

## **Introduction**

"That was a great idea! You sure are smarter than you look."

Was that a compliment or a put down, serious or lighthearted? I've said it before, intending it as a true compliment but with a humorous twist at the end. I don't purposely say hurtful things to others. But recently, as I read the following verses the words seemed to jump off the page:

"I tell you, on the day of judgment people will render an account for every careless word they speak. By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:36)

"With it [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who are made in the likeness of God." (James 3:9)

I began to reflect on what those verses meant, and decided to start being more careful in what I say. The most telling word in the first verse is *careless*. The dictionary defines *careless* as: "Not paying attention, not accurate, without consideration, having no concern".

I then thought about the different situations that provide opportunities for careless speech by not paying attention, not being accurate, not being considerate or just not caring. Here are some reflections.

## **Just being funny**

Saying something in a light-hearted way with no harm intended may seem humorous; but without consideration could be harmful.

We don't know if the other person is having a rough day or maybe someone else made a similar comment to them. The possibility exists that, due to other circumstances, they totally miss the compliment and simply hear "I look stupid". An often-unconsidered outcome is the effect on how others perceive us. They may see us as a person who cannot, as they say, leave well enough alone with the compliment; but enjoys a good put down.

There is nothing wrong with humor in general. Humor can lighten the mood. But humor at the expense of another person made in the image of God is careless.

## **Habits of speech**

Sometimes careless speech happens because we don't pay attention to our speech in general. Habits can develop over time, causing us to speak or act without even thinking.

The use of inappropriate words, expletives or "colorful language" is often just a habit. Those kind of words don't add intelligence or value to anything said. However, once they become part of our way of speaking, the habit is difficult to break.

"We put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us" (James 3:3). It might just take a spiritual bit to bridle the tongue.

Consider as well how one's own insecurity can lead to a habit of putting others down. A child who grows up under constant criticism by overbearing parents may grow up to criticize others. A child who is often humiliated by insensitive classmates may grow up to humiliate others to build self-esteem.

Saying words and phrases out of habit is careless. When doing an examination of conscience, it can be beneficial to consider speech habits to confess and break careless speech habits.



# *Be Careful What You Say*

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## **Correcting others**

Sure, the other person just said the dumbest thing possible. They obviously have no clue. They need, or deserve, to be corrected. Correction, however, is not an open door to a free put down or humiliation of someone.

Opportunities to correct others should be approached with a bridle. Pausing to think before offering correction can help to approach the situation with the right attitude. It's important to ensure motivation is not misplaced, and we are not simply using the situation as an opportunity to degrade the other person. Rash accusations about the person's intelligence aren't beneficial, and usually serve to alienate the other person. Kindness in guidance is key.

The Apostle Paul writes, "Encourage one another and build one another up" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Correcting others without being demeaning can certainly be an art, but it is possible. Trying to see some value in what the other person said can become a point to encourage them. Offering encouragement means giving the other person hope that they can come to understanding or change the way they think.

In the moment of pause before giving correction to another, maybe it seems there is nothing of value in what the other person said, or maybe there is no way they will change their mind. When this is true, before using careless words, remember the old proverb: "Speech is silver, but silence is golden."

## **Bad moods**

Have you ever found yourself snarling and saying insensitive things to others because you were having a bad day?

Sometimes, having a bad day can lead to taking it out on others. The steam of anger or frustration gets bottled up inside, and it only takes someone saying the wrong thing to cause an explosion of words and emotion. Speech becomes careless, because we are self-centered on our own problems and lose concern for others.

The Apostle Paul writes, "Humbly regard others as more important than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). Our own bad day shouldn't become an excuse to ruin another person's day. Loving others should include sacrificing how we feel at the time to pay attention to the needs of others. Love means being gentle, kind and forbearing towards others regardless of personal circumstances.

But the highest consideration in how we approach others should be how our approach impacts our witness for Christ. Christians are called to be the light of the world and be different from the world. Our light should shine before all, that they may also give glory to God. If the way we speak and conduct ourself during a bad day are no different than the rest of world, there is no witness for Christ and no evidence of the Holy Spirit's power in our life. Unless Christians can be different than the world, the world will not come to Jesus.

## **Arguments**

Disagreements can't be avoided...arguments can.

Disagreements are differences of opinion or perspective. Arguments are intense, emotional, and confrontational. In a disagreement, each party uses persuasion and logic in an attempt to seek common ground. In an argument, there is often aggression and personal attacks in an attempt to get the other person to completely change their position. Arguments are nothing more than disagreements that got emotional and out of control.

Once emotions get involved, careless words and personal attacks can arise. Emotions and harsh words can be (subconsciously) perceived as ways to intimidate the other person into submission. Arguments lead to all kinds of unacceptable tactics of debate, such as bringing up the past and degrading the other person's character.

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The moment emotions start to become part of disagreement, it is best for both parties to either take a break or just walk away from the discussion.

### **Retaliation**

They started it, I'm going to finish it. This one may be the easiest of all to address. The Apostle Paul writes, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:17).

Consider how our Lord reacted when others started it. Confronted with accusations and lies, Jesus sometimes was silent, sometimes gently corrected, and sometimes just offered his accusers a parable to think about. When crucified, Jesus said out loud, "Father, forgive them." How we repay others can be a powerful witness for Christ or a denial of our very faith in Christ.

### **What we don't say**

I thought I would end with something different: how what we do not say can be careless. Not only should we "encourage one another and build one another up" (1 Thessalonians 5:11), but we should also "take advantage of every opportunity" (Ephesians 5:16). Consider the following scenarios:

A stranger walks into the room at a group meeting or church fellowship. Nobody greets them and makes them feel welcome. The person leaves and never returns, feeling uncomfortable and unwanted. No careless words were said, but lack of caring caused an unfriendly outcome.

Someone makes an exciting announcement. It seems petty or does not excite us, so we just sit there. No careless words were said, but there was a missed opportunity to build someone up and consider them as more important.

During the Mass, we pray, "I have greatly sinned, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do." Being careless can mean missing opportunities to build others up, to minister others, and to lead others Jesus. Being careless can mean failing to be the disciple Jesus calls us to be.

### **Conclusion**

Being careful with words can take a lot of willpower and energy. It isn't always easy, but is possible through patience and prayer. Our Christian walk with Jesus should lead us ever closer to being in the likeness of his image. We should become gentler, kinder, and more aware of how we impact others by what we say, what we do, what we don't say, and what we don't do.

Being thoughtful in everything we say is important, because every careless word will be judged.

### **More verses for meditation**

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue; those who choose one shall eat its fruit." (Proverbs 18:21)

"A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse one breaks the spirit." (Proverbs 15:4)

"The babble of some people is like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise is healing." (Proverbs 12:18)

"From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. This need not be so, my brothers." (James 3:10)