

Sticks and Stones

Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you -- for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others (Eccl. 7:21-22).

We all remember the little rhyme our parents taught us. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” It was meant to steel us against the sting of the unkind words of our peers during the sometimes perilous process of growing up. The fact that we had to be taught the little ditty is testimony that our parents knew we actually *could* be hurt by words said to or about us, especially as youngsters. I remember my mother being very concerned about this issue. She took great care to caution me with utmost seriousness before my first day of school. “Don’t let the other kids know your real first name is Paul, they’ll start calling you P.P.” (Paul Paulus). I suppose hardly a worse fate could befall a six year old. Maybe it was just parental regret over a naming error. Anyhow, my middle name, Steve, always stuck.

There is some wisdom in the sticks and stones adage, though. It seems we were of hardier emotional stock then; less sensitive, more able to roll with the punches. Now it seems we are hyper-sensitive, and need to be protected by things like campus speech codes. It’s true, words are important and have the power to bless or curse. We need to be vigilant over what comes out of our mouths, especially with our spouses and children. As the proverb says, “*The tongue has the power of life and death and those who love it will eat its fruit*” (Prov. 18:21). Learning the discipline of godly speech is among the most important tasks of a disciple of Jesus Christ. “*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs that it may benefit those who listen*” (Eph. 4:29). James says “*If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight reign on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless*” (James 1:26). But for every truth there is a distortion or heresy. Teaching about speech has been distorted in some circles, giving words almost god-like power. While we must understand the power of our speech and teach our families to speak life, we cannot give words more power than they really possess. “*Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse does not come to rest*” (Prov. 26:2).

When people speak evil about us, many times we need to learn to let it go. We’re often too thin-skinned. By all means we needn’t spend time trying to find out every word others have spoken about us. In leaders especially, this is a sign of unhealthy, even cultish, paranoia. 19th century London pastor C.H. Spurgeon put it this way in a fascinating chapter of *Lectures to My Students* entitled, “The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear.”

Some are childishly anxious to know their friend’s opinion of them, and if it contain the smallest element of dissent or censure, they regard him as an enemy forthwith. Surely we are not popes and do not wish our hearers to regard us as infallible! We have known men to become quite enraged at a perfectly fair and

reasonable remark, and regard an honest friend as an opponent who delighted to find fault . . . How much better is gentle forbearance! You must be able to bear criticism or you are not fit to be at the head of a congregation; and you must let the critic go without reckoning him among your deadly foes or you will prove yourself a mere weakling. It is wisest always to show double kindness where you have been severely handled by one who thought it his duty to do so, for he is probably an honest man and worth winning” (C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, Second Series, p. 169).

Words can have tremendous destructive power because they can express contempt, hatred and rejection in place of love and affirmation. In the days ahead the followers of Christ may be subject to much public ridicule. Sometimes we need to let criticism roll off our backs and follow Peter’s instruction, “*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who gives you a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander*” (I Peter 3:15-16). With Paul we must be ready to “*take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one*” (Eph. 6:16). Finally, we must imitate our savior. “*When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live to righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed*” (I Peter 2:23-24). We are who Christ says we are, not who our detractors claim we are. Sticks and stones...