

Speaking with an Edge
The Biblical Case for Hard Words

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Version 1.2

Preface: Stance of Blessing

The occasion for this essay is, well, a bit unfortunate. We've been involved in city ministry in Englewood, Colorado, for a number of years, and during that time, we've worked hard for the blessing of the city. We have consciously chosen to take a stance of blessing toward our city government and our city officials. We have met with them to hear their concerns and challenges. We have prayed with them and for them consistently. We have sought to work in partnership with them whenever possible to address the needs of our community.

We took that approach because Jesus taught us to. He told us to begin in a new city from a stance of blessing, to literally say "Peace to this house" when we enter a home for the first time. We wanted to know what would happen if we just obeyed. The results have been spectacular. (Obedience works! Who knew?) We started in our neighborhoods, and God blessed us with favor with our neighbors. We grew into working at the city level, seeking to bless key city officials, and again, God gave us favor. We were able to bring the Neighborhood Rehab Project to Englewood in partnership with the city government.

Englewood already had an unprecedented degree of unity among the churches before we came along; we were able to join in with the pastors that were here before us. As other pastors also sought to bless the city, we were able to pool our resources, and together, we have seen a beautiful cooperation between the faith community and the city government.

As so often happens when everything is going well, trouble was brewing in the background. One evening, in a public meeting, a city council member launched an assault on one of our city's most important homeless ministries. In a 10-minute tirade of lies and distortions, she accused the ministry and its volunteers of being cruel and inhumane, if not downright dangerous, to its homeless patrons.

Because of the public nature of the assault, it required a response on a number of different fronts. Several people stepped to the ministry's defense, including us. As we prayed over how to respond, we felt called into a mode of discourse that we hadn't ever used in this city, a prophetic voice much sharper than the stance of blessing that we'd taken up to this point. Early in his ministry, Tim had gotten quite a bit of practice in this, when faced with the need to defend people against cult leaders. But it had been a while, and he wasn't relishing going back.

It made us both deeply uncomfortable. But obedience often does....

Introduction: The Sin of Niceness

As American Christians, we're socialized to be nice. We're encouraged to think that the norms of suburban, middle class gentility are Christlike. Consequently, we cultivate a soft sensibility that makes us very uncomfortable when someone is too honest, too clear, or too sharp for our tastes. However, as we look at the pages of Scripture, we see very little niceness. God calls His representatives to be loving and kind, but He also requires us to be honest, and often, it isn't very nice. Many times, God calls His representatives to speak sharply.

This essay is about those times. We're going to talk about what sorts of things God calls His people to say, and why. We're going to talk about how to speak as God would have us speak, even though it's uncomfortable. Perhaps most important, we're going to talk about when and where to do it. We want to be clear right up front that this is not a license to be a jerk to everybody all the time. That violates the biblical parameters. The point, though, is that being nice to everybody all the time *violates those same biblical parameters*. It is a sin to be harsh when God is calling you to be soft. It is a sin to be soft when God is calling you to be harsh--and sometimes, He does.

It is as Christlike to say, "Woe to you, hypocrites!" as it is to say, "I don't condemn you; go and sin no more." Jesus didn't speak the same way all the time, and neither can we. We cannot avoid our duty to discern which approach God is calling us to in this particular situation, at this particular moment.

As with all discernment, this has two facets. If we are really following Jesus, then we know how to speak the same way He did: "The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works" (John 14:10). We cannot hope to speak God's message to the world if we are not listening very carefully to God.

At the same time, listening to God includes paying attention to what He has already said. Scripture gives us a lot of guidance here, if we will pay attention to it. In this essay, we are going to walk you through the biblical patterns of sharp speech and what happens when you apply them.

You will discover that biblically sharp speech is just that--sharp. It is a rapier, not a bludgeon. If you are following Jesus, you are not allowed to flail about. Speaking with an edge requires *focus*. That focus often includes giving offense, but you are never allowed to leave someone with no way out. We are not condemning someone as irreparably damaged or irredeemably wicked. The human beings we speak to may be willing pawns of the enemy, but they are never the enemy; they are the prize. The object is to leave someone no way out *except repentance*. The object is never to destroy, but to bring life, and as with many things that bring life *in extremis*--CPR, surgery, the fireman's ax--it's not very nice in the moment.

Part 1: Biblical Examples

Biblical examples of sharp language abound, and somehow, most Christians seem to miss them. It's like we have blinders on, and we somehow don't notice what's going on in the very passages we're reading. An exhaustive list of the sharp speech in Scripture would be way too long to wade through, but we want to give you a few examples to sink your teeth into. Look at the context of each of these passages, and notice what's going on and what else is said. Then look around your Bible, and see what else you can find.

