

## Volatile Rhetoric and the Loss of Truth by Pastor Marty

I have now been doing newsletters for almost three years. During this whole time, I have avoided any clear discussion of politics as much as possible. However, there are times when certain issues become such a part of our culture and society that it becomes impossible to discuss truth and reality without stepping on certain toes. For example, when I did the two-part newsletter on the nature of masculine and feminine, there was no way to do so without giving some attention to the issue of gender; any attempt to do otherwise would result in nothing more than speaking words without any real meaning. However, I have aimed to focus on core principles rather than specific issues because the former will inform the latter while the reverse is not always true. For instance, knowing what God thinks about “covenant” will automatically provide insight into family, law, marriage, business, trust, and numerous other topics, but discussing a biblical view of “tithing” will not necessarily explain how God views our investments in the stock market. Some issues are the exception to this rule because they affect our very ability to function. Our language and our style of communication is one of these foundational issues. If we wish to continue as human beings, we must recognize that the words we use—and how we use them—matter.

***If we wish to continue to be human, we must recognize that our words do matter.***

In *The Magician’s Nephew*, C. S. Lewis describes the creation of Narnia as well as the origin of the White Witch. After Aslan created the animals, he chose some of them to become talking beasts. In clear similarity to the book of Genesis, the Great Lion breathed on those animals and commanded them to awaken. The sign of their unique nature was their ability to speak. This was not just a coincidence, for he

specifically warns them that if they at any time forsake their calling and their identity, they will revert back to “dumb animals” and lose the ability to speak. There are two instances in the book series when we see beasts lose the ability to speak: in *Prince Caspian* when they have forgotten who they are, and in *The Last Battle* when they have forgotten who Aslan is; in both cases, the tragedy and horror of their fate is clear. However, it is important to note that their fate—becoming dumb animals—is directly linked to losing the ability to speak. In one instance, a bear becomes wild when he forgets how to speak, and in the other instance, the cat loses the ability to speak after using his words to intentionally deceive other animals. As one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, Lewis is making a significant point: he is stating that who we are as human beings is inextricably linked to what we do and say.

***Our very identity as human beings is inextricably linked to what we do and say.***

This is not something we may often think about, and it may seem a bit foreign. However, if we think about this, we will notice that this concept is supported by orthodox theology. In the New Testament, Jesus is called the “Word” Of God, and He describes Himself as the perfect representation of the Father. The Apostle John chose to use “logos” precisely because it meant a unit of language with eternal significance and representation. In other words, identifying Jesus as “the Word” was no coincidence—either for John or for the Holy Spirit. He was indicating that Jesus is the perfect communication and representation from the Father. Similarly, the Scriptures—also identified as the Word of God—perfectly represent God’s nature and character. The fact that God cannot lie is directly equated in the

Bible with His being perfect, holy, true, and completely devoid of any hint of darkness and evil. Numerous passages connect a person's words with their true nature, and Jesus even relates lying with being a child of the devil. The problem is that sometimes we may not realize that the process actually works both ways.

***According to Proverbs 18:21, the words that we speak will even affect our lives.***

Some theologies have been built around the idea that the words we speak affect our circumstances, including both our health and finances. Irrespective of how that concept may fit into anyone's theological paradigm, it should be relatively obvious to most people that their words will affect their relationships, business dealings, and emotional well-being. What many people seem not to realize—or simply refuse to accept—is that their words also affect their souls. In other words, the things we say and the way we say them have the ability over time to affect and change who we are as human beings in this life. If we are justified or condemned by the words we say (Matthew 12:37), then we should not be surprised to hear that our words can either help or hinder the process of being transformed from glory to glory as children of God. However, as is usually the case with spiritual truths, the benefit or consequence is not exclusive to Christians; unbelievers are also affected by the words they speak. If we can say and do things that help us become more like Jesus, then we can also say and do things that make us less like Him. In our own lives, we can evolve or devolve based on choices we make.

***In our own lives, we can evolve or devolve according to the choices that we make.***

Probably all of us know people who swear to one extent or another. However, it is almost impossible to go out into the world and be with people without at one time or another interacting with somebody who seems to make

every third or fourth word some type of an expletive. It may seem like they have forgotten how to speak normally. Of course, some of this is intentional for the purpose of being accepted in a peer group; however, it really is indicative of a truly deteriorating ability to communicate. Similar to just about any other addiction, the more someone swears, the more that type of shocking language becomes normalized so that an increased level of swearing actually becomes necessary to relate any additional emphasis. Language that is shocking or offensive to others no longer has any real affect or meaning to the user. Eventually, it becomes such a part of their communication style that they actually have to concentrate in order to communicate without it. Paul warned of the potential of sinning so regularly that a person's conscience becomes seared so they no longer are able to distinguish between good and evil. In terms of language, the same is true concerning swearing, insults, gossip, hate, and even self-deprecating or self-aggrandizing statements. If we are not careful, we lose the ears to hear what we actually say.

***If we are not very careful, we will lose the ears to hear what it is we are saying.***

If we were to go back in time one or two centuries, we would find things significantly different than they are today. People not only had a significantly larger common vocabulary but also took their words much more carefully. A verbal commitment carried such a legal and moral weight that a contract in writing was often unnecessary. An accusation of lying was considered so serious that it would even lead to violence and legal recourse. In some cases, the public rebuke of "shame on you" carried a profound level of disgrace upon the target. This is almost a polar opposite of what we find in our culture today. One need only to turn on a television, listen to a radio, read a news article, or peruse social media to discover the most extreme rhetoric used with reckless abandon.

