



CHAPTER 1

# HARD WORDS TO HEAR

“He who dares not offend cannot be honest.”

THOMAS PAINE

“It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds:  
in reality our best work is done by keeping things out.”

C.S. LEWIS, *THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS*<sup>1</sup>

“See that guy over there?” I whispered, pointing to a man standing near the altar. “I work with him. He got fired this week.”

“For what?” my friend whispered back.

“Poor job performance, I guess. I don’t know all the details, but I heard they walked him out to his car.”

Before he was fired, we had worked together on staff at the church, a large congregation with a coffee shop, fitness center, and newly installed theater seating. We were in different departments, and I didn’t know him well. I was only a Bible college student working part-time at the church. I couldn’t believe I’d been hired. In a matter of weeks, I had gone from visiting the church for the first time to sitting in on staff meetings and participating in important decisions.

## A SHARP COMPASSION

But sitting there ready to worship, what had motivated me to bring up such a distracting thing? At the time, I couldn't have told you. Who thinks about motives when some bit of gossip works its way to your tongue? You speak and think later, if at all. Like most indiscretions, our real motivations are usually somewhere beyond our awareness. As Edward Bernays, the nephew of Freud, explained, "Men are rarely aware of the real reasons which motivate their actions."<sup>2</sup> We live unaware of the forces at work in our inner lives.

Who knows why people do what they do? We make mistakes. We call it sin, shrug, repent, and move on. On Sunday, the pastor reminds us of the doctrine of total depravity. We hear it not as a warning but as an explanation, even an absolution. The complexity of sin at work within us rarely inspires us to dig deeper. It feels too tedious. These days, too much talk about sin makes you sound prudish, morbid, even fanatical. We may not have it together, but we know people far worse. The human heart is totally depraved and, in my experience, totally uninterested in it.

We have no trouble recognizing the reality of sin in our world. We see it clearly in each day's news of more violence, chaos, and hatred. We recognize it in the annoying habits and wounding actions of neighbors, coworkers, and family. We are experts at recognizing everything that is wrong with our world, but how rarely do we find a reason to turn that same critical eye of investigation toward our own hearts and inner lives? We know what is wrong with the world and yet know very little about what is truly wrong with ourselves.

The Bible warns that sin is far more than bad behavior. God explained in the opening pages of Genesis, "Sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it."<sup>3</sup> Sin

## HARD WORDS TO HEAR

is hiding and waiting to defeat you. It is not only in your actions but lurking in your heart. You must learn to see it, or you will be ruined by it.

Sin is a trap, a snare, baited and hidden to cause your fall. Enticed into that trap, you are most vulnerable when you are least suspicious of it. The smell of the bait draws you in with the promise of fulfillment and pleasure. Eventually, that disinterest comes with a cost. The snare is tripped; you find yourself caught. The more you struggle, the more the snare tightens. If you've ever had a sin exposed, you know what I'm describing. You thrash and roll, blame and accuse. But you can't get free.

I want to show you how sin works: how the trap is baited, how the hidden snare is set, and the consequences of overlooking it. But be prepared; it often takes a hard word to get your attention and free you from the snare. And the same word required to free you risks offending you. The most dangerous animal is always the one that feels trapped. Corner a snared animal and you're likely to get bit even if you seek to free it. As you sense the trap closing, you become irrational, prone to suspicion, and less likely to recognize your salvation. You reject the very word meant to set you free. But if you learn to see the trap, you'll also learn to recognize God's hard word as one of rescue.

\* \* \*

Fatigued from a recent hip injury, C. S. Lewis overslept and missed his regular 8 a.m. service at Holy Trinity Church. He usually arrived at the service late enough to avoid the opening hymns, which he referred to as "fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music."<sup>4</sup> But Lewis had missed several weeks and, waking up late, decided to attend the midday service instead. There in his regular pew by the stone

## A SHARP COMPASSION

column, bored by the sermon (as he often was), Lewis was struck by an idea. He later wrote to his brother:

Before the service was over—one could wish these things came more seasonably—I was struck by an idea for a book which I think might be both useful and entertaining. It would be called *As One Devil to Another* and would consist of letters from an elderly retired devil to a young devil who has just started work on his first ‘patient.’ The idea would be to give all the psychology of temptation from the other point of view.<sup>5</sup>

Lewis wrote that book and titled it *The Screwtape Letters*. The book contains a collection of letters from a senior tempter to his novice nephew with instructions on tempting his young human patient away from God. I remember first reading the book as a teenager and being struck by the depth of Lewis’s understanding of human temptation and the blindness of the human heart.