Solomon mocks the lazy: "As a door turns on its hinges, so a lazy man turns on his bed; the lazy man buries his hand in the bowl, too tired to bring it back to his mouth" (Proverbs 26:14-15). Amos attacks idle rich women: "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountains of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, 'Bring wine, let us drink!'" (Amos 4:1). Micaiah lies to the king to make a point, then prophesies death to both the king and the other prophets (1 Kings 22). The prophetic books are full of this kind of language, sometimes directed at Gentile nations, sometimes at the kings of Israel and Judah, sometimes at the priests, sometimes at the rich.

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" also has a lot to say in this vein. He tells stories that mock the religious leaders (Luke 15:11-32), He calls them names (Matthew 12:34), He picks fights at dinner parties (Luke 7:36ff, 11:37ff). Even early in His ministry, He was calling out their hypocrisy and encouraging people not to be like them (Matthew 6). But let's take a look at one passage in particular and see what Jesus does there. After that, I'd invite you to read the gospels again, with new eyes. I think you'll be surprised. We're looking here at Matthew 23, starting in the second verse.

The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

Notice how measured this is. Jesus doesn't say to just ignore them. He acknowledges their authority to explicate the Law, and tells people to follow their instructions. But He cautions people against following their *example*. Then He begins to describe why it's a bad example to follow. In brief, it's because they lay a crushing weight on other people, but make things easy for themselves.

But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, "Rabbi, Rabbi." But you, do not be called "Rabbi"; for One

is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

This is where it gets very “unChristlike.” He judges their motives (to be seen by men). He makes fun of their clothes. He picks on them for where they sit at public events, for being recognized in public, for their titles. And then he challenges His hearers to take a different path.

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

Where to start? The name-calling (“hypocrites!” “son of hell”), the motive judging (“for a pretense you make long prayers”), the threats of judgment (greater condemnation)! Jeepers.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, “Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.” Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And, “Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.” Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.

He doesn’t slack off on the name-calling here. If anything, it gets worse. But He also exposes their hair-splitting, self-serving moral reasoning that allows them to cheat and steal with impunity, and He does it with style. It’s succinct, memorable, and hard-hitting.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of

hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Jesus acknowledges the things the scribes and Pharisees do right, but if anything, that makes them look even worse. He paints a vivid picture here: a man that will carefully count out the cumin seeds on his spice rack so he can give every 10th one to the Temple, but he doesn't hesitate to be unjust and unmerciful in his dealings with others. Notice also that Jesus speaks in the most vivid terms about their inner lives.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, "If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets." Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

From a mockery of their outward righteousness and a criticism of their inner lives, Jesus moves on to threaten the scribes and Pharisees with imminent judgment. He points out their family ties: they are descended from murderers of prophets, and they, too, want to murder those God has sent to them.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!"

Here, Jesus begins to mourn what will happen to Jerusalem's people as a result of the coming judgment. This is important; He isn't gleeful about their sin and delighting in the coming consequences. But He doesn't mince words about them either, and He doesn't hesitate to speak to the fact that God will judge. It isn't fashionable today to say this kind of thing, but it wasn't particularly fashionable in Jesus' day to threaten the religious elite with divine judgment, either. But He did it.

Jesus' followers continued the tradition, addressing people both inside and outside the faith. Peter accused a large crowd of murder in his sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:23, 32), and Stephen did the same to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:51-53). Paul rebuked Peter very sharply in Antioch for his hypocrisy (Galatians 2:11ff), blasted the high priest (and then apologized *because it was the high priest* without retracting anything he said) (Acts 23:3), nailed the characteristic sins of Cretan culture (Titus 1:12-13),

and wished aloud that the pro-circumcision party would just go all the way and chop it off (Galatians 5:12). Jude's description of the false teachers is a breathtaking feat of descriptive name-calling (Jude 9-13). John wrote a letter to a third party about a church leader that was building a little cult, naming the man by name, addressing his conduct, and diagnosing his motives (3 John 9-10).

There's more--much more--where these examples came from. However uncomfortable it makes us, God regularly calls for His people to engage in colorful and sharp speech throughout history. The prophets did it in the Old Testament, Jesus continued the tradition, and His followers carried it forward--as should we.

The question is, when?

Part 2: When and To Whom?

Jesus, as we observed earlier, doesn't *always* speak sharply. He is often gentle. And so we need to ask, when do we speak like this? To whom? In what settings?