In many cases, this is entirely intentional: an “ad hominem” attack upon an opponent largely absolves a person from having to defend any position, define and clarify any stand, or prove any point. This has been a common practice in the last decade where political extremists have used charged accusations of racism, sexism, bigotry, ignorance, hate, and immorality with reckless abandon to silence and to invalidate proponents who may hold inconvenient facts.

***Attacking a person's character is a very easy substitute for facing untimely facts.***

Many years ago, I was in a situation where it had seemed appropriate to address another person's questionable actions. What I fully expected to be a simple, honest, and civil discussion concerning some misunderstandings turned out to be anything but that. I was shocked and dumbfounded at the person's response, which instantly escalated in scope and intensity. In all honesty, I probably did not approach the topic as carefully as I could have, for I had some preconceived notions about the person's awareness of the situation; however, the response consisted entirely of denying any truth to the events and simultaneously making scathing accusations against my character. I found that there was nothing I could say that had any effect on diffusing the situation, and I had to leave things completely unresolved. An attempt to resolve the conflict a few years later resulted in even more extreme reactions even though I tried to approach the topic carefully. I discovered that the person was unable to hear anything I said, having an entirely different recollection of events. Different people often remember events slightly differently, but there have only been a few times when someone's perceptions were separated from reality to such an extent that I was literally concerned for their mental health and wondered if they posed a potential danger to others; this was one of those times. In this case, there could be no full

resolution. As Joshua (the advanced computer) stated in the *Wargames* movie, sometimes the only winning move is not to play the game.

***As Joshua learned, sometimes the only winning move is not to play the game.***

One of the byproducts of using an “ad hominem” attack is that it changes the person's perceptions. It begins when a person becomes emotionally invested in winning an argument. At that point, the ends justify the means. Accuracy and truth becomes secondary to method and approach. Ascribing a specific motive or ideology to an opponent immediately frames all statements and responses in a suspicious and negative context. Once that has been accomplished, every question, objection, or response can be equated with an extreme instead of the norm, which makes honest discussion impossible. Those in media and in politics who use this strategy rarely recognize the dangerous side effects: their perceptions change to such an extent that they are no longer able to view reality except in extremes. Even the slightest disagreement elicits an emotional response and becomes immediately interpreted as radical, extreme, dangerous, and immoral. In that type of situation, the language has to match the intensity of the emotion, so the intensity of the rhetoric increases. In the process, the words themselves begin to lose their effectiveness due to their overuse, so more extreme rhetoric becomes necessary. The cycle continues until the person eventually dissociates from reality and enters a paranoid delusional state in which they can no longer see or hear things as they actually happen to be. As Paul describes it in the book of Romans, they end up consumed by their chosen destruction.

***Those who repeatedly choose destruction will eventually be fully consumed by it.***

Today, we are in the middle of a cultural revolution that is intended to eradicate every

noticeable trace of God and truth in our public lives. What began with an intentionally inflated “separation of church and state” fallacy has now become a violent hatred for conservative and godly beliefs. Suddenly, even using certain phrases to argue against progressive immorality and the destruction of human nature is being immediately identified as a type of hate speech that deserves punishment. This is becoming so commonplace that a growing number of people recognize no difference between a sentence handed out by a court of law and a judgment delivered by a violent mob. Additionally, those in positions of power now use their influence to try and have the laws reinterpreted to coincide with their elevated levels of rhetoric. The clear danger is that many people eventually will not be able to distinguish between minor offenses and major atrocities. Any indication of personal beliefs that do not exactly coincide with certain parameters will be instantly equated with an intentional affirmation and support of radical behavior. This is not just a potential outcome—it is an absolute and certain result. As the level of rhetoric increases, the corresponding level of emotional sensitivity will continue to increase.

***As the rhetoric increases, the emotional sensitivity will also continue to increase.***

One of the things history teaches us is that we can almost always find something if we search for it with determination. In the case of the Salem witch trials, many people died when evidence of their collusion with the devil was discovered. The big problem is that almost all of the “evidence” was identified as such after the fact. Once those in control began to investigate an accusation of witchcraft, there was only a very small likelihood that the person would not be found guilty. Every action, statement, or coincidental event was reinterpreted in light of the charges. In that type of situation, nobody comes out unscathed. If even Jesus was found at fault in a court of predetermined guilt, there

is very little chance for anyone else to escape a similar sentence. Today, we are repeating what we did not learn from history. We are seeing all of the same methods in use that led to many of the horrors of the past: leaders rule without the constraints of the same laws that limit normal citizens, government is run by those who have money and influence in high places, corruption is ignored or dismissed when it conflicts with a political or social goal, the flow of information is controlled and framed by those who have a specific agenda, and violent mobs operate with near immunity to create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. What makes the danger even more immanent is that class, identity, and race are used to prevent the masses from realizing they are being manipulated, used, and abused. In coordination with these, volatile rhetoric is keeping groups polarized according to identity and silencing any discussion that has a potential to introduce inconvenient truths into the mix.

***Volatile rhetoric keeps groups polarized and prevents introduction of new facts.***

In *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace continually gave in to his base nature, and he felt no remorse until he ended up being turned into a dragon. It was only when he saw his own reflection that he realized what he was and the depth of his fall. At that very moment, he had a choice: he could own his identity as a dragon or he could devote his life to becoming better. He chose to do all he could to change the attitude that led him to that fate, and he eventually not only became human again but also became a much better person than he was before. In our current culture, the siren’s song to embrace the speech of the dragon is exceptionally loud, and many have already been transformed to such an extent that they have forgotten how to be a human being. However, it only takes a desire to change to begin to reverse the process. We are now in the position where we have to decide personally what we will do about the rhetoric.