

Valley View Chapel
June 7, 2015
Tongue in Check Part 4
"Healing Words"
Proverbs 15:1-7

Introduction

Back in 1988 I attended a three-day leadership conference in Carlisle, PA taught by John Maxwell. There's just one thing I remember from that conference. It has stayed in my mind for twenty-seven years: "We all carry two buckets in our hands at all times. One bucket contains water; the other, kerosene. When we speak, we can either pour water on the conversation or we can pour kerosene."

I couldn't help but think of Maxwell's observation as I studied today's text – Proverbs 15:1-7. It especially applies to verses 1 and 4, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger....The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit."

What Maxwell was saying and what Solomon said three-thousand years ago is essentially the same thing: What we say can make things *better* or they can make things *worse*. Maxwell used the image of "water" and "kerosene." Solomon used the words "gentle" and "harsh."

My outline for this morning's message is about as simple as it gets. I'm going to describe "harsh" words – "kerosene words" - and give a few examples from the Bible and contemporary life. Then I'll describe "gentle" words – "water words" – and do the same. I'll spend considerably more time on "gentle" or "healing" words because those are the words that please God and help people. Finally I'll try to tie it altogether with several principles of application.

Harsh Words

"Harsh" words literally mean "words of pain." They are usually spoken in a tone of anger, impatience, insensitivity, or sarcasm. The NIV describes these words in Proverbs 15:4 as "deceitful." So they could be "lying" or "misleading" words as well.

Proverbs 25:28 describes the person who habitually uses "harsh" words: "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control." (NIV)

"Walls" in antiquity were a means of defense against the enemy. A person lacking self control when it comes to words is a victim of everyone who disagrees with, annoys or frustrates him. So the person with no "walls", the person lacking in self-control, the one who resorts to harsh words in a stressful situation is weak - spiritually, morally and emotionally.

One biblical example of this kind of man is Nabal. 1 Samuel 25:3 described him as "surly and mean in his dealings."

One day David and his men were near Nabal's property. David remembered that they had been kind to Nabal's men on an earlier occasion so he sent messengers to Nabal asking to return the favor and supply them with provisions.

1 Samuel 25:10-11 recorded Nabal's response to David's men: "Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?"

Did Nabal throw water or kerosene on David's request?

When the men reported Nabal's belligerent response to King David, he ordered his men to strap on their swords and take by force that for which they had politely asked. Thankfully Nabal's wife – Abigail – heard about her husband's foolish and dangerous words. She collected sufficient supplies for David and his men and went out to meet them. She said: "My lord, let the blame be on me alone...I did not see the men my master sent...let this gift, which your servant has brought to my master, be given to the men who follow you. Please forgive your servant's offense, for the Lord will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my master, because he fights the Lord's battles. Let no wrongdoing be found in you as long as you live."

Did Abigail throw kerosene or water on the situation?

Nabal's words were "harsh." Abigail's were "gentle."
"Harsh" words cause pain, heartache, trouble and tears for everybody concerned. "Gentle" words often facilitate peace and reconciliation.

Ed Waltz and his wife Barb from Ann Arbor, Michigan had a precious little girl named Deb who had cerebral palsy. Ed and Barb had hoped that Deb would walk one day. After performing a battery of tests, the doctor led them into a small conference room where he laid out for them what they could expect. In a tone that was cold and emotionally disconnected, the doctor said, "It is extremely unlikely that your daughter will ever walk."

Still in a state of shock from the devastating news, Barb asked, "But what kind of shoes should I buy for my daughter?" She was thinking about some special corrective shoes, or perhaps shoes connected to a brace.

The doctor replied, "Buy her whatever kind of shoes you want. She won't be using them to walk in." And with that, he quickly left the room, and Barb burst into tears.

If "harsh words" literally mean "words of pain" then that doctor was the poster boy for "harsh words." Doctors are supposed to be agents of "healing." It's sad and regrettable when some physicians think that "healing" the body is the only "healing" that some people need. There are hidden wounds that need healing just as much if not more.

Gentle or "Healing" Words

The same word for "gentle" in Proverbs 15:1 was used in 2 Kings 22:19 to describe the godly King Josiah. God himself said concerning this king: "You displayed a *sensitive* spirit and humbled yourself before the Lord..."

The prophetess Huldah had sent a message to Josiah that God would judge the people and the reason (in God's own words) was "because they have abandoned me and offered sacrifices to other gods..." (NET)

God's judgment was realized a few years later when Jerusalem was captured, the Temple was destroyed and the people were carried into Babylonian exile.

Josiah could have poured kerosene on the word of the Lord delivered through Huldah and argued with God. Instead, with humility and gentleness, he submitted to God's sovereign will.

The word translated "gentle" in Proverbs 15:1 and "sensitive" in 2 Kings 22:19 is intimately related to the thought of "healing." Our verbal response to disappointment or frustration can either intensify wounding or pain or it can promote healing and comfort.

One outstanding example from the Old Testament of the effectiveness of gentle or healing words to defuse a tense situation is found in Abraham's well-documented controversy with his nephew Lot.

