**Lesson: Sticks and Stones**

 Words hurt; I learned this the hard way. As a child, I was brainwashed to believe the oft repeated rhyme, “sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me.” I discovered that words can hurt longer than a beating; because bruises to the body heal, but not so much battery to the psyche. Verbal abuse is akin to other types of abuse, and can have long-lasting effects on one’s mental health—not just victims of abuse but also abusers. I have treated victims of repeated emotional abuse and repeated physical abuse, and their symptoms are not markedly different; but when sexual abuse is thrown in then much worse problems become evident. Children are especially susceptible to psychological pain from verbal and emotional abuse, as well as neglect.

If only people would think carefully before speaking, but that takes tremendous effort. Make no mistake, everyone has difficulty controlling their mouth. But anyone can learn self-control (temperance), which is listed among the most valuable of spiritual gifts (GAL 5:22–23). Self-control also increases confidence which will raise a person’s self-esteem. Inviting the Holy Spirit to guide your life enables such higher order thinking and control over your thoughts.

These days you really have to be careful what you say publicly if you want to avoid being vilified or worse (despite your first amendment right to speak your mind). I recommend that you judiciously choose your words before you speak, text, or email. Chances are someone somewhere will keep a record. Of course, God keeps a record, don’t you know? Wouldn’t it be great if we could expunge the record of all the nasty things we have uttered? Well, Christ already has if you have turned your life over to Him.

* PSA 139:1–2 ~ Oh Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know my sitting down and my standing up. You understand my thoughts from afar.
* ISA 66:18 ~ God knows their works and their thoughts. The day will come when He will gather all nations and tongues; everyone will see His glory.
* JER 17:9–10 ~ The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. Who can understand it? I (the Lord) search the heart, I analyze the mind, and I reward people according to their ways and according to their fruit.
* LUK 5:21–26 ~ The scribes and Pharisees began to reason amongst themselves saying, “Who does this man think he is speaking blasphemies? Can anyone forgive sins but God alone?” Jesus perceived their thoughts and answered them saying, “I know what are you thinking: which is easier, to say ‘your sins are forgiven’ or to say ‘rise up and walk’. But so that you might know the Son of Man has power upon earth to forgive sins...” Jesus turned to the paralyzed man declaring, “I say unto you, arise, collect your bed, and return to your home.” Immediately the man rose up before them, took his bedding, and departed to his own house, glorifying God. Those who saw this were amazed, and glorified God; they were equally filled with fear, saying to one another, “We have seen extraordinary things today.”
* 1 CO 4:1–5 ~ Consider us as ministers for Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Those who are entrusted as stewards must show faithfulness. It is nothing to me to be judged by you, or by a jury of your peers. Actually, I don’t even judge myself, for who am I to judge anybody? I am not so innocent, but the one who will judge me is the Lord. Therefore, judge nothing until the appointed time; wait for the Lord to come. He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will expose the motivations of every heart. Then all will receive God’s just rewards.
* HEB 4:12–13 ~ The Word of God is alive and powerful; sharper than any double-edged sword, it pierces deeply to divide the soul and spirit, and the joints and marrow. It can discern the thoughts and intents of every heart. No creature alive is hidden, because all things are exposed before the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account.

 Resolved, some words should be prohibited from use under most if not all circumstances. For example, it is never okay to use the Lord’s name in vain, to curse someone, or to testify falsely. It is also unnecessary to use foul language, to emphasize a point with “by God” or “by heaven” or to swear an oath unless it is before the altar or in a court of law. These major tenets of God’s Law specifically illustrate improper communication (read EXO 20:7,16; LEV 20:9; ECC 7:21–22; ECC 10:20; MAT 5:34–37; EPH 4:29; JAM 5:12).

Undoubtedly, everyone should remove certain words from their vocabulary. When I was a youngster, I heard people using a particular N-word when referring to black people. I later discovered that every ethnicity had a denigrating nickname which people tossed about carelessly, and many still do. When I was in the Army, I sometimes was called “cracker” and yes, I found it offensive. I figured, this person doesn’t even know me, nor does he want to know me. As I matured, I became more determined to eliminate distasteful verbiage and cursing from my vocabulary. I’m still working on it by the way; I occasionally get angry and emit bad words. It may take quite a while to unlearn decades of social and behavioral conditioning, but if you work hard at it, you will notice improvement.

