

What Did You Say? Mary Southerland

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Proverbs 25:11).

Fruit is one of my favorite foods. When I go grocery shopping, it always takes me longer to get through the fruit section than any other area of the store. I spend what some might consider a ridiculously long time picking out what I hope will be the juiciest apples, the plumpest grapes and sweetest bananas. Experience has taught me to quickly discard any piece of fruit that is bruised, mushy or discolored. I shake cantaloupe and thump watermelons. Ripe strawberries have a unique sweet scent and only the reddest cherries will do. Plums and tomatoes must be firm to the touch, bright in color and wrinkle-free while the more wrinkles the better when it comes to choosing passion fruit.

On a recent trip to the grocery store, I was carefully making my fruit selections when the thought occurred to me that I spend more time choosing fruit than I spend choosing my words.

Words are power tools that can build and encourage. Words can also destroy and cause confusion. We have all been hurt and even defeated by words spoken in anger or words rising out of a wounded and bitter heart. I have been guilty of speaking damaging words with the ulterior motive of flaunting power or demonstrating control. It is so easy for my mouth to be in motion before my mind is in gear, and the result is rarely good or godly.

The words we speak can clarify or complicate a situation. I have watched my husband diffuse an emotional bomb and avoid a potentially explosive situation with a few carefully chosen and quietly spoken words of wisdom. I have also observed him in the art of confrontation – and with Dan, it really is an art. In fact, one person told me that he was halfway home before he realized that Dan had just confronted and corrected him.

Solomon offers great wisdom concerning the use of words, “Whoever controls his mouth protects his own life. Whoever has a big mouth comes to ruin” (Proverbs 13:3 GWT). If we do not learn to use and control our tongue, it will use and control us. While it is true that we need to choose our words carefully, it is just as true that the tongue is a spiritual thermometer that reflects the condition of the heart.

I am not a good patient and tend to think that most medical rules apply to everyone else in my life – but not to me. After all, I am a woman and I am a Southerland. According to my husband, it doesn't get much tougher than that. Several years ago, I was slammed with a high fever and blinding headache that sent me to bed for days, something highly unusual for me. I called my doctor. When he heard my symptoms, he told me to come in immediately and even though his waiting room was full, he would make room for me in his already crowded schedule. His urgency was not encouraging.

The minute I walked in his office, the receptionist waved me back to the patient area where a nurse promptly escorted me to an examination room, hurriedly recorded my symptoms, took my temperature, glanced briefly at my throat and quickly left the room. Minutes later, the doctor and a nurse walked in and stood on the opposite side of the room, *almost* smiling at me. At this point, I realized that whatever I had was evidently highly contagious and probably fatal. I felt so awful that the latter was definitely appealing.

“Mary, I am almost certain you have viral meningitis,” the doctor said. Seeing the blank look on my face, he explained, “Your abnormally high fever of 104 and severe headache are classic symptoms of meningitis, but we need to run some tests to verify my suspicions. Oh, and by the way, how long have you had the solid white coating on your tongue?” I was stunned! What coating? Why is the color of my tongue even important in determining my illness? The doctor continued, “The health of the tongue is a very strong indicator of the health of the entire body.”

The same is true when it comes to the words we speak. “The mouth speaks the things that are in the heart. Good people have good things in their hearts, and so they say good things. But evil people have evil in their hearts, so they say evil things” (Matthew 12:34-35, NCV). If my words are boastful, my heart is insecure. If my words are filthy, my heart is impure and if my words are critical, my heart is filled with pride and anger. In other words, the problem is not really my mouth, it’s my heart. The words I speak reflect the true condition of my heart.

Careless words can cause such grief. Unless strained through discipline and holiness, words can convey false perspectives and untruths. However, the right word, spoken at the right time and in the right way can bring order in the midst of confusion and light on a very dark path. I believe God gives us spiritual “radar” so we can assess a situation and speak the right word for that circumstance. We just need to check the “radar screen” before we speak.