

Bimonthly Encouragement to Sudanese Christian Workers

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Good words – whatever the language!

(Matthew 12:33-37; Luke 6:43-44)

Pastors are people of words! Tradesmen all have their own “tools of their trade”. A farmer will have his plough and silo. A mechanic will have a variety of spanners, cutters and measures. A printer will begin with a camera and end with a paper trimmer. Even a nurse has her medicines and bandages. For us Christian leaders WORDS are the most important tools that we possess.

“Words” are units of language that express particular meaning by themselves or with others.¹

When a preacher says, “In other words ...” he is going to try to say the same thing in a simpler, explanatory way. To “have a word with someone” is to engage in vocal intercourse – to chat, to converse, often with a firm trace of anger to try and put a wrong right. The “number of words” is important for a thesis submitted at university. Not too many and not too few. Either error will mean being awarded a lower mark.

The list of words about words goes on.

Sometimes you are made to “eat your own words”. This doesn’t mean you eat your written paper, perhaps with some sweet raspberry jam spread all over it! It means you retract the statement you made, because you realise what you said earlier is not true – something I hope you never have to do as a preacher of God’s truth.

Jesus clearly stated that people show what they are really and truly like by the things that they say. Spoken words indicate plainly the inner attitude and character of any person. Just as a banana palm produces bananas while a coconut palm grows coconuts, so a genuine Christian – a man or a woman spiritually born again to live under the rule of the Kingdom of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ – a genuine Christian, wisely uses good words well.

Matthew 12:36 tells us we must account to God on judgement day for every “careless” word. Consulting commentaries and dictionaries this Greek word *argos* means idle, unfruitful, ineffective, inactive, barren or worthless. My brothers and sisters, please, do NOT waste words!

You and I ought to be wordsmiths, people skilled in using words. Just as a locksmith constructs a suitable lock for every individual job, ensuring that it fits, it makes secure, it is user-friendly but keeps out unwanted intruders, it is

¹ Macmillan School Dictionary (Oxford) 2004.

strong enough for the job without overkill (little point in a five bar lock on a box that could be carried away in a pocket anyway!). We are to be especially *Christian wordsmiths*. I mean by this that there are certain key Christian words we must be able to define, keeping the depth of mystery as well as miracle and majesty that our subject deserves.

When someone asks us to “give a few words” we are required to give a brief talk. This is something very few preachers can do, and even fewer are able to do it well! You may even be thinking right now that this article is too long, so I’ll bring it to a relevant but challenging conclusion.

A friend I used to room with in Bible College in Australia around 1968-70 is now back living in Australia after missionary service in Thailand. His knowledge of the Thai language brings him job opportunities to earn money, something which is always useful. But he is called into critical situations and asked to translate. One person may be accused of a serious crime from drug smuggling to murder. Another may be suspected of entering Australia illegally. At other times my friend is called to a hospital to translate where a patient is trying to describe his life-threatening symptoms to a surgeon. How my friend needs Holy Spirit inspired translation and sympathetic but specific expression in the words he puts to the authorities on behalf of his “customers”. I firmly believe that every one of us have similar deep and precious responsibilities as we speak God’s word from the pulpit and in everyday conversation.

During 40 years of Christian ministry, with small groups often being at the heart of my meetings even though it was the large meetings which “made the headlines”, I have noticed that people who are “men or women of few words” are well worth listening to. By and large it is true that empty vessels make the most noise, see the implication of 1 Corinthians 13. A lot of preaching I have heard would have sounded better if the preacher had honestly said: “words fail me”, and then sat down to let the actual words of God (the Bible itself) be heard expressing the wonders of God’s grace extended towards sinners like me.

Sadly some “expository preaching” makes things *less* clear and not *more* clear. For examples of principles and of good practice see Ezra 7:10; Nehemiah 8:7-8; 2 Chronicles 17:7-10; Deuteronomy 33:8, 10-11; Deuteronomy 8:1-5; 2 Corinthians 2:17; 2 Corinthians 4:1-2; 2 Timothy 2:15; Acts 20:25-31.

Our words show our hearts’ state of health. A diseased tree will always bear unusable fruit until the disease is properly treated. Let’s ask ourselves the question posed by JB Phillips paraphrase from Matthew 12: “**You must choose between having a good tree with good fruit and a rotten tree with rotten fruit**”. And trees are only an example to us, an example of a person’s life. What do you want YOUR LIFE to become?

Pastor Colin Salter. (Please share these thoughts with others and refer them to my website for more study resources!).