I pondered, would it be racist to call someone other than dark-skinned the N word, or was it reserved for blacks? Besides, I often heard black people addressing one another using that word. Apparently, it was a term of endearment to them, much like when my friends would address me as “fart face.” In that context it wasn’t an insult, neither did I find it hateful. My confusion was further exacerbated because certain words or phrases meant different things depending on who was saying them and to whom. Plus, there were opposite meanings for some words like “really” and “gross” and “tight” depending on context. Add to that socially dictated grammatical rules regarding places, people, things, and every human demographic in the book. I deemed it necessary to weed out idle and feckless words to gain any meaning from a conversation, if there was any meaning to be had. I bet you could list twenty different ways to interpret the word “no” from various experiences. It makes more sense to speak clearly and to the point.

 Returning to the present, have you noticed pundits referring to political adversaries as Nazis? Obviously, they mean it as an affront, for it is always uttered out of disdain for someone that disagrees with them. Here is yet another N-word being used to denigrate a person just for looking, acting, or thinking differently. Nowadays, if you dislike someone, insult them, for what can they do about it? If they bust you in the chops, they are the ones who get arrested. That’s why miscreants get in your face—to provoke you into anger. People doing such things are as bigoted as any racist, sexist, xenophobe, and the rest of the names they call other people. Of course, those in authority regardless of political party, religion, or ethnicity deserve respect. In fact, everybody deserves the utmost of respect; but you seldom see that in politics, or society for that matter. When respect is given, it is being returned? Many will openly display their dislike for others; and much of the time they are not even accurate in their knowledge of the person’s beliefs, feelings, or opinions. So, what is their prejudice? Do they even know? Or is this a calculated means to an evil end? That’s right, verbally abuse them until you get your way, that’ll work.

It is not for us to judge others (MAT 7:1–5). Instead, we are to love others, even our enemies (LUK 6:26–36). We are not to think evil of others, or speak evil about them or to them. This is easier said than done, huh?

* PRO 4:23–24 ~ Guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it flow the issues of life. Silence your perverse tongue, and eliminate distasteful speech.
* PRO 12:15–20 ~ The way of fools seems right in their eyes; but those who seek counsel are wise. A fool’s anger becomes immediately apparent; but a prudent person overlooks an offense. Those who speak the truth exhibit righteousness; only a false witness tells lies. Careless words pierce like a sword; but the words of the wise bring healing. When truth is spoken it lasts forever; but a lying tongue lasts for a moment. Deceit is in the heart of those imagining evil; joy is in the heart of those promoting peace.
* PRO 24:17–19 ~ Do not rejoice when your enemy falls and do not be glad when others stumble. For the Lord will see this and He will be displeased with you; and He might withhold His hand from them.
* MAT 15:19; MAR 7:20–23 ~ That which proceeds out of the mouth flows from the heart and defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts that lead to murder, adultery, fornication, theft, lying, blasphemy, covetousness, wickedness, lasciviousness, foolishness, pride, and an evil eye. All these wicked things come from within a person.
* ROM 12:14–18 ~ Jesus taught, “Bless those who persecute you; do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not act high-minded but humble yourselves, even to people of low estate. Do not act haughty or self-centered. Do not return evil for evil. Display honesty to others; and to the best of your ability, live peaceably with all people.”
* EPH 4:31–32 ~ Put away bitterness, rage and anger, fighting and insulting, evil speech, and all maliciousness. Be kind one to another, tenderhearted, and forgiving even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you.
* JAM 1:26 ~ If anyone purports to be religious, but cannot hold their tongue, they deceive themselves and their religiosity is in vain.
* JAM 4:10–12 ~ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. Brothers, do not speak evil one of another. Anyone speaking evil of his brother and judging him speaks evil of the law and judges the law. Anyone who judges the law cannot be keeping the law. There is one lawgiver and there is one judge who is able to save and to destroy. So, who do you become when you judge another?
* 1 PE 2:1 ~ Put aside all malice, all treachery, all hypocrisy, all envy, and all evil speech,

We are to humble ourselves before others like Jesus did. We also are to hold our tongues. Both take a lot of practice. I think I’m getting better with the humility part. And though I stop myself from saying things that I know are wrong, I still think them before stopping the evil word from escaping from my heart. I have concluded that it is considerably more difficult to stop the evil thought, but that is the best way to hold the tongue. You have to think before you think.

