

MUD DRIES

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Rejoinders

Sir Winston Churchill was known as the grand master of the rejoinder (the smart comeback) and made a habit of using others' own words to sting them. He made just such a legendary response to Bernard Shaw, who had invited him to the opening-night performance of one of his plays. Shaw sent two tickets, with a note that read, "one for yourself and one for a friend—if you have one." Churchill responded to say that he could not attend but asked if he could have tickets for the second-night's performance, adding, "if there is one."

On another occasion, a peeved member of Parliament, Lady Astor, said, "Winston, if you were my husband I should flavor your coffee with poison." To which Churchill replied, "Madam, if I were your husband, I should drink it."

Another frustrated member of Parliament chided, "Winston, you're drunk." Churchill retorted, "Bessie, you're ugly, but tomorrow morning I'll be sober."

An envious woman congratulated another woman on a book she had recently written. "I enjoyed it," she purred, "who wrote it for you?" Came the answer: "I'm so glad you liked it. Who read it to you?"

Said a churchgoer to his pastor, "Your sermon reminded me of the mercies of God. I thought it would endure forever."

Not So Laughable

Insults are often the stuff of modern comedy. We laugh at the sting as long as it is not aimed at us. But when it is the stuff of our everyday life, it is seldom laughable.

According to U.S. News & World Report (February 21, 1994, p. 67), verbal insults are the bullets most frequently used to bring down marriages and disrupt homes. What starts out as a stinging repartee, ends up as brutal verbal bludgeon.

"In order to uncover the processes that destroy unions, marital researchers study couples over the course of years, and even decades, and retrace the star-crossed steps of those who have split up back to their wedding day. What they are discovering is unsettling.

“None of the factors one would guess might predict a couple’s durability actually does: not how in love a newlywed couple say they are; how much affection they exchange; how much they fight or what they fight about. In fact, couples who will endure and those who won’t look remarkably similar in the early days.

“Yet when psychologists from Catholic University and the University of Denver studied newlyweds over the first decade of marriage, they found a very subtle but telling difference at the beginning of the relationships. Among couples who would ultimately stay together, (only) 5 out of every 100 comments made about each other were putdowns. Among couples who would later split, 10 of every 100 comments were insults. That gap magnified over the following decade, until couples heading downhill were flinging five times as many cruel and invalidating comments at each other as happy couples.

“Hostile putdowns act as cancerous cells that, if unchecked, erode the relationship over time,” said one of the researchers. “In the end, relentless unremitting negativity takes control and the couple can’t get through a week without major blowups.”

No wonder Apostle James wrote as he did on this theme. Indeed, its thread winds through every chapter of his letter. Listen:

“If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless” (James 1:26).

“Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way” (James 3:2).

“But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself. People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!” (James 3:5-10).

“Don’t speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters” (James 4:11).

“Don’t grumble about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged” (James 5:9).

“Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results” (James 5:16).

Putdowns and verbal insults are not just about poking fun; on the other end, they are dehumanizing remarks, that discard the God-given value of a person's soul. They are the arrows of a fool.

Arrows of a Fool

“Whatever these people don’t understand, they insult” (Jude 10).

It is an easily observable pattern that people speak insults about those things and ideas and (especially) people that they don't like. What is less frequently recognized is that a common motive for such reaction is that we simply "don't get them," don't understand them or, in the case of people, don't know why they act or speak or think as they do. And what we fail to understand, we usually fear.

When people act in ways that seem to us strange or unreasonable, we may discount or dismiss them, and speak of them in disparaging terms. Jude lets us know that such reactions are not good or godly. They only demonstrate our lack of understanding and cloak our fear.

Firing off insults is an act of avoidance. Those we insult (we imagine), we need not deal with; we feel justified in ignoring them, for they are "beneath us."

Insulting others is an act of judgment. We imagine that we are above them and can properly render judgment. We cannot. There is only one Judge, whose place you cannot fill, no matter how much you would like to.

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Hurling insults is an act of sin. It is unloving. It is abusive. Our sneers may garner a good laugh among friends, but God does not share our sentiment.

The Law of Love

Jesus' law of love is contrary to such reactions and behaviors, as indicated by this sampling of New Testament verses:

“Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don’t argue with them about what they think is right or wrong” (Romans 14:1).

“Do not judge so that you will not be judged” (Matthew 7:1).

“Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love” (Ephesians 4:2).

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” (Ephesians 4:25).

“For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don’t use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13).

Get Understanding

“Whatever these people don’t understand, they insult” (Jude 10).

In order to change our reactions, and please the Lord, we must continually try to understand each other.

“Give me understanding and I will obey your instructions; I will put them into practice with all my heart” (Psalm 119:34).

“Your commandments give me understanding” (Psalm 119:104).

“My child, listen to what I say, and treasure my commands. Tune your ears to wisdom, and concentrate on understanding. Cry out for insight, and ask for understanding. Search for them as you would for silver; seek them like hidden treasures. Then you will understand what it means to fear the Lord, and you will gain knowledge of God. For the Lord grants wisdom! From his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:1-6).

“People with understanding control their anger; a hot temper shows great foolishness” (Proverbs 14:29).

“A truly wise person uses few words; a person with understanding is even-tempered” (Proverbs 17:27).

“Fools have no interest in understanding; they only want to air their own opinions” (Proverbs 18:2).

Without understanding, we will continue to dismiss and insult people; therefore, as said the wise man of old:

“Get wisdom! Get understanding!” (Proverbs 4:5).

“Wisdom is the principal thing; Therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding” (Proverbs 4:7).

Evidently, we have failed to recognize the image of God in other people, but that is merely the backdrop (and that is not unusual). More to the point, we have failed to simply love them in Jesus' name.

“Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10).

God has asked of us just to love one another. It is a simple rule, but intensely difficult to carry out consistently.

Love Them

Just love them. But how?

Remember, godly love is not a feeling; rather, it is an estimation of (an esteem for) another person; it is not something you receive from, or feel in response to, another person, but something which you give to them: worth.

And how do you give someone worth? By treating them kindly. Acts of kindness toward another person ascribe value to that person. God has ascribed high value to you and I by treating us kindly.

We tend to think that persons have value only if they have done something to demonstrate their value; if their behavior has been deserving. By this standard, people are divided in our minds between the deserving and the undeserving (sheep or goats—and by the way, that time will eventually come, but it is not now, and it is not ours to judge).

The secret of the Good News (and what makes it truly good!) is that high value can be ascribed to undeserving people. Jesus demonstrated that when He died on the cross for us—*“the Just for the unjust”* (1 Peter 3:18).

In a world of holiness—in Heaven—sinners have no value whatsoever. Isaiah described it this way:

“A highway will be there, a way, called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not pass over it, but it will be for those whom he guides—fools will not stray along it” (Isaiah 35:8).

Sinners are excluded from that place. The only way you or I or anyone else may go to Heaven, is by an act of divine kindness. Grace.

Remember this definition of complementary terms: Mercy is when God does not give us what we deserve; Grace is when God gives us what we do not deserve.

Now, you *“be merciful, just as your Father is merciful”* (Luke 6:36). Do NOT give people what they do deserve; instead, give them what they do not deserve: your kindness. This is how you love even your enemies.

And you have been given the Spirit of God so that you can do this very thing; you have no excuse. Though you may have a multitude of reasons, you have no good excuse. You have the power!

“Show mercy to others, even though you are afraid that you might be stained by their sinful lives. God can guard you so that you don’t fall” (Jude 23-24).

Mud Dries

An old Englishman, known as Father Graham in his village, was greatly loved because of his positive influence. One day an angry young man who had just been badly insulted came to see Father Graham. As he explained the situation, he said he was on his way to demand an apology from the one who had wronged him.

“My dear boy,” Father Graham said, “take a word of advice from an old man who loves peace. An insult is like mud; it will brush off better when it is dry. Wait a little, till he and you are both cool, and the problem will be easily solved. If you go now, you will only quarrel.” The young man heeded the wise advice, and soon he was able to go to the other person and resolve the issue.

How often the tongue pours fuel on a fire that would go out if left alone! Solomon said, “Do not be rash with your mouth,...let your words be few” (Eccl. 5:2). And hymnwriter William Longstaff put it well when he wrote, “Take time to be holy, be calm in thy soul; each thought and each motive beneath His control.”

Perhaps you have a problem with someone and have decided to “tell him off.” Why not wait? It’s easier to brush off mud when it’s dry.

And pray for the one who offended you. It may dry the mud a little faster.