

Understanding How to Answer – Proverbs 15:1

INTRODUCTION

For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. This is what our science teacher taught us in school. In some ways, this is also true in the realm of speech. How we respond to others' words can either inflame or put out flames. If there is an equal and opposite reaction to every heated word spoken to us, the world would be in flames centuries ago. Words spoken or written out of the heart can be very deadly and devastating. An Olympic hopeful was sent home by her country because she wrote something racially derogatory. Her years of training and sacrifices were for nothing because of one moment of foolishness. A young boy was arrested because he posted on the net that he was going to bomb a building. Presidents branding countries as "terrorists" have incurred the ire of these "terrorists" countries. Words spoken or written have consequences. All of us have multiple experiences to share regarding this truth!

Our answers to the words of others are just as important. It is also important to God for we bear the Name of Christ everywhere we go and in everything we say. God has given all believers in the Book of Proverbs many wise verses to help us understand the right way to answer questions from people, especially those who attempt to deceive, destroy, and hurt.

I. Powerful Answers – Proverbs 15:1, "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger." (Antithetical parallelism) – The "reply of a believer to angry words" is where we must begin our study. No man can control the mouth of another. However, he is duty bound by God's Word to control his own. He answers to God for what comes out of his mouth because they reveal the kind of heart he has inside. His answer can influence the words and the mood of others.

If he replies in anger when angry words are hurled at him, then he inflames the whole situation which can turn from explosive to atomic. Lives and relationships have been affected by wrong words uttered in the heat of the moment, especially during an argument. The counsel from God's Word is to answer softly. The word for "soft" means "tender." It is not just the tone; angry words spoken softly can be even more deadly than if they are shouted. Tender words are loving, kind and gentle words. Words like "sorry," "my apologies," and "please forgive me" are tender because they can turn away wrath, i.e., divert a torrent of destructive stormwater.

However, grievous words, i.e. hurtful words, make matters worse. They stir up the anger of the other person which is the purpose of grievous words. The intent is to retaliate and hurt the other person who has hurt us. The contrast in this verse is very clear: the Christian must behave differently from the world, and there is no better way than to answer tenderly in response to angry words.

II. Joyful Answer – Proverbs 15:23, "A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!" (Synthetic parallelism) – A believer is said here to possess joy in his words, in particular his answers. How he answers can bring joy to himself and the recipient. What an honour and privilege it is to have such a blessed gift. This gift is given to every believer without exception. It is indeed a blessed and wonderful way to live when the child of God's words have the power to bring genuine joy. "Joy" as used in the Bible

must be distinguished from "humour" or "jesting" or "jokes." Many famous and well paid comedians make a great living hosting shows where humour is the central theme. These jokes are usually at the expense of others, especially famous personalities, movie stars, or leaders of countries. These kinds of carnal jokes are good only for the moment. The audience laughs, feels good, and experiences temporary, light relief from the pains and realities of life, which are full of sorrow and troubles.

The joy that the Bible speaks of here is everlasting and comes from God. How can a believer be blessed with such an honour such that his words can bring real joy that lasts for eternity? The open secret is in the very Word of God itself. The words that come forth from the lips of the child of God have to be God's Word. God's Word alone has this power to save and to grant the abundant life that Christ promised to all His obedient disciples. These wise words are not limited to giving counsel in the form of reciting Bible verses that are rightly and contextually applied, but also include explanations.

The believer must not only quote God's truth but also explain it, based on God's Word, and apply it carefully and judiciously to all the right circumstances. This is what the second line of 15:23 intimates. It is a word spoken in due season, i.e. at the right time and in the right manner and to the right people. The LORD says that there is a time not to say certain things and there are times when certain things ought to be spoken. Do you have the wisdom or discernment from God to know the difference?

God calls this right usage good! The believer has been bestowed to do good by the way he answers.