What makes *The Screwtape Letters* so fascinating is the complexity of temptation orchestrated beneath the “patient’s” awareness, a central theme of the book. The two tempters scheme tactics for drawing the young man away from any consciousness of their work. Secrecy and subversion are their stock in trade. But, after revealing himself to his patient, the young tempter loses him to the Christian faith. His uncle replies, “How well I know what happened at the instant when they snatched him from you! There was a sudden clearing of his eyes (was there not?) as he saw you for the first time, and recognized the part you had had in him and knew that you had it no longer.”<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing what’s happening in your heart is more than half the battle of overcoming sin. But recognizing it is no easy task. It’s one for which all hell and your own polluted condition plot to thwart.

## HARD WORDS TO HEAR

In your heart resides the whole of history. In your heart stirs the story of sin and idolatry, the fall of man, and humanity's rebellion against God. In your heart plays out the dramatic tale of rebellion, repression, and redemption. All of it is there. All of heaven and hell crammed into that small cavity of your chest, and yet you pass most days with no more awareness of that cauldron brewing within you than you are aware of the churning molten rock at our planet's core. If reading *The Screwtape Letters* accomplishes anything, it opens your eyes to just how much is at work within you. There is more going on in your heart than you have recognized.

How shrewd Screwtape was to recommend that his apprentice aggravate that most useful human characteristic, the horror and neglect of the obvious. You must bring him to a condition in which he can practice self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself which are perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office.<sup>7</sup>

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah understood it too, writing, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"<sup>8</sup> We can't understand it on our own. Introspection often uncovers very little.

How, with so much distraction and temptation stacked against us, can anyone ever understand their own inner life? The Bible and believers throughout history have long recognized an important tool for learning to see within your own heart. It is not easy nor without risk, but for the hardest of hearts, it often takes a strong blow. Christ comes to reveal what you most need, to split open your heart, and to expose what is true. He will be honest with you

## A SHARP COMPASSION

about your real condition.

David McCracken, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Washington, has written extensively on offense in culture, literature, and, specifically, the Bible. He explains that it is the “difficult-to-bear, personal nature of an offense, its confrontational nature that makes it hard to ignore or to shrug off, its blatant attack on what we take to be our deepest selves or our strongest allegiances—these are precisely what give the offense its power. The offense has a way of bringing the individual to a moment of crisis, revealing the heart’s desire.”

But many are unwilling to hear that word. How few are those who have ears to hear? So it is that many are offended by Jesus. What we need is a deeper understanding of offense and how Jesus wields offense for his purposes. From the old French *offendre*, to offend simply means to strike, to cut, to wound. Offense is a sword. And that risk of offense, those cutting, piercing words of Jesus, are often just what we need to break through the slab of our indifference.

God himself will risk offending you to save you.

\* \* \*

To be clear, as I gossiped about that coworker, I was not thinking about sin or my motivations. I certainly wasn’t thinking about the doctrine of total depravity or any trap. But just as that service was about to begin, I was unexpectedly forced to take a long, hard, uncomfortable look at what had motivated my words. It came as a word of offense.

My motivation for gossiping may not have been clear to me, but there was at least one person to whom it was perfectly clear. I’ve always whispered too loudly, but to my surprise, the woman seated in front of me turned around. Red in the face, she let me have it.

## HARD WORDS TO HEAR

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” she said, her voice shaking with anger. “You work at this church and speak about your brother like that. You don’t even know what you’re talking about. You have no business saying what you’re saying, and you have no business working here if that’s how you treat people. Something is wrong with you, not him.”

