

# Building Relationships: Handling Offence

## Introduction

Everyone has, or will, at some point in their life face a situation where they feel they have been misunderstood, mistreated, falsely accused, or in some way shape or form “wronged”. This is taken as a personal attack either on their person or their character, and as a result they “take offence”. If this is not resolved quickly then the offence will settle and the person concerned will become “offended”.

There are some basic issues here that I think it would be helpful to be clear about.

1. We need to look at how we cause offence to others.
2. We need to look at how we become offended.
3. We need to understand the implications of both causing and receiving offence.
4. We need to understand how God would want us to act.
5. We need to see how our actions and attitudes can and should change.

Let us start by looking at some passages from the Bible which touch on this important topic.

## Bible passages:

In all the quotations below I am providing an English translation from the Greek text, based on that provided in *The NIV Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, by Rev A Marshall (Zondervan Publishing House, 1976). This is based on the Nestle Greek Text.

I am deliberately translating and consistently using the English word “offence” when the NIV text uses other English words.

### **Luke chapter 17 verse 1**

*And he said to his disciples: It is impossible for offences not to come, but woe to him through whom they come.*

In this verse Jesus underlines what we all know – if you live on this earth, you will come across people who offend you. There is no surprise here.

Yet the NIV text translated this as “Things that cause people to sin”. Here we can see that meaning has to do with the impact on the offended person – that taking offence can lead us into sin.

This points out the difference between something being offensive (that finding something offensive is not sin), and being offended (that holding an offence against another person, being unforgiving, is sin).

### **Matthew chapter 13 verse 21**

*But he who has no root in himself but is short-lived, when tribulation or persecution occurs because of the word, immediately he is offended.*

In the parable of the sower Jesus tells us that the ground is a picture of different people’s hearts. The “rocky ground” is described in this verse. Here we see people who initially appear to be on fire for God, but as they face troubles and difficulties in life something changes. Jesus says they become offended – and the offence acts

like a rock in the ground: it gets in the way of development and growth, and so stunts life. As the NIV text tells us, the offended person “falls away” from God.

### **Matthew chapter 13 verses 26 to 43 – note verse 43**

*The Son of Man will send forth his angels and they will collect out of his kingdom all things that cause offence and those acting lawlessly.*

The frightening thing about this verse is it shows us how seriously God takes offence. It has no part in the Kingdom, and needs to be removed.

### **Matthew chapter 18 verses 1 to 14**

This is very similar to what we saw in Luke 17. Note verse 6:  
*And whoever offends one of these little ones who believe in me*

I believe this is one of the verses in the Bible that must be on the “least understood” list today. If we have a young person who is seeking to live for God and we “offend” them we are danger. Why? What does this mean?

### **Some definitions**

*English Dictionary:*

**Offence:** attacking, aggressive action: wounding of the feelings: transgression, misdemeanour, illegal act.

The English word “offence” is used to describe a form of aggression shown towards another person. A person becomes “offended” when they experience this aggression and become wounded as a result. The “offender” is the person committing the “offence”.

*Bible words:*

**Skandalon** – a trap spring; a stumbling block or impediment; a cause of ruin or misery; a cause or occasion of sinning.

**Skandalizo** – to cause to stumble; to offend, shock.

**Proskopee** – a stumbling; offence; shock

Note the word “skandalon” is the word from which we get the word scandal meaning something that causes outrage or indignation.

These words paint a slightly different picture from the English. Here we are talking about something that trips a person up, causes them to stumble on their journey. The action or attitude is seen as something put in the way of another person in order to obstruct them, to halt them or hold them up in some way. It originally described that part of the trap that held the bait and so released the trap to catch its prey.

Offence is the bait that tempts us into making a judgement about another person, and also to hold things against other people – which results in unforgiveness. This is the start of a breakdown in the relationships we have with these other people, and also with God. If we cannot forgive those who have offended us, how can God forgive us for the things we do that offend Him?