The Bible's sharp speech skewers a number of different targets: civil rulers (Luke 13:32), the predatory rich (Mark 12:40), people within the church (Galatians 5:12), and the church's enemies (Acts 7). Biblical writers mock idols and their worshippers (Psalm 115:4-8, 1 Kings 18:27), call out those who form cults of personality (3 John 9-10), and challenge false teachers who enslave their followers' consciences (Colossians 2:16-19, Matthew 15:7-9). But if there's a center, a bulls-eye, it is religious hypocrites in positions of power. Jesus has more sharp things to say about that group of people than any other, by far. He doesn't seem to feel a need to make a private approach first, and He doesn't mind generalizing a bit. If Jesus was around today saying the kinds of things He said then, someone would start a #notallPharisees hashtag--but that person would be missing the point.

The point is that all those things He said about the Pharisees were generally true, and the Pharisees needed to repent of them. For the rare Pharisee who could justly lay claim to the #notallPharisees hashtag, well, he'd know better than most just how true Jesus' charges were. And it would be his job, as a righteous man, to affirm the justice of those charges, not nitpick about the vanishingly rare counterexamples. In other words, you shouldn't be deterred from denouncing a wicked group because there's one righteous person in it somewhere.

When you see a person or group in power claiming the moral high ground, and at the same time taking advantage of the powerless or poor, that would be a good time for speaking with an edge. Of course, just because *someone* should be speaking with an edge to those people, that doesn't mean that *you* are called to be the one. Listening to God is really indispensable here; you need to spend the time in prayer to see if He is calling you into this.

Based on our pastoral experience, we have seen certain personal traits that disqualify you from trying to follow Jesus in this particular way. Generally, this is not for the immature, the critical, the hotheaded, the inexperienced. If that's you, go apprentice yourself to a more mature and stable believer, and spend yourself in blessing and building people up for the next five years; then we'll see. Demolition is easier than construction, and it's bad for your soul to develop a specialty in tearing things down. If you start there, it's just too easy to never get around to developing the skill to build. If you're going to do this, you need to be seriously invested in building people up.

So if you're the kind of person whose close friends and family are used to cutting remarks from you, this is not for you. If you're the kind of person that just seems to be surrounded by incompetent folk who can't quite get anything right, this is not for you. If you're the kind of person people seek out to tell you juicy stories of others' failings, this is not for you. If you're the kind of person who's excited that now you have a legitimate target, and you can get the *fun* toys out--this is definitely not for you. If you're that person, "But Jesus did it!" is not a good excuse. Jesus sacrificially loved people, and looked with mercy on their flaws. Go work on that. When you've grown in that area, you can come back to this one.

As a matter of simple observation, not many young people will meet the criteria here, but some do. Most young people are all too willing to speak sharply, and it is evident to anyone with some adult life experience that they simply don't know what they're talking about. So a young speaker who has done their homework and has something to say faces a special problem. How can *that* speaker be heard? If that's you, then you need to take to heart Paul's instructions to Timothy: "Let no one look down on you because of your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). If you are young and you want to be taken seriously, you will also need to be *exemplary*. Paul gives a series of areas to look at: your words, your conduct, your spirit, your faith, and your purity. In these areas, older people should look at you and wish they were like you. If they do, then you will be able to demand that they take you seriously.

That effect will only be enhanced if you are slow to speak. Consider the example of Elihu in the book of Job. He lets Job speak. He lets the three friends speak. He thinks they're all wrong, and he's mad about it—but he waits until his elders have gone several rounds and reached a stalemate. Then he speaks, and God included his words in the account, with approval.

Young or old, if you're a sober-minded believer, devoted to loving your family, friends, and the Body; if people come to you when they need encouragement, strength, and support, if you've been quick to listen and slow to speak, and you've devoted yourself to service--if you're that person, and you're confronted by a situation in which gentle suggestions to do better are bouncing off like nerf

balls against a brick wall--then let's talk about how to speak sharply, and do it well.

Part 3: How To Speak Sharply

Getting Started

If you are new to sharp speech, you need training. The best training comes through following the biblical models and following them very closely. Find a passage that models the kind of sharp speech that God is calling you to and adapt it to your situation, substituting the appropriate metaphors, rebukes or mockeries that are needed for your situation. Smooth it out to make it fit your voice and deliver it.

There are two advantages to this approach. First, it will give you confidence that as long as you have all your facts straight and have correctly identified the sins in the situation that your sharp words are not sinful. Second, it will make it much easier to explain yourself when your Christian friends confront you. If you do this right, you will have good Christian allies who will think you have sinned. You will need to be able to show them that what you did was entirely biblical. Being able to say that you adapted a particular passage will make that conversation much easier.

The Options

So what are the options for sharp biblical speech? We'll lay out four angles here. This isn't the only way to slice the pie, and of course there are more options, but this covers most of the territory.

