



"Truth must necessarily be stranger than fiction, for fiction is the creation of the human mind and therefore congenial to it."

—G.K. Chesterton

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## **Learning from Clichés**

Whether we were born yesterday, born with a silver spoon in our mouth, or born and raised a stick in the mud, we hear and most likely use clichés a million times a day. We all carry a verbal handbag of these memorable phrases to draw from when caught in a moment that requires comment, and we do so even though we may not know when, where, or how we obtained them—or even what they mean exactly. "Raining cats and dogs"? "True blue"? "Talk turkey"? "Take the plunge"? "Pig in the poke"? Each phrase may have an etymology that explains its origin, but I'm sure as the day is long that not many of us know them. Like any other word or phrase we know, we have simply learned these clichés and how to use them—even if, when we examine them word-for-word, they are patently absurd.

Open any handbook on writing, and there are rules against clichés. But why, if we regularly use them in speech, are we not to use them when we write? Because, the writing handbook will answer, clichés are unoriginal, overused, and denote a lack of thoughtful composition. Clichés may work nicely in conversation, given their ready availability, but in writing, they cause an author to appear hackneyed. In this universal writing tip lies a lesson that sheds light first on how the world's thought-system influences us, and

secondly, a lesson on why [Jesus Christ](#) often spoke in [parables](#) and paradoxes to teach His disciples and us today.

Clichés serve as interesting cultural and linguistic phenomena, phrases that are acquired without one's cognizance and that make sense only when spoken between members of a given culture. However, this fact points toward a concern for Christians: What else is slipping in under the radar and passing, not only into our verbal vocabulary, but also into our vocabulary of values, if you will? In the same way that we pick up clichés, we also pick up values from our culture that, unexamined, become assumptions, "givens" about the way [the world](#) works.

Take for example the American concept of personal space. Here, it is assumed that everyone has an irrefutable right to it. The handshake, the hug, and the kiss demonstrate this value. In American culture, each gesture has its proper place and is reserved for certain people, such as an acquaintance, a friend, and a spouse respectively, depending on whose personal space we are allowed into. But, drop in on a dinner party in any given European country, and someone we have just met might greet us with an awkward—to us—peck on the cheek.

Though handshakes are a harmless example, other cliché-like values are not. A much more serious concern is the way advertising depicts women, a problem that has become something of a cliché itself, yet nonetheless effectively demonstrates the point. Because nearly all commercials for everything from jeans and jewelry to a cruise to Jamaica present fit women with perfect features, these images become a cultural standard, a cliché for how women should look. The prevalence of eating disorders, unhealthy diets, and overly exhaustive workout routines testify to the danger of this deeply entrenched image.

Nevertheless, even this example serves as only one of the countless worldly values we unknowingly acquire. Through every medium imaginable, [Satan](#) spreads his values, hidden within the stories our televisions broadcast, our movies so spectacularly feature, and our songs rehearse. We can even identify actual clichés that encapsulate anti-[God](#) values: Look out for number one; finders keepers, losers weepers; *carpe diem*; and nice guys finish last.

In the Gospels, Jesus provides us with memorable phrases, but His are memorable for the opposite reason than clichés are: They are paradoxical. We know that Christ chose to speak in parables and with difficult language so that those who were not called would "hear but not understand" ([Mark 4:12](#)). However, there is likely a second reason: Paradoxes jolt our minds, force us to look at a thing from a new angle, and cause us to suspend our logical assumptions. Through paradoxes, Christ does just this in Matthew 20 in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard and in the exchange between Christ and the mother of James and John.

In [Matthew 20:27](#), Christ corrects the two disciples with the paradoxical statement, "whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave." Earlier, in verse 16, He ends the parable with a parallel statement, "So the last will be first, and the first last." Taken literally, neither statement makes logical sense, and this is the point: Jesus is forcing us to meditate on His words, to contemplate their meaning until we realize the truth that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" ([Matthew 20:28](#)), and we are to do likewise. This goes directly against this world's ethics, which Christ points out in verse 25.

These paradoxical verses challenge a worldly value that we may have learned without realizing: selfish ambition. We all assume that our labors must be rewarded, praised, or at least recognized. Our vocabulary may even contain several clichés that express this value. But such an assumption, as Christ indicates, is carnal and antithetical to God's perspective.

His paradoxical language is, however, only paradoxical when read from a human, carnal perspective. In truth, there is actually nothing paradoxical about Christ's words; they all make perfect sense. This is one reason why studying God's Word and meditating on it are crucial to our spiritual health. His Word exposes and uproots worldly values and concepts that we have picked up and assumed as true, both of which happen, so to speak, right under our noses.

When the apostle Paul exhorts the Corinthians to "examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the [faith](#). Test yourselves" ([II Corinthians 13:5](#)), he exhorts them to do just what Christ's paradoxical language forces us to do. If we continue without meditating on God's principles, without questioning

each decision to determine why we make it, we live according to the world's false notion of what is true. We must instead meditate on Christ's seemingly paradoxical messages, follow Paul's advice to examine ourselves, rid our minds of all worldly ideas, and replace them with God's unimpeachable truth. If we do not, then, just as clichés speak for us when we cannot come up with the right words, worldly ideas will think for us, and this can put us, in a word, dead in the water.

- Staff

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## **From the Archives: Featured Sermon**

### **[How the Human Mind Shapes What We Believe](#)**

by Martin G. Collins

Our society has determined that everyone's opinion is of equal value, regardless of how ridiculous and sinful it is. There are numerous fallacious reasoning patterns to which we can all fall prey. These twisted thinking patterns are seen in a number of incidents recorded throughout the Bible as well as in our daily lives. As we, through the power of God's Holy Spirit and the mind of Christ, continue to grow in godly knowledge, we should learn to recognize and guard against these deceptive thought patterns (or anything else that exalts itself against the knowledge of God) displacing them with godly wisdom- pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy (James 3:17), in short, taking on the divine nature of God.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[This Is Not God's World](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

In several places in Scripture, God urges His people to come out of this world. Because He is the earth's and humanity's Creator, we may struggle with this command. But the world of which He speaks consists of society's

anti-God religious, psychological, and philosophical systems whose beginnings reside in the Adversary, Satan the Devil. John Ritenbaugh suggests we thoroughly evaluate how much of this world still influences us.

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