

Daily View

“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’” Hebrews 3:13

January 29, 2021

Maxims & Proverbs

Besides using a platitude or pat answer to get me to eat my vegetables, my mother also was a master at putting a great point into a few words. “*Mr. Can’t never did anything*” was her common retort to my “I can’t do it.” Or, to allay my fears during the cold war when it was at its iciest, she would say, “*there will always be wars and rumors of wars*” (a rough quote of Matthew 24:6). She had many of these, probably borrowed from her father, a man of few words but great influence.

If the article yesterday left the impression that pithy sayings, aphorisms, maxims and proverbs are bad that was not at all what I intended. I use my share of those, mostly borrowed. Here are a few you’ve probably heard me say: “God is God — and you’re not”; “God is the audience”; “God has no grandchildren”; “a text can never mean what it never meant”; “a mist in the pulpit, is fog in the pew”; “you can’t be optimistic if you have misty optics”; “if you have one clock, you know the time; if you have two, you are never sure”; and one that I often need to remember: “*when someone asks you the time, don’t build them a watch.*”

Like Randy Clark (see *Daily View*, 1/26), I had coaches who used pithy statements to make a point. To one of my baseball coaches, “*wimmers never quit and quitters never win*” was not a platitude; it was a philosophy and he would throw you off the team if he decided you were a quitter. Of course, sometimes perfectly good sayings become platitudes only because they are used too often to be helpful. Hence, my example in yesterday’s piece, “there is no ‘I’ in team” has, in the eyes of many, become a hackneyed saying that needs a reincarnation. It’s like a bee that lost its buzz.

Again, a “platitude” is defined as “a trite, or overused statement or a banal remark presented as fact.” Twitter is full of these. A tweeter will make statement and then say something like, “it needs to stop!” Or, if I say in a sermon, “brethren, we need to be good!!!” that is a platitude, meaningless without more explanation. Note how often platitudes end with exclamation points.

According to the dictionary, a “pat answer” is “a simple answer that fails to fully or adequately explain or respond to something.” There is comfort in answering a question in a word or two but such an answer is often deficient.

Platitudes and pat answers are different than maxims and aphorisms. The latter are defined as “short, pithy statements that express a general truth or rule of conduct.” They are helpful and memorable precisely *because* they are short and “pithy” (concise). “*Brevity is the soul of wit*” is short and memorable. Yes, it needs fleshing out but it’s helpful because of its brevity. It makes you think. At least, it makes *me* think, especially when looking at the length of my sermon.

The book of Proverbs, of course, are full of maxims. Unlike “platitudes,” the inspired Proverbs state important truths in a concise, often memorable, form. “*Train up a*

Unlike ‘platitudes,’ the inspired Proverbs state important truths in a concise, often memorable, form. “*Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it*” (Proverbs 22:6) is generally true, but not a guarantee that your child will never ‘depart’ from what you taught him.”

child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6) is generally true, not a guarantee that your child will never “depart” from what you taught him. Sometimes, a proverb states what *should* be the case though there are exceptions. For example, “*A man is commended according to his good sense, but one of*

twisted mind is despised” (Proverbs 12:8) should be generally true but one look at the political landscape and you’ll conclude there are many exceptions. — sometimes, those with “twisted minds” are favored by the majority.

Some of the proverbs are absolutely true, without exception: “*One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil, but the fool is reckless and careless*” (Proverbs 14:16). That can serve as a fine definition of a wise person and a fool, yet in a short, “pithy” statement.

Don’t confuse maxims, proverbs and aphorisms with platitudes and pat answers. It’s not that maxims never need more explanation; they do. Jesus’ “*render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s*” (Matthew 22:21) requires a thoughtful response — we should ask, “what is Caesar’s and what is God’s?” That’s what Jesus wants us to do. Using a secular example, JFK’s “*ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country*” is a famous saying that is beneficial because it’s short and memorable. But it also begs the question: “what are some things I can do?” That’s the question JFK’s speechwriters were wanting to encourage.

Maxims, aphorisms and proverbs encourage further thought; platitudes and pat answers stifle thought. (I wrote these articles mainly as a reminder to myself to remember that).