

A Simpler Christmas

My children aren't supposed to know there is an oversized American Girl Place shopping bag stuffed with presents stashed away in my bedroom closet. I have a mountain of bargain finds, admired goodies and toys to die for tucked away on a shelf. I found that shopping ahead spreads the financial burden throughout the year and helps me avoid the last-minute holiday rush.

Sounds like a plan, doesn't it? I thought so, too, until four years ago. Something happened that made me rethink my supposedly brilliant strategy.

It was the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, but I felt like a louse! The tree looked bulimic—only I was the one who had binged. Brilliantly wrapped packages were bulging from every available nook and cranny.

I slumped to the floor and thought: *We have only two children. There's enough here for 10!*

My husband and I stared at each other. We realized things had gotten out of hand. We had to ask ourselves: What message are we giving our children?

One by one, we started dismantling the swollen pile. This present can wait for a birthday, this one for next Christmas, this one for a special reward for hard work.

Finally the stack looked sensible.

Right then and there, we made a decision. In the future, Christmas gifts would be limited to three types: 1) a gift really desired, 2) a needed item or 3) something educational. Of course, our children hated the idea and hoped we would eventually come to our senses.

We haven't.

And we've seen a change. No longer is Christmas an endless list of "wants." There is a new emphasis on cherished gifts. This represents a stark contrast to the disturbing trend among kids today to feel entitled to get whatever they want, whenever they want it.

As I listen to children move through the hallways of our house, I hear the chatter of "more." "We have more videos than you." "I have a CD player in my room." "You don't have your own phone line?" "I'm asking for a laptop." "You need a cellphone to look important."

They get it from their parents. My favorite is the mother who proudly boasts that her daughter will outdo everyone in the neighborhood. She will have the best of everything—before everyone else. The daughter knows this strategy and is horrified if anyone beats her to the material punch.

Not understanding her conscious intention to overload her daughter with "stuff," I naively asked, "Aren't you worried you're spoiling her?" The blank stare she gave me was enough to answer my question.

One summer the hot ticket was a scooter. Everyone on our block ran to the stores to buy one. My kids asked, but they knew what was coming: "Tell me again why I should run to the store to buy you a \$100 item?"

Materialism not only distorts the meaning of Christmas but also creates ungrateful kids. It's time to stop the madness. Instead of a new scooter, take your kids to a soup kitchen and let them serve. Visit a homeless shelter or a hospital children's ward and put things in perspective.

I know what I am saying isn't new, but we need to hear it regularly. It's so easy to indulge our kids this time of year. We need to examine our motives.

Is our overindulgence related to guilt from being absent or unavailable? Is it an attempt to communicate love, compete with others, create an identity or look successful? Is it the result of idol worship, a lack of self-restraint or misguided thinking?

When I see kids quickly open presents and throw them off to the side without even a thank you, I know something is wrong. When little Suzie tells me Christmas was no fun because she didn't get what she wanted, I am concerned. The Grinch hasn't stolen Christmas; our ungratefulness has.

Christmas is about God giving His Son as a glorious gift to mankind. Don't clutter that gift with so many others that He gets lost in the fray. This season, teach your children to cherish the gift they already have—Jesus.

3 Ways to Kill a Relationship

Being unduly critical of others is a behavior pattern that not only destroys our relationships but also blinds us to our own weaknesses.

Much torment comes to people's lives because of judgmental attitudes, criticism and suspicion. Multitudes of relationships are destroyed by these enemies.

In the area of judgment, the mind is the battlefield. Thoughts—just “I think”—can be the tool the devil uses to keep a person lonely. People do not enjoy being around someone who needs to voice an opinion about everything.

Being judgmental, opinionated and critical are three sure ways to see relationships dissolve. Satan, of course, wants you and

me to be lonely and rejected, so he attacks our minds in these areas.

“Judging” Defined

According to *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, one of the Greek words translated *judge* is partially defined as “to form an opinion” and is cross-referenced to the word *sentence*. God is the only one who has the right to condemn or sentence; therefore, when we pass judgment on another, we are, in a certain sense, setting ourselves up as God in his life. That puts a little “godly fear” in me. I have a lot of nerve, but I am not interested in trying to be God!

These areas were once a major problem in my personality. I was critical because I always seemed to see what was wrong instead of what was right.

Some personalities are more given to this fault than others. Some of the more jovial personality types do not want to see anything but the “happy” or “fun” things in life, so they really don’t pay much attention to the things that could spoil their enjoyment.

The more melancholy personality or the controlling personality often sees what is wrong first; generally, people with this type of personality are generous in sharing their negative opinions and outlook with others.