If she had waited and confronted me after service, if she had just begun with a simple, “Pardon me, I couldn’t help but overhear—,” I might have been capable of mounting some kind of self-justification, as pathetic as it probably would have been. But something about the intensity of her correction caught me entirely off guard. There was, for a very small moment, that rising feeling of offense. That upward rushing sense of indignation. *Who was she to speak to me like that? She didn’t even know me.*

But I could not answer. The worship team struck their first chord, and the service began. I stood there, humiliated and ashamed. I was sick with it. I hadn’t seen it coming. I realized at that moment things were stirring in me to which I had given no real attention. My careless words had been more than gossip. But that was only a symptom of something far worse at work inside.

I realized she was right. They were hard words, but they were true. Often, the truest words are the hardest to hear. But they’re often just what we most need.

\* \* \*

I want to suggest something to you that will sound both strange and possibly offensive, especially given our cultural moment. But I am convinced it is true—convinced by both my past experiences and by the consistent witness of Scripture. If you are willing to endure being

## A SHARP COMPASSION

offended and honestly look at it, what offends you can reveal important characteristics about you. Offense can be a form of revelation. It can shock you into seeing things you've overlooked about yourself. Understanding what offends you can even lead you to a deeper faith in Christ. But it will require a willingness to confront Christ's hard words and not be offended by them.

I still think about that Sunday service and that woman's confronting words. To this day, I do not know who she was, nor have I ever spoken to her again. If I ever met her, I would only want to tell her thanks. I am grateful for what she did. She could have waited to discuss it with her husband on the drive home. She could have gossiped about me to someone else in the church. She could have said nothing at all. But instead, she risked offending me and, in the process, helped save me from the dark and destructive forces I was blind to in my own heart. She made me see something I needed to see.

Once I was forced to see it, it didn't take much work to connect all the pieces. I had turned that new job at an influential mega-church into an idol. I imagined it validated me. Seeing a coworker's failure gave me some meager feeling of superiority. I was in; he was out. It was a cheap trick to sedate my own insecurity. What a distorted thing to hold in your heart. How dangerous to act without knowing it was there.

Who knows what your heart holds? Who knows what is there even now, neatly concealed and desperately avoided?

But while offense can be a powerful tool for breaking through your heart's defenses, offense can also be your excuse for avoiding the vulnerability of that introspection. That is the perplexing reality of offense. Offense can reveal, but it can also harden your defenses.



## REVELATION OR SUPPRESSION

I recently saw a man at Walmart with a sweatshirt that read “I’m offended that you’re offended.” That sentiment feels accurate for our time. These days, who isn’t offended? You can hardly turn on the television or scroll social media without hearing someone claiming to be offended. Every day, another public figure is forced to apologize to “anyone they may have offended.” Offense has become so common the internet now has a whole genre of “I’m offended” memes. Offending or being offended seem constantly at the center of our conversations about everything from politics to art to business to comedy and, certainly, religion. The world is wound tighter, the stakes higher, and everyone seems anxious, annoyed, and offended.

In an interesting set of dual statistics, the Pew Research Center found that 53 percent of adults in the United States now believe “people saying offensive things” is a major problem in our country. However, that stat is complicated by 65 percent who believe “people being too easily offended” is the major problem.<sup>9</sup> That means a significant margin of people must believe both statements are true—there is too much offense, and people are too easily offended by it.

Another way to observe the trend is the frequency with which we now claim offense. Google’s database of more than 129 million digitized books can be easily searched for changes in how we use words and phrases. Called the Ngram Viewer, it charts phrases on a line graph to display their frequency across time. The tool can reveal patterns in usage as far back as the 1500s. Search the phrase “I’m offended” and the resulting trend line is striking.<sup>10</sup> Up until about 1950, the phrase was used sparingly. You can see its gradual growth throughout the late-1900s. But beginning around 2000,

the frequency line makes an almost vertical climb. This century, the phrase “I’m offended” has grown in usage by more than 5,600 percent. In 2016, The Collins English Dictionary named the term “snowflake generation” one of its words of the year. The phrase describes an entire generation’s tendency to take offense easily.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps people have always felt offended, but we certainly seem to be talking more about it.