* PRO 11:2 ~ With pride comes shame; with humility comes wisdom.
* PRO 18:12 ~ Before the destruction of one’s heart comes arrogance, and before honor comes humility.
* LUK 14:11 ~ Whoever exalts themselves will be humiliated; whoever humbles themselves will be exalted.
* ROM 12:3 ~ By the grace given to me I discourage everyone from thinking of themselves more highly than they ought. Instead, think soberly in accordance with the measure of faith God has bestowed upon you.
* 1 CO 13:4–5 ~ Love endures; love is kind. Love is not envious, haughty, or conceited. Love does not behave unseemly, does not seek self-satisfaction, is not easily provoked, and does not think about evil things.
* PHP 2:3–5,8 ~ Do nothing through strife or vanity; but in humbleness of mind esteem others above yourselves. Do not focus exclusively on your own interests, but also on the interests of others. Act like Christ, who as a man humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death even on a cross.
* COL 3:12–13 ~ As a child of God, reflect His mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with one another and forgive each other of any grievances you may carry, just as the Lord forgives you.
* TIT 3:2 ~ Do not speak evil or fight with others; instead, be gentle and humble to everyone.
* HEB 12:14–15 ~ Try to be a peacemaker, and exhibit holiness, without which nobody can see the Lord. Make sure that nobody misses out on their opportunity to enjoy the grace of God, and help prevent roots of bitterness from springing up trouble among yourselves which might defile some people.
* JAM 3:13 ~ Who is wise and knowledgeable among you? Let them show it through good conversation and by good works done with the humility that comes from wisdom.

There are some who do not care about others or how their behavior affects people. They see nothing wrong with taking advantage of others or putting them down. They would justify such behavior by asking, “Didn’t Jesus insult people?” It is true that Jesus frequently admonished sinners. He was especially critical of the Pharisees and Sadducees with their holier-than-thou attitudes. Jesus, who was without sin, called out sin so everyone would recognize sin for what it was. He made examples of people so they might change their ways and possibly influence others to likewise change. Calling someone out is not the same as insulting them; an insult is rarely the truth. A person may be a sinner, but not necessarily a hater. One who insults is a hater; one who reproves is a helper. For example, if your child misbehaves, you coach him or her; sometimes this admonishment includes punishment. But calling your kid names will not help to reprove him or her We are children of God, and He will scold us and reprimand us when we cross the line. We are brothers and sisters and are responsible for one another, so we are obliged to admonish each other out of love and with humility. It is best not to conceal the matter or brush it off. I can assure you that God will not forget about it, unless you confess and seek His forgiveness.

* DAN 2:22 ~ God reveals deep and secret things. He knows what lies in darkness, for the light abides with Him.
* LUK 12:2–3 ~ Everything that is hidden will be revealed, everything that is concealed will be found out. Whatever you speak in darkness will be heard in the light; and that which was whispered in closets will be shouted from rooftops.
* MAT 12:34–37 ~ Jesus said, “You generation of vipers, how can you who are evil speak good things? For from the heart flows the words you speak. A good person will, from the good treasures of the heart, brings forth good things; an evil person will, from the evil treasures of the heart, bring forth evil things. I assure you that everyone will give account of every idle word that they have spoken when the day of judgment comes. By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

We can call people out if we employ a righteous judgment. The purpose is to reason with them from the standpoint of welcoming them into the flock, not with the purpose of making a spectacle of them. They might not know what they are doing is wrong or that it is against God’s will. This we should convey privately, not publicly, by using humility and respect. Granted, they may take offense anyway, in which case you should leave them be (MAT 10:14). Some will listen and some will not. Make sure you practice what you preach however, otherwise you might irritate someone who would otherwise listen.

