

Save a Life, Hold Your Tongue

Far too many Bahamians are insensitive and cold in their language. Too many Bahamians “kill” people with their tongue every day. If there were laws against “tongue murder,” the prison would be overcrowded ten times. Too many of us say things to relatives, friends, and even strangers, that on the surface these persons may respond to with laughter, but deep inside it is a painful blow. Proverbs 21:23 says: “Watch your words and hold your tongue; you'll save yourself a lot of grief.” (*The Message paraphrase*)

In this article, I am not just talking about offensive words that come from the lips of street thugs. I am really talking about any remark or joke that refers to someone's body, personality, or emotional characteristics. The person receiving the remark may respond with laughter only to avoid further embarrassment or to cover up his or her feelings. However, at night, they stuff their heads in the pillows, ashamed and weeping. It was as though the person was stabbed in the heart. It's a painful, seemingly slow road to depression and sometimes suicide.

Many parents or grandparents make fun of their children's body type, size, or strange behavior thinking they are really showing love. Here a few examples of remarks that can lead to emotional pain:

“Look at my fat teddy bear.”

“Bring your fat self here.”

“You are so small you will never get fat.”

“Why do you have such a crazy laugh?”

“Come here with your peasy head.”

“Bring your black self here.”

“Bring your red self here.”

“You are my lanky son.”

“How many times I need to tell you that your head isn't good.”

“You will never make it in this world.”

“You have big hips.”

“You sissy. . . ”

I could go on and on, but I am sure you can think of some yourself. Many people underestimate the power of the tongue and how emotional pain can impact the human spirit. Research says that “pain caused by emotional distress is more deeply felt and longer lasting than that caused by physical injuries.” (*Chris Irvine, 2018*) O how I wish many

would understand this. Psychologist, Kip Williams, from Purdue University, said: "While both types of pain (physical and emotional) can hurt very much at the time they occur, social pain has the unique ability to come back over and over again, whereas physical pain lingers only as an awareness that it was indeed at one time painful.

Many younger children do not really understand why they are feeling so badly when called names. They "suck it in" because that is what they are supposed to do. But an emotional scar is growing deep within the heart. It gets larger and larger until there is a giant emotional wound infested with the putrefying puss of anger or rage, frustration, low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts.

There are some spiritual leaders who cause emotional damage to their congregants. Endeavoring to "purge" their congregation of wrong or perceived wrong, they make statements that stab directly into the very hearts they are trying to reach. They say their church doors are open for everyone but they still shoot their visitors in the back. For example: "You fagots are going to hell." "Divorcees, you are going against God's will. You will never get a divorce if you truly have faith in God." Such statements assume that the individual does not have a personal struggle to resolve his own dilemma. Instead, the preacher pushes them deeper into the dark pit of despair. Even ministers of the gospel need to learn how to avoid creating what they think they are preventing. They need to find a way of making the gospel attractive and not a stab in the heart. Many people leave church feeling more wounded and frustrated than when they first came. This text is quite apropos here. Proverbs 13:3 says: "Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin."

Dear readers, seek ways to tame your tongue. Make it your commitment not to wound another person with your tongue. Think before you speak. Try placing yourself in the place of the listeners. Listen to the hurting one when they say your words are causing them pain. Observe carefully the body language, facial expression, and overall demeanor of those you are talking with. Try to listen with your heart and not just your head. Let your words breathe life and not death. "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." Ephesians 4:29

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