



THE EXHORTER

“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40

The Palmer Road church of Christ, Westland, Mi. (prchurchofchrist.org)

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Proverbs 18:21 "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit."

What an interesting verse. It's written backwards from the way we tend to say things. The Bible does that in several places. For instance, in the creation account, God says, "there was evening and there was morning." We usually say the opposite, "there was morning and there was evening." God says, "Honor your Father and mother." We normally say, "Mom and Dad," the reverse order. And, here in our verse today, it begins, "Death and life." We'd say, "Life and death."

Death and life are in the power of the tongue. You can kill someone with your words or you can pump life into their soul by your words. The choice of words can make all the difference. Your words can help or they can hurt. Encouragement or discouragement-it often comes down to what and how we say things.

All of this reminds us of some simple truths:

First, we must be careful what we say. The words we say can be death to someone. It's amazing how some give so little thought to what they say. They don't think about what it would be like to be on the receiving end of those words. I'm not talking about saying crude, offensive or even mean words. We can simply say things that will cause unrest, worry and fear in someone. Somebody gets a new car. You feel compelled to announce before many people, "Isn't that the model that blows up when you turn it on?" Now think about what you just said. Or, to a pregnant woman, "Isn't your doctor being sued for dropping a baby?" Life and death are in your words. Those might be true statements, but the setting, and the way you say those words can help or they can hurt.

Second, not everything needs to be repeated or said. Passing on "death" words is only going to discourage someone. Consider who said those words. Their attitude and their heart may be very far from God. Negative, discouraging and uncomplimentary words is all that is necessary for a tender faith and a young heart to quit. It's because of death words that many young preachers no longer preach today. They had enough. Some things should not be said.

Third, the value of an encouragement is hard to measure. A kind word. A kind act. Being thoughtful of someone else. The shut in. The widow. The young person. The new preacher. The shepherds.

(OVER)

There are so many people and so many ways that we can touch the lives of others. More than thirty years ago, I was the new preacher in a congregation. I had a young family. One Wednesday night after services, a family stop by with grocery bags full of groceries, including "real butter," as my wife proclaimed. We couldn't afford "real butter." They just wanted to greet us and help us out. A simple thing. That amazing encouragement is still remembered three decades later. That's the value of "life." Going out of your way to talk with someone. Giving up a Saturday for someone. Sending a class teacher a note at the end of a quarter and thanking them for teaching you. Life-it makes all the difference.

What kills so many people is the thought that no one cares. No one appreciates what I do. No one notices. No one even said a word. A few times with that and a person has had enough. Why go out of my way when no one cares. It's hard to overcome that.

Parents, begin with your kids by teaching them to give "life" to others. Have them draw a thank you card for Grandma for the gifts she brings. Teach them to say, "Thank you." Have graduates write a thank you card for graduation gifts. It's amazing to learn that a bride and groom don't send thank you cards for the gifts that they received. We are living in a time which is not grateful for others. Disciples are different. We realize that a thank you is one way to extend life to others.

Fourth, even when the message must be hard, whether in a sermon, a talk with the kids or even a conversation with a friend, there is a way of saying things without tearing them up. Think first. Pray. Speak carefully. Usually when we get excited, our mouths run far ahead of our brains. We say things that we shouldn't. We get in trouble for saying things that are out of line. There is a way. The word "Gospel," means good news. You'd never know it the way some preach. They make a person go home feeling worse than when they came. Life and death-we must remember that concept.

Fifth, encouragers, those that give life, are fun to be around and can turn a dark place into something bright and good. The gloom and doom crowd rains on everyone's day. They are no fun to be around. You leave discouraged. That's the death squad. They kill with their words. The encouragers, those that give life, have a special way of lifting up a sad spirit. They smile. They hug. They are truly glad to see you.

There is a wonderful concept that comes from the synagogue official's little girl who died. Jesus went to his home. He took her by the hand and told her to get up. She obeyed. I just wonder when her eyes first opened, if the first person she saw was Jesus. I want to think so. What an encouraging face. I don't know this, but I expect there was a smile on His face when she opened her eyes. I like to think our death will be like that. We close our eyes to this world, and when they open on the other side, we see His face. Don't know for sure if it will be like that, but that certainly puts "life" into my steps.

Good thoughts. Kind words. Compliments. Good laughter. Happy times. Conversations with a three-year-old. An afternoon with a dear Christian. Thoughts of Heaven. The face of Jesus. Life. Let us be the givers of life. Satan is death. Death is the world. Death is dark. Death seems to be the end, even though it's not. Death isn't pleasant or happy. But life, oh, my! Wonderful, wonderful life.

Be kind with what you say. Don't hide behind, "I just told him the truth," and be guilty of dispensing death. Don't abuse God's word by thinking, "It's a sword and swords cut." Give life. Be a fountain of blessings and hope. You can change the temperature of your home and even the congregation by your words and attitude. Sour folks make things cold. Mean folks makes things too hot. But givers of life, offer that refreshing breath of air that's just right. It picks up tired spirits on a Wednesday night. It offers hope to those who are discouraged and scared. It motivates us to keep on.

Life and death-you hold the key. Your words...use them carefully today. Find ways to give life to a dying world.

Roger Shouse