

Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones But Words Hurt Worse

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Identity, Purpose, Belonging / Kind / 1 Peter 2:21–25; Proverbs 12:18; John 7:53–8:11

See July 31st, 2024 Bible in a Year

Pg. 150-151 (Helen) Who Am I Lord? Language is important

August 8, 2024 Bible in a Year (Corinthians passage about Paul)

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Notes

You is Kind, You is Smart, You is Important from the movie The Help

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” is a saying I’m sure we’ve all heard, particularly as a kid, but one I’ve never quite understood because, well, it’s not true.

It was hard to pinpoint the exact origins of this saying. It’s an English-language children's rhyme used as a defense against name-calling and verbal bullying, intended to increase resiliency, avoid physical retaliation, and/or to remain calm and indifferent. The full rhyme is usually a variant of: Stick and stones may break my bones but words shall never hurt me. The saying as far as they know goes back as early as 1830 to Alexander William Kinglake in his *Eaothen* when he used golden sticks and stones. It appeared in *The Christian Recorder*, a publication of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, on March 22, 1862, where it was presented as an "old adage" in this form: Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never

harm me.

As a kid I really didn't break bones, or at least not in comparison to my siblings. While they each have broken just about every bone a kid usually breaks, legs, back, yes they each broke their back, I just broke my baby toe and well as an adult fractured my foot. Two weeks before giving birth to Madi I remember my foot giving out on me and hurting, but it went away in a day or so, so I didn't think much about it. Fast forward two weeks, Madi was 11 days late and there were still no signs of labour so I went to the hospital to be induced. They started the induction process, sent me home, at which point Mark and I went for a walk. On the way back from the walk I reached a point when I was in severe pain, not from labour, but from my foot. Mark helped me hobble back to the house, thankfully we weren't far from home by that point and I laid low the rest of the day. The next day the induction hadn't taken and so we were back in the hospital, but this time they were going to keep me and we were going to have a baby that day. It was when I was in labour at the hospital that they mentioned to walk around the halls to try and help get my labour back going, to which I mentioned, I can't, my foot is in severe pain. Fast forward hours later, I was holding a beautiful baby girl, who made a grand entrance into this world, and then was being wheeled down to X-ray to find out about my foot. Sure enough, fractured. While I remember the

pain of the foot (though labour pain was way worse), and I remember the nuisance of wearing a walking boot, particularly with a toddler and now newborn at home and how difficult (or impossible) it was to walk up the stairs with the boot while holding Madi, it's not something that I think back on too much, or has too much impact on my life, but words are a different story.

There was one year of school which I didn't particularly like, around the age of 10. I remember one day the teacher being gone and we had a substitute. While I don't remember what book we were reading, the substitute teacher read out loud to us and the next day the teacher called on me to explain what was read the previous day. I don't remember exactly what I said, but it must not have been what he wanted for he called me out in front of the whole class saying that I must not have been paying attention, which wasn't the case at all. In fact, as I have become an adult I recognize that I am not an auditory learner so I don't understand well when someone reads to me. If you give me the book to read along with I do much better (or if I can read it myself). This is one reason, why, as a teacher, I have tried, though probably unsuccessful at times, but nevertheless it was always my goal to never make a child feel inferior in a class for however they needed to learn. To never say unkind words to them, or about them, for we are all children of God, who learn

differently, interact differently, all with a different story, but all made in the image of God. Words have power.

The passage for today comes from John 7:53-8:11.

I have loved this story for as long as I can remember. Probably why when I took the course, Theology of Love, and read the book, Love is an Orientation, the following quote really resonated with me, “It’s the Holy Spirit’s job to convict, God’s job to judge, and our job, as Christians, to love.” So often in this world we point out what people are doing that is wrong, or what they shouldn’t be doing, instead of our focus being pointing people to Jesus. When was the last time you were actually willed into doing something (or to not doing something) by negative or unkind words?

This reminds me of a time at school when after teaching about the brain and how drugs and alcohol impact the brain the students would declare I’m never going to do that...at which point I would remind them that as they get older they would forget this talk, or peer pressure would kick in. When they saw some high school students smoking a few of my students would hollar over to them, shaming them for smoking, at which point I would point out that shaming isn’t the way to go. Some of them could potentially become smokers in the future, and we don’t know the circumstances behind why these youth were smoking, but shaming most likely wouldn’t make them

stop, instead knowledge, love, and kind words could.