III. Studious Answer – Proverbs 15:28, "The heart of the righteous studieth to answer: but the mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things." (Antithetical parallelism) – It is not the righteous that is the focus here but the HEART of the righteous. The heart is the source from which all motives originate. It is this that 15:28 highlights. Before the words come out of the believer's mouth, the Bible says that the heart of the righteous person would study first before answering. The word "studies" means "to meditate" or "to ponder." The believer does not speak brashly or impulsively. He ponders his reply carefully and weighs them against the Word of God before he answers. This is a good practice to have. If this were practised more often by God's people, many problems and relationship issues would not have arisen. This is a privilege given only to believers, as they are the only righteous ones in the Bible. The believer studies his reply against the Word of God and determines how it will affect the other person, so that he can help that person grow in his faith and trust in the Lord, if he is a believer. If the person is not a believer, then he helps the person come to know Christ by his gracious words.

However, the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things. Note that it is not the heart that is emphasized here but the mouth. The emphasis here is on the audible and, perhaps, even the visible, for all to see and hear. His words reveal the kind of heart he has. The heart is one of wickedness and filled with sin. The former speaks of the invisible (heart), whereas the latter points to the visible (the words). He speaks without thinking. His words are reactive, intended to retaliate and hurt the other person in return. The Bible describes it as pouring out, i.e. like water gushing forth in torrents evil things. The motive is wrong. Therefore, the words are evil.

IV. Honest Answer – Proverbs 24:23-26, “These *things* also *belong* to the wise. *It is not good to have respect of persons in judgment. 24 He that saith unto the wicked, Thou art righteous; him shall the people curse, nations shall abhor him: 25 But to them that rebuke him shall be delight, and a good blessing shall come upon them. 26 Every man shall kiss his lips that giveth a right answer.*” – All of us in one way or another sit in positions of leadership. A parent makes decisions in the home regarding his children. A leader at his place of work has to make fair and just judgments on a daily basis. A church leader makes decisions that affect the people under his charge. The list is limitless. The difference between them is that the impact varies with the size of the group. The decisions of a nation's leader affect the nation. A parent's decisions affect his home. God demands that every believer should make judgements that are not based upon the person. A distorted judgement in favour of the rich is often the case, sadly even in some churches. Leaders are afraid to offend the wealthy, as they think they need them in the church to boost weekly offerings. Therefore, their judgements are eschewed in favour of the rich. To the wealthy wicked they would say they are righteous. To the righteous who are poor, they would say they are wicked! Such distortions in judgement are more common in churches than we think! This is sad but true in our world.

But to them that rebuke fairly and justly without respect of persons, he is a delight and good blessings will come to him. The LORD is pleased with what he is doing. Not everyone will like him. No one must make decisions to please men. The believer must make decisions based solely on right and wrong, according to Holy Scripture. He does not practise situational ethics, in which he makes decisions based on what he believes will happen. He has little or no absolute morals as his morals changes with the situation. To the believer, the Bible is his absolute guide. He decides based on the Word of God, not on what he thinks might or might not happen. He trusts and commits the outcome of his decision to God whom he believes and knows is sovereign and will do what is best and right for His glory. Everyone would kiss the lips of one who gives the right answers. The practice and culture in those days was to kiss someone as a show of respect, honour, and obedience (cf. Psalm 2:12). In this context, the judge who made righteous and just judgements would be loved by all, for they would find justice through his judgements. The nation, the home and society as a whole would be happy and equitably cared for. The people who receive just judgement would love the judge dearly.

V. Wise Answer – Proverbs 26:4-5, "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit." (Synthetical parallelism in both verses) – In the first verse, the believer is warned not to answer a fool according to his folly, i.e. in the same foolish manner, or else the believer would become like the fool. This is the normal retaliatory manner of many non-believers. But God says that this must not be the way for all His children. The old man would love to retaliate and get his pound of flesh back from the other person who foolishly utters harsh and hurtful words with the intent to wound. The moment the child of God retaliates in like manner he fails the LORD and sins against Him. He must never stoop to the fool's level no matter how much he desires to do so. It is better to keep silent in situations like this so that he could meditate before answering.