* EZE 3:18–19 ~ God has said to the wicked that they will surely die. If you do not speak to them and warn the wicked to change their ways and be saved, they will die in their iniquity; but their blood will be partly on yours hands. If you warn the wicked and they continue a life of wickedness, they will die in their iniquity; but you will have safeguarded your soul.
* JOH 7:24 ~ Do not judge according to appearances, so you can make a righteous judgment.
* GAL 6:1 ~ Brothers, if a person is found to be sinning, you who are spiritual should restore that person using the spirit of gentleness. But take caution that you are not tempted yourself.
* EPH 5:11–13 ~ Do not associate with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things they do in secret. Everything exposed by the light can be seen, because the light makes all things visible.

Freedom of speech, religion, and assembly are inalienable, insofar as they are endowed by God and not society or government. But there are restrictions. You cannot instigate an emergency where there is none, like yelling fire in a theater for amusement. You cannot feign a peaceful protest in order to incite rioting, looting and burning of private and public property. You cannot assault or murder people who do not share your belief system or worldview, even if directed to do so by your holy book or spiritual leader. Simply put, you cannot turn the exercise of liberty into a pernicious act. It is impossible to apply your civil rights if you are violating the civil rights of another. If your intentions are evil the result will be sin. The government does not outlaw every sin, but in your conscience, you will know if it is against God’s Law. Any motivation of the heart that runs contrary to God’s will is sin. And don’t forget, sin is not only an action but also can be a word or a thought (JAM 1:15).

Have you ever been called, or called someone else, a sinner? Well, that is what we are, sinners, every last one of us. But I rarely hear the “S” word except in church. In particular, the media avoids that word like the plague. This is because the majority of media outlets are complicit with the craziness going on about the globe. It is a fact that the word “sin” fits the person using that word when describing others. But we should warn others when they are becoming overcome by their vices. It is not an insult since it is the truth. The only one who is insulted is God when someone is persistent in their rebellion. God is especially offended if such insults are directed at Him (EXO 20:7). That’s right, people that hate God or claim not to believe in Him are prone to blaming Him for all the evil in the world or in their life. God does not cause evil, but He calls it out. Jesus had to call certain people out who were accusing Him of being a blasphemer, liar, or seditionary. Since Christ is sinless, He is most qualified to be calling out sin. The only thing that makes followers of Christ worthy is they have accepted His righteousness in exchange for their sin, and this is good news for everybody. Yeah, Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites, the ultimate insult in that culture; but that is what they were, believing themselves to be above others, even Christ. Jesus didn’t have to put them down, they did it by exalting themselves (MAT 23:12; LUK 14:11). To this day, people put others down to make themselves feel higher; but the opposite is true. Thus, unseemly speech with feed into one’s own psychological hang-ups.

You can call someone every name in the book using every letter in the alphabet, knowing that people will get stuck on a name or a label. We need to remember who we are, and who we belong to. We bear the name of Christ, so any other name-calling is meaningless (well, except for birth names). I am not offended to be called a sinner, because I know that I will arrive in heaven without sin. Like St. Paul wrote, I am not swayed by the judgment of others because God is my judge. And I will be judged not guilty because I gave my sin to Jesus who left it on the cross. Jesus didn’t just call out sin, He gathered every sin and dragged it to Calvary. That is why He has a name above all other names (PHP 2:9). No matter what names I am called, I am called by God to bear His name. So, it doesn’t bother me personally, but it saddens me that name-calling has become a routine element of political speech.

We are obliged to call out sin when moved by the Holy Spirit to do so. If you are not sure when the Holy Spirit is calling you, He probably isn’t. But it is not that hard to figure out after you examine yourself (1 CO 11:28–32). If you ponder what Jesus would do, the Holy Spirit will tell you.

By Andrew V. Barber (Posted 04/30/2021)