

Breaking the Cycle of Perpetual Outrage (15:1-20)

Pray. They call it the “cycle of perpetual outrage.” That’s the name given for the posture all too common in our day and age. It’s the phenomenon where so many people, driven by political ideologies and personal grievances, and then emboldened and enabled by the internet, have settled into a constant, burning sense of anger at the world around them. And specifically, at anyone who would dare do or say something that *they* consider offensive. As comedian John Mulaney puts it: “I’ve been watching the news...and it seems like everyone everywhere is super-mad about everything all of the time.” That about sums it up.

Years ago, when Facebook started trotting out its mission statement—“bringing people together”—that statement was met with near universal mockery up and down the line. Because while their products *do* help people connect with each other, it seems far more often to set people *against* each other. Maybe their motto should be something more like “Facebook: there’s always *more* to be offended by.” One Twitter user sums up the cycle of perpetual outrage well when he posts to the platform, first thing every morning, “Okay Twitter—what are we angry about today?”

In many ways, this is the cultural climate we live in now. **There’s always something to be angry about, offended by, and outraged at.** And it’s not really specific to any one group of people: the anger and offense comes *from religious* and *non-religious* people. Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. Young and old. All races. All genders. All backgrounds. We have a society that sometimes tends to *run* on outrage.

And it’s not always outright *rage*. Psychologists sometimes distinguish between people who “rage out” and those who “rage in.” In other words, some people just have a slow-burning inward sense of bitterness and resentment, rather than outright, obvious outbursts of anger. Some people aren’t perpetually *outraged*—they’re more like perpetually *bothered*. But the inclination towards being offended, in one form or another, is now seemingly *everywhere*.

But while that posture may *seem* unique to our day and age, it actually isn’t. Arguably, the great-great-great grandparents of outrage culture in the bible were a group of people called the Pharisees. If you’re newer to the bible, the Pharisees were basically the religious *elite* of Jesus’ day. And nearly every time that we come across them in the Scriptures, they are offended, frustrated or outraged about *something*. They’re always bothered by something people were *doing*, or *not* doing, or doing the wrong way—or some combination of all those things. **The Pharisees were angry at a lot of people, a lot of the time.** In their minds, nobody was as *serious* about obedience to God as they

were. Nobody was as serious about *holiness* as they were. So they ended up finding plenty of things to be *bothered* about.

And today's passage is **a story about their latest outrage**. This one was directed at the disciples of Jesus. So let's take a look and see what we can learn from it. Starting in **Matthew 15**, v. 1:

[1] Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, [2] "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders (we'll come back to that term)? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

So **for context** here, the Pharisees aren't bringing this up because they're germaphobes or something. Or maybe they are—I don't know, I've never met them—but that's not what they're talking about *here*. *This* hand-washing was not what you and I do before a meal. It was a meticulous, *ceremonial* hand-washing that was laid out in the Pharisee's oral tradition (or in their language, the "tradition of the elders"). **Basically, as we just said, the Pharisees were very serious about obedience to the Torah: the laws and commands in the first five books of our bible. So serious in fact, that they added 1500 additional commands to make sure they didn't accidentally disobey the original 613 in the Torah. Those additional commands were called the "oral tradition," or the "tradition of the elders."**

So here's an example of **how it would work**. The *Torah* said that you were *ritually unclean* if you came into contact with certain *unclean* things over the course of a day: things like a dead body, or certain types of animals or an open wound. So the Pharisees were obviously very sure to avoid all of *that*. But *their* thinking was that there was really no way of knowing if you *unknowingly* came into contact with those things during a typical day. **(Who's to say you didn't walk by a house that had a dead body inside? Who's to say you didn't spend time with somebody who had an open cut or a wound under their clothing that you couldn't see?)** Their thought was that you could become *accidentally* unclean.