The softest level is to answer a person's behavior or claims in a straightforward fashion, on the merits. The sharpness in this case will depend on what kind of mischief you're answering. It is one thing to confront an instance of careless gossip, and another to confront deliberate character assassination. It is one thing to address an unguarded moment of lust, and another to address an act of adultery. In these cases, if your hearer is offended, it will be the substance of the claim you're making that offends, not the manner in which you make it. If God is calling you to speak up, that's as soft as you're allowed to get.

A second angle also rebukes the behavior, but turns the volume way up. One example of this would be when Paul rebuked Peter for his hypocrisy in Antioch (Galatians 2:11ff). Paul doesn't call Peter names or mock him, but he directly addresses the problem behavior in vivid terms, and takes it all the way back to first principles. Most evangelicals would feel like taking a problem with seating arrangements at a church dinner and making it all about justification by faith (which is what Paul does) is pouring it on a bit. The aim of the higher volume is to highlight the severity of the behavior and make it impossible to miss the problem.

A third angle rebukes the person. At this point, you are definitely breaking the norms of

niceness in our psychotherapeutic culture. We socialize people to avoid name-calling and focus on problem behavior, if they must address a problem. But when Jesus addresses the Pharisees as “brood of vipers,” “blind guides,” and “whitewashed tombs,” He has moved beyond just addressing *what they do*; He is addressing *who they are*. It’s a character issue, and that is precisely the point. This element is mostly absent from the Sermon on the Mount, for example, but very present in Matthew 23, in Jude, and a number of other passages.

A fourth angle moves beyond simple rebuke to mockery. When Jesus points out the Pharisees’ broad phylacteries and the long tassels on their garments, He has moved beyond rebuking their character; He’s literally making fun of their clothes. But it’s not gratuitous meanness; it’s relevant to the rebuke. He is contrasting their outward religious display against their conduct and the condition of their hearts. But imagine the disciples saying, “Come on, Jesus. You could’ve said all that without making fun of their clothes!” Yes, He certainly could have. He didn’t have to bring the wardrobe into it. For the purposes of our discussion, the point is: He didn’t have to, but He did. And the vivid image sticks with you: a Pharisee adorning himself just to look holy to other people.

It is critical with all these, but particularly with mockery, that you not be bitter in your own heart when you do it. That might take quite a lot of prayer, because the circumstances where sharp speech is appropriate tend to incline us toward bitterness. Remember Jesus’ instructions: “Blessed are you when they insult you and say all kinds of evil things against you falsely for My sake; rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets before you.”

Your heart needs to be light. Rejoice! Then choose your tone. It will be a judgment call, and that’s okay. Sometimes a somber, serious tone to the rebuke is called for: it’s impossible to imagine Paul smiling while he rebuked Peter in Galatians 2. On the other hand, It’s easy enough to imagine Solomon chuckling as he delivered his proverbs about the lazy man. Sometimes a lighthearted tone is just more effective, especially for mockery. It’s okay to be effective. Jesus was.

Part 4: Strategy and Expected Results

The aim of speaking with an edge is to cut to the heart. The phrase “cut to the heart” occurs two times in Acts. The first is in Acts 2 where Peter delivered a sermon that ended in a sharp rebuke, “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:35). The result of this rebuke is that they were “cut to the heart” and asked Peter “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). They then repented and 3000 were added to the church.

The second time the phrase occurs, Stephen was preaching to the Sanhedrin. His sermon

landed in the same place Peter's: "And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it" (Acts 7:52-53). The result was that the Sanhedrin were "cut to the heart" (Acts 7:54)... and they stoned him. The message was successfully delivered, but did not result in repentance. We cannot control whether our hearers will repent, but by following biblical models, we can make sure that our words reach through the skin, flesh, and bone, and are actually delivered to the heart.

When we deliver sharpened words well, we are doing our hearers the service of delivering great clarity. The goal is to allow those who have been blinded to their sins to see them clearly. They may not like the clarity and they may attack the person who delivered it, or they may repent. But we should not be surprised to see either hardening or repentance.

When you are using sharp words in a public situation, something similar happens with observers. Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace, but division (Luke 12:51). When you deliver sharp words, people will take sides. They may for the first time see the issue with great clarity and join with you. Or they may see it with clarity and turn against you. If you charge someone with a sin, the observers will either believe you and agree that the person you are addressing has transgressed, or they will believe you have transgressed by calling out the sin. The rhetorical edge will win you both friends and enemies. Most will find it impossible to remain neutral, *and that is the point*.

Your sharp speech will also expand the range of acceptable discourse. By staking out a position on the very edge (or beyond the edge) of what is socially acceptable, you expand the definition of "moderate," legitimizing a wider range of options in the middle. You make it possible for other people to object (in nicer terms) to the same evils you are rejecting without having to live with the opprobrium of being considered an extremist. The beneficiaries of your efforts will not thank you, but you'll know this dynamic is at work when, after you've been denouncing sin X, someone points to you and says, "Well, I'm not as extreme as that guy, but I do think X is wrong."

