

Why We Should Not Call Others Ugly Names

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-26

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Here's what happens. Gradually, ever so slowly, inch-by-inch, or four letter word-by-four letter word, something that is not acceptable becomes normalized. At first it is startling. We react negatively. But then it happens again and again and again until we are no longer startled, no longer react negatively, and it has become normalized.

The classic southern novel *Gone with the Wind* was published in 1936, the year my mother was born. The movie followed three years later. It is a historical romance story set against the backdrop of the Civil War and the early period of Reconstruction. The dashing Clark Gable played Rhett Butler and Vivien Leigh played the strong willed Scarlett O'Hara. At the end of the story, Rhett Butler had finally given up on their tumultuous relationship. But by then Scarlett had fallen in love with him, and she pleaded, "Where shall I go? What shall I do?"

If you are over forty, you know Rhett Butler's response and the uproar it caused. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," he responded.

In 1939, that four-letter word was a violation of the Motion Picture Production Code. What Rhett Butler said to Scarlett O'Hara on screen in 1939 was scandalous. I remember when I was a child hearing my parents and grandparents still talking about the use that four-letter word in that movie.

I wonder what my grandparents would think if they saw a movie today, where gratuitous profanity and crassness are ubiquitous.

Here's what happened. Gradually, ever so slowly, four letter word-by-four letter word, it became normalized. Yes, it startled at first. Our society reacted negatively. But then it happened again and again and again, and today we hardly even bat an eye.

This is happening again right before our eyes. Most of us were taught as children not to call other people ugly names. Stupid. Retarded. Idiot. Dummy. All of these and others were prohibited in my home, probably yours too. It was simply inappropriate and unacceptable to call other people ugly names. When Donald Trump first called Hillary Clinton “Crooked Hillary,” I was taken aback. Then came Lyin’ Ted for Ted Cruz. Then there was Little Marco for Marco Rubio. Mr. Magoo for Jeff Sessions. Pocahontas for Elizabeth Warren. Shifty Schiff for Adam Schiff. And many others.

And, of course, many of them responded with ugly names for Mr. Trump, calling him Don the Con, Benedict Donald, and Little-Hands Donald. Someone called him Spanky. I’m kind of afraid to look into that one.

I know the temptation is to smile when we hear these names. Yes, they’re funny. They’re intended to be. But I want to call out this behavior today as wrong. There was a time, not long ago, when this kind of behavior from our most senior elected officials was deemed unacceptable. Sure we had the rogue politician here or there who would get into the mud. But it was not approved and encouraged. I know what my grandmother would say about this kind of behavior: the same thing she used to say to me. It is wrong. It is disrespectful. It is demeaning. It is an inappropriate expression of anger. It is an absence of love. And I’m here today to say that this ugly name-calling is beneath us as a people, it is hurting our nation, and we must not participate in it. We’ve been taught better, and I don’t mean by my grandmother. Jesus taught us better.

The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, represents the heart of the teachings of Jesus. I’ve said that if I could have only three chapters of the Bible, I would pick Matthew 5, 6, and 7 because those three chapters capture the essence of the message of Jesus. In our text for today from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked with his followers about anger and name-calling. Some argue that Jesus changed the Law of Moses here, but I would disagree. He didn’t change it; he reached in and pulled out its essence, its heart, its most fundamental intention. While sitting on the side of that mountain, like one of their prophets of

old, Jesus declared, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to the judgment.’”

They all knew that because they knew the Law of Moses. That was one of the Big Ten: “Thou shalt not kill.” Now, look at what Jesus does next. He doesn’t throw out the law. He “reaffirms” and “radicalizes” it. (M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*)

But I say to that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire.

In my study Bible back in my office, I have a note written in the margin here. It came from one of my seminary professors. I think it was the late Dr. Harold Songer, whom I had for advanced New Testament. He said this verse needs to be read this way, “But I say to you that if you hold onto your anger against a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.” So it’s not just a matter of becoming angry. We all get angry. Even Jesus got angry. What he’s talking about here is holding onto anger, kindling it, enjoying it, refusing to let it go, and thereby giving it an opportunity to explode.

Notice the progression of the anger and the judgment in this teaching. First, Jesus describes being angry with a brother or sister, choosing to hold onto that anger. If his followers did that, he said they would be held accountable by a local court, probably a court of twenty-three peers. The next level of anger and judgment is using insulting names. Your translation may use the term *Raca*, which is a term of contempt. His followers who used insulting names would be brought before the highest court of the land, the Sanhedrin. The third and most serious level of anger and judgment is to call someone a fool. If his followers called someone a fool, Jesus said they would be liable to *Gehenna*, the hell of fire.

Was this important to Jesus? You bet it was. It was more important than worship, he said. If you are at worship and remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave worship

and be reconciled. If you are on your way to a court hearing, even at that last hour, seek to be reconciled with your brother or sister.

So why was this so important to Jesus? It's in the Sermon on the Mount, the heart of his teaching. It's more important than worship, he said. It could make us vulnerable to the hell of fire. Here's why it's so important. God's desire is not that we just not kill each other, not murder one other. That's too easy. Most of us will never murder anyone. Jesus knew that God's desire for creation was higher than that. God's desire was that there be a people who are not driven by hostility, who are not controlled by anger, a people who do not bully and abuse others. God desires a people who truly live in love and respect. Our relationships should be fueled by love, not hostility. Here's why. Human relationships are of greatest value. Calling someone a fool, an idiot, retarded, or any other ugly name undermines human relationships. Ugly name-calling is clearly in contradiction to the teachings of Jesus, and we must not participate in it, even if it is so common that people hardly even bat an eye.

Let me tell you about a conversation I see in my mind. Call me naïve if you will, and maybe I am. I prefer to think that I'm an idealist. But wouldn't this be great? It is a conversation between President Donald Trump and Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

President Trump takes the initiative in this conversation and says, "Nancy, I want to humbly apologize to you. I've said some things about you that were mean and unnecessary. I need to set a better example for our country. I'm here today to ask for your forgiveness and to repair our relationship for the good of the country. Nancy, would you forgive me and allow us to start over?"

In this conversation in my mind, Speaker Pelosi responds, "Mr. Trump, you're not the only one at fault. I shouldn't have torn up your State of the Union speech. I've called you plenty of mean and ugly names, too. I accept your apology and ask that you forgive me, too. I also want to repair our relationship for the good of the country. Donald, would you forgive me, so that we can start over?"

Do you think that will ever happen? Probably not. But imagine

what it could do to Congress, if Congress then followed their lead. Bipartisanship, for the sake of our country, for the sake of the world, could return. That could filter into the states, into the economy, into our schools, into our homes. Into the world.

But it's probably not going to happen, is it? Which means the burden of living in love and respect falls upon you and me. It's what we're called to be. It's what we've been challenged by Jesus to do. We cannot control what happens in Washington, D.C., but we can control what happens in here. Calling others ugly names is beneath us. Let us not participate in it.

Closing Prayer

Lord, it is very tempting to jump on the bandwagon, to wallow in the mud, and ignore what you clearly taught. Forgive us and help us to live up to our calling. Amen.