So they had a whole hand-washing ritual they would participate in before a meal, where they would make sure they addressed any *accidental* impurity they had encountered that day. And here in Matthew 15, they want to know why the disciples don't participate in *that type* of hand-washing. And in fact, they're very *offended* that the disciples *don't*. Such that they travel all the way from *Jerusalem by foot* to express their offense. That's what they're asking Jesus about in the passage.

Jesus responds, v. 3:

[3] Jesus replied, “And why do **you (Pharisees)** break the command of **God** for the sake of **your tradition**? [4] For **God** said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ (that’s straight out of the Ten Commandments) and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ (Also in the Old Testament law) [5] **But you say** that if anyone declares that what might have been **used to help** their father or mother is ‘**devoted to God,**’ [6] they are **not** to ‘honor their father or mother’ **with it.** Thus **you nullify** the word of God for the sake of **your tradition.**

Jesus responds to their pointed question, with a pointed question of his own.

They ask *him* why his disciples break their oral *tradition*; he asks *them* why their oral tradition makes them break God’s *commands*. Jesus here goes straight for the kill. Because *remember*: what the Pharisees care *most* about is obedience to God’s law. So Jesus says “why are you letting your oral tradition make you *disobedient* to God’s law?” Pulls the self-righteous rug right out from underneath them.

Then, Jesus gives **an example to illustrate** exactly what he means. Jesus reminds them that the *Scriptures* teach them to ‘honor their father and mother.’ To care for their parents; provide for them, help them, treat them with honor and dignity. So if your parents were *aging* and in need of assistance, the expectation is that *you* would *honor them* by helping in whatever way you could, including using your own money and assets to do so. Similar to what many of us would do today.

But the *Pharisees* **had found a way out** of having to do that. They invented a *designation* for their money called *corban*, or in the language of our passage, “devoted to God.” Basically, they said that if some of their assets were designated as ‘devoted to God,’ they had legal justification for *not* using that money to help their parents. **Think of it like a sinful escrow account.** The Pharisees would put money in this “account,” and then when their parents were in need, the Pharisees would go “you know...I’d really love to help you. But the money that I would use to help you is already *devoted to God*. I can’t take what was devoted to God and give it to you! That wouldn’t be honoring to *God*. So sorry, you’ll have to figure it out yourself.” It was a sneaky way of weaseling out of what the bible taught.

But here’s the other thing: that “devoted to God” money **went to the temple treasury.** Who do you think helped *manage* the money in the temple treasury? The *Pharisees*. Not only were they *not* helping their family with the money, they were often *benefitting* from it themselves. **So it’s not a one-to-one, but it would be kind of like if you needed financial help, you asked me to help you, and then I really quickly went and tithed a large amount of money to City Church. Then went back to you and said “dangit—you know I really**

would help, but I just gave that money to the church. Shucks.” And *then* took that money from City Church and built me a really nice new office. That’s sort of like what a lot of the Pharisees were doing. In fact, *elsewhere* in the bible, it even says that much of the Pharisees’ behavior was driven by a secret love of money.¹

So Jesus cites that *whole backwards practice* the Pharisees were caught up in. And he says to them, essentially, “you’re using *noble, spiritual-sounding* language to justify doing something that is in *direct contradiction* to the Scriptures. You’re doing something blatantly *sinful*, but you’re trying to make it appear *righteous*.” These Pharisees were just as greedy, just as sinful, just as unloving as other people were—they just used their oral tradition as a *guise* for it all. This is the very definition of *hypocrisy*.

Which is *exactly where Jesus takes it* next, v. 7:

[7] You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: [8] “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. [9] They worship me in vain [in other words, it’s not real worship]; their teachings are merely human rules.”

Sounds like a spot-on assessment of what the Pharisees are doing, right? So next, Jesus is going to pivot and *make all of this a teaching moment* for the crowds. Jesus is wanting to use the Pharisees as a prime example of what *not* to do, how *not* to live. Here’s what he says, v. 10:

[10] Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. [11] What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them [so here, he’s building off of the hand-washing idea. The Pharisees washed their hands this way because they thought if they didn’t, something that they ate would defile them because their hands were defiled. Jesus says, “hey—what goes into people’s mouths doesn’t defile them.”] ...but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.”