Aside from the low-level resistance of your allied moderates, you will of course get higher-level resistance from your targets and their allies, if they don't repent. You will undoubtedly be slandered in response. Plan on it, expect it, and learn to rejoice in it. Also understand that your biggest source of resistance will not be other people. "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Eph 6:12). The real enemy is spiritual. They go to great lengths to install wickedness in places of power; when you attempt to reclaim those strongholds from the kingdom of darkness, they will hit back. The enemy will go after your relationships, your home and your own sanity. Equip yourself with prayer, worship and a team of on-call intercessors. It's not

like a battle, it is a battle.

There is one more expected result we need to talk about: success! Jesus' sharp language had a polarizing effect, and in the short term, it made Him many enemies. In the long term, He won. His followers spread out across the world, carrying His message everywhere they went. He had faced an uphill battle speaking to the hypocrisy of the respectable, established religious leaders of His day, but today, the very word "Pharisee" means "self-righteous hypocrite."

It's a marathon, not a sprint. Sharp language clarifies, and the resulting clarity brings conviction. Over time, that has an effect. So as we follow Jesus in this, we do it in the certainty of long-term victory. People will repent; lives will be yielded to Christ. Over time, God will work through our obedience to bring about His will.

Part 5: Follow-up

Over time, obedience pays off. In the meantime, you have to live with the short-term consequences of sharp speech. The first thing to do is evaluate the consequences you're seeing. When you're addressing a foolish person, Proverbs says, there are two things you need to manage: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him; Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes."

You can't become like the person you're addressing, but you can't let them walk away satisfied with the wisdom of their position. If the person remains wise in their own eyes, you need to think about whether there was something you could have done differently. The goal is to have them walking away seeing the folly of their actions, *whether they will admit it or not*. So part of your job after the fact is to discern whether you were successful at that. Obviously, repentance would be a clue, but wanting to shoot the messenger is also a common response, as we've seen in the biblical examples above. There are other signs that may not be so easy to spot; ask God to give you eyes to see the clues that will tell you what the person is really thinking.

If you have descended to the fool's level, then there's just two fools fighting it out, and you have failed. Note, though, that you need to apply biblical criteria, as we've been discussing. Many people will accuse you of "descending to his level" solely on the grounds that you weren't nice. That's baloney. The Pharisees called Jesus a bastard child and accused Him of casting out demons through Satan's power; He called them blind guides, hypocrites, and whitewashed tombs. Was He "descending to their level"? Not a bit.

Don't get sucked into a false moral equivalence. As Chesterton once said, when one man pushes an old woman in front of a bus, and another snatches her out of the way at the last minute, it

will not do to describe them both as the sort of men who shove grannies around in traffic. The Pharisees were just telling lies. If Jesus had made up convenient lies about them and slandered them right back, *that* would have been descending to their level. But what Jesus said was true, and timely, and God called Him to say it. Despite the superficial similarities in tone, telling lies and telling the truth are not the same thing at all, and that difference matters.

After you've spoken sharply, you will have to deal, not only with your offended opponents, but also with your offended allies. In Christian circles, you will nearly always find yourself surrounded by nice people who wonder what in the world came over you. Believe it or not, that is a good sign. If instead you find your Christian allies shrugging and saying, "Oh, well, you know how he is," *that* means you're usually a jerk. If people can't tell the difference between you being a jerk and you following Jesus, you shouldn't be doing this. On the other hand, if your friends can't figure out what's gotten into you, then you might be doing it right.

You will have to discuss what you did, and why you did it. Since we live in a terminally nice culture, people will tend to just think you were being mean for some reason. You will have to explain the biblical examples you were following, and why you believed that it was an appropriate place, time, and target for biblically sharp speech. The talking points in the next section will help you to articulate your stance. But once you've explained yourself, you need to listen closely to the feedback you get.

Some people will simply never believe that there's a time not to be nice. Be kind to those people, but ignore their feedback. If they would have told Jesus He was going too far, then they don't have much to offer you on how to be Christlike.

But it is possible to do this wrongly. It is possible to choose your target poorly, to judge motives wrongly, to stray into bitterness rather than delivering your rebuke with godly cheer or godly sobriety. In the nature of the case, if you've become bitter, you will have a hard time seeing it. From the inside, it just looks like you're being reasonable. So you will need to rely on the people who understand that there is a time and a place for sharp speech to tell you if you picked the right time and place. Once you have some people around you who understand the biblical case for sharp speech, you need to treat them very well, especially when they disagree with you. Listen well, and encourage them to keep talking to you.

