

Sticks And Stones

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"Also do not take to heart everything that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you."

— *Ecclesiastes 7:21*

As children on the playground at school, we would hear the old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Anyone who has been stung by the lashing of another's tongue will know that this saying is not always true!

Small children tend to allow words to go in one ear and out the other, but as we grow older, our attitude toward what is said to us becomes more and more personal. The wounds caused by sticks and stones heal, but many of us have likely experienced times when we thought the wounds caused by words would *never* heal. We have come to understand that words have a massive potential power over us. We have seen the harm that the tongue can inflict. It is amazing that an organ created for so much good could produce so much damage and heartache.

As members of God's church, what are we to do when destructive words come our way, words spoken to us that hit us like a rock upside the head?

Shrug It Off

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:20-22:

For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin. Also do not take to heart everything people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others.

"Others" here is referring to another person; it could even refer to a stranger. What Solomon is giving us in this section (verses 15-29) is counsel for balanced living.

Verse 20 shows that no one on earth does what is right all the time, never making a mistake. It is the character of a just man to do good, but that is not what always happens.

Then verse 21 begins with the word "also," which means "in addition," "likewise," "too," "in like manner," and "furthermore," suggesting that verses 21-22 continue the thought of verse 20. In just about every situation, sin is involved. Either we have sinned or others have sinned against us—or both.

Solomon advises us not to pay attention to or take to heart everything people say, even if we hear an employee or someone under our authority insulting us—because we know that we have insulted other people many times.

Understanding the word "curse" is important here. It does not mean "to invoke or bring evil or misfortune upon" or "to damn." It is the Hebrew word *qalal*, which means "to make light, trifling, bring into contempt, abate." Our English word *abate* means "to make less," "to reduce in quantity, value, degree, or intensity," "to beat down," and even "to deprive."

These verses do not give specific examples of what might have been said. Perhaps it was a defaming remark, an unwarranted comment, an angry threat, a joke at another's expense, or deliberate untruths. What was said is ultimately unimportant.

Baptist commentator John Gill (1697-1771) writes in his *Exposition of the Old Testament* on verse 21:

Seeing so it is, that imperfection attends the best of men, no man is wise at all times, foolish words and unguarded expressions will sometimes drop from him, which it is better to take no notice of; they should not be strictly attended to, and closely examined, since they will not bear it. A man should not listen to everything that is said of himself or others; he should not curiously inquire what men say of him; and what he himself hears he should take no notice of; it is often best to let it pass, and not call it over again; to feign the hearing of a thing, or make as if you did not hear it; for oftentimes, by rehearsing a matter, or taking up words spoken, a deal of trouble and mischief follows.

In the face of provocation, the true quality of self-restraint is displayed in our ability to take it patiently with forbearance and longsuffering. A person who is longsuffering is not quick to retaliate or promptly punish someone who has insulted, offended, or harmed him.

David's Example

As Solomon wrote these words in Ecclesiastes, he had the experience and example of his father, Israel's King David, to learn these principles of a proper balance in dealing with people. Notice how David handled such a situation in II Samuel 16:5-6:

Now when King David came to Bahurim, there was a man from the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei the son of Gera, coming from there. He came out, cursing continuously as he came. And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David. And all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left.

In Hebrew, the word for "cursing" here is the same word as in Ecclesiastes 7:21-22.

David's warriors, especially Abishai the son of Zeruiah, wanted to lift the head of Shimei right off his shoulders (verse 9), but how did David reply to his request to do so? "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? So let him curse, because the Lord has said to him, 'Curse David.' Who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?' . . . Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the Lord has ordered him" (verses 11-12).

Who else in all Israel was more deserving of honor and respect than David? He could have given a simple command, and Shimei would have been dead, but he held his peace.

Later on, Shimei bowed before him, knowing he had sinned against the king by cursing him, and Abishai again wanted to put the Benjamite to death. Yet, David swore to him that he would not die by his hand (see II Samuel 19:18-23).

Solomon knew what had happened with Shimei because later on he had to deal with Shimei himself (I Kings 2:36-46). However, he learned from his father's patience and self-restraint and passed it on to us.

The world does not teach such principles today. Satan's world is not one of forgiveness, longsuffering, or patience but of retaliation and revenge. Today's motto is: "Don't get mad, get even"; "Even the score"; "Hit back"; and "Give back as good as you get." So many of today's movies, television shows, and popular songs are based on revenge. Showing restraint is seen as a weakness.

Sometimes we do not realize how competitive our human nature is. It is full of pride. It feels it has to win, to be vindicated, and if possible, elevated over others. Man's pride tends to drive him to extremes. And yes, this propensity is not easy to overcome. It is difficult to withstand unlawful and unwarranted criticism, but we must be able to forgive and forget, which our human nature fights against with all its power.

Dealing With "Enemies"

In God's Word, we are instructed in how we are to deal with those who sin against us. To begin, we must remember, as Solomon reminds us in Ecclesiastes 7:22, that we have been guilty of the same sins in what we have said to others. Therefore, we must be willing to wipe the slate clean every day, not allowing feelings of hurt and revenge to eat at us like a poison.

As part of the model prayer in Matthew 6:12, Jesus tells us, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Our sins are debts to God, which we, the debtors, cannot pay. God is willing to wipe our slates clean if we humble ourselves before Him. We ask for forgiveness for our sins, and by so doing, we acknowledge that there is no other way to get rid of sin but through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When we forgive others, God can see His own image reflected in us. As His children, we must be willing to forgive no matter the affront. Jesus gives us the example to follow, as He was able to ask the Father to forgive those who were crucifying Him (Luke 23:34)!

Solomon gives us more advice in these verses in Ecclesiastes 7. We need to be balanced in our response, not over-reacting or taking what is said too seriously. We must be thick-skinned and not wear our feelings on our sleeves. We should not believe everything people say about us, and we should be careful when inquiring of others what people are saying about us.

Yes, we may sometimes hear others say bad things about us, maybe words spoken in anger and intended to deliberately hurt us. But we have also said things that were unkind about others. Perhaps there was a time when a friend said something to us he did not mean and had no idea was insulting. Maybe what he said was true but his tone was offensive. These things happen in human relations. We need to learn to take them in stride.

We must also consider the words spoken to us in spiritual correction, when we receive godly rebuke and instruction. In these situations, no specific sin is necessarily involved. Solomon teaches in Ecclesiastes 7:5, "It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools." Some "hurtful" words are for our ultimate good.

We must learn to take everything in our lives with much patience and longsuffering. What do we achieve by being patient with each other? What is the result of forgiving and showing proper restraint toward those who curse us? Peace.

Paul writes in Hebrews 12:14-15: "Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking diligently lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled."

God has called us to peace (I Corinthians 7:15). God's peace is a deep, spiritual calm that is unaffected by the world. It comes through our relationship with Jesus Christ and by taking on the character He displayed when He walked the earth. He did not react to the curses and false accusations of others (I Peter 2:23). We can have this kind of peace by striving to reproduce His character and by being obedient to His Word.