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SMOOTH TALKERS

This is a rebellious people....who say to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us *right things*; speak to us *smooth things*” (Isaiah 30:9,10).

(Biblical quotations are from the New King James Version, NKJV).

A story is told of a rich, well-to-do woman who wanted to have a book written about her life and family. She hired a writer who began to take down information. The woman told her to feel free to mention any family member in the book—*except Uncle John*. “I don’t want you to mention my Uncle John,” she said. “He got into all kinds of crime, spent years in Sing Sing Prison, and was finally executed in the electric chair.” The writer said, “I think we can include Uncle John—I will just reword it a little bit. We will say, ‘Uncle John was involved with one of our large government agencies for many years; when he left it was a big shock!’ Yes, I think we *can* include Uncle John in the story!”

Some lawyers specialize in being smooth talkers. They can make a guilty person look *innocent*, or an innocent person look *guilty*—depending which side they are on. Honesty is not their priority; their motive is simply to win a case.

The Bible says, “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isa. 5:20).

Jesus taught: “Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’” (Matt. 5:37).

Turning to 1 Kings 22:1-38, we read the account of Ahab who wanted to hear *smooth things*, not *right things*—and it cost him his life!

Ahab was the king of Israel (the northern kingdom); Jehoshaphat was the king of Judah (the southern kingdom). The two kings were linked by marriage: Jehoshaphat’s son was married to Ahab’s daughter (2 Kings 8:18). When Ahab asked Jehoshaphat to join him in a military attack at Ramoth Gilead, he agreed; but said to Ahab, “Please inquire for the word of the LORD today.” So about 400 “prophets” were assembled, all of them smooth talkers. When asked if he should go against Ramoth Gilead to fight, they all said: “Go up, for the Lord will deliver it into the hand of the king.”

Despite the unanimous message of these 400 prophets, it appears Jehoshaphat had some doubt. He asked Ahab if there was yet another prophet they could call upon. Reluctantly, Ahab mentioned Micaiah, but added: “I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.”

Nevertheless, Micaiah was quickly summoned. In the process, a messenger explained to Micaiah what the 400 prophets had said, and that he should agree with them. When Ahab asked about going to war against Ramoth Gilead, Micaiah echoed the words of the others: “Go and prosper, for the LORD will deliver it into the hand of the king!” But, as the context confirms, he was using *satire*—a literary form which, while saying one thing, actually reinforces another.

A number of examples of satire can be brought forth from Scripture, but two will suffice:

When Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Cry aloud, for he is a god” (1 Kings 18:27), he was not saying Baal was *actually* a god who would answer their cries—just the opposite.

When David’s wife Michal, said, “How glorious was the king of Israel today!” (2 Sam. 6:20), she was not saying he was glorious—just the opposite.

Evidently Ahab realized the use of satire in what Micaiah said. It was not so much *what* he said, but *how* he said it. So Ahab quizzed him more, claiming he wanted nothing but the truth. Then Micaiah said right out: “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd.” (cf. similar wording in the New Testament, Matt. 9:36). Micaiah’s message was one of doom regarding the proposed attack at Ramoth Gilead, and from which the king would not return alive.

Like an expression we hear today—“I told you so!”—Ahab said to Jehoshaphat: “Did I not tell you he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil?”

Micaiah then provided a glimpse of what had gone on behind the scenes in the spiritual realm:

“I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by...and the Lord said, ‘Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?’ ...Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, and said, ‘I will persuade him...I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ ...Therefore look! The LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours, and the LORD has declared disaster against you” (1 Kings 22:19-23).

For telling the truth, Micaiah was put in prison. Like those of whom Isaiah spoke, Ahab wanted to hear “smooth things,” not that which was “right.” Following the crowd, as it were, he chose to believe what he wanted to believe—and it cost him his life:

“Now a certain man drew a bow at random, and struck the king of Israel [Ahab] between the joints of his armor...and he

died at evening. The blood ran out from the wound onto the floor of the chariot...So the king died, and was brought to Samaria. And they buried the king in Samaria” (1 Kings 22:34-37). Though Micaiah was outnumbered 400 to 1, he was *right* and the 400 smooth talkers were *wrong!*

The words of Exodus 23:2 come to mind: “You shall not follow a *crowd* to do evil”!

