

Tired Clichés

Martin G. Collins

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We have all fallen into perpetual habits. We have expressed some phrases so many times that they are often the first expressions that come to mind, and we occasionally overuse them. It is also why we are inclined to lather up with the same shampoo or spread the same shaving cream on our face, year after year. Our brains prefer not to have to think about shampoo or shaving cream brands early in the morning.

Do you respond with almost the same words no matter what question your child asks? Do you answer you spouse with effortless acknowledgement every morning? Do you respond to co-workers with the same worn out greeting every time? Do you welcome friends with the tired cliché you've always used?

We have all used common phrases as clichés. Some popular ones are:

- “in the nick of time” - meaning: to happen just in time.
- “only time will tell” - denoting: to become clear over time.
- “a matter of time” - suggesting: to happen sooner or later.
- “at the speed of light” -signifying: to do something very quickly.
- “lasted an eternity” - designating: to last for a very long time.
- “lost track of time” - representing: to stop paying attention to time.

But it does not end there. What about religious, non-biblical phrases as clichés?

- “Hate the sin, love the sinner.”
- “God helps those who help themselves.”
- “When God closes a door, he opens a window.”
- “God never gives you more than you can handle.”
- “Have a blessed day.”
- “Bless your heart.”
- “God works in mysterious ways.”

What about biblical phrases that have become clichés because of thoughtless overuse?

- “Love is patient.”
- “Love is kind.”
- “A drop in a bucket”

Did you realize that is a biblical phrase? Where did “a drop in a bucket” originate?

Stuck between the mighty pharaohs on one side, and a succession of great Mesopotamian empires on the other, Israel was always destined to be a small fish in a big and dangerous pond. By the middle of the sixth century BC, the Israelitish kingdoms had been conquered repeatedly, and a decent chunk of the population was living in painful exile in Babylon. Amid all this geopolitical gloom, the Book of Isaiah had some words of comfort.

Compared to God, says the prophet,

Isaiah 40:15 Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust on the scales; look, He lifts up the isles as a very little thing.

Comparing the nations of the earth to the Almighty God makes it a much more powerful phrase than what we casually use it for today.

Writers and editors criticize the use of clichés. So, what is wrong with clichés, anyway?

First, clichés are boring. They are read and heard so often that the recipient tends to yawn and shrug and say, “Whatever.”

Second, clichés tend to lose meaning. When something is repeated too often, the listener assumes he knows what it means, even if he doesn't.

The "perfect storm" cliché is even more overused than the "black swan" cliché. A black swan is an unpredictable or unforeseen event, typically one with extreme consequences.

People understand a perfect storm as two or more events that are independent but converge to produce an outcome much worse than either event alone. That's a good working definition. Sometimes, the inputs to a perfect storm involve three or even four independent events. The cliché problem arises when users apply the term to trivial events, or a set of events that happen sequentially without the requisite convergence.

For example, you may ask someone, “How's your day going?” and they might roll their eyes and say, “Oh, it's been a perfect storm of disasters.” What they mean is that they awkwardly spilled coffee on their shirt at breakfast and inconveniently had to stop for gas on their way to work. Both events are trivial and had nothing to do with each other—not exactly a perfect storm—and that's how good phrases lose their meaning and become tired clichés.

I mentioned earlier that we have all fallen into perpetual habits. Over the last decade, much research has been done on human habits. And are not clichés habits? For instance, a Duke University study concluded that habit rather than deliberation shapes over 40% of the decisions you and I make every day.

Both Columbia University and the University of Alberta measured the vital role that habit plays in exercising.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology identified how our brains convert repeated behaviors into habits, thus preserving our real brain power for unpredictable circumstances. (God's design is amazing.) So, habits can be beneficial.

While converting frequent activities into automatic habits is quite natural, that doesn't mean that it is always desirable. We engage in many regular activities that should certainly not be automated. Many of us are blessed to be able to say, “good morning” and “good night” to our spouses every day. That should be personal, authentic and heartfelt every single time. Neither do we want autopilot switched on when we interact with children and friends. You know how we casually just say some phrase to our children just to shrug them off sometimes.

What about praying to God each day? Do you want that to be meaningless repetition? There is even a scripture about that. And if you do feel that merely mouthing the words today just as you did yesterday is OK—which we have all done, I'm sure—would it be equally acceptable if God began treating you the same way? Allowing our repeated prayers to become automatic routines is such a real danger that God explicitly warns against it.

Any word repeated exactly seven times in a passage is the crucial word in that section. Leviticus 26 contains horrifying details of the consequences when God's covenant with Israel is shattered. In Leviticus 26:21-41, the word repeated seven times is *keri*. It means casual, random and mindless. These verses indicate that of all the damaging results of relating to God with unthinking casualness, the worst is that He subsequently relates to us in exactly the same way. This is the principle of reciprocity!

Obviously, God intends us to exert effort to ensure that our relationship with Him remains forever fresh, vital, and genuine. In the same way, we should constantly struggle to relate authentically to God's other children, be they family, friends, co-workers or acquaintances. It is fine to drive your regular commute on cruise control, and it is fine to pick up your shampoo out of habit, but it is really not so loving to relate to human beings in that way.

Instead, try to delight the people with whom you interact regularly with a fresh comment or an innovative service. Look at the world around you with renewed appreciation. While we're at it, and more importantly, praying deliberately and thoughtfully would also be a blessing to God and to our advantage, to say the least.