Thousands of things we encounter every day are neither right nor wrong but are simply personal choices—choices people have a right to make on their own without outside interference.

My husband and I are extremely different in our approach to many things. How to decorate a house would be one of those things. If we go out to shop for household things together, it seems Dave always likes one thing, and I like something else. His opinion is just as good as mine, and mine is just as good as his; they are simply different.

It took me years to understand that there wasn't something wrong with Dave just because he did not agree with me. Of course, I usually let him know that I thought there was something wrong with him. Obviously, my attitude caused much friction between us and hurt our relationship.

The Problem Is Pride

Judgment and criticism are actually the fruit of a deeper problem—pride. The Bible repeatedly warns us about being high-minded (see, for example, Romans 12:3).

Whenever we excel in an area, it is only because God has given us a gift of grace for it. If we have an exaggerated opinion of ourselves, it causes us to look down on others and value them as “less than” we are.

This type of attitude or thinking is detestable to the Lord, and it opens many doors for the enemy in our lives. We must have a holy fear of pride and be very careful of judging others or of being critical of them (Gal. 6:1-3).

Each of us belongs to God, and even if we have weaknesses, He is able to make us stand and to justify us. We answer to God, not to each other; therefore, we are not to judge one another in a critical way (Rom. 14:4).

The devil stays very busy assigning demons to place judgmental, critical thoughts in people's minds. I can remember when it was entertaining for me to sit in the park or the shopping mall and simply watch all the people go by as I formed a mental opinion of each of them—their clothing, hairstyles, companions and so on.

We cannot always prevent ourselves from having opinions, but we do not have to express them. I believe we can even grow to the point where we do not have so many opinions, and those we do have are not of a critical nature.

I frequently tell myself, "Joyce, it's none of your business." A major problem is brewing in your mind when you ponder your opinion until it becomes a judgment.

The problem grows bigger the more you think about it until you begin to express it to others or even to the one you're judging. It has then become explosive and has the ability to do a great deal of harm in the realm of relationship as well as in the spiritual realm. You may be able to save yourself future problems by simply learning to say, "This is none of my business."

Judgment and criticism were rampant in my family, so I "grew up with them," so to speak. I wanted to do things God's way, but I couldn't. It took many years of misery before I learned about the strongholds in my mind that had to be dealt with before my behavior could change.

Matthew 7:1-5 are some of the classic Scriptures on the subject of judgment and criticism. When you are having trouble with your mind in this area, use these Scriptures and others as weapons against the devil who is attempting to build a stronghold in your mind. He may be operating out of a stronghold that has already been there for many years.

Sowing and Reaping

The Scriptures plainly tell us that we will reap what we sow (Matt. 7:1-2; Gal. 6:7). This also applies to the mental realm.

We can sow and reap an attitude as well as a crop or an investment. Many times we are reaping in our lives what we have previously sown into the life of another.

The devil loves to keep us busy, mentally judging the faults of others. That way, we never see or deal with what is wrong with us!

We cannot change others; only God can. We cannot change ourselves either, but we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit and allow Him to do the work.

When we have our thoughts and conversation on what is wrong with everyone else, we are usually being deceived about our own conduct. Therefore, Jesus commanded that we not concern ourselves with what is wrong with others when we have so much wrong with ourselves (Matt. 7:3-5). Allow God to deal with you first, and then you will learn the scriptural way of helping your brother grow in his Christian walk.

Besides reaping judgment ourselves when we criticize others, the Scriptures tell us that we ourselves do the same things for which we criticize others (Rom. 2:1). The Lord gave me a good example once to help me understand this principle.

I was pondering why we would do something ourselves and think it was perfectly all right but judge someone else who does it. The Lord said, "Joyce, you look at yourself through rose-colored glasses, but you look at everyone else through a magnifying glass."

We make excuses for our own behavior, but when someone else does the same thing we do, we are often merciless. Doing unto others as we want them to do to us (Matt. 7:12) is a good life principle that will prevent a lot of judgment and criticism, if followed.

A judgmental mind is an offshoot of a negative mind—thinking about what is wrong with an individual instead of what is right. Being positive and not negative will benefit others, but you will benefit more than anyone.

Be Suspicious of Suspicion

First Corinthians 13:7 reads, "Love bears up under anything and everything that comes, is ever ready to believe the best of every person" (AMP).

I can honestly say that obedience to this Scripture has always been a challenge for me. I was brought up to be suspicious and to distrust everyone. In addition, I had several very disappointing experiences with people, not only before I became an active Christian but afterward as well. Meditating on the components of love and realizing that love always believes the best has helped me greatly to develop a new mind-set.