Following Ahab's defeat and death, we read: “Then someone washed the chariot at a pool in Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood while the harlots bathed” (1 Kings 22:38). Though some translators say his “armor” was washed in the pool, there is strong evidence that “harlots” is indeed the correct translation. Perhaps even this detail adds to the picture of Ahab's degradation—the mention of a despised, sordid place frequented by wild dogs, a bathing place for harlots.

Apparently Paul concluded that some of the Galatian believers preferred smooth talk, rather than the truth: “Am I therefore become your enemy because I speak the truth?” (Gal. 4:16). He warned the young preacher Timothy about those who “have itching ears....they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Tim. 4:2-4). He wrote to Titus that “there are many...idle talkers and deceivers...whose mouths must be stopped” (Titus 1:9-11).

Not every doctrine that *sounds good*, is *good sound doctrine*. (cf. Titus 2:1).

The prophet Ezekiel—who was certainly not a *smooth talker*—had to deal with people who were *smooth hearers*. “They come to you as people do, they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words...with their mouth they show much love, but...you are to them as a *very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument*; for they hear your words, *but they do not do them*”! (Ezekiel 33:31-33).

Someone said to a pastor: “Why are you preaching so hard at us, we haven't done anything!” He replied: “*That's the problem!*” The Bible says to be “*doers* of the word, not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22).

A supermarket advertized a special price for a head of lettuce. But one woman only wanted to buy a *half* head of lettuce. The man in charge of produce told her they did not sell it that way—only by the head. She explained that she lived alone and only needed a *half* head of lettuce. She insisted! Finally, after some discussion, he agreed to go talk to the store manager. Walking clear over to another part of the store, he found the manager, and said: “There is a crazy woman that insists on buying a *half* head of lettuce!” When he turned and realized the woman had followed him, he said, “And *this* dear lady right here wants to buy the other half!” That was a smooth talker!

The pastor of a church in San Jose, California (where I spoke a number of times), told me an incident about a smooth talker he encountered some years before. When he was serving as the pastor of a church in Nebraska, a man came to the parsonage door asking for help. He and his family were traveling, he said; their car broke down, leaving them in dire circumstances. He explained he was from a certain city in Florida, mentioned a pastor's name there, and the name of the church (which was the same denomination). All that he said was valid information—*except the part about his bad luck!*

It so happened the pastor had resigned the church in Nebraska and was getting ready to move the 1,600 miles to San Jose. Two weeks passed and the pastor had now relocated in California. A knock comes on the door. It is the *same* man, with the *same* hard luck story. The pastor asked him, “Didn't I just talk to you a couple weeks ago in Nebraska?” With this the man took off—nearly running—his smooth talking scheme had been exposed!

The tragedy of smooth talkers like this is that they cause doubts that discredit those who are *truly* poor and do need help.

Years ago, President Calvin Coolidge (who attended the Congregational Church), had returned from the Sunday service. Someone asked what the pastor's subject was that morning. Coolidge (who was said to be a man of few words), simply replied:

“Sin.”

When he was pressed as to what the pastor said about sin, he responded:

“I think he was against it.”

Sin *is* a serious issue; we *must* be against it. It is so serious that “Christ *died* for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3). Because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), and because the Bible says we must “repent” of our sins (Acts 2:38; 3:19), *sin must be exposed for what it is*.

God told Isaiah: “Cry aloud, spare not; lift up your voice like a trumpet; tell my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their *sins*” (Isaiah 58:1).

Motivational, upbeat, positive, success-oriented messages may make some good points, but if a preacher is a smooth talker who avoids saying anything about sin, he misses the mark. We need more than nice little Sermonettes to Christianettes.

To five of the seven churches of Revelation, Jesus said, “Repent.” If that was the ratio in those churches back then, I wonder what might it be today?

We sometimes hear the slogan that people should attend the church of their choice. Not to subtract from something of great value—freedom of religion—but a better phrase would be for people to attend the church of *God's* choice!

God forbid that we should be like those of whom Isaiah spoke, desiring to hear “smooth things” instead of that which is “right”!
—RW

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