

FOCUS ON FAITH

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COLLATERAL DAMAGE

I'm sure like me, there have been plenty of times when you've wished you hadn't said something; when you know you should have bitten your lip and controlled the urge to *"give someone a piece of your mind"*.

I don't often remember my dreams but last night I had this vivid vision of a situation in which I was being confronted by someone I know (I definitely won't tell you who) and they were having a right royal go at me. It seemed that years of pent-up frustration and vitriol were being released in my direction – and the odd thing was that most of it had nothing to do with me!

Thankfully the dream ended and I woke up – not quite in a cold sweat – before I responded. Perhaps my subconscious was trying to protect me from my potential reaction!

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The trouble is though I know that there have been times when I've allowed real life situations like my dream to get out of hand. Times when I've defended myself too vigorously or when I've gone on the attack without either just cause or taking the time to think through the options instead of launching out and boldly going where I shouldn't.

Sad to say but it's often all too easy to *"shoot from the lip"* without engaging the brain and I recognise that this is an area in which I need to improve.

The Bible has a lot to say about our tongues and the way we use them. It's variously referred to as:

- Being as sharp as a two-edged sword
- A spark that can set a huge forest ablaze
- Deadly poisonous and a restless evil
- Having the power of life and death

Strong stuff and one translation of Proverbs 21:23 says, ***"Watch your tongue and keep your mouth shut, and you will stay out of trouble"***.

There is of course a human proverb that says, *"Actions speak louder than words"* and in many cases it's true but we all know the power words have over us.

How many of us have been criticised unjustly; spoken to harshly; had unkind, hurtful things said about us? Then there's the hurt caused possibly by members of our own families through sibling comparison, jealousy or resentment. Maybe we've been told we'll never amount to much; that we're not good enough or lacking in intelligence or common sense. Perhaps in a work situation an employer has belittled our contribution or maybe you've suffered the phenomenon now known as *"retail rage"* (as opposed to *"road rage"*) where a customer has over-vigorously vented their feelings about a problem that has occurred. The list could go on.

What we say (as well as what we don't say when we fail to appreciate other people) has a huge impact on those around us. Whilst it is often not our intention to hurt those we love, we often do so when we speak and the collateral damage we cause can be immense.

The apostle Paul however has some wise advice about how we should verbally communicate. He wrote that we need to ***"speak the truth – in love"***. This doesn't mean we should gloss over difficulties, indiscretions or even failures because confrontation can be appropriate when it's approached with a positive outcome in mind. Too often we hide behind the excuse of not wanting to upset someone when we should speak up – but only if we do it to benefit the person concerned rather than pulling them down or using the situation to *"get our own back"*.

It's a tall order though because to a certain extent all of us have our own agendas. But the apostle Paul goes on to say that when we do speak the truth in love ***"we grow up"*** – i.e. we become more mature.

Now that might be easy for me to say (or in this case, write) but I hope it will be the way I live out my faith – building rather than destroying.

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