When your mind has been poisoned or when Satan has gained strongholds in your mind, it has to be renewed according to God's Word. You renew it by learning the Word and meditating on it—pondering, muttering to yourself and thinking on it.

We have the wonderful Holy Spirit in us to remind us when our thoughts are going in the wrong direction. God does this for me when I am having suspicious thoughts instead of loving thoughts.

The natural man thinks, "If I trust people, I'll be taken advantage of." Perhaps, but the benefits will far outweigh any negative experiences.

Trust and faith bring joy to life and help relationships grow to their maximum potential. Suspicion cripples a relationship and usually destroys it.

God condemns judgment, criticism and suspicion, and so should we. Love what God loves, and hate what He hates. Allow what He allows, and disallow what He disallows.

A balanced attitude is always the best policy. That doesn't mean we are not to use wisdom and discernment in our dealings with others. We don't have to throw open our lives to everyone we meet, giving every person we encounter a chance to crush us. On the other hand, we don't have to look at everyone with a negative, suspicious eye, always expecting to be taken advantage of by others.

One time after I had been involved in a disappointing church situation, God brought John 2:23-25 to my attention. It speaks of Jesus' relationship with His disciples.

It plainly says that Jesus did not trust Himself to them. It does not say that He was suspicious of them or that He had no trust in them; it explains that because He understood human nature, He did not trust Himself to them in an unbalanced way.

I had been hurt badly in the situation at church because I had become too involved with a group of ladies and had gotten out of balance. I had been leaning on the ladies in this group and placing in them a trust that belongs only to God.

We can go only so far in any human relationship. If we go beyond wisdom, trouble will brew, and we will be hurt.

Some people think they have discernment when actually they are just suspicious. Suspicion comes out of the unrenewed mind; discernment comes out of the renewed spirit.

True spiritual discernment will provoke prayer, not gossip. If a genuine problem is being discerned by a genuine gift, it will follow the scriptural pattern for dealing with it, not fleshly ways that only spread and compound the problem.

Pleasant Words Are Sweet

“The mind of the wise instructs his mouth, and adds learning and persuasiveness to his lips. Pleasant words are as a honeycomb, sweet to the mind and healing to the body” (Prov. 16:23-24).

Words and thoughts are like bone and marrow—so close, it is hard to divide them (Heb. 4:12).

Our thoughts are silent words that only we and the Lord hear, but those words affect our inner man, our health, our joy and our attitude. The things we think on often come out of our

mouths and sometimes make us look foolish.

Judgment, criticism and suspicion never bring joy. Jesus said that He came in order that we might have and enjoy life (John 10:10). Begin to operate in the mind of Christ, and you will step into a whole new realm of living.

Read a companion devotional.

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Are Your Words Loaded With the Spirit?

There is an indescribable quality about words, even when they are printed, but more so when they are spoken. Words are chariots in which the quality of the heart and mind ride forth to other souls.

The dominant heart-quality of a person will possess and accompany his words with absolute precision. If the spirit of a man is superficial, or narrow, or timeserving, or selfish, or trifling, these qualities will pervade his words, in spite of all the seriousness or sanctity he may try to put into them.

If, on the other hand, his heart is large and filled with the broad, tender love of Jesus and compassion for others, then the simplest expressions, which may seem commonplace, will be freighted with these qualities. All words are loaded with the quality of the soul out of which they proceed.

It is eternally impossible for God to utter one word that is not loaded with divinity; it is equally impossible for the devil to utter one word which does not, in some way, contain a lie.

Words are like eyes. Some eyes are inquisitive; others are pleading; others are brave; others are searching; others are mild and tender; and still others are low and mean. There is an invisible stream of soul-quality that flows out from people's eyes, and there is no way in the world to change the quality of that stream except by changing the eye, and the only way to change the eye is to change the immortal spirit that looks out through the eye.

This same thing is true of words. Our words are the eyeballs of the heart, in which others see the quality of our minds.

The apostle Paul speaks of our words being seasoned with salt (see Col. 4:6), and Jesus tells us that we must "have salt in [our]selves" (Mark 9:50, KJV). Salt is a type of the indwelling Christ; and it is when we are salted through and through with the blessed Holy Spirit that our words will be seasoned with the real Christ-life.

Our words cannot be loaded with the Holy Spirit after they leave our lips. If God is in them, they must proceed out of a Holy Spirit element in us. The drops of blood or the tears that you may shed all contain salt; but that salt is in the stomach and the heart before it is in the blood-drops or the teardrops.

In like manner, if our words have a savor of life and power in them, they must get that quality from the inner depths of our spirits before they drop from our lips or our pens. Jesus teaches that our words reveal our heart-character and says: "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" (Matt. 12:37).

