

“They’re Just Words, but....”  
January 17, 2010

You may have heard the story about two taxidermists who were standing in front of a window in which an owl was on display. They immediately began to criticize the bird, saying it was mounted incorrectly, and noting how unnatural its eyes were. They scrutinized the owl more closely, observing that its wings didn’t appear to be proportional with its head, and noted that its feathers were not neatly arranged. Even its feet could stand some improvement. Just about the time they had finished their critique of the bird, the old owl turned its head.

I know folks like that, and maybe you do, too—people who can find fault and criticize virtually every little thing. Had that been a human being instead of an owl, I suspect the hard words and unkind criticism would have felt quite hurtful.

You may know the rhyme that children sometimes learn. It goes, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” I think that’s wrong, dead wrong. Words can and do hurt us, and harsh words and constant criticism can cause untold harm. Maybe another saying has it more accurately: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can really hurt me.”

Language is powerful, and its power is subtle. Even the slightest inflection or tone of voice can turn an innocent word into a cruel weapon. One little word, carelessly chosen and harshly spoken, can inflict untold pain upon the recipient. Criticism, regardless of how it’s delivered, is difficult to take. Frank P. Jones once commented,

“Honest criticism is hard to take, particularly from a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, or a stranger.”

Sometimes the words we use are innocent enough, but there are times that all of us are guilty of name-calling or labeling in a way that’s callous and cruel. Most of us have probably seen or heard someone making fun of someone else, by putting the person down, or by demeaning him or her in one way or another. Unfortunately, I suspect most of us, at one time or another, have been guilty of uttering unloving and unkind words, totally unaware of how much they might sting the one who hears them.

One of the most vivid examples I’ve ever seen really struck me over 20 years ago on my first trip to Israel, and it did again last fall when we were there. We had the opportunity to visit Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, which is the Jewish memorial to the Holocaust. There, the photo that caught my attention so many years ago, again captured my attention this trip. It shows some young boys and a couple of Nazi soldiers who have surrounded a small Jewish boy who’s wearing the yellow Star of David. Their faces are contorted and they are jeering at the young boy, making fun of him, forcing him off the sidewalk and into the gutter. That photo haunts me, and is graphic evidence of the hate and inhumanity we inflict on one another.

If you were here last week, you may recall that we shared a revised vision for our 10% program, where we give 10% of the monies donated in the watering cans each week to a grass-roots, nonprofit organization that is doing good work in our community. I mentioned that for the first quarter of this year, we are focusing on those

groups that assist those who are victims of domestic violence.

Typically, when we think of domestic abuse, we think of inflicting physical harm on another. However, that's not the only form of abuse; verbal abuse is also rampant, sometimes leading to physical abuse, but extremely hurtful even without physical involvement. Unwarranted criticism, taunting, demeaning, ridiculing—those are all forms of verbal abuse. So are things like bullying, trivializing, being accusatory, berating, discounting, and threatening. Those are all elements that, when they happen constantly, create a dangerous and volatile situation. If you find yourself in that kind of a situation, please seek help.

I suppose all of us say things in the heat of the moment that we really don't mean, but the kind of abuse I'm talking about is that which stymies the other's self-esteem and confidence. Always criticizing someone, telling her she's stupid, telling him what a mess he's made of things, wears down whatever respect or regard ever existed. I recall a friend telling me one time that it really didn't matter how well he did in his business, or how much acclaim he got from others. When he got home, he always had to brace himself to hear what he'd done wrong that day. He felt as though he was constantly berated for even the most innocent of mistakes or failures.

That's why I maintain that words can and do hurt us. Constantly being told we're ugly or incompetent or foolish gets internalized, and our sense of self worth suffers. Being called names or being put down takes a heavy toll, and can destroy any love or goodwill that ever existed.

To be honest, I've always believed that there's something seriously wrong with the person who has to always be making fun of another person or putting someone down. He or she must be pretty unhappy. Judge Harold Medina may have been right when he said, "**Criticizing others is a dangerous thing, because you may be revealing the truth about yourself.**" While that may be true, it offers little comfort to the one who's the target of the blame or criticism.

That's why the bible talks a lot about how hurtful our words can be, and we're encouraged to measure our words carefully. Our Bible passage is one of several that address the issue of how we are to treat one another. It's very straightforward, and says this: "**Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment.**" There's no way Jesus could have been any clearer; we're not to use harsh, unloving, unkind words with our brothers and sisters, but we're to be positive and affirming with one another; we're to do good always, and not inflict harm.

That reminds me of something John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, offered to us. He shared his General Rules for living life as God would have us live. His three rules were simply these: "**Do no harm; Do good; Stay in love with God.**"

That might be the best blueprint for how to live better with one another, especially when we recognize that doing no harm includes being loving in terms of the language we use to address or describe one another. Doing good means that we seek to find the encouraging ways to relate together, helping each person walk the high road and be the best he or she can be. If we

strive to stay connected with God, “in love with God,” as Wesley said, God’s loving ways can certainly guide our words and ways, if we allow it.

The reality is that we all need encouragement, and we all need to hear words of praise. Probably the best thing we can do is to commit to becoming quite liberal with our affirmation, and stingy with our criticism. Paul, in his writing in Ephesians, said it this way: “Say only what is good and helpful to those you are talking to, and what will give them a blessing.”

There’s a reading I know I’ve shared with you before, but it’s very fitting to share again. You’ve probably seen it numerous times, but it never hurts to see and hear it yet another time. It’s entitled, “Children Learn What They Live.” It goes, in part, like this:

“If children live with encouragement,  
They learn confidence.  
If children live with praise,  
They learn to appreciate.  
If children live with fairness,  
They learn justice.  
If children live with security,  
They learn to have faith.  
If children live with approval,  
They learn to like themselves.  
If children live with acceptance and friendship,  
They learn to find love in the world.”

You know, if we substitute the words men, women, or adults for children, it’s just as true and fitting. Let’s make sure that everything we say is filled with encouragement, praise, fairness, approval, acceptance and love.

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we will measure our

words carefully, and vow to do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God. How about it?

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.