The story is told in Genesis 13:5-9, "Lot, who was traveling with Abram, had also become very wealthy with flocks of sheep and goats, herds of cattle, and many tents. But the land could not support both Abram and Lot with all their flocks and herds living so close together. 7 So disputes broke out between the herdsmen of Abram and Lot....Finally Abram said to Lot, 'Let's not allow this conflict to come between us or our herdsmen. After all, we are close relatives! The whole countryside is open to you. Take your choice of any section of the land you want, and we will separate. If you want the land to the left, then I'll take the land on the right. If you prefer the land on the right, then I'll go to the left.'" (NLT)

Abraham was the patriarch, the senior member of the family. In the ancient east the patriarch was accorded utmost respect and considered the ultimate authority in all matters related to the family. Abraham could easily and rightfully "pulled rank" on Lot and his men and told them to "salute, click their heels, and do what they're told." Instead Abraham offered a concession. He gave Lot and his men first choice. Ironically Lot chose to settle in Sodom. Abraham's "gentle" and "healing" words were wise indeed.

The New Testament word for Abraham's demeanor is "meek." Jesus commended "meekness" in his third beatitude: "Blessed are the *meek*, for they will inherit the earth." Matthew 5:5 (NIV)

The word "meek" means "power under control." It was used to describe "a soothing medicine;" a "gentle breeze;" or "a colt that had been broken." Medicine out of control can kill. A breeze that intensifies into a hurricane can destroy; and a colt out of control can injure and maim. But when *under control* medicine can heal; a gentle breeze can refresh; and a submissive colt can prove useful.

Whereas "harsh" and insensitive people demonstrate moral and spiritual weakness, "meek" and gentle people demonstrate moral and spiritual strength.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle was by no means a Christian. In fact he lived more than three centuries before Christ. Yet in his treatise *Vices and Virtues* he described the "meek" man as able to "bear reproaches and slights with moderation, and not to embark on revenge quickly, and not to be easily provoked to anger, but to be free from bitterness and contentiousness, having tranquility and stability in the spirit."

Warren Wiersbe described the "meek" or "gentle" man this way: "Meekness reveals itself when I am right and when I have the power to hurt someone who is wrong."

Think about Jesus in light of Wiersbe's observation. Was Jesus right? Did he have the power to hurt those who wronged him? Did he throw kerosene on the problem of sinful humanity estranged from a holy God or did he pour water on it?

Jesus, "the tree of life," brought healing to a world that had fractured her relationship with God.

It's no wonder that Jesus described himself in Matthew 11:29 as "meek and lowly in heart...." (KJV)

In light of what we know about "meekness" and the healing, gentle words that flow from the mouth of such a person, let's revisit Proverbs 15:4 and look in again on Ed and Barb Waltz.

Proverbs 15:4 tells us that "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life...."

We saw earlier that little Deb Waltz's doctor did speak healing words to her parents' wounded hearts. His harsh words caused pain and tears. He was not a "tree of life" but rather an instrument of cruel insensitivity.

The Waltz's understandably sought a second opinion. The second doctor had the sad task of telling Ed and Barb that there was very little hope that their daughter would ever walk. Barb asked once again: "What kind of shoes should be buy for her?" The second doctor looked compassionately and directly into Barb's eyes and said, "You know what I would do if I were you, Mrs. Waltz? I'd buy my daughter the prettiest little pink shoes I could find, with purple shoe laces."

"The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life...."

Conclusion

One of my pastimes is reading about the crime families of New York, in particular the Gambino crime family.

Back in the 1980's one of the most notorious members of the Gambino family was Roy DeMeo. He was summoned whenever John Gotti wanted to eliminate someone in a particularly gruesome way. Roy DeMeo was a stone cold killer.

Strangely enough, he was a devoted family man who, by all accounts, loved his wife and children. Though his wife and kids suspected that he was connected to the mob they had no idea about his gruesome line of work within the Gambino family. Eventually John Gotti believed that Roy was cooperating with law enforcement so he ordered Roy's execution.

In his book *The Sins of My Father* Roy's son Albert told of receiving the news of his father's death and the aftermath that followed.

"It came on January 18 – my seventeenth birthday. My mother had baked a cake, and I was at the table with her and my sisters, trying to act as if nothing were wrong. Just as I blew out the candles, the doorbell rang. I went to answer it. My mother followed a short distance behind.

"A crowd of police officers stood on the porch. There were at least a dozen of them....Bracing myself, I asked them what they wanted. They said they had some news about my father and asked if my mother was home....Catching sight of her behind me, they shoved me aside and pushed through the door....The lead detective's face was impassive....I tried to get closer to my mother, longing to protect her, but two officers stepped between us, blocking my way.

"Roy's dead, Gina," one of the detectives said. "We found his body in the trunk of his car."

"On Monday I returned to school and tried to appear as if everything were normal....But the weekend news reports had torn the veil of secrecy that had covered my home life for years. For the first time at school, people actually backed away from me as I approached, turning their backs, averting their eyes.....My teachers avoided my gaze, as unable as my peers to speak openly to the mobster's son about his father.

"Only one of my teachers had the courage to speak to me with compassion about my father. As my last period of that interminable day ended and my classmates crowded out the door, he asked me to stay behind a minute and speak to him. Shutting the door behind the stragglers, he sat down at a desk and motioned for me to sit down across from him. His words were straightforward and unaffected. 'Al, I heard about your father's death. I'm so very sorry. I just wanted to tell you that if you need anything, someone to talk to, anything at all, you come to me. I know how rough this must be, and I'm here for you.'

"For the first time since the funeral, tears welled up in the face of his simple kindness. I mumbled a few words in thanks and shook his hand. He stood up, put his hand briefly on my shoulder, and returned to the front of the room to collect the papers on his desk. I wonder if he ever knew what his thoughtfulness meant to me."

Will we be a "water-bearer" or a "kerosene-bearer?"

Will we be "a tree of life" or an instrument of insensitivity?

May we use the tongues that God gave us to be agents of his healing compassion, grace and power.