There are several characteristics that can be attributed to

“loaded” words:

1. Words spoken or written by the Holy Spirit will be loaded with light. There will be a transparency and straightforward simplicity in them like that of clear glass. They will not be spoken for ostentation, or for sound, or in guile, or with double meaning. Words spoken for such purposes are opaque rather than clear.

Many a sermon is so preached, and many a religious book so written, that instead of revealing the truth to the simplest understanding, it obscures it. The only proper end of words is to make a thought easily and perfectly intelligible, and when the Holy Spirit inspires them, they are like balls of clear glass, in which the very core of the thought can be known.

2. Words loaded with the Spirit have an inexpressible warmth and magnetism in them. They seem to quiver with a heavenly electricity; they vitalize the mind; they penetrate the understanding; there is a love-quality in them, like the pungent, penetrating heat of sweet spices and aromatic oils. A piece of cedarwood or sandalwood will give forth a sweet, pungent odor for hundreds of years; and so there is a hot, burning flavor in the words which have come from minds aflame with divine love.

It often happens that persons devoid of the interior flame of the Holy Spirit try to put a pathos or an unction into their prayers or sermons or conversations; but in spite of all their efforts, their words are insipid, milk and water, chilly and powerless, because they come not from an interior furnace but from a painted fire, which dazzles the eye and freezes the hearer.

The Holy Spirit alone can put into our words that burning, warming sensation that kindles other souls into fervor. Notice, when some person speaks in a religious meeting under the melting, burning love of Jesus, how their words strike the

mind like a warm south wind in early spring; notice how the congregation listens to catch every word; how the fiery stream of speech will evoke a pleasant smile, or a flowing tear, or awaken conviction, or a sense of joy; every mind in the congregation that loves the truth will be wide awake; there is a warmth in the expression of the people's eyes, and if you could see into their intellects, it would resemble a flower garden blossoming into bright and glowing thoughts, and their affections melted into sweetness.

Those burning words are being shot like red-hot bullets from a divine magazine of a fire-baptized heart. In comparison with such words, all human eloquence is like cold moonbeams on a frozen sea.

3. Holy Spirit-loaded words have a divine fitness in them with regard to time and place and matter. God often arranges to have His Spirit-led children speak words in a particular set of circumstances, or at a particular time, and in a particular tone of voice that were not premeditated by the speaker and that accomplish vast and everlasting results. The people they are directed to will later say, "You spoke a certain word to me years ago, under such and such circumstances, that made a great change in my life."

Take the case of a young lady physician who has packed her trunk to leave a certain camp meeting. She is invited to lead a young people's meeting. An evangelist standing by, in an unpremeditated way, simply says: "Sister, the Lord wants you here; go, unpack your trunk, and lead that meeting." The words are loaded; they pierce the heart. The young lady leads the meeting, and from that time on becomes a holiness evangelist.

A certain man is holding a meeting in North Georgia. A brother steps up and says: "I met you 10 years ago in Augusta. When I was seeking sanctification and walking in the street, I asked you several questions. You simply answered me: 'Brother, just

leave yourself in the hands of Jesus, and He will answer all your questions.' Your words were loaded, and in a few moments I was in spiritual liberty."

There are millions of instances in which words have been spoken under the guidance of the Holy Spirit just in the nick of time to accomplish great results.

4. Loaded words are durable; they have in them the element of immortality. Commonplace words glide away from us by the million; but certain words, appropriate to our needs and charged with the Spirit, bury themselves in our memories and remain fresh with us throughout life.

If we want our prayers, or sermons, or testimonies, or written words, to abide in everlasting fruitfulness, they must be in the order of divine will and under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. Some persons try purposely to speak wise and appropriate and powerful words. But all such is a failure.

You can't speak loaded words by trying to; it is only by having the very fountains of our being so melted and filled and united with the Holy Spirit that, without any premeditation, every stray shot and even our ordinary conversation will be just as full of holy gravity and fiery truth as our prayers and sermons. The power must be generic and continually flowing through us from the indwelling Christ.

A trifling preacher during the week cannot speak fiery and weighty words on Sunday. Let us in secret prayer bathe ourselves so long in the bright and warm presence of Jesus that when we go forth we shall unconsciously carry in our manners and words that imitable quality of life and durability which can come alone from the Eternal One.

If in the past our words have been lacking in the divine aroma of grace, let us go to the fountain and, by persevering prayer, get in such abiding relation with the real source of all holiness as to make our very words conductors of heavenly

electricity. Our infinite, loving God will gladly utilize any little humble one on this earth as a channel of holy fire, if he will utterly yield himself up to His will and the current of the Holy Spirit.

Read a companion devotional.

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