We've heard the saying, walk a mile in their shoes, when in fact we really can't. I can only imagine what it's like in some circumstances, and even then I can't always imagine, as reality can be much scarier than our imagination. I don't know what it's like to be homeless, addicted to drugs and alcohol so much that I would do just about anything for it, forced into prostitution, or believing that is the only way to support your family, being physically, mentally, or sexually abused as a kid or adult, what it feels like to be a minority in a system that doesn't always think about you, and the list goes on. I don't know what it's like in those scenarios. And while it's easy to say a person just needs to do this or that, or whatever that may be, what instead does a kind thought or gesture do, to support and show Jesus' kindness throughout the world instead?

Think of how kind words have inspired you to do things over the years. Jesus only uses kind words towards this woman, he doesn't shame her but extols grace.

One commentary writes, "The story of the woman caught in adultery is a magnificent example of Jesus dealing with his critics and at the same time dealing graciously with someone in need. Moreover, it is a story in which anyone burdened by sin and guilt can find consolation and yet recognize that moral standards are not diminished in the touch of mercy. It is a story that touches the reader's

heart.”

It begins with the chief priests and Pharisees (including Nicodemus) and maybe their officers who had just returned from their unsuccessful attempt to arrest Jesus. They exit for the night only to return together again with Jesus and the woman.

There are many questions one can ask about this story upfront...What happened to the man in the story...why was he not brought before Jesus as well? Was the woman married or merely engaged? What law is being cited and what was the state of the law in Jesus' day? Whose responsibility was it to execute punishment? In the Torah stoning was the punishment designated for the breach of an engagement. And in such cases both the man and the woman were to be put to death by stoning. In the case of a married woman's unfaithfulness both the woman and the guilty man were likewise to be put to death, but the method of death remained unspecified. You see, who, but God, knows the whole story of this woman. The story seems like a set-up, where mercy and justice are made to be opposing principles. To choose either one would call for the condemnation of Jesus because he would be viewed on the one hand of being against the law of Moses and on the other of advocating mob action involving capital punishment. Instead of falling into the trap of answering them, Jesus stooped down and used his finger to write or

draw on the ground.

I would love to know what Jesus writes on the ground. There have been numerous hypotheses, including some saying the Ten Commandments, or perhaps Jeremiah 17:13 “Lord, you are the hope of Israel; all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water.” Or maybe Deuteronomy 17:6–7 “On the evidence of two or three witnesses the death sentence shall be executed; a person must not be put to death on the evidence of only one witness. The hands of the witnesses shall be the first raised against the person to execute the death penalty, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst,” which was saying that the charges needed more than one witness. It’s not mentioned, so we don’t know. However, an individual offered this as an explanation, coming from Eastern cultural sensitivity which I give to you know, “by writing on the ground Jesus redirects the shaming gaze of the accusers away from the woman to himself, an act respecting her dignity. Jesus thus establishes solidarity with her in taking the accusing gaze upon himself. His writing on the ground gives time for the accusers to cool down, feel the guilt of their own sins, and melt before the integrity and love of Jesus.”

No matter what he was writing they kept at him. Jesus then

says, Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,” and then continues writing. If the woman has indeed been “caught in the act of committing adultery” by the necessary two witnesses, and if the witnesses are indeed present (which would have to be the case), then Jesus is inviting one of them to do what the law requires. If for any reason the actual witnesses were not present, then anyone who picked up a stone in response to Jesus’ words would in effect be taking on himself the role of witness against the woman. The law required that such witnesses not be “malicious” or “lying” witnesses, “without fault” as Jesus says, as simply personal integrity before God in the matter at hand. That is, whoever takes on himself the role of witness-executioner must be confident before God that he is doing the right thing—hardly an unreasonable demand.

The situation now becomes very different. The legalists hear what Jesus has said and leave. Jesus was not ruling out a critical evaluation of sin. Jesus saw what they were trying to do, self-righteous individuals who were full of judgement, ready to kill another for their own evil ends. Jesus saw right through it and judged it for what it was. Again, “It’s the Holy Spirit’s job to convict, God’s job to judge, and our job to love.”

