decided they needed to kill the Christ.

Here was there problem: they thought they were good enough and religious enough. They didn't need Jesus. They were not in need of saving, and that Jesus would suggest that they did need to be saved, well that was just plain offensive.

But before we get too critical of them, is there a “religious” streak in you that is just as offended at this suggestion that you really need a Savior? And you don’t just need a Savior, you need a really BIG Savior!

God places his Word and his Prophet before you. Jesus Christ stands before you today. The temptation is for us, like the people of Nazareth, to listen without faith. So why are you here?

- Did you come here today hoping for something just a little entertaining, or maybe some little nugget of insight you could take home? Or did you come to weep at the feet of Jesus because of your sin, and to joyfully receive his forgiveness?
- Did you come to church to pay your dues to God? Or do you come to connect with Almighty God and the salvation that comes through his Son?
- Did you come to this place to get some tips on living right? Or did you come here because you know Jesus speaks truth always since he is the Son of God, and your life is all wrong, and you’re broken, so you were compelled to come to the One whose perfect life and innocent death makes your life right, and whole and perfect in the eyes of God?
- Did you come hoping you could influence or control Jesus to give you what you think you need? Or did you come here in humility to receive from Jesus what he knows you truly need?
- Did you come here just because that’s what good people are supposed to do... go to church once in a while? Or do you come here because Jesus is your life, and you want to be near him and his people, and you *need* his assurance of acceptance and forgiveness?

Friends, Jesus, the Prophet, the Word stands before you today and calls a spade a spade. You are corrupt right down to the core. And you have done said and done things almighty God calls offensive. And you don’t have in mind the things in God but the things of man. Will you react violently to this and haul Jesus to the edge of a cliff to throw him out of your heart?

That’s what the people of Nazareth tried to do. There is no record that Jesus ever returned to Nazareth. Even to this day, Nazareth is largely a Muslim town. When the Gospel is rejected it moves on to others. When the Prophet Jesus is rejected, his good news of forgiveness, life and salvation will go to other people and other places. God’s Word will not return to him empty... it will either create faith in God, or enemies of God.

Or will you listen to the Words of the Prophet, repent of your sin, and believe in him as your Savior who lived a holy life for you and died on the cross for you? ...and follow him as the only one who has life and gives life? ...and obey him as the only one who speaks Truth? Entrust your life to the Lord Jesus, and again I’ll call a spade a spade. You are forgiven. You are a child of God. You belong to him. Go and testify about him. Go and live for him! Amen.