

Negative Spin

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news, believe God's promise, follow his instructions and you will receive eternal life. But sometimes Jesus delivered his message with a negative spin. Why? Sometimes as I am teaching the Gospel the lesson I have worked out is received by some as being much too negative. The response sometimes is; "If your message is negative it can't be from God" or "antagonizing people does not bring them closer to God, it just doesn't work". Let's look at some examples from the Bible to test this inference.

The Gospel of John chapter six opens with the miracle of Jesus feeding five thousand people, who were listening to him teach, with five loaves of bread and two fish. The next day they came looking for Jesus:

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."¹

Jesus indicates that they missed the point of the miracle, they're focus was on the food. Jesus then uses the metaphor that he is "the bread that came down from heaven" to underscore this point:

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."²

Jesus purposely puts a negative spin on the message and employs a metaphor that some in his audience found offensive to weed out those who would truly follow him from those who heard his words but would not repent:

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."³

The apostle Peter gives the response that God is looking for, Jesus Christ is the one chosen by God to show the way to eternal life and also make it clear how much society in general and each of us as a result has strayed away from God. It is necessary then for each of us to make a firm commitment to this truth to avoid being drawn away by the culture we are a product of. Jesus again uses a negative spin to make this very point:

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and

¹ John 6:25-27

² John 6:53-63

³ John 6:66-69

sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.⁴

Jesus of course is not teaching that one should hate his or her parents, what Jesus is talking about here is a degree of commitment. He goes on in the verses that follow to talk about understanding the cost of discipleship. But notice in the passage quoted above he puts an extremely negative spin on his statement to drive home his point. Let's look at another example:

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.⁵

This is an example of a positive response. Jesus once again puts a negative spin on his message to make the point that he was sent to deliver the Gospel to the Jews first. The apostles would have the job of spreading the Gospel to the rest of the world. Notice the woman is not offended because she recognizes Jesus as Lord.

Jesus reserved his most negative spin for the religious leaders who did not recognize Jesus as Lord. They were blinded because their religion had wandered away from God and had deteriorated to merely a hollow human tradition. Jesus strongly rebuked them because they were leading people away from God. They were leading people toward destruction instead of salvation:

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

"These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules taught by men."

Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"

Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"

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

⁴ Luke 14:25-27

⁵ Matthew 15:21-28

"You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!"

"Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are."⁶

The point is not to offend people. The point is to correct them. We see in the book of Acts that some of the Pharisees later became obedient to the Gospel. The apostle Paul strongly rebuked the believers in Corinth but instead of being offended they corrected their behavior even though the negative spin of Paul's rebuke caused them sorrow at first:

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it — I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while— yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.⁷

The response God is looking for in these examples is a "Godly sorrow" not a sorrow that causes the listener to become offended, but a sorrow that causes the listener to stop and correct their behavior so that it is in harmony with God. So these various messages we see in the Bible that are delivered with a negative spin are not done to offend or drive people away. They are the heartfelt admonitions of a patient God who desires all to come to repentance:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.⁸

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⁶ Matthew 15:1-14, Mark 7:8-10, 13, Matthew 23:15

⁷ 2 Corinthians 7:8-11

⁸ 2 Peter 3:9