That’s *an idea that Jesus is going to unpack further* here in just a few moments. For now, let’s keep following the dialogue. Verse 12:

[12] Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?”

¹ See Luke 16:14

Gosh, you've just **gotta love the disciples**. And by "love them," I mean in a real "bless their heart" kind of way. They ask Jesus, "did you *know* the Pharisees were *offended* by what you said?" You've got to think Jesus is going "yes. Yes, I'm aware. Also, it's the *Pharisees*: they're pretty much offended at everything *everyone* does all of the time. So yes, I had an inkling that when I directly challenged them, they would be offended." But I will say, do **think about it from the disciples' perspective**. They're witnessing Jesus critiquing the spiritual authorities of their day. The people everyone else *followed*. So the disciples are just trying to ensure that Jesus realizes what he's just done. But Jesus fully understands—**he responds** with this, v. 13:

*[13] He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has **not planted** will be pulled up by the roots. [14] **Leave them**; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."*

In other words, don't follow the Pharisees. They *look* like they know what they're talking about, they *sound* like they know what they're talking about—but they *don't*. Leave them alone; God will sort it out. Verse 15:

[15] Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."

Now, here's **what's funny about this request** from Peter. Most commentators point out here that Jesus hasn't really *told* a parable. Peter just *thinks* that he has, because he's so confused by what Jesus said. Jesus' response even confirms that his words weren't *meant* to be confusing, v. 16:

*[16] "Are you still **so dull**?" Jesus asked them. [And here comes the important explanation for what he said earlier, v. 17] [17] "**Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?** [18] **But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.** [19] **For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.** [20] **These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.**"*

So Jesus here is **trying to reorient people's understanding of sin**. But he's using the framework of "defilement," since that's language people are familiar with. The *Pharisees*, and apparently a lot of *other* people at the time, believed that someone became defiled, primarily, from the *outside-in*. **You eat unclean food, you touch unclean things, you associate with unclean people—and as a result, you become unclean**. But Jesus says here that **there is a much more dangerous type of defilement you should be concerned about**. It's the kind that comes from the *inside-out*. A kind of impurity

that has nothing to do with what you eat or who you spend time around or where you go. Rather, it has to do with what exists in the depths and recesses of your own heart. *That* is where *true* uncleanness comes from.

And I'll just tell you: **his language for unpacking all of this** is actually **quite graphic**. In v. 17, when he says that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then "out of the body," that "out of the body" phrase is actually the word for a sewer drain. He's using it to talk about the literal process of your body discharging waste. He says 'everything you eat goes into the body and then becomes *sewage*, to be *discarded*.' 'But,' he continues, 'what *actually* defiles *isn't* that stuff.' *True defilement, true sewage?* Is the stuff that comes out of your *heart*. **Sin is not *first* something out there in the world for you to avoid. Sin originates in your *heart*, and gets revealed in what you say and how you act.**

And **the Pharisees fit right into this** framework. Because **Jesus has just exposed them as people who are very diligent at avoiding the outward *appearance* of sin, but *not* very diligent in addressing the true *problem*: the greed, selfishness, and lack of love that has a deep hold on their life from within. They've spent all of this time and energy avoiding even *accidental* uncleanness, but have given in *completely* to the uncleanness in their *hearts*. And *that*, Jesus says, is actually where the problem lies: in your *heart*.**

And no doubt, **the Pharisees' inability to *perceive* all of this** is what's behind their constant **outrage and offense** at everything around them. **When you live life like the Pharisees, you get the result that the Pharisees got.** When you see the world like they saw it, you end up taking the posture they took to nearly everyone around them. **You end up *consumed* by the cycle of perpetual outrage and offense.** You end up super bothered by everything, nearly all of the time, just like the Pharisees were. That's the result.