### **More Bible Passages**

**2 Timothy chapter 2 verse 26** describe how the Devil has set a snare to capture us. This trap here is described as being in opposition to other believers, specifically the

leaders within the church. The trap is to “fall out” with each other, to disagree with each other. Could this mean also to become offended with each other?

### **Romans chapter 14 verse 13**

*Then let us no more pass judgement on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or offence in the way of a brother.*

This verse is very clear. Is there something in the order of the instruction that can help us though? We will come back to this later, but it is worth noting that deciding not to offend others comes after deciding not to form judgements about them.

### **1 Corinthians chapter 8 verse 9**

*Look out in case this authority of yours becomes a stumbling block to the weak*

This is another verse that warns us about causing others to stumble. Here it can be our “authority” – our freedom in Christ, which can trip up another person. We must make sure that even good things do not cause bad ends. Doing something because we can, and are entitled to do it, is not right for us if it is going to cause a fellow believer to stumble and “fall away” from following God.

### **How do people get offended?**

Something happens which you believe to be unjust – another person has misjudged you, misrepresented you, contradicted you. You feel you have been judged or treated wrongly, and this is an “offence” to you.

The process is simple:

1. Something happens
2. I perceive this to be wrong
3. As a result I take offence
4. I become offended

This can develop and grow so that:

5. The offence is unresolved
6. Offence becomes resentment
7. Resentment becomes bitterness

Offence causes hurt and pain. If this is not treated properly, then an emotional wound remains, and you will start to protect yourself because you will feel vulnerable. This defensive posture will result in other people being evaluated in terms of the potential threat or harm they might be towards you.

The consequences are:

1. My emotions are damaged.
2. My relationship with the person or persons who have offended me is damaged.
3. My ability to relate to other people is damaged (Proverbs 18:19).
4. My perspective on life changes.
5. My relationship with God is damaged.

## **How do people cause offence?**

1. Innocently – sometimes we say or do things and we are totally unaware of the impact they may have on those around us. This is probably not as common as we would like to think!
2. Thoughtlessly – possibly a more common occurrence is we just do not think about how other people will hear what we say, or how our actions will impact upon them.
3. Negative responses – sometimes we hit back at people because they have hurt us. We justify our reactions based on our understanding of the way they have behaved towards us.
4. Defensively – sometimes we have been so hurt by other people that we do not feel safe in letting people get too close to us. As a result we allow ourselves to behave in ways which act as “tests” to see if the other person is likely to back off from us, get upset or angry with us, or if they genuinely care about us. We know that this behaviour may offend some people, but it is a price we are prepared to pay for our own safety.
5. Deliberately – some people do go through life with an uncaring attitude. They are not interested in the feelings of other people. If hurting you helps them get on in life then they will do it. This is a sad reality in our world.

## **Is offence ever OK?**

The Bible makes it very clear that there is one thing that can become a “rock of offence” to us, which God himself has ordained.

In Romans chapter 9 verse 33 Paul quotes from Isaiah chapter 8 verse 14. This tells us that God himself will be both a place of sanctuary for those who are living his way, but also a stumbling stone – a rock of offence – to those who do not live his way. This thought is repeated in 1 Peter chapter 2.

Jesus himself is that “stone”. As people hear about the way of life Jesus is calling us to, so they – and at times we – may struggle and find it both hard and possibly offensive. This happened in John 6. In verse 61 we read how Jesus challenges his disciples who were concerned about the “hard sayings”, and were becoming offended.

The claims of Jesus Christ will offend people today. Our responsibility is to explain these claims in a way that people can clearly hear them – we are not to get in the way ourselves (become a stumbling stone to them). We must never use this as an excuse for our behaviour.

## **How should we behave?**

### **1. Do not cause offence!**

We are responsible for our actions. If we offend people by the way we live, behave or speak, then that is our responsibility. How can we address this practically?

