

Taking a Dog by the Ears

By Elder David Pyles

He that passeth by, and meddleth with strife belonging not to him, is like one that taketh a dog by the ears. – Prov 26:17-18

A person who takes a mean dog by the ears will quickly find himself in a predicament. If he lets go, the dog will bite him. Even if he runs, the dog will catch up. Such is a person who meddles with strife not belonging to him, and I think the principle also applies to him who initiates strife of his own.

Most people living under the stress of strife had not planned it and did not foresee it, yet it nearly always came via the same three avenues. Strife may take one by surprise, but it usually could have been predicted. If this were not so, then how could the Bible reasonably expect us to take measures to avoid it?

The first avenue is by saying things of other people that should not be said. A good rule to follow is to speak of other people as though they were present. Another good rule is to ask: Would we prefer that what we are saying be recorded or not be recorded? If the former, then we are probably in the right spirit and disposed to say things we will not regret. But if we are saying things that we would not want recorded, then we are likely reaching for the ears of a mean dog. Be sure that, in fact, it is all being recorded. Jesus warned, “*But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment,*” (Mt 12:36).

Oftentimes strife is produced because a person expresses an opinion they should have kept to themselves. We cannot help but have opinions, but expressing them is a different matter. The danger of expressing unwanted opinions can frequently be seen in the media, where at nearly all times there will be someone in the midst of a controversy they provoked by vocalizing thinking that should have never left their heads. It is especially foolish to produce strife this way because anyone knows that a person who is a perpetual effusion of opinions makes for wearisome conversation. Even if the opinions do not offend, they are apt to be an annoyance. On the other hand, a person who asks others for their opinions will nearly always be appreciated, and will be a catalyst to good conversation.

The second avenue is by saying things the wrong way. For example, even happily married people will readily confess to have brought themselves much grief because they said things to their spouse with exaggeration, dramatization, over-charging or too much passion. Solomon said:

A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger. The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright: but the

mouth of fools poureth out foolishness. The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good. A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit. –
Prov 15:1-4

Paul expressed the same principle in: “*Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand,*” (Phil 4:5). By “*moderation*” he meant gentleness. When He warned that the “*Lord is at hand,*” his meaning was that God is always near, hearing our conversation, and will surely judge it for its truthfulness, its fairness, and for whatever hypocrisy it might contain. He will surely expect us to treat others with the same gentleness we hope to receive from Him.

Observe also that Paul said this is to be done when dealing with *all* men. A common error is to suppose that because we are speaking with family, friends or confidants, the usual rules do not pertain. It is as though God wrote one set of commandments for dealing with some people, but an entirely different set for dealing with others. Any Bible reader will know that a second set of commandments nowhere exists in that book. The fact that a man happens to be our husband or that a woman happens to be our wife or that a person happens to be our confidant does nothing to change the rules, either in respect to how we address each other or how we talk of third parties.

The third avenue to strife is in being offended at something that was said when no offense was intended by the speaker. There is no better form of Christian forgiveness than the one that does not become offended in the first place. Paul said that charity “*is not easily provoked,*” (1Cor 13:5). This means that a person with tender feelings can have an illusory appearance of innocence. They are in fact being uncharitable if too easily offended at what other people say.

It is of course important that none of us approach this subject with a self-righteous posture. All of us err in respect to these things from time to time. James said the tongue is something no man can tame (Js 3:8). This means that we should always be prepared to forgive others when they err, and be prepared to apologize when we err ourselves. At the same time, the exhortations given by James clearly imply that all of us can do better, and after a few unpleasant experiences with taking the dog by the ears, we should certainly have strong incentive to do so!