How to Kill A Word

When our grandson Griffin was 5 or so, his brother Will did something that made him angry. Finally, in his frustration, he yelled at Will, "You Calvinist!!"

Will, at the age of 9 at the time, may have been a lot of things, but he was not a Calvinist. I doubt he even knew what the word meant.

But words do mean things. Who can argue with that? Yet, some do. I've heard people say, "words mean nothing — only actions count." Wait… what? Words mean nothing?

So, that old yarn, "sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me" is true? Well… no.

So your words do mean something. Actions can discredit or confirm your words; but your words mean a lot. Jesus said,

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. Matthew 12:36-37

"Careless words." We are witnessing today the systematic assassination of words and terms, even those that have unique, even precious, meanings. If Jesus' words apply to politicians, talking heads on TV and to those who post on social media — and why wouldn't they? — a lot of people have a lot to answer for at judgment.

For example, during a recent hearing on Capitol Hill, a congressman attempted to defend a man who had been grilled by members of the other party. He told him he would like to give him the Purple Heart (the man on the hot seat was testifying about some nefarious texts he sent to his mistress). The congressman's words were outrageous. At the very least, his words display an ignorance of what the term "Purple Heart" signifies. And if we take the statement of the congressman to its logical conclusion, we would begin handing out those medals like candy to those we feel have been mistreated. What an insult to those who have received that badge of honor for their bravery and sacrifice in wartime.

The congressman's words were careless and he should be ashamed. Words mean things.

In another case, some political commentators — who claim to be "politically correct" — said that

President Trump's visit to Russia last week was "our Pearl Harbor." Another called it our new "9-11" — and neither were challenged by the other commentators. Regardless of one's opinion, those statements are irresponsible and insensitive to those who suffered through the attacks on Pearl Harbor and the World Trade Center. Words and terms mean things.

There's more. There were those who reacted to a decision by saying it was worse than the "holocaust." That's sickening. There is only one "Holocaust," and that term points to the death of 6 million Jews at the hands of Hitler.

What happens to a word or a term when it's carelessly marshaled to describe a political or policy decision that someone doesn't like? The term "racist," for instance, has been uttered so often and so carelessly in the last couple of years that the vile nature of the action it symbolizes is being lost. Why can't they see that? That word should be reserved to de- scribe the real thing when it rears its ugly head.

Words mean things. In an essay at https://tinyurl.com/y7vowzv4, Jeff Goldstein says,

…for a word to be a word, it must have first been signified… If we didn't assume such signification took place, we'd have no reason to assume we were dealing with language at all. Which is why when one argues that "words can mean different things to different people even in the same context," one is really arguing that one can make signifiers do different things in a given context based on their own intent to mean…In the simplest terms, taking someone else's signs, ignoring their meaning, and then adding your own meaning in place of the original meaning, is not interpretation. Interpretation requires that the receiver attempt to decode the message sent by the author. It does not justify replacing the author's message with one of your own creation and then pretending what you've done is anything other than engaged in a bit of creative writing.

Whatever your political leaning, or your personal scruples, and no matter how frustrated you get with someone or something, be careful that you use your words carefully. We should take Jesus' words seriously, when he said,

Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

This text is teaching integrity but it is also teaching economy — the less we talk, the less likely we will get in trouble. As the saying goes, "do not speak unless it improves on silence."

There are people in our culture — like that congressman who used "Purple Heart" in an inappropriate way — that are displaying, for all to see, their extreme ignorance, or an alarming lack of integrity. As Christians, we cannot afford to be careless be- cause our words will be our judge one day.