

Today's second reading has two statements which seem to contradict each other. First Saint Paul wrote: "Avoid giving offense, whether to the Jews or Greeks or the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in every way." "Then he said: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." Did Jesus worry about offending people? Was he non-confrontational? Did he worry about making everybody happy? We are hearing those words today through modern ears in a society in which people are easily offended by pretty much everything, even things that are clearly not intended to be offensive. There is also a tendency to cancel, unfriend, or ostracize anyone who does not agree with us; ironically, this is especially prevalent in groups who claim to be open-minded and welcoming. Paul is not telling us to avoid giving offense by just being nice and going along with everything, even lies and sin. Paul wanted to try to please everyone, but he knew that he would not be able to please the enemies of Christ. The same goes for us.

So what is Paul really saying? I am going to try to take the biblical context and put it into more modern terms. In one sense avoiding giving offense to the Jews and the church means to avoid causing scandal. If our external behaviors do not match what we say we believe, we can cause people to turn away from God. I could easily spend an hour on where we see this among high profile Catholics inside and outside of the church. What about closer to home? We are supposed to believe that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist. When I hold up the consecrated host during the consecration, that is Jesus we are looking at. We also profess the belief that Jesus is God. Do our behaviors reflect the belief that we are in the physical presence of God? Does our attitude towards attending Mass reflect the belief that we are going to be as close to Jesus as we possibly can be in our earthly lives?

Paul also said not to offend the Greeks. In context, Christians were often invited to share meals in the homes of Greek non-believers. Paul told them if they received such an invitation and that they wanted to go, they could go and eat whatever was placed before them. Paul saw the social interactions between Christians and non-Christians as an opportunity to lead people to Jesus. Paul wanted all things to be done for the glory of God. As long as it wasn't a direct contradiction of the teachings of Jesus—and did not create a scandal which would damage those who were weak in faith—Paul wanted the Corinthians to use every opportunity to lead people to Jesus.

Let's apply this to a modern-day situation. Is it okay to attend a Super Bowl party or a similar event on a Sunday? Is it okay to watch or participate in sports on a Sunday? Does this distract us from God or put us in a near occasion of sin?

Rule number one is to make sure those events do not interfere with our full, active, and prayerful participation in Mass. We can't just give God an hour then go about our own business and ignore him. Make attending Mass the priority. Spend some time in personal prayer and consciously offer the rest of the day to God. Whatever you do with the rest of your day, do it for the glory of God, invite him along. Don't do anything that God would not want to be a part of.

What about the danger of near occasions of sin you might encounter? Face it...just waking up in the morning puts us into a near occasion of sin. There is no way to live our lives without facing temptation. We have to learn how to deal with it. Facing down temptation can help us to grow stronger. We can't do that by locking ourselves away in our rooms and disengaging from the world.

Do sports activities distract us from God? God created athletes; he created athletic ability. Some people have been given greater gifts in this area than others. Championship games celebrate those great gifts and they can inspire those of us watching them to work harder to make better use of our God-given gifts and talents. Putting all of the commercial hype aside, enjoying and participating in sports is one way we can give thanks to God for the wonders of his creation.

Events like these are also reasons for us to gather with friends and family and build or rebuild relationships and they can be opportunities to lead people to Jesus—as long as we are good models of disciples of Christ. Paul recognized that. While he did not want us to cause scandal by watering down the faith or acting against the teachings of Jesus, he also recognized that it is possible for us to have good relationships with others who don't share our beliefs by searching for common ground, recognizing what is good and using that as the basis for a deeper conversation. Remember too, a lot of times, the best evangelist is the one who speaks through actions instead of words. We are going to be role models whether we want to be or not—so be a good role model, be a bridge to Jesus instead of a roadblock.

One final thing to think about. In whatever we do, can people tell to whom we belong, that we are followers of Christ? It was very clear to whom Paul belonged: Jesus. Do our words and our actions say the same thing about ourselves? It was very clear to whom Paul belonged because he did all things for the glory of God. May our words and our actions always proclaim that we are imitators of Jesus, that we belong to him and that he is our one and only king. And may we do all things for the glory of God.