

# "Sticks and Stones"

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Theme: Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will hurt or heal me.  
Text: Proverbs 12:18

Here's a thought: Someone wisely advises, "Be sure to taste your words before you spit them out."

"Sticks and Stones" is an English language children's rhyme. It's first reported appearance was in "The Christian Recorder" of March 1862, a publication of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, where it is presented as an "old adage" in this form:

Sticks and stones will break my bones  
But words will never harm me.

Ten years later it appeared in another publication with the word "hurt" in place of "harm" (from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sticks\\_and\\_Stones](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sticks_and_Stones)). The intention is well-meaning, encouraging children to ignore the nasty taunts and name-calling of others and to calmly refuse to retaliate.

I remember chanting this as a child in the faces of bullies and mockers.  
However, deep down I wondered if it was true.

King Solomon had a lot of relationships in his lifetime and he observed in Proverbs 12:18, "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." NIV

Your words can:

**Hurt**

Or

**Heal**

**Hurt**



Imagine what life would be like if we blurted out every thought that emerged in our heads. Fortunately, we typically have some measure of self-control. Verbal Dysdecorum is a brain disorder where patients can't censor themselves (<http://io9.gizmodo.com/5874229/10-incredibly-strange-brain-disorders>).

This syndrome was first observed in a Vietnam veteran who demonstrated exactly what happens when you don't constantly censor yourself at your job: You get fired. You get fired over and over until finally someone sends you to a doctor. This particular case was steered towards psychology - rather than an etiquette book - because the soldier had been shot in the head years before. The right front part of the brain has something in it that allows people to consider their words and quietly keep the socially unhelpful ones inside. Other injuries to this area of the brain have caused similar responses. Some injuries expand beyond the verbal into actual social dysdecorum, which includes inappropriate and ill-considered actions, verging on complete sociopathy.

Jesus highlights the importance of how we speak about others in Matthew 5:21-22:

21 You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, "Raca," is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell. NIV

To call someone "Raca" in the Aramaic-speaking world of Palestine was to hold someone in such contempt to call him or her "useless, foolish, empty-headed, stupid or worthless". We can actually murder with our hateful words. This warning from Jesus should make us think twice before we call someone an idiot! Such names or labels bring deep hurt and great destruction to someone's identity.

The Apostle Paul explains in Ephesians 4:15, "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." NIV

Generally speaking, I enjoy being around people who are straight shooters. They don't mince words so I am clear and certain on where I stand with them.

They tell me what they think and feel so I don't have to guess. The other side of this coin is that straight shooters can be hurtful. It is often helpful to know what someone thinks or feels but their words can stick like barbs into my side, my head or, worse yet, into my heart.

Someone wisely advises, "Be sure to taste your words before you spit them out."

It is possible to speak the truth without love. We might feel better about "getting some things off our chest" but will what we say leave a lot of pain in the chests of those who hear us? What we say might have a lot of truth in it but is how and when we send our message the best it can be? It is very helpful to consider the effects of our words before we decide to deliver them.

I have some ponderous questions for you:

How do those dead bugs get into enclosed light fixtures?

Why doesn't Tarzan have a beard?

Why do they use sterilized needles for death by lethal injection?

Our words provide a very effective gauge for how we are doing at the core. Jesus explains of the good man and the evil man in Luke 6:45, "For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks." NIV

There is no place for God's people to speak out of "both sides of our mouths". What we say on Monday morning should be consistent with what we say on Sunday morning. James says it this way in James 3:9-12:

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. NIV

Hurtful words can be more destructive eternally when they come out of the mouths of people who profess a relationship with Christ because we represent Him to the world. Maybe this is why many prefer to keep it private but, like it or not, when we go public with our faith the hopes and expectations around us are raised. Certainly none of us are perfect yet, but this definitely means we avoid hypocrisy and embrace sincerity in our speech.

