

"They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist . . ."

These were the last words spoken by General John Sedgwick as he surveyed the enemy troops during the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse. In mid-word, a Rebel bullet found its mark and so ended a great military career. The general's statue stands today near the parade grounds at West Point, an enduring testimonial to Confederate marksmanship!

Stories like this should remind us just how silly - and dangerous - our words can be. Speech reveals what's in our hearts. Sedgwick's comments evinced great confidence in the safety and security of his troops, when in reality, he was merely seconds from the Grim Reaper.

Our own words are no less revealing. Whether statements are casual, careless, or deliberate, our choice of terms and voice inflection belie what might otherwise remain hidden.

Consider some of our "stupid" words:

"I was just too busy to do my Bible lesson." In truth we're too wedded to the world to divorce ourselves from carnal concerns long enough to cultivate spiritual growth.

"It's the church's job to teach my children the Bible." Then what, pray tell, is your job, Dad?

"I don't know why the preacher can't quit on time?" Perhaps it's because there is so much you need to hear.

"The Bible doesn't say I have to go to church on Sunday night." The Bible doesn't say you have to go to heaven either, but why would you want to miss it?

- by Steve Dewhurst

Dealing with Sin

When confronted with the reality of your own sinfulness, you can:

JUSTIFY YOURSELF - like Adam did (Gen. 3:12)
COVER IT UP - like David initially did (2 Samuel 11,12)
DENY IT - like Gehazi (2 Kings 5:20-26)

or you can:

CONFESS IT - like the prodigal (Lk. 15:17-19)
REPENT OF IT - like Ninevah (Jonah 3:1 0)
FORSAKE IT - like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8)
WASH IT AWAY - like Paul (Acts 22:16)

- by Jim Martin

Preaching the "Whole Counsel" of God

Fill a banquet table with all manner of food. At one end, place a variety of nutritious foods such as fruits, steamed vegetables, lean meats and the like. At the other end, load it up with candy, cookies, and a tempting selection of sweets and desserts. Now, to complete the experiment, turn a company of youngsters loose to choose whatever food they like from the table. Do you have any doubt as to what they will choose? Of course not! Repeat the exercise again and again, and the result will always be the same. The kids will rush to the sugary end of the table every time. Immature children will not discern what is best for them. They do not recognize the need for a carefully balanced diet. They are, after all, only kids!

Try another experiment. Select an array of Bible subjects. Be sure to include an ample supply of lessons that are of the positive, 'feel good' variety. These should speak about the love of God, the blessings He provides, the hope and promise of His Word, etc. In addition to these, pick a sampling of negative issues. Include things like denominationalism, moral challenges facing Christians in the modern age, and doctrinal errors prevalent among brethren. Now, let Christians decide which ones they will prefer to hear on a regular basis. The result of this test is

also obvious. Folks do not like the unpleasant negative lessons and will repeatedly favor the more positive themes. In particular, immature Christians will flock to preachers and places that cater to their specific appetites.

If preachers and teachers plan their lessons based exclusively on what the people like to hear, they are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of letting kids choose a constant diet of sugary treats. Unfortunately, some seem to be doing this. Certain subjects are purposely avoided from the pulpit. Others are dealt with so ambiguously that the hearers miss the point entirely.

Some may defend this approach by saying that no error is being taught. They console themselves by suggesting that -- while others may prefer to do the negative work -- they choose to emphasize the positive side of things. Those who go this route will not be able to say with the apostle Paul: "I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you," and, again, "I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:20,27).

Paul instructed Timothy to "preach the word," and to "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Timothy 4:2,5). To do this he would need to "reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (vs. 2). Others have noted that two thirds of that instruction involves what some would call 'negative' preaching ("reprove, rebuke"), and one third 'positive' ("exhort"). While we would not argue that any specific percentage is being set forth here, it is, none-the-less, clear that the work of preaching cannot be satisfied with an exclusive emphasis on the so-called 'positive' themes.

A specific example may help illustrate the important need for balance in our preaching. Consider the subject of marriage. It is right and proper that we teach again and again the positive scriptural truths that pertain to husbands and wives. Let us stress the blessings of this relationship and the great wisdom of God's plan for the home. Let everyone know how following His wonderful design for our families will enrich our lives. But, wait, this will not be enough. No matter how much we wish it were not so, the ugly question of broken homes and divorce is out there. Brethren must know the truth on this subject, for it will certainly impact someone close to them. It is not a pleasant thing. And, it is made worse by the controversy that arises when some teach error on this topic. Their errors must be exposed before others are carried away. This is altogether 'negative,' but it is essential. Do you see it?

It is a serious responsibility to assume the role of teacher, and all who do so are promised an increased accountability (James 3:1). Be sure to do the full work. Strive for the important balance between 'negative' and 'positive' subjects. Realize that your work, when done properly, will not always be popular (2 Timothy 4:2), but it will always be needed.

- by Greg Gwin