No previous age has given as much attention to offense, but we aren’t making much progress in reducing it. Instead, we’re growing more divided, and our conflicts only seem to make us more sensitive to it. Each offense drives new wedges and fragments our society more deeply. The more we’re offended the more we contribute to the offending.

We can’t even agree on whether offense is actually a problem. Some seem determined to double down on offense, offending to prove a broader point about our culture’s sensitivities. Others resolve to show no offense at all and so abandon all distinctions for the sake of vague affirmations and some naively hoped-for agreeableness. What few seem to be doing is asking why. Why are we increasingly sensitive to offense, and why can’t we control it? Perhaps we find being offended easier than the alternative: being honest about its cause.

Offense can be revelation, but it can also be a tactic of suppression. Offense is an easy way to avoid facing what is in our own hearts. When a hard word threatens you externally, the last thing you want to acknowledge is that it might be right and that you might be blind to it. You claim offense, partly as a strategy to shield your vulnerability.

The language of offense allows you to object to the threat without the liability of explaining why it hurt so deeply. Claim-

## HARD WORDS TO HEAR

ing to be offended grants you the moral high ground. It is a tactic of defense, just as a king is willing to tear down his whole city to reinforce the walls before an invasion. Offense often hardens the defenses of your heart and focuses your attention on the external threat at the cost of self-awareness. It allows you to respond with outrage rather than despair.

Political cartoonist Tim Kreider explains,

Obviously, some part of us loves feeling 1) right and 2) wronged. But outrage is like a lot of other things that feel good but, over time, devour us from the inside out. Except it's even more insidious than most vices because we don't even consciously acknowledge it's a pleasure. We prefer to think of it as a disagreeable but fundamentally healthy reaction to negative stimuli, like pain or nausea, rather than admit that it's a shameful kick we eagerly indulge again and again.<sup>12</sup>

Being offended is addicting, in part because it shields us from our own sin and insecurity. But it's a dangerous trick. The more you feel offended, the more you feel justified in it, and the less you care to know why. As you give into the impulse, you become increasingly less aware of the internal mechanisms fueling it. As a result, you become less capable of understanding your own inner life and motivations. Offense always begets more offense. Embracing offense moves you further into the darkness. It makes you less self-aware.

It's a strange paradox, but the more we stumble over the same obstacle of offense, the less willing we are to acknowledge it's there. What offends us becomes an obsession. It's not hard to see this fixation in the way offense has swept through our culture, hijacked our public conversations, and absorbed our private thoughts. French

## A SHARP COMPASSION

thinker René Girard described offense as “not one of those ordinary obstacles that we avoid easily after we run into it the first time, but a paradoxical obstacle that is almost impossible to avoid: the more this obstacle, or scandal, repels us, the more it attracts us.”<sup>13</sup> Few will admit it, but we can become addicted to offense. That addiction makes it increasingly difficult to see our own vulnerabilities.

Jesus recognized that offense would be an unavoidable part of the human experience. He warned his own disciples, “It is impossible that no offenses should come.”<sup>14</sup> Jesus knows we will face offense. But the real question is, will we be blinded by it, caught up in its obscuring obsession, or will we look honestly at what it reveals? Can we recognize offense as an opportunity? Offense will either lead to revelation or suppression. It depends on how we respond. And how we respond to offense will also shape how we hear the words of Christ. Jesus did not shy away from offending. Instead, he recognized that the truest word often risks offending us.

## JESUS AND OFFENSE

In 2020, as the world spiraled downward into political division, vaccine debates, and church fractures, our congregation decided to focus on Jesus. Honestly, I was naively trying to avoid all the conflict and the constant pressure to weigh in on each week’s new developing controversy. Instead, we took our time in the gospel of John and tried to stay calm in the presence of Jesus. For that year, we spent each Sunday working verse by verse through the fourth gospel, grounding ourselves in Christ and his words.

What’s better for calm and tranquility than Jesus? Jesus in some peaceful pasture. Jesus welcoming a group of kids. Jesus walking a

## HARD WORDS TO HEAR

dusty road with his disciples, the sun setting over the gentle tides of Galilee. It's the old image of Jesus and those footprints in the sand.

*Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,  
look upon a little child,  
pity my simplicity,  
suffer me to come to thee.*<sup>15</sup>

That's a prayer for children, but it's an image most of us have held on to. We like to imagine Jesus above all the conflict and offense. We like to imagine him somehow serenely detached from it. We retreat to Jesus to get away from all that offends. What we rarely imagine is what the Gospels actually record, that when people met Jesus, they often left offended by him.

Offense constantly surrounded Jesus's ministry. And far from avoiding it, Jesus even seemed to provoke it. Jesus had to remind his own followers, "Blessed is he who is not offended because of me."<sup>16</sup> As, David McCracken writes in *The Scandal of the Gospels*, "If we assume that Jesus is a kind, gentle, and loving hero and that such traits are antithetical to offensiveness, we as readers will do whatever we can to ameliorate any apparent offensiveness in the text."<sup>17</sup> And that is largely what we have done.

Perhaps we're willing to accept a version of Jesus that offends the same people we enjoy offending. Sure, Jesus occasionally came down hard on those self-righteous Pharisees, but what no one likes to imagine is Jesus offending them. No one expects to open the Bible and find Jesus coming down hard on them. But if you remove the offense of Jesus's words, you risk robbing them of their power.

Jesus offended his disciples, even those closest to him. He offended the crowds. He offended his own family and his hometown.

## A SHARP COMPASSION

He offended Jews and gentiles, rich and poor, male and female, political leaders, and religious teachers. Peter and Paul both went so far as to label Jesus a stone that causes stumbling.<sup>18</sup> They called Jesus an offense and pointed out that preaching the gospel would cause others to be offended as well.

I had turned to the gospel of John to try and avoid offense. Instead, I kept finding conversations full of it. I came across a phrase by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard that captured my experience in John's gospel. Kierkegaard described conversations with Jesus as "frightful collisions."<sup>19</sup>

Those conversations of offense forced me to reconsider what offense was and why it was so common in Jesus's ministry. It forced me to listen, reckon with hard words, and search my own heart. And I discovered that while many walked away from Jesus due to offense, others found in those same words a breakthrough of faith. They encountered real offense and yet found their eyes opened, their hearts exposed, and their souls moved to believe. When Jesus risked offense, some walked away and others pressed in. Some were blinded by it and others found new sight. Jesus's hardest words are a key component of his good news.

I'm not suggesting we rework Jesus into a swaggering, cursing, ill-tempered brawler, as some have attempted to do. We can't put words in Jesus's mouth, but neither should we take them away. The temptation is to try and make Jesus just one thing. We must instead do the much harder work of holding together both images of Christ. He is peaceful, loving, gentle, and lowly, and he is also confrontational, frank, and sharp with rebuke.

G.K. Chesterton described the true believer's ability to hold together these two images:

## HARD WORDS TO HEAR

He has always cared more for truth than for consistency. If he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each other, he would take the two truths and the contradiction along with them. His spiritual sight is stereoscopic, like his physical sight: he sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that.<sup>20</sup>

Our ability to hold on to these two pictures of Jesus preserves his real depth. Think of it this way: You technically see two distinct images of every object. The space between your eyes means each eye has a slightly different angle of the world. Your brain fits those two images together into a single image, giving you a greater perception of depth and movement. Two unique images merge into a single vision of the world's forms and contours. Losing one eye can cause a significant loss in depth perception, the perception of movement, and your ability to judge distances. So, too, having only one image of Christ can jeopardize your ability to perceive his real depth and movement. Without both views, Christ collapses into a one-dimensional preference.

Again, Kierkegaard provides helpful in his warning of a diminished Christ. Kierkegaard wrote to a Danish Christian culture that gave little attention to the actual Christ, having assumed that their Danish identity certified their Christian faith. Kierkegaard recognized that in polite Danish society, Jesus's message had been simplified and emptied of its offense. It had been watered down to make it palatable to that culture and so lost its power.