Reckless, hasty words can leave a lot of damage in their wake. I have learned the hard way there are days and times when I am a verbal accident waiting to happen. Words and tones slip out more thoughtlessly when I am hungry, tired

or frustrated. I know that when I am verbally vulnerable (say this fast five times) I must be extra careful about what I say and how I say it. This is no way to live continually, however, so in the long run I am much better off to ensure that I eat properly, get the rest I need and establish healthy boundaries. I need to keep soaking in God's Word, talking to the Lord and listening to His Spirit so I have the inner strength to speak what helps rather than what hurts.

As I hear profanity being used more freely on our big screens, televisions and conversations I get the distinct impression that it has become cool to be edgy. In a culture that pities - even despises - innocence and virginity we have subconsciously decided that naughtiness is a virtue to be admired. In an age where expletives (curse words) are used freely as adjectives and adverbs to make greater impact, wholesome and edifying speech is becoming more conspicuous and unusual. Can you and I live without being viewed as cool and edgy?

Will you forgive those who have said hurtful things to you? Will you ask for forgiveness from those you know you have hurt with your words?

Your words can:

Hurt

Or

**Heal**



Solomon expresses it a different way in Proverbs 18:21: "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit." NIV

I think of the power of words when God created. The phrase "God said" is repeated frequently throughout Genesis chapter one. Jesus is the Word who became flesh as described in John chapter one. It is noteworthy that the Hebrew word, ruach, and the Greek word, pneuma (from which we get the English word "pneumatic"), can be translated "breath" or "spirit". Like Adam in Genesis 2:7, when God breathes into our bodies at conception our lives begin and when our spirits leave our bodies our earthly lives come to an end (Matthew 27:50).

Our words have the capability of bringing life or death to others. We are not

capable of speaking words of life in our own strength. Words of life come only when the Giver of life speaks through us.

To bring healing through our words does not mean that we avoid having difficult conversations. Some of the most painful yet helpful words have been spoken to me by people who love me enough to endure discomfort or risk rejection.

Phil Callaway observes, “Truth without love is cruel; love without truth is cowardly.”

When I broke my ankle in January 2015 I did not need someone to rub cream on it and tell me it would get better; I needed an orthopaedic surgeon to open it up with his skillful use of a scalpel, set the bone, install a screw to hold it in place and stitch it up to close the incision.



I am grateful for people who put their arm around my shoulders and encourage me when I am down. I also thank the Lord for family, friends and mentors who care enough to give me a kick in the behind when I need it!

A man was recovering from surgery when the surgical nurse appeared and asked him how he was feeling. “I’m okay but I didn’t like the four letter-words the doctor used in surgery,” he answered.

“What did he say?” asked the nurse.

The man replied, “Oops!”

Paul raises the bar for how we speak in Ephesians 4:29-31:

29 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. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. NIV

The traditional approach to speech focuses on avoiding certain words or phrases that are particularly offensive – which can differ with cultures and generations. I admit that I find certain words to be offensive – particularly the flippant references to God, Jesus and hell. Such language is being used more

commonly by people who say they are followers of Christ and I find it disturbing.

I propose a different approach to how we monitor our speech. Let's go deeper than keeping a mental checklist of words we should avoid. Rather than labelling certain words as "taboo" because they are offensive in the ears of a certain culture or generation, let's use our words to focus on building others up and adding value to them. This is actually a higher standard to live by than the traditional approach.

Jesus calls us to die to ourselves and to what people think of us so we are free and focused on what He thinks and says. This requires a fundamental shift from saying things that we hope will impress or entertain people to saying things that build up and benefit others. This changes our motivation from using our words to serve *us* to using our words to serve *others*. What is bouncing around in our brains eventually finds the doorway through our lips. Rather than straining with self-effort to guard our tongues, let's pursue excellence in our speech by soaking our thoughts in what is excellent. By walking with the Holy Spirit each day our talking will reflect the Holy Spirit.

Will you commit to using your words to build up others? Will you start by filling your mind with thoughts of blessing and prayer for others?

Your words can:

**Hurt**

Or

**Heal**

My conclusion is the "old adage" with a "new twist": "Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will hurt or heal me."

Close with prayer.

Close by showing "TobyMac - Speak Life" at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZeBv9r92VQ0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZeBv9r92VQ0).

Now go and speak it!