

Silence as a Weapon

CONVENTIONAL wisdom suggests that “silence is golden”—a saying that no doubt originated with harried parents.

While silence can be beautiful, it can also be ugly. It can wreak more havoc than words can ever match. Silence can cut sharper than a knife and pierce the heart more keenly than an arrow.

A number of years ago I became aware of the terrible power of silence during the painful divorce of a friend. The following is taken from an article I wrote at the time, in which my friend expressed his pain:

“During the long year in which my marriage lunged toward disintegration, nothing was more difficult for me to endure than my wife’s intense silence. We lived together in the same house, but we never talked. If I initiated a conversation she would answer in monosyllables, and she initiated nothing. She didn’t argue, complain, or become angry. She did her work around the house and cared for our children, but she would not talk to me. It would have been easier for me if she had cursed me for my inadequacies and denounced me with bitter hatred. Anything she had to say, no matter how venomous and virulent, would have been less oppressive than that hateful silence she hurled at me” (*The Banner*, March 21, 1988).

Wielding Silence

In the succeeding years I’ve seen the weapon of silence used to wound people on many occasions. As a minister I have often seen the destructive power of silence within the church community. I’m convinced that silence is the weapon of choice for churchgoing folks.

There would be heavy sanctions against a church member who assaulted a fellow believer with a switchblade, but who has ever come under church discipline for wounding another person with the “silent treatment”?

My first adult experience in being on the receiving end of hurtful silence came during my early years as a pastor. When the church council made a decision to change hymnals, one of the senior and respected members of the congregation was outspoken in his anger. The next thing I knew, he was icing me out with silence.

I tried everything I could to create a warmer climate, but to no avail. At every church service I sought him out, greeted him cordially, and tried to shake his hand. Although he did reluctantly take my outstretched hand, I would have received a friendlier shake from a polar bear. Until the day I left that congregation to serve another church, this angry man never surrendered his hurtful silence.

I would like to claim that I have never myself wielded the weapon of silence. The truth is that I live among people who abuse the power of silence, and I am just the same.

Jesus and Silence

More than anyone else, Jesus has taught me when silence may and may not be used.

Prior to his 24 hours before the cross, Jesus never gave anyone the “silent treatment,” not even his enemies. To be sure, he had plenty of cause. Throughout his ministry people constantly taunted him, baited him, tested him. On many occasions Jesus could have turned a cold shoulder and walked away.

But he didn’t.

When the Pharisees gleefully sought to trap him by posing a tax dilemma, Jesus didn’t turn mum—he answered them



(Matt. 22:15-22). When the Sadducees lured him into a verbal minefield with a question about marriage and the resurrection, Jesus calmly responded to their inquiry (22:23ff). Though he did occasionally speak to his enemies with veiled meaning, Jesus never inflicted silence on them. That is, not until just before he died.

One of the most striking features of our Lord’s passion was the silence of his suffering. All four gospel writers note his remarkable silence.

Matthew informs us that when Jesus “was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer” (27:12). Mark points out that the high priest bluntly



asked Jesus why he would not respond to his accusers, “but Jesus remained silent and gave no answer” (14:61). Luke records that when Jesus later appeared before Herod, Herod “plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer” (23:9). Silence! Powerful and pointed silence.

Why? Why was Jesus so silent? His silence was prophesied by Isaiah centuries earlier, but Isaiah does not explain its purpose.

The Simple Truth

The simple truth is that the silence of Jesus was the final result of a love that

was again and again rejected. It was the silence of judgment.

Jesus’ silence was directed at the Pharisees and teachers of the law who had hardened their hearts against him. It was a silence that said, “You have spurned my saving grace so often that there is nothing more I can say.”

As the late Peter Eldersveld wrote many years ago:

There comes a time in God’s dealings with sinners when he has nothing more to say, when something more powerful than words will be necessary if they are

just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over” (Matt. 18:15). Communication with the hope of reconciliation must be the goal for believers who feel wronged by another.

Likewise, if another person treats us with a stony silence, it is our duty to attempt communication in the hope of reconciliation. We must not acquiesce easily to another person’s attempt to hurt us with silence! The inspired word from the apostle Paul is, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom. 12:18).

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to be converted. And that is usually his last witness to them. If the utter silence of God does not impress them, then there is nothing left for him to do but to forsake them forever (*Nothing But the Gospel*, 1966).

Silence in the Hands of the Christian

In the hands of anyone less than the Son of God, the weapon of silence is extremely dangerous. When we take aim and shoot a cold stream of silence at another person, we are pronouncing our judgment on that individual. We are saying that that human being is so despicable and unreachable that we do not consider him or her worthy of any attempt at communication. We pour out our utter contempt by our silence.

Rarely are we justified in making such a judgment.

Jesus did not say, “If a brother or sister sins against you, hit them with the weapon of silence until they shape up.” Rather, Jesus said, “Go and point out the fault,

Unfortunately, in this fallen world there will always be someone who hits us with silence, and, despite our best efforts, we will not be able to warm the relationship. Eventually, we may realize that further attempts to communicate are fruitless. In such situations perhaps we are justified in responding to stubborn, persistence silence with a silence of our own.

We must make certain, however, that our silence never rises out of hatred or contempt, but out of a Christ-like love that has again and again been rebuffed. ■



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