

Sticks and Stones: The Tools of Unity

MATTHEW 12:36-37 (NRSV) *“I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; ³⁷for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”*

EPHESIANS 4:29-32 (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. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you*

were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

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.*

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.*

“Evil talk” is the NRSV translation. The NIV says “unwholesome talk;” the NLT says “abusive language;” and other versions say “corrupting talk,” “foul language,” “filthy talk,” “hateful words” - basically useless talk that is harmful in some way. In the reading from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is saying, “...you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter...”

One obvious application is **Gossip**—idle talk—rumor (sometimes malicious)—spreading dirt and misinformation, particularly about the private affairs of others, especially if scandal is involved.

A second, less obvious application is **Opinion**. We love our opinions! We cling to them and defend them; and we all have a right to our opinions. But none of us is obligated to share them. Wikipedia, the online Dictionary, says, “In general, an **opinion** is a judgment, viewpoint, or statement about matters commonly considered to be subjective, i.e. based on that which is less than absolutely certain, and is the result of emotion or interpretation of facts. What distinguishes fact from opinion is that facts are verifiable, i.e. can be objectively proven to have occurred.”

By Definition, “opinion” is an unproven idea; and, by practical observation, “opinions” have very little intrinsic value. In fact, frequently—and that frequency has increased greatly through social media, opinions are divisive.

And the tools of division are words.

We have become a script culture, in which we devalue words—particularly spoken words: “Show me a picture.” “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one.” “Talk is cheap.” “If you really mean something, write it down.” Will Rogers said, “The only thing I know is what I read in the newspaper.” (I wonder what he’d say about today’s “news” media. Remember Walter Cronkite? I miss news with integrity.)

But, if you think words aren’t 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. Words can build up or tear down. In our Gospel text Jesus said, *"by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."*

In today's epistle: *"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 own words—four ways to help *"the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts to be acceptable to (God), our strength and our redeemer."*

I. Is it useful? One of my primary social incompetencies is that I'm not good at "small talk". No, I'm not saying that every conversation has to have some 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 is a part of living within a relationship.

II. But the writer of Ephesians qualifies the usefulness of our words: are they "useful for building up?" Do our words Build Up? Do they edify? Do they make things better?

Once 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 offered than with what is said. Does it build up?

And there are valid times for debate. Disagreement is not, in itself, a bad thing. But in the midst of disagreement, 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). Does it build up? When I counsel with estranged couples, the first question I always ask is, "Do you truly want to resolve the issue between you; or do you just want to 'win the fight'?" Winning the fight will never build up.

III. And the writer of Ephesians continues in the cumulative construction of letting *"the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to God..."* Are they *"useful for building up, as there is need..."* Is it needed?

Which brings us back to "opinion." Yes, we have a right to have our opinion; and we have a right to share our opinion; but we are not obligated to exercise any right. But is there a need for it? Will it be useful? Will it build up?

I've said this many times. Perhaps by repetition I will be heard. Whenever a need presents itself, in every situation our approach—the words we choose, the strategies we employ—will have one of three effects:

Effective (sometimes the most effective response is simply not response.

Let it go.) Will it be effective? Will it build up as there is need?

Ineffective. Will it prolong the need?

Counterproductive. Will it make things worse?

IV. The writer of Ephesians has one final litmus test by which we can choose words that are useful for building up as there is need: Will our words give grace to those who hear? 17th century poet, François Fénelon, wrote, "Learn to imitate Him who reproves gently..."

Grace is more than a passive refusal to condemn. Grace is more than permissiveness. Grace doesn't let anybody "get away with anything."

In permissiveness, something is overlooked; in grace, something is overcome—something is 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. Grace transforms fate into meaningful destiny; guilt into confidence and courage. There's something triumphant in the word, Grace.

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

I'm a Rotarian. I haven't been active since I came here; but, I've been strengthened by my association with Rotary International. Rotarians are guided by what we call a "Four-Way Test" of the things we think, say or do. It becomes a moral code for personal and business relationships.

1. *Is it the truth?*
2. *Is it fair to all concerned?*
3. *Will it build goodwill and better friendships?*
4. *Will it be beneficial to all concerned?*

I share this because I see a connection between the "Four Way Test" and our text from Ephesians.

Folks, this isn't rocket science. It's not some deep, mysterious, complicated theological construct. The tools of unity are the same as the tools of division: "*by your words you will be justified; and by your words you will be condemned.*"

That's not complicated. It's not easy; but it's not complicated. Words that are useful for building up, as needed; and that give grace to those who hear. And the writer of Ephesians sums up this passage very neatly: "*...be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*"