The second verse is to answer the fool in the right manner. Answer him according to his folly, i.e. in a manner that shows that he is a fool so that he will not be arrogant and remain in sin. If the fool is teachable, then point out his errors and sins so that he will stop sinning and turn back to the LORD. After trying and the fool rejects all the wise counsel, then leave him alone

and let him remain in his foolish conceit. The important thing is that you have tried to help, but since the help is rejected, move on to others who want to be helped. A person can only be helped if he wants to be helped. Understand that these fools might even turn around and bite you and try to destroy you because you have pointed out their sins and their conceit! Do not be overly concerned about such a reaction, because when it happens, verse 4 applies. Keep silent and do not answer like a fool.

If the believer does not know how to answer or is about to answer foolishly, then he must apply verse 4 immediately or else he becomes a fool if he answers foolishly. If he knows what to say in reply, then apply verse 5.

VI. No Answer -- Proverbs 29:19 (KJV) "A servant will not be corrected by words: for though he understand he will not answer." (Synthetical parallelism) – Sometimes the silent treatment is worse than talking things through. It is important to calm down one's anger before speaking. But when the silent treatment becomes a weapon of choice to inflame a situation, then it is wrong and a sin. The situation portrayed here is like that of a master slave relationship. The servant is not supposed to talk back to the master. He would do whatever the master says. Very often when he is lazy or does something wrong, the master would correct him with words. These kinds of exhortation help the servant to serve correctly and with the right attitude. But the servant would not listen and remain in his old slothful ways. He dares not talk back to his master for fear of being punished. He stubbornly refuses to change, but dares not answer either. The silent treatment is applied here in a bad sense.

He understands what the master says and that the master desires for him to improve. But the servant will not obey and dares not answer! This kind of spirit is common and very harmful to those who use it. As children of God, be teachable at all times. Learn from all quarters, both young and old, the lowly or the mighty. As long as we learn, it does not matter where the teaching comes from because God can use even the ass of Balaam to teach him, but sadly Balaam did not learn! That is a lesson for us all when it comes to a teachable heart! Very often, pride is the centre of this bad form of silent treatment. Not answering is good only when it helps the person ponder carefully, ensuring that what he is saying is of God and pleasing to God. Otherwise, the silent treatment, as a form of stubborn refusal to change and improve, is very damaging to the self and to the witness of Christ in the believer's life.

APPLICATION – The main thrust every believer ought to remember concerning answering properly is found in God's Word. The text to remember all the days of his life is **Ephesians 6:12-13 (KJV)**, which states very clearly, "**For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. 13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.**"

With the above reminder, the answer of the child of God ought to be:--

- Wise;
- Honest;
- Studious;
- Powerful; and

- Joyful.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is usually the reason for retaliating with grievous words? What is the gain in retaliation? Who benefits when a Christian retaliates in anger and hurts the other person in return?
2. At a vigil service, one of the bereaved family members shared with you that he received a dream from God indicating that the person who has died has gone to heaven. What would you say? Would you correct the person, or just ignore it and make no comments? What if you heard it from a person who has just suffered the loss of his 3-year-old son because of a car accident? What would you say to that person?
3. How does one determine evil words? Do they include flattery? Please share some incidents from your own life in which you carefully pondered before answering. Were your answers Bible-based, and did they help calm someone who was feeling sad and dejected?
4. If a multimillionaire in the church wants to be a deacon, should he be allowed to serve, especially when he threatens to leave the church if he is not appointed? If the pastor favours the rich and well-educated in the church, what would you do?
5. Do you often resort to the silent treatment when dealing with problems? What was the longest silent treatment you have employed against your "foe" whereby you did not wish to say a word? Are there Biblical instances where a long, silent treatment is approved or even encouraged?