

A store encounter shows the temptation to escalate

Good morning friends, let's ask for God's help...

So about a year ago, I'm out running a bunch of errands. My last stop is to pick up some double stick tape for my kids' school projects. As I enter the store, an employee says hi to me and I say "hi" back and head towards the back corner to the bathroom, because nature is calling.

After answering that call, I head towards the office supplies aisle on the other side of the store, to get the tape. On my way, the same employee stops me and asks, "Can I help you find anything?" And I say, "I'm looking for double stick tape."

She points me to the office supplies aisle I'm already heading towards and I say, "thanks" and then grab some tape and go check out. That same employee is at the checkout, and as I'm typing in my rewards number, minding my own business, she says to me, "You men never ask for help, you'll just waste time wandering all over the store. If you'd asked me for help, you wouldn't have wasted five minutes looking around."

In that moment, in my pride, I felt two internal urges. The first was to justify myself, to explain to her that I actually just went to the bathroom. That I hadn't been wandering around the store; that I'm not the guy she's stereotyping me to be. The second prideful urge was to attack her back, to escalate the situation. What immediately popped in my head was, "So does this store pay you to criticize how customers shop and stereotype people you don't even know?"

Relevance: Escalation is like a dangerous ladder climb

That last, not so pastoral response would have been an example of escalation. The very helpful Christian marriage book *A Lasting Promise* describes escalation as when people "respond back and forth negatively to each other, continually upping the ante so that the conversation gets more and more nasty."

The Christian researchers who wrote this book studied decades of university-based research on couples and also themselves researched 135 couples, all 135 couples for 12 straight years. In all this research, they found four destructive communication patterns. If one or more

of these patterns persisted in a relationship with frequency, they were strong predictors of a marriage that would be chronically unhappy or not make it.

One of those four destructive communication patterns was escalation. The researchers compare escalation to two people climbing up the two sides of a ladder. That one person makes a negative comment and takes a step up the ladder. The other makes a negative comment with one just as bad, or worse, and takes a step up the other side of the ladder.

As they trade negative comments, they climb higher and higher, responding to each hurt with one of their own. Like with a ladder, it is easier and faster to climb up than to climb down. So with escalation, it's easier in the tension to keep climbing higher than go back down. As the pair climbs higher, there is less and less stability. Imagine two people up on the top step. And so the higher they climb, the greater the chance of the escalation ladder falling and taking them down with it.¹

We're all vulnerable to the dangers of escalation. If you joined us last Sunday, you saw that even Paul and Barnabas may have faced this temptation to escalate as they had a sharp disagreement about John Mark. I know this is hard to believe, but even worship leaders like Jake are vulnerable to escalation. ☺ So we'll hear a story now via video from Jake and his better half Megan ☺ about a time they climbed the escalation ladder.

Thank you, Jake and Megan, for sharing. This escalation thing is not limited to couples, the dangers apply to any relationship, especially when tensions rise: with your relative who insists on arguing about politics at every family get together, with your roommate who hasn't been doing their chores as you're been stuck together at home for months, with someone from our church who posted something on social that you really disagree with.

Orienting to God's Word: Proverbs speaks to anger and escalating conflict

Not surprisingly, God's Word was speaking about the dangers of escalating in anger millennia before university research.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, go ahead and open to the Old Testament book of Proverbs, chapter 29, Proverbs 29. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

¹ Info from original (in *Introduction*) and the revised (in *Chapter 2*) editions of *A Lasting Promise* by Stanley, et. al.

The most common theme in Proverbs is living with wisdom rather than folly. As it discusses the ways of wisdom and folly, Proverbs talks most about our speech, because our words matter. It's why Proverbs gives us tons of wisdom on our use of words, including when we're angry and tempted to escalate.

So let's learn about escalation, and wise alternatives that will save us and those we love from so much pain and impact the quality of our relationships over a lifetime.

Teaching: Wisdom on escalation

There's nothing good at the top of the ladder – Let's start in verse 11 of Proverbs chapter 29.

Verse 11 says:

Fools give full vent to their rage,
but the wise bring calm in the end.

This verse says that it's the fool who gives full vent to their rage, who lets it all out on the other person. It's foolish, when tensions are high, to lose control and keep escalating the conflict up the ladder. You and I just can't say everything we feel when we're angry and have our relationships stay healthy.

If you or I give full vent to our rage, it will likely stir up anger in the other person, and soon, if we're not careful, both will be yelling accusations that start with, "well, you always..." and "well, you never..." as we head up the escalation ladder. Once things are spoken rashly in anger, they can never be taken back from being spoken.

If we often let our anger control our speech, giving full vent, the relationships most important to us will begin to tear apart. There's nothing good at the top of the escalation ladder waiting for you. It's why verse 11 warns us that fools give full vent to their rage.

The words of the foolish can cause such harm, which we see in chapter 12 of Proverbs, so turn there with me, to Proverbs chapter 12, verse 18. Verse 18 says:

The words of the reckless pierce like swords,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

This verse is a vivid image of the power of our words. Just one "little" comment in escalation can cause so much damage. A kid on the playground saying, "Yeah, well you're a wimp." A teen saying, "Yeah, well you look fat and ugly in that outfit." A family member saying, "Yeah, well you're a loser, just like your dad."