Part 6: Some Objections Answered

Speaking sharply is always objectionable to someone; if it were not, there would be no point in doing it. But often the most difficult objections we face are not from the adversaries we're speaking to,

but our allies, who are cringing on the sidelines, wondering what in the world has come over us. The all-purpose answer to objections is the case we've already made above: under certain circumstances, this is *exactly* what God calls us to do, and we ought to obey God rather than men. As you read these objections, imagine the disciples saying them to Jesus, trying to talk Him out of the tirade He's about to deliver in Matthew 23....

To illustrate the range available in the way we talk to people, we'd like to present this section in two different modes. The softer answers to the objections will come first. The sharper responses will be in their own section a little further down.

Soft Answers 🌶️

These are the answers you'd use for your sweet Christian granny, who never said a harsh word to anyone in her life, and just can't imagine why you'd be so mean to those poor people. The truth of the matter is, she's probably never going to understand, but you gotta try.

"But that's really more Old Testament stuff."

If what you said closely parallels something Jesus said, this is a great time to point it out. But in any case, point to Jesus. Your goal here is to help the objector see that this is New Testament stuff too.

"I'm more of a red letter Christian."

If you modeled your sharp speech on something Jesus said, again, this is a great time to turn to the passage and explain the parallels. If not, then perhaps just turn to Matthew 23 or somewhere analogous, and explain that Jesus often speaks in this way, and you're seeking to follow His example. That will usually lead to the next objection.

"You're not Jesus."

Of course not, but He called us to be like Him. In fact, Scripture repeatedly says that we are "in Christ," and Paul says "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). We are, presently, in union with Christ. We are the Body of Christ: His hands, His feet, and His mouth here on earth. We ought to be like Him, to do the kinds of things He did and say the kinds of things He said. He said exactly these kinds of things—why wouldn't we?

Usually this objection will lead to one of the others, below.

"You can't see someone's heart! How dare you judge their motives?"

Jesus did, and look at how He did it. When someone tithes off their spice rack in order to be holy, and then turns around and oppresses the poor, isn't it obvious that they don't actually care about mercy? When someone makes an outward display of godliness, but doesn't actually show love to people

when it counts, isn't it obvious that they don't love people as God requires?

Of course it's possible to be wrong in a particular case, but the idea that you can't ever speak to motives is just not true. Jesus did, and so did His followers.

"Can't you see this causes division?"

Again, Jesus did it, and He did cause division, as He Himself acknowledged. Real unity is beautiful and valuable, but false unity based on concealing the problems under a veneer of country-club niceness is not. The way in which we get to real unity in the long term is by addressing the problems, not by papering them over.

"Doesn't Matthew 18 require you to approach the person privately first?"

Remember that Jesus gave the instructions in Matthew 18, and Jesus also regularly called out the Pharisees in public, both in sermons (Matthew 6, 23) and in their houses in front of all their dinner guests (Luke 7:36ff, 11:37ff). He didn't seem to see a contradiction there. We would suggest that's because Matthew 18 is addressing private offenses between individuals, and public sin calls for a different approach.

"It just looks bad."

Yeah, to some people, it does. But let's think about the different groups of people that it looks bad to. There are people who agree that everything I said was true, but they cringe that it was put so starkly. They're gonna be fine. There are people who would oppose us no matter how we said it. They're going to be against us no matter what. Then there's the persuadable middle, and the goal of speaking sharply is to help them see the choice clearly, in such a way that they can't un-see it. If they kinda cringe because it was put so starkly, that's okay, *as long as they see it clearly*. If we go so far over the top that they can't see what we're saying, then that really is a problem. That's a judgment call we'll have to make, and evaluate the results as we go.

"It just seems like you're enjoying it too much."

You know, I don't actually enjoy this kind of thing. It makes me angry and sad, and I have to pray *a lot* to get to the point where I can speak without being bitter about it. If I come off as cheerful, it's because I'm asking God to take the bitterness away, and it's working.

"Okay, I get that this is permissible. But is it really necessary? It's so risky!"

There are always risks on both sides. If we speak sharply enough to clarify the situation, we risk alienating some people who are put off by the sharpness, that's true. If we don't speak at all, we risk tacitly supporting evil by our complicit silence. And if we speak so softly that we fail to clarify the situation, we risk being ineffective and unconvincing, which can be worse than not speaking at all.

“Doesn't the Bible say your speech should always be gracious (Colossians 4:6)?”

It does say that. And Jesus was unfailingly gracious, because He was perfect. We need to be using God's definition of gracious, not ours. Our definition of “gracious” is usually “nice and inoffensive,” but that's not what God means when He says that.

