

Introduction

"That was a great idea! You sure are smarter than you look." Was that a compliment...a put down...serious...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:

(Jesus said) *"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).

(Concerning the tongue) *"With it 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 best approach seemed to be starting with the definition of "careless":

"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 simply give a compliment; but enjoys a good put down.

Humor is good. But humor at the expense of another person made in the image of God does not sound like a good idea.

Habits of speech

Sometimes careless speech happens because we just do not pay attention to ourselves. Habits develop over time that can lead to speaking or acting without even thinking.

The use of inappropriate words, expletives or "colorful language" is often just a habit. The words do not add intelligence or value to anything said. However, once they become part of a person's 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. There may be a sub-conscious need to knock others down



in order to build oneself up. A prayerful reflection of speech habits is beneficial. That reflection might uncover areas where spiritual healing is necessary to help overcome careless speech.

Correcting others

Ok, the other person just said the dumbest thing possible. Obviously, they have no clue. We can't just let this go; honesty is the best policy. Honesty is not, however, an open door to a free put down or humiliation of others.

Correcting others without being demeaning can certainly be an art; but it is possible. A good start is to consider what the other person was thinking, and if there is possibly a little value to what they said. Opportunities such as these should be approached with a bridle, to ensure our motivation is not misplaced and we are not simply finding another opportunity to elevate oneself.

St. Paul tells us, "*encourage one another and build one another up*" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Rash statements about a person's intelligence are not encouraging. Finding no value in something the other person said does not build them up. Our correction should lovingly guide others to the truth or a better thought process. If it cannot, then maybe it is best to be silent instead of honest.

Bad moods

Have you ever found yourself snarling and saying insensitive things to others because of a bad day? This falls into the careless category of having no concern. We might be self-centered in our own problems that we show no concern for others. We are willing to drag others down because of our own issues.

St. Paul tells us "*humbly regard others as more important than yourselves*" (Philippians 2:3). If we take St. Paul's words to heart, we certainly would not want to use a bad day as an excuse to punish someone more important than oneself.

Also, consider the potential domino effect of a bad mood. Might our mood ruin someone else's day, causing them to then ruin another person's day? The impact of our speech and actions do not necessarily end with one person. But the highest consideration should be the impact on 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 our actions during a bad day are no different than everyone else's, what does that say about the power of the Holy Spirit in our life as a Christian? Would anyone be motivated to become Christian if they do not see that it makes a difference?

Disagreements

I was on the Speech and Debate Team in High School and learned the correct way to debate a disagreement. None of those debates came close to resembling any political debates I've watched or disagreements many people have with each other. I don't like to use the word "argument" because an argument is nothing more than a disagreement that got emotional and out of control.

Personal attacks during a disagreement can arise if we are not careful. Does informing someone about their irrational thought process or lack of intelligence add credibility to our side of the debate? Is bringing up past times the other person was wrong applicable to this issue? In a true debate, anything said that does not focus on the actual issue is a loss.



Retaliation

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

Consider how our Lord reacted when others "started it"? When confronted with accusations and lies He sometimes was totally silent, sometimes gently corrected and sometimes just spoke in a parable to give them something to think about. Being able to repay evil words with good words can be a powerful witness for 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).

There is a man who sits on the end of the last pew at Mass most weeks. He smiles and extends his hand to everyone walking by. Some walk past and simply ignore him. Maybe this is an opportunity to build someone up. Jesus did not ignore anybody, even those with leprosy.

A new person attends a group meeting and people just watch them walk through the door without a welcome. After a few meetings maybe the person starts thinking nobody really cares for them, maybe they don't belong, maybe they did something wrong. They become uncomfortable and stop attending. Jesus welcomed everyone.

Someone makes an exciting announcement; but it seems petty or does not excite us so we just sit there. No harm was done. But still, there was a missed opportunity to humbly regard them as more important, encourage them and build them up. No words were said, but it was a spiritual miss.

Avoiding careless words

Bridling the tongue is a hard thing to do and it takes effort. It may also take a decisive plan.

The practice of an Examination of Conscience is not only good just before the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but also nightly. A nightly reflection of careless words with repentance and prayer for guidance can go a long way to changing hearts and habits.

If nothing else, pausing and thinking before speaking helps. Reflecting on how Jesus was silent before the Sanhedrin and Pilate may help.

Conclusion

Jesus tells us that we will be accountable for all our careless words. James reminds us that it is hypocritical to praise God and curse those made in His image. Our witness for Christ may be severely hurt by our words and actions toward others.

Being careful with our words may take a lot of thought, effort and prayer. But we are more in the likeness of Jesus when we encourage others and build others up. In the long run, we will also feel better about ourselves and have a more positive influence on others and our world.



Additional 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)