



DIOCESE OF
FORT WAYNE-SOUTH BEND

Lenten Message of Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades February 28, 2019

Jesus' words in the passage from the Sermon on the Plain, which we hear in this Sunday's Gospel (Luke 6:39-45), offer us important counsel as we begin the season of Lent.

First of all, Our Lord says: "No disciple is superior to the teacher; but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher." Lent is a time of training, training in virtue and holiness. Isn't that why we pray and fast and give alms? Our Lenten resolutions should be things that will help us to become more like our Teacher, more like Christ. It's good to think of what we can do during Lent that will help us better imitate Jesus.

Lent is also a time to remove the wooden beam from our eye. Jesus called those who want to remove the splinter in their brother's eye without noticing the beam in their own eye "hypocrites." The Greek word "hypocrite" means an actor who plays a part on a stage. We're hypocrites like the Pharisees when we judge others' faults while ignoring our own faults.

How often we're tempted to accuse others, to point out their sins and shortcomings, not in order to help them, but to put them down, sometimes to their face or sometimes behind their back to other people. This is the sin of detraction, and it can be a mortal sin if it causes serious harm to another – disclosing someone's faults and failings to others without an objectively valid reason. Detraction can destroy another person's reputation and honor and is a sin against justice as well as charity. There are also other sins of the tongue like calumny, in which one says false things about others, harming their honor and reputation. And the sin of rash judgment: assuming as true, without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbor.

Oftentimes gossip involves these sins – malicious talk about other people. When we rob people of their honor and reputation, we are doing harm to them. Pope Francis preaches a lot about this and calls Christians who gossip this way "killer Christians." He says, and I agree, that this is an evil and a sickness in the Church. It sows division in parishes and even hatred towards others. Pope Francis has used even stronger language, saying that "to make gossip is terrorism." He once said: "Whoever gossips is like a terrorist that throws a bomb and if it goes off, destroys, destroys with the tongue." He says they're not suicide bombers, because they protect themselves in the process.

We must resist the temptation to speak ill of others and learn to bite our tongue when we are tempted to commit these sins of the tongue. We must learn to bridle our tongues. Or bridle our hands, since these sins often are committed by writing uncharitable, even hateful, remarks in letters, tweets or blogs. When we think about giving something up for Lent, it's much more important to give up the sin of gossip, to give up detraction or slander, than candy or desserts.

When we are tempted to speak ill of others or to write derogatory things about others, we should try to hear Jesus saying to us: “You hypocrite! Remove the wooden beam from your own eye first.”

We must stop thinking that sins of the tongue are of little importance. Though not every sin of speech is a mortal sin, such sins can be, depending on the harm that is intended or done. Jesus once said: “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken” (Matthew 12:36).

I am speaking about this topic because sins of the tongue like detraction, calumny and rash judgment seem to abound in our society today and even in the Church. There is a lot of uncharitable and malicious speech. Social media is filled with these things – reviling others, name-calling, and backbiting. Some social media forums delight in these things. Polarization in both the Church and in society is caused or worsened by this constant speaking negatively of and attacking others. Many don’t think twice about robbing people of their honor or reputation.

What do you do when you are in a situation where you begin to hear this type of harmful speech from someone you are with or when you are in a group? St. John Vianney said: “If something uncharitable is said in your presence, either speak in favor of the absent, or withdraw, or if possible, stop the conversation.”

“A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit,” Jesus says in this Sunday’s Gospel. In Lent, we should examine the tree of our lives by examining the fruits: our words, our deeds, our conduct. Do we find good fruit, the virtues? Or do we find rotten fruit, vices, sinful words and deeds? If we’re honest, we probably find both. We need to get rid of the rotten fruit by going to confession. We can produce good fruit, with the help of God’s grace, through prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Most important, of course, is the tree – our lives and what is in our hearts. All our external Lenten practices should be aimed at interior purification, true conversion.

Jesus says: “A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil.” A good person has an interior store of goodness, and from that store produces good conduct, just as a good tree produces good fruit. Good or evil flows from one’s inner self. When there’s something rotten in the tree, in our hearts, we will bear rotten fruit. We need to pray with the repentant King David: “A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me” (Psalm 51). In His mercy, the Lord will hear and answer this prayer if we offer it with true repentance, which means we humbly recognize the beam that is stuck in our own eye.

These are the last words of Jesus in the Gospel today: “for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.” The mouth expresses what the heart contains. If our mouths are filled with harsh attacks on others, detraction, rash judgments, calumny and harmful gossip, there’s definitely something rotten within us. That rot is sin. If our hearts are purified, our speech will be purified.

The goal of Lent is to become like our Teacher. As Jesus said, “when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher.” We all need this training. That’s what Lent is about. It is a time of prayer a time to more deeply absorb Christ’s teaching. It is a time of mortification and self-denial, following the example of our Teacher who fasted in the desert for forty days. It is a time to heed our Teacher’s instruction to take up our cross and follow Him along the way of self-giving love. Almsgiving is an expression of this love.

May the disciple most like the Teacher pray for us during this season of Lent! That disciple is Mary His Mother. May her example inspire us to grow in virtue and holiness as true disciples of her Son!