

## Sticks and Stones

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EPHESIANS 4:29 (NRSV) *Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ...*<sup>31</sup>*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,*<sup>32</sup>*and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

MATTHEW 12:36-37 (NIV) *I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.*<sup>37</sup>*For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”*

In normal times, it's very important to me to establish the context of any Scripture I use. A biblical text, jerked out of context, can be made to say almost anything—even to contradict the original intent. In this case, my primary text speaks for itself, in or out of context: *Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*

“Evil talk”—literally “rotten (putrid) words”; the reference is to over ripe fruit; thus, useless, corrupt words. Sometimes it's translated, **Gossip**—idle talk—rumor—particularly related to personal or private affairs of others (especially if scandal is involved).

Today we might apply it as **opinion**, which Wikipedia defines as, “a judgment, viewpoint, or statement based on that which is less than absolutely certain; the result of emotion or interpretation of facts. What distinguishes fact from opinion is that facts are verifiable, i.e. can be objectively proven.”

We love our opinions! And we have a right to our opinions; but no one is *obligated* to share them. By definition, “opinion” is an undocumented idea. We cling to our “opinions”; we treasure them and defend them; but, by themselves, “opinions” have very little intrinsic value. In fact, all too often, opinions are misinformed.

Still, words are important. Spend an hour with a middle school child who's been called names at school. “Sticks and stones may break my bones; but words will never hurt me.” That's a lie.

Words are important. Jesus said, *“by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”* And again, from Ephesians, *“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building*

*up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”*

I find four litmus tests by which we can judge the use of our words—four ways to help *“the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to (God), our strength and our redeemer.”*

Is it useful? One of my primary social incompetences is that I'm not good at small talk. Not that every conversation needs deep significance. There's value in chatting with a friend over lunch. That's useful. It has a purpose: it shares information of mutual interest; it strengthens the relationship—it builds up.

And the writer of Ephesians adds another layer in evaluating the usefulness of our words: (1) are they “useful (2) for building up?” Do our words edify? Remember Momma's dictum, “If you can't say something nice...”? Do our words make things better? Do they build up?

Again, I'm not calling for sugar-coating every conversation or avoiding controversy and disagreement. There are valid times for constructive criticism. Constructive. And whether a criticism is received as constructive probably has more to do with how it's presented than with what is said. Does it build up?

And there's a time for debate. Disagreement is not, in itself, a bad thing. But in disagreeing, words that are useful for building up are aimed at working together to discover a resolution that meets everybody's needs (not necessarily everybody's desires and preferences. It's true: you can't please everybody). But, do our words build up?

When I do conflict resolution—married couples, parents and children, co-workers—I always begin with a question: “Do you really want to resolve the issue between you; or do you just want to 'win the fight'?” Words used to “win the fight” will never build up.

Then the writer of Ephesians adds another layer to his counsel: are your words *“(1) useful (2) for building up, (3) as there is need...”*

Which brings me back to “opinion.” Yes, we have a right to hold and share our opinions. But will it be useful? Will it build up? And, is there a need for it?

In every situation the words we choose will have one of three effects:

They may be effective (sometimes the most effective way to respond is simply not to respond. Let it go.) Will our words be useful for building up as there is need?

They may be ineffective. Will our words fail to resolve the issue, or even prolong it?

They may be counterproductive. Will our words make things worse?

The writer of Ephesians adds one final layer by which we can choose words that are (1) useful (2) for building up (3) as there is need: Will our words (4) give grace to those who hear?

Grace is more than a passive refusal to condemn; it's more than permissiveness. Grace doesn't let someone "get away with something."

In permissiveness, something is overlooked; in grace, something is overcome—transformed. Grace occurs in spite of separation and estrangement. Henry David Thoreau said most men live lives of "quiet desperation." Grace transforms quiet desperation into bold determination; fate into meaningful destiny; guilt into confidence and courage. Paul Tillich said, "There's something triumphant in the word, *Grace*."

So, the writer of Ephesians calls us to let our words be *"(1) useful (2) for building up, (3) as there is need, so that(our) words may (4) give grace to those who hear."*

One day Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, came to him with a wrathful letter written to a Major-General who had accused him of favoritism. Stanton read Lincoln the letter which was full of sharp retorts and the President told him it was a good letter that the general deserved.

While Stanton, much gratified, was folding up the letter and putting it into its envelope, the President asked him, "What are you going to do with it now?"

"Why, send it, of course," replied Stanton, looking blank.

"Don't do it," said Lincoln.

"But you said it was just what he deserved," demurred the Secretary.

"Yes, I believe he does deserve it, but you don't want to send such a letter as that. Put it in the stove! That's the way I do when I have written a letter while I am mad. It is a good letter, and you have had a good time writing it, and you feel better, don't you? It has done you good and answered its purpose. Now burn it!"

**PSALM 19:14 (KJV)** *Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.*

May it be so between us in these abnormal days. Amen.