So **here's what I thought we'd do** with all this. Here on Sundays, we *normally* spend our time learning from *Jesus* how to live—right? How to structure *all of our lives* as a response to the good news of the gospel. But *today* I thought, just for fun, we could switch it up a bit and do things in reverse. In this passage, Jesus uses the Pharisees as a *negative* teaching example: an example of how *not* to live. So taking that cue from Jesus, we're going to learn from the Pharisees this morning how *not* to live. So here is **how to be offended by everything**: a step-by-step guide from the Pharisees. This should be fun. Y'all ready? Okay, #1...

Make Your Rules, *The Rules*

So **remember at the beginning of the passage**: the Pharisees had taken *their oral tradition*, and they had emphasized its importance to a level where it didn't belong. To the point that they functionally *equated it* with the Scriptures. In their mind, breaking the oral tradition was every bit as bad as violating the teaching of the bible. Which is why they are so bothered by the disciples' breaking their oral tradition. They had made *their personal* rules, *the rules* for everybody to follow.

And there is a way to do this, even if you're not a Pharisee. I'll give you an example. So I have learned, over the years, that there are **certain TV shows and movies** that I personally just have no business watching. They're not blatantly *sinful* things, or even X-rated things—just things that I, as a 34 year old man, don't need to watch. They're not good for my *heart*, for my *mind*, for my *contentment* in Jesus. Just things I personally do not watch. It's a personal *rule* for me not to watch them. But here's what I don't get to do: I can't expect *other* people not to watch those things just because *I* don't. I don't get to make *my* rules, *the rules*. And if I *do* expect that from others, I'll find myself perpetually frustrated when they don't see things like I do.

But **that is what we sometimes do**, right? We start believing that Christians shouldn't go certain places, do certain things, partake in certain activities. Or inversely, that *all Christians should* do certain things and participate in certain activities. And those things may be personal *rules for us*. But that doesn't mean they get to be rules we hold everyone else to. **One way I see it come up a lot is in how Christians express certain expectations of the church** they attend. Early on at City Church, we had a guy come around who firmly believed that *the thing* small groups should do is study through books of the bible, line-by-line. In his mind, that was really the *only* thing small groups should be doing when they got together.

Now, **I think that's a great thing** for small groups to do together—many of our groups have done that and *are* doing that as we speak. It's a great thing to do, but I don't know that that's the *only* thing our LifeGroups should be doing. If anything, there are actually some places in Acts that seem to say that studying Scripture is just *one of many* things the early Church did when they got together.² But in this guy's mind, studying Scripture was *the only* thing small groups should be doing.

And **so what would happen** is that every time he would get together with his group and they spent time doing something *other* than study the bible, he would get more and more frustrated by it. More and more offended and appalled that they weren't doing that. And

² For example, Acts 2:42-47.

eventually he got so frustrated that he had to leave our church. But it all started with him making *his* rules, *the* rules.

So just, **as a practical tip** on this: if you find yourself regularly growing frustrated, resentful, or outright angry at other people—and especially at other Christians—over something, I would recommend pausing, taking a step back for a second, and asking a very important question. The question is: this thing that I’m expecting them to do or not do, and getting offended by—is this *the* rule, or is it *my* rule? If it’s *the* rule, let me figure out healthy ways to engage them on it. But if it’s *my* rule, it may not be their fault that I’m angry; it might actually be *my* fault that I’m angry. It’s because I’m holding them to expectations that they never agreed to. Does that make sense? First way to guarantee being offended by everything is to make *your* rules, *the* rules. The second way is this...

Use noble-sounding language to justify your behavior

The second thing we see **in the passage**—one that *Jesus* points out in the Pharisees—is that they used noble-sounding language to justify behavior completely at odds with the Scriptures. They used this very respectable idea—*corban*, or “devoted to God”—to justify *not* honoring their father and mother (something the bible clearly taught them to do).