Jesus’ words are gentler. Jesus then asks the woman two questions: “Woman, where are they? Has no one

condemned you?” The first concerned the presence of her accusers, and the second was whether or not anyone had officially condemned her. She replies “No one, sir.” He then says, “Neither do I condemn.” Jesus’ response wasn’t just a simple acquittal but to sin no more, to allow her encounter with Jesus to transform her life, turning away from sin. She was being given the opportunity to start life anew.

In the words of a commentator, this story suffered nonrecognition/nonacceptance for so long. Was it simple because it was unknown?... the Scandinavian scholar H. Riesenfeld, may have stumbled onto a reasonable explanation. In the centuries following the ministry of Jesus, the early church developed strict rules of discipline. Not until the fourth century with the passing of the persecutions and the easing of the patterns of reinstatement following sin was the church in the west more open to less stringent means of penance. In the earlier periods, when the church was forced by outside social pressures to maintain a self-protective stance, grace and forgiveness often were subject to legalistic interpretations, just as in the times when the Jewish rabbis felt threats from Syria or Rome. Although the story hardly promotes sin (cf. 8:11), fearful people often find the lack of strict rules to be threatening.

But this little story captures magnificently both the gracious, forgiving spirit of Jesus and his firm call to the

transformation of life. This text is divinely inspired and fully authoritative for life.

If you have ever watched the movie, *The Help*, you may remember the scenario which happens a couple times between an African-American maid and nanny Aibileen Clark, played by Viola Davis, and May Mobley, a young white girl she helps raise. In her role as a nurturing caregiver, Aibileen attempts to speak encouragement, value and worth into the life of the young girl by having her repeat several phrases along with her, including, “You is smart, you is kind, you is important.” Words of affirmation.

Dr. Steven Scoggin of Wake Forest Baptist Health talks about the bio-psycho-social factors that affect the health and well-being of every human. He speaks of the value and importance of community indicating that a child raised in social isolation will suffer life-long health concerns equally damaging as problems brought about in the life of someone who is a life-long smoker. In other words, emotional health and words of affirmation go a long way in bringing wellness to someone’s life. Many individuals could be greatly helped by encountering people who are kind to them and who listen to them. People who are compassionate, kind, and non-judgmental positively impact an individual, just as the opposite has a negative impact. Research has shown that whenever someone encounters a person who is kind and listening, there is a

reaction that physically changes the brain for the better. Have you ever noticed that certain people seem to always make you feel better? Their compassion and grace actually cause your brain to think and feel differently.

Working in schools and in the public I have seen how words have an impact. Unkind words, gossip, false accusations have a negative impact on relationships - friendships, families, and communities. And they can tear these relationships apart.

I leave you with this:

You're standing in a bank. You're in line waiting for the next teller to become available when you see a man walk into the bank. He's got a visible firearm, and he begins to give people instructions. You see a second man. He walks right past you and all the other people waiting in line to talk to the tellers. He opens that little, swinging half door (I've never understood the point of that door anyway—who's it going to stop?), and he walks over to the safe and begins to open it. A third man has a handful of empty bags. He begins to fill up each bag. Once the bags are full, he leaves out the back door of the bank. What's going through your mind?

Now picture that scenario with a few more details. The man who's filling up his bags is a custodian, and the bags he's carrying are garbage bags. The reason he's exiting out

the back of the bank is because that's where the dumpsters are. The man who marched by you and all the other customers, he's the bank manager. He opens the safe every morning. It's part of his job. The man with the visible firearm is the bank security guard. The details make a difference, don't they? Imagine if you attempted to walk past the tellers and open the safe. They'd call 911, slap handcuffs on you, and throw you in the slammer! We don't have the authority to do what the bank manager does. In John 8 Jesus Christ makes clear he has the authority to do and to say everything he's done and said. We often don't know the whole story looking from the outside, and even when we think we might know the story we don't, and we certainly don't always know the intentions. So, be as Jesus to those around you, compassionate and full of grace. You may have heard the saying...."In a world where you can be anything, be kind." This simple message can be forgotten. Let people see Jesus in you. Remember, "It's the Holy Spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge, and our job to love."