“Take away the possibility of offense, as they have done in Christendom,” Kierkegaard wrote, “and the whole of Christianity is direct communication; and then Christianity is done away with, for it has become an easy thing, a superficial something which neither wounds nor heals profoundly enough; it is the false invention of

## A SHARP COMPASSION

human sympathy which forgets the infinite qualitative difference between God and man.”<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard warned of a faith built on one-way communication. We worship but make no room for God to convict. We talk of God but have lost our ear for hearing his voice. We have opinions about God but care very little for his opinion of us. Only a Christ, Kierkegaard contended, who is permitted to risk offending can cut deeply enough to heal.

That idea is foreign to modern faith. We are looking for affirmation and power, not conviction and correction. But Jesus is willing to tell us the truth. As the book of Hebrews describes it, he wields a two-edged sword that cuts deep enough to reveal the secrets of the heart, mind, soul, and spirit.<sup>22</sup>

In the book of Revelation, that two-edged sword emerges from his mouth, judging what is true from what is false.<sup>23</sup> His sword is his word, dividing, rebuking, correcting, and revealing. If you come near Christ, if you listen, he will reveal what is in your heart. But only you can decide if that truth will humble you or blind you with offense.

Like antiseptic in a wound, being saved is not always comfortable. Stitches, lances, and reset bones never feel good, but they are the work of healing. The physician must sometimes cut deeply to abstract what ill. So, too, offense is often the heat of Christ’s light shone into our deepest needs, his greatest work done within those secret places of your deepest vulnerabilities.

It is just as the old man Simeon saw it, lifting the newborn child in the temple and prophesying, “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.”<sup>24</sup> Simeon got it right. Many did stumble over Jesus. Many fell and went away offended. But others found what Simeon also



saw: their hearts revealed and their faith formed. When you truly encounter Christ's word in all of its dimensions, it will offend you or it will cure you. The outcome is up to you.

## UNCOVERING THE MECHANISM OF OFFENSE

Jesus does not seek to offend. But he will not let our sensitivity to offense keep him from telling us the truth. His hardest conversations are our guide to understanding the trap of offense and learning to receive from even those hard words. What lies ahead in this book is a view beneath the surface of offense. I want to use Jesus's conversations to help us explore beneath the controversy, beneath the headlines, beneath the memes, the outrage, and the trends.

Have you ever seen one of those Rube Goldberg contraptions? A ball rolls down a track and releases a rope that runs through a pulley and raises a board that flips a switch that finally turns on a light. Goldberg was a cartoonist who liked to draw absurdly complex mechanical processes for achieving simple tasks. To understand them, you had to follow the machine one step at a time. As a kid, we used to play a board game called Mouse Trap that involved one of those complicated Rube Goldberg machines. The contraption would run—crank, boot, bucket, ball, slide, catapult—until, eventually, the plastic net came down on the mice beneath. Your heart is a similar Rube Goldberg machine. As we uncover the mechanisms of offense, you'll find it depends on a similarly complex series of linked feelings, assumptions, and desires that play out in your heart.

In the following chapters, we'll look more closely at how that machine of offense works. You'll learn to recognize how each step triggers a response: how an obstacle forms in your insecurity, which draws you to an image, which triggers an imitation, which

## A SHARP COMPASSION

demands affirmation, and which finally provokes accusation and unleashes offense.

Every offense is an opportunity to break the progress of the machine. Expose it and you can keep from being snared by it. But to recognize it, you must be willing to look hard at your own heart and to listen closely to Jesus's actual words, even when they risk offending. Jesus's hard conversations will help you finally recognize the trap of offense.

I didn't write this book to offend you, but I do hope it leads you into a moment of crisis, the kind of crisis that strips away the superficial and allows you to sense again those things that matter most. I hope it reveals your heart's desires and insecurities, and I hope this book will enable you to better understand the mechanisms at work in your heart. I hope you come to recognize and appreciate the good but sometimes hard words of Jesus. They are, as C. S. Lewis described them, a "severe mercy,"<sup>25</sup> or, in the words of T. S. Eliot, a "sharp compassion."<sup>26</sup>

\* \* \*

*"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
nor be weary when reproved by him.  
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,  
and chastises every son whom he receives."*

*Hebrews 12:5–6*