Sometimes we do *this* too. Probably the **most basic example** is when we use language like “**God told me** to” do something, when what we *really* mean is “I *want* to do this, and I don’t want anyone to challenge me on it.” God told me to *date* this person. God told me to *break up* with this person. God “opened a door” to take this job, move to this city, buy this house, buy that car... You name it. And sometimes God *does* speak to us about those things. But sometimes we also use that language as a way to simply justify whatever it is we want to do.

I’ve also heard people do **the inverse** of this, too. They say things like “well God would *never* ask me to (you fill in the blank). God would *never* ask me to deny myself. God would *never* ask me to give up something that makes me happy. God would *never* ask me to do something that makes me uncomfortable.” And that can *sound* really noble. But then you look at the Scriptures and you realize that God apparently did and said *all* of those things. And probably plenty *more* things we’re uncomfortable with too. That’s using noble-sounding language to justify things at odds with the Scriptures.

I’ve seen it in other ways too. *This* one is a **newer one** to me. I’ve noticed that people have started using noble sounding **counseling terminology** to justify things at odds with the bible. So you’ll tell somebody they need to go work through conflict or reconcile with another follower of Jesus. And they’ll say they can’t because that person is an “unsafe

person.” Now, listen: there *is* such a thing as an unsafe person. Some people are abusive and not safe people to be around. *Absolutely*. But sometimes, people will use language like that to describe any person they just don’t want to have a conversation with. Or to describe a person who has lovingly engaged them on their sin in the past. They’ll call that person “unsafe” just to avoid having to talk to them, or reconcile with them.

So there’s **all sorts of ways** it plays out. But we need to be careful anytime we are using *noble-sounding language* to justify things that the Scriptures clearly condemn. Or to *get out* of doing things that the Scriptures clearly teach us to do. When we do that, we find ourselves in exactly the same position as the Pharisees, who used noble-sounding language to excuse *their* behavior. And *if* we do that, we will find ourselves continually offended and outraged, because we have excused ourselves from listening and obeying, while meanwhile expecting everyone else *to* do so. Which sets up our *third* and *final* way to be offended by everything, which is...

See everything else as the problem

As Jesus highlights with his *non-parable* about where sin comes from, the Pharisees thought sin was mainly out *there*. Sin was out there in other *people* or other *things*, or other *places*. And so they believed that if they could somehow *avoid* all of those people and places and things, they could remain *unstained* by sin. The problem was that the sin was *within* their *hearts* all along. It was *within* them. And **washing your hands can’t cleanse your heart**. So the final way to ensure that you remain offended at everything, is to decide that everyone else and *everything* else (but you) are the problem. Then there is always *plenty* to be outraged at.

We do this **when we think that we only did what we did** because of the situation or circumstances we were in. “Well I wouldn’t have said that to my spouse, if my spouse wasn’t so hard to deal with.” “Well I wouldn’t be so miserable to be around at work if my job was a better place to work.” “Well I’m only short with people because of all the pressure I’m under.” And there may be *some* truth in all those things. **But when we take that posture, we fail to realize that the sin being revealed in our *life originated* in our *heart*. Not in our situation. Not in our spouse’s behavior or tendencies. Not in our *job*. Not in our *circumstances*. In our *heart*. **Circumstances and situations in our lives may expose sin, but they do not create it**. They don’t *generate* it in the first place.**

One of my **favorite marriage books illustrates it** like this: when you squeeze an *orange*, what comes out? Not a trick question: *orange juice*. Right? Not apple juice, not grape juice—not anything else. When you squeeze an orange, *orange juice* comes out, because

orange juice is what's inside. In the same way, when life squeezes *us*, presses *us*, puts *us* in difficult *situations*, what comes out of *us* is simply what was *inside our hearts* all along. So we shouldn't be surprised by it. Or turn around and blame the situations or the other people. If anything, those things did *us* a *favor* by helping *us* see more *clearly* what was in our hearts all along.