- Start by not judging others (Romans 14)  
Other people may do things that cause you to question but stop there. Don't allow yourself to become their judge. Pray for them, encourage them, seek

their good and trust God to speak to them about the things you are concerned about.

- Edification test: Romans 14:19  
Ask yourself if you are “building up” your fellow believers. If you are not, then use this to measure yourself – reflect on your words and actions to see how you can become more supportive and encouraging.
- Helpful test: 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, 31-33  
Before you act or speak, ask yourself if this is going to be helpful. You may decide that your planned action is neither helpful nor harmful. Make the decision not to act / speak unless it IS helpful.

In the light of Matthew 18 verses 1-14, are we prepared to do “whatever is necessary” to stop this? Having good or right intentions is not enough if our behaviour never changes.

## **2. Do not “take” offence!**

Look at the process by which people become offended. Identify the points at which you can stop the process.

Ask yourself:

- Does this person know they have upset me or is it genuinely accidental?
- Do I need to be offended by this or can I just let it go?
- Forgive the hurt!

Note on Forgiveness:

Mark 11:24-26. Forgiveness is a command. There is no way around it, from this passage we see clearly that God expects us to forgive people. It is also very clear that our forgiveness is conditional – God will forgive us in the same way we forgive other people. (Matthew 6:14-15, Luke 6:37) This is also seen very clearly in the parable of the king settling accounts in Matthew 18: 23 and the verses following.

## **3. No Revenge: Romans 12:17, 19**

If we seek revenge we place ourselves in judgement over the other person, and seek to “right” what we perceive as “wrong”. God makes very clear that this is His role and right, not ours.

Do we trust God to administer Justice in a way that is truly just?

Do we trust God to look after us till that happens? (2 Timothy 4:18)

## **4. Understand the process!**

Commenting on 1 Peter 1:6-7, John Bevere writes, “*God refines with afflictions, trials, and tribulations, the heat of which separates impurities such as unforgiveness, strife, bitterness, anger, envy, and so forth from the character of God in our lives*”. (The Bait of Satan, page 9.)

Maybe we should be asking ourselves what God is trying to reveal within us – is God using this circumstance, which I find offensive, to speak to me about my reactions and attitudes towards other people.

## **5. Clear out the rocks**

Unresolved offences are like rocks in the garden of our hearts (Matthew 13 v18ff). If we want to grow spiritually we need to clear away these rocks, which means recognising the offences we are carrying and choosing to forgive.

## **6. Put down roots (Matt 13 v18ff)**

Offences cause us to stumble in our walk with God. One way to keep ourselves free from offence is to keep close to Jesus. In the parable in Matthew 13 this is described as a plant that has good roots. Talking to God all the time, reading the Bible so we can learn more about His ways, these are the basics that will keep us close to Jesus.

## **7. Cultivate an attitude of Grace**

Paul writes that he sought to relate to the believers at Corinth “not according to worldly wisdom but according to God’s grace” (2 Corinthians 1:12). Do we live life by following the wisdom of the world, or by following the example of Jesus who was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14)?

In Romans 12 we are advised to “be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody” (verse 17). In other words to look and try to put ourselves in the other person’s shoes – how will they see this? In verse 18 we are also told to “live at peace with everyone”, to do everything in our power to make sure there is no strife, no dispute, no breakdown in relationships with anyone.

If you have been wronged, why not let it go? (1 Corinthians 6:7)

Have you tried praying for those who you believe are out to get you? (Matthew 5:44)

Why not be like Jesus? (1 Peter 2:21-23)

## **8. Do not deny the power of God to change people!**

Paul warns Timothy of people who believe all the right things but fail to acknowledge God’s power and ability to change people (2 Timothy 3:1-5). When we say that we cannot change (forgive), or that other people cannot change (repent), we put ourselves in the same place as these people Paul is talking about.

For more on this topic I would recommend the following two books:

**The Bait of Satan**, John Bevere (2004: Charisma House, Florida)

**How to Respond when you feel Mistreated**, John Bevere (2004:Nelson Books, USA)