Sharp Answers 🌶️🌶️🌶️🌶️🌶️

These are the answers you might give someone who just chewed you out for 20 minutes and judged your motives for speaking sharply, while berating you for judging people's motives. When a person is not prepared to listen to a soft answer, then we use the more forceful answers. A forceful answer is a crowbar; the proper use of a crowbar is to pry open a crate, not to smash it to kindling. These arguments can be abused to beat up your friends and make them afraid to talk to you--but that's not what they're for. They are intended to pry open minds that have been closed to the biblical possibilities of speaking like Jesus, so that they can help you do it better. You need people with the courage to stand up to you and tell you when you are wrong, but you need them to be working with biblical criteria. It's usually much easier to help your courageous friends learn better criteria than to help your nicer friends learn to stand up to you.

“But that's really more Old Testament stuff.”

First of all, not really. There's a great deal of continuity between the Old Testament examples and the New Testament ones, and even if you're prepared to just discard two thirds of the Bible (not advisable), you still have to reckon with the New Testament examples, and they're just as harsh as anything the minor prophets ever said. Take a look at Jesus!

“I'm more of a red letter Christian.”

Have you actually *read* the red letters? Try starting with Matthew 23, and then we'll talk. Jesus said some of the harshest things in the whole Bible.

“You're not Jesus.”

No, I'm not. But I am called to be like Him, to do the sorts of things He did, and to say the sorts of things He said.

When we press into this objection, what we usually find is the belief that because Jesus was God, and we are not, He could do a bunch of things that we simply can't do, and shouldn't try to. That is simply a lie, and a very poor understanding of what Jesus taught. Jesus said, “whoever believes in Me, the works that I do he will also do, and he will do greater works than these, because I go to My Father” (John 14:12). Do we believe Him? If we do, He didn't call us to do less than He did; He called us to do what He did, and even greater things! That's precisely what we see in His early followers--they did

and said the kinds of things Jesus did, spread the message further, worked more miracles, cast out more demons, rebuked more sanctimonious hypocrites, all of it.

This objection simply misses the most basic promise of the Christian message, which is that you--just as you are, with all your failings--can be a partaker of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). Jesus deliberately set aside His inherent godly prerogatives to be a man (Philippians 2:5-7), and acted while on earth in intimate fellowship with the Father and through the power of the Holy Spirit, Who came upon Him at His baptism (Luke 3:22). You are indwelt by that same power. There is no part of Jesus' example that is off-limits to you--not because you are so capable, but because you have the same Holy Spirit that He did.

We also want to observe, in passing, that people are very selective about where they apply this objection. When Jesus sets an example we want to follow, we are very quick to say we're just following Jesus, but when Jesus does something we don't want to do, we say, "Well, I'm not Jesus." It's fine to admit, in a spirit of confession, that we are unlike Jesus. But we ought never use that as an excuse. We should repent, pray for courage, and get on with it!

"You can't see someone's heart! How dare you judge their motives?"

The human heart is a twisty thing, and it's easily possible to misjudge someone's motives; people do it all the time. People also change lanes without signaling all the time; that doesn't mean it's impossible to use your turn signals. It is a truism of our psychotherapeutic culture that no one ever knows someone else's motives, so it's always deeply misguided to impute motives to another person. This is a cultural belief that we have. But it's not true, and it's not biblical, and anyone who's raised a child (or made a disciple) knows better.

People regularly reveal their own motives. At the most obvious, they simply tell you. When the plain girl shoves the pretty girl on the elementary school playground and angrily says, "You think you're so pretty!"-- come now, are her motives really such a mystery? She's jealous, and she's revealing it to anybody with eyes and ears. Adults are sometimes more complicated...but often not. It's amazing what people will tell you when you listen to what they actually say. (Especially over an extended period of time. As Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45).) Despite our cultural belief that we ought never to call out someone else's motives, the biblical examples do it regularly. If we are going to speak as Jesus speaks, then we are going to have to find our way to obedience on this. If obedience doesn't fit well with our culture, then our culture needs to repent. So are we going to follow the examples God gave us, and figure out how to do this well, or are we going to declare it off-limits, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men?

"Can't you see this causes division?"

Yes, it certainly does. Judging from the biblical examples, that is the point. When we speak sharply, we cut away the fuzzy thinking and the calming illusions. We force people to make a choice. That is the goal.

And again, we are pursuing unity, not false unity and not uniformity. We can't get real unity by papering over real differences. We aren't interested in achieving uniformity; it's okay if our allies disagree with us to some extent. They can feel that we spoke too harshly, and we can still work together. That's okay too.

"Doesn't Matthew 18 require you to approach the person privately first?"

No more than it required Jesus to privately approach every Pharisee or Paul to privately approach Peter in Antioch. Matthew 18 is dealing with a private offense between two people. What we're talking about here is public discourse, and the biblical examples, from Amos to Jesus to Paul, treat that differently. What people do in public can be addressed immediately in public.