But **if we, like the Pharisees**, choose to think that our hearts are always *pure* and the problem is everything and everyone else, we will be continually offended and outraged at the things in our life that *expose* our sin. We'll constantly point our finger at everything and everyone else, rather than taking those opportunities to honestly examine what's in our own heart. That was the problem with the Pharisees.

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So **there we have it**: a step-by-step guide to being offended at *everything*. If you want to follow our culture's lead in always being offended, always being frustrated, always being outraged—those are some pretty good ways to make it happen. **But I'm assuming that because many of *us* are followers of Jesus, that's not exactly our goal. I'm assuming that we would much rather embody the love, compassion, and peace that Jesus offers and Jesus *embodies*.** So let me give you what I think is a sure fire way to achieve *that*. And the good news is that *this* approach is much simpler than a life of outrage.

In fact, we can sum it up in just one word: **confession**. If you want to chart a better way forward than the cycle of perpetual offense, the way to arrive there is to be motivated by the good news of Jesus to *confess*. Now, I know for some of *us*, that word might conjure up some odd images. So let me be very clear about what I mean. I mean **the practice of regularly acknowledging your sins, faults, and failures to God, and to other followers of Jesus**. That's what that word means in the bible. It's regularly taking the "sewage" that is present in the recesses of your own heart, and bringing it out into the light for God and others to see. Not hiding it, not sugar-coating it, not blaming it on others or your situation. *Confessing* it.

The **Scriptures teach that if we have been transformed** by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will regularly practice *confession*. **And here's why: if you're a follower of Jesus, you've already been outed as a sinner. You've already acknowledged that you are deeply flawed and that you therefore *needed* someone and something to address that sin. So when you choose to be honest with God and others about your sin, you're not telling any of those people anything they don't already know. What you *are* doing, though, is realigning *yourself* with reality. You're taking time to remember that you're no better than anybody else. You're remembering**

that your sin is simultaneously the biggest problem in your life and the thing you have the most power to do something *about*.

And *that* is **how you break the cycle** of perpetual offense. **If you are regularly acknowledging and confessing your own sin, you will find it harder and harder to be outraged at everyone and everything else.** One, because you're acknowledging regularly that *you* are your biggest problem. But two, because even when someone *else* does something wrong, confession helps you view *them* with *compassion*, rather than anger. It makes you more inclined to see them as a *fellow sinner*, rather than someone you're better than. It is **very, very difficult to be perpetually angry** at everyone else while simultaneously being honest about all of your sin. **The people I've known in my life who are the most consistently outraged and offended, also tend to be the people who confess their sin the *least*.** The times in *my* life where I am the most outraged and offended at others, are the times where I am *confessing* the *least*. **Gospel-motivated confession is *the antidote* to outrage and offense.**

So **if you find yourself perpetually frustrated and offended** at everything and everyone else around you—or more importantly, **if you just want to become more like *Jesus*—do this: this week, find a way to be brutally honest with God and other followers of *Jesus* about your own sin.** Bring all the sewage out of your own heart and expose it to the light. And watch the perpetual outrage start to melt away. And I'll **just add this**, too: if you don't know where to start with confessing your sin, start with confessing the outrage *itself*. The Scriptures teach that things like bitterness, resentment, and rage are sinful in and of themselves. So even if you're not aware of anything else you need to confess, start *there*. Say "I've got this rage, this offense, this anger in my heart at *these* types of things, and that's not okay."

One wonders **how different *Jesus*' interactions with the Pharisees would've been** if they saw their own sin as their biggest problem. I wonder what a difference that would've made in their lives and in their interactions with others. And I wonder what difference it would make in *us* as well. *Jesus* has made all of this possible by his life, death, and resurrection. Let's let him guide us into the fullness of life that he's made available, by acknowledging and confessing our sin.

Let's pray together.