

If you don't have anything nice to say

In my freshman year of college, a group of dorm mates fell into a giant squirt gun fight. At first it was somewhat harmless, all in fun. The only danger was that walking down the hall, one might get a little wet in the crossfire.

Soon it escalated when someone went to a toy store and came back with a more substantial squirt gun that produced better results. In order to counter the measure, some found that empty spray bottles or even shampoo bottles were also effective weapons.

Someone filled up a waste basket with water and raised the danger level significantly. I remember mattresses out in the hall, but do not know if they were being used defensively or were just drying out after having been drenched.

Later a full-sized trash can came into play and the scene resembled a football coach's plight after a successful championship campaign. Of course, everyone was sneaking around trying to avoid being attacked or conspiring to catch somebody by surprise. Noncombatants were drawn in after they had been the victims of unintended fire. It got to the point that one could not easily walk down the hall and stay dry at the same time.

Tempers began to flare. After having doused an opponent with a trash can full of water, and expecting a revenge attack, one person went into the closet of an adversary and donned his \$350 sports coat. One can imagine what happened next.

When the revenge attack came, he simply took off the jacket and handed it back to its owner who had just dumped water all over it. After some blows, the war ended, but the two, who had previously been friends, did not speak to one another for the rest of the year.

This dynamic can happen with words as well as actions; "Let no 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," Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians (4:29), and "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ, God has forgiven you."

(4:31-32).

Increasingly, we seem to live in a trash-talk world. In sports, trash talk is pervasive and athletes take pride in their successes and the best talkers of smack are held in high regard. If it is all in good fun, what is the harm?

And in our public discourse rhetorical ability is often used to diminish one's opponents through

insults and hyperbole. Everyone loves a good zinger. Things are sometimes said that are not meant and there are sometimes unintended victims.

I am willing to listen to those who disagree, but my impression is that the situation is escalating, and escalating to the point where it cannot be thought of as fun or taken lightly.

“Let no 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.”

— Ephesians 4:29

Myself, I am pretty good at not over-using hyperbole or insults, but I am not very good at building others up. I easily forget to say please and thank you and rarely say words of blessing designed to lift the spirit.

I am aware that words can be superficial, I have heard about “sticks and stones ...” I can be accused of being old-fashioned. But as we move away from politeness and decorum in our manners, I vote that we pay greater attention to the other popular maxim, it sounds more like scripture, “If you don’t have anything nice to say ...” Perhaps it would have been better if there had never been a squirt gun fight.

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Your Pastor Speaks

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