"It just looks bad."

To whom? Seriously, make a list. Then go down that list and check to see if anybody on it outranks God....

There is, sometimes, a legitimate concern here that we are going to unnecessarily alienate people who would otherwise have sided with us, just because we're perceived as being mean. This is where it's important to think through the different groups among our hearers, as described above. If necessary, we should make course corrections. But as we guard ourselves against the temptation to be jerks unnecessarily, we should also guard ourselves against the much more seductive temptation to love the praise of men rather than the praise of God. If everybody agrees that we're wonderfully nice, and the very model of civil discourse, then we are not very much like Jesus, are we?

"It just seems like you're enjoying it too much."

That's definitely possible. Biblically sharp speech is a grievous necessity, and we ought not to relish the situations that call for it. If we're just having fun bashing someone, then we have wandered into sin ourselves, and lost track of what we're trying to do.

At the same time, we have been given a spiritual discipline of rejoicing in the face of spiritual battle, an instruction reinforced from Jehoshaphat's singers going before the army (2 Chronicles 20) to Psalm 149 to the apostles' response to persecution in Acts 4:24-31 and 5:41. When someone lies about us for Jesus' sake, Jesus instructed us to get happy (Matthew 5:11-13). What a terrible thing for us, if we did not obey!

There are times for somber delivery: at the end of His scorching rebuke in Matthew 23, Jesus mourned for Jerusalem's fate under the influence of the scribes and Pharisees. But He didn't always end with

mourning. In John 8, He just stared them down until they left. In the parable of the wicked tenants in Luke 20, He finishes by telling them they're going to get ground to powder, and just leaves it there. In Luke 11, when one of the lawyers complains that Jesus is also reproaching them by His comments about the Pharisees, He responds with an extended critique of the lawyers. In Matthew 15, when the disciples tell Him how much He offended the Pharisees, He reinforces the criticism.

Because we are acculturated to niceness, we are also acculturated to needing to project sadness when we have to say something hard, as if it were a grievous necessity to depart from the norms of country-club decorum. But this is just not the way the Bible teaches us to be.

"Okay, I get that this is permissible. But is it really necessary? It's so risky!"

When you're making a risk calculation, you have to look at the risks on all sides. We tend to see the risks of the thing we don't want to do, and the benefits of the thing we want to do already--and never the other way around. The risks of sharp speech and the benefits of soft are readily apparent.

But for certain purposes, soft speech is simply ineffective. When someone is abusing the poor and those who help them, soft words offer no shelter to their victims. You can't stop a robbery or an assault by pelting the attacker with paper napkins. You can't stop a verbal assault with slight objections.

Soft words also don't bring about repentance in some people. Solomon says, "A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the fool's back," and again, Jesus furnishes the example here. What if the reason He spoke so harshly to the Pharisees was precisely because nothing else was going to get through? The risk of speaking softly is total ineffectiveness.

At some level, we know this, and at times, we benefit from it. There is a cultural niche for people who cover their asses by objecting to popular evil without resisting it effectively. They get to maintain their private convictions that the thing is wrong, but they are tolerated *precisely because* they are ineffective at actually producing any kind of conviction or change in the majority opinion. Jesus warned us, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). Let's not be those people.

"Doesn't the Bible say your speech should always be gracious (Colossians 4:6)?"

It does--and the definition of "gracious" we should be using is God's, not our culture's. The very next phrase in that verse helps us understand what God has in mind: "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt..." As Charles Spurgeon once said, we're the salt of the earth, not the sugar. There's nothing ungracious about a little spice.

Conclusion: Victory Conditions

Having laid out how and why to speak sharply, let's look at what happens when we win. In the world's reckoning, winning means that we've crushed our foes and can move forward with our agenda. But we don't measure by the world's reckoning. Again, Jesus and His followers provide us with our examples here.

The result we hope for, of course, is repentance. If they see their sin, and are convicted, and repent, well, that's what we were going for, right? Peter cut to the heart at Pentecost, and three thousand people repented. That's a good day. But American Christians often suffer from a delusion that if we're doing it right, it will always go like that. This is a lie from the enemy, and we need look no further than Jesus' example to see the truth: "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20).

We are seeking to speak as Jesus spoke--and they murdered Him. We can't expect better treatment than Jesus got. At the same time, we *can* expect God to work through the Body of Christ (that's us) in the same way He worked through His Son. God has the power to bring redemption from martyrdom, and across the centuries of the Church, He has done it again and again. If they repent, it's a good day. If they try to kill us, it's still a good day. The strategy worked; the conviction struck home, and the message is bearing fruit. We are being obedient to what God gave us to do, and that's enough. The results are in His hands--and there's no better place for them to be.