“The words of the reckless pierce like swords.” And often the one swinging the sword is trying to protect themselves in a foolish way by piercing the other person. Like a sword thrust, the damage from hurtful words can scar for years.

As the researchers in the book studied escalation in marriages, they found that partners who frequently escalated tended to say things that threatened the very marriage itself and also had children with greater adjustment problems as they watched their parents keep escalating. Children struggling with more sadness, anger, or fear. There is nothing good for you or anyone else at the top of that ladder.

Don't start up the ladder – It's why chapter 21, verse 23 of Proverbs instructs us to guard our mouths. Let's go now to chapter 21 of Proverbs, to verse 23. Verse 23 says:

²³ Those who guard their mouths and their tongues
keep themselves from calamity.

God's Word has something much better for us than the foolishness of escalation. His Word invites us to guard our mouths, to not start up the escalation ladder in the first place, and so keep ourselves from calamity. Guarding your mouth in a key moment could lead to having a good drive to your honeymoon ☺, or making peace here at church, or keeping your job, or staying on speaking terms with an adult child.

One suggestion from the book to help guard your mouth and not start up the ladder is by separating issues from events. Sometimes as we're going along an event in the day triggers an issue that matters to us. Right when we're feeling the raw emotion of that triggering event is often the worst time to talk about the underlying issue, because we'll want to get on the ladder.²

One year, early in my marriage, I got on the ladder. These days, being on time is not that important to me, but back then, it was. One time, my aunt, uncle, and cousins came in town. They were staying with my parents, and we all planned to meet at our church in Dallas. Since it was Easter Sunday, I figured we needed to get to church pretty early to get 10 seats together. That morning, my wife Stephanie happened to be running late, a triggering event for me.

As we drive to church, I'm frustrated. Foolishly, I start up the ladder, saying how I can't believe she's running late on Easter when we need a whole row of seats and how my aunt, uncle, and cousins live overseas and we hardly see them and now we won't get to sit together. And

² Stanley, et al, *A Lasting Promise* (revised edition), Chapter 8.

then my memory, which is normally poor, becomes super-charged as I, in frustration, bring up other times she ran late, climbing further up the ladder.

We had just left our seminary apartment, where I was studying to become a pastor, driving to church, on Easter Sunday, yet I'm speaking hurtful words to my wife. Someone was not in the Easter spirit. Because of how I was rushing up the ladder, I doomed our conversation from the beginning.

A wise husband would have separated his issue of valuing being on time from this triggering event. That husband would have guarded his mouth, realizing that on the way to church to celebrate the resurrection with family, while frustrated, was not the best time to discuss this issue, nor to bring up other times his wife had been late.

Rather than rush up the ladder, a wise husband would have waited until he was calmer. Better able to separate his emotions from the events and better positioned to actually consider his wife's perspective as well as his own. And perhaps that husband also might have realized that he never even communicated his desire to get to church early, that he was frustrated by his unstated expectation.

As verse 23 says it, "Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity." Don't be like that foolish husband, guard your mouth. Do things like not talk about issues right after triggering events. This wisdom, by the way, applies not only in person, but also online. It'll help us not start up the escalation ladder.

Don't join someone on the ladder - But what if the other person is playing the fool, saying hurtful words that are tempting you to climb up the ladder with them?

Let's turn now to chapter 20, verse 3, which tells us one wise option in this situation.

Chapter 20, verse 3. Verse 3 says:

It is to one's honor to avoid strife,

but every fool is quick to quarrel.

Sometimes the honorable thing to do is just to avoid the conflict, even if the other person is wrong, to be more concerned about peace than being right. To not be the fool of verse 3 who is quick to quarrel, always ready to join someone on the ladder at a moment's notice.

So kids, verse 3 here is saying that just because your brother or sister said something mean to you doesn't mean you have to say something mean back. Teens and adults, just because

your coworker keeps trying to bait you into an unproductive argument doesn't mean you have to join them on the escalation ladder.

When the lady at the store criticized me as I'm just minding my own business trying to buy some tape, I was annoyed. But thankfully in that case, unlike the running late to church story, I was operating more in God's grace.

I was frustrated, but also felt secure enough in that moment to not have to defend myself, or have to show her how she was wrong, or have to attack back. As I was typing in my rewards number, I just said "huh" in response, inserted my credit card, and was on my way. As verse 3 says it, "It is one's honor to avoid strife." Sometimes the more honorable path is not to defend your honor.

If someone is acting foolishly, don't join them on the ladder. For the more we respond like a fool, quick to quarrel, the more pain we're going to cause and experience.

Since I didn't even know this lady and she was wrong in this case, I think it made sense to not engage, to avoid strife. Sometimes not engaging is a healthy response with those we are in relationship with. Sometimes you just don't need to clap back after your friend's insensitive comment or respond to that controversial thing your coworker posted on social media.

But with those we are in relationships with, sometimes we do need to have conversations about important issues where we disagree or have hurt feelings.

We can't just avoid all hard conversations all the time and enjoy good, close relationships. In fact, another one of the four destructive communication patterns that the research in the book found was when a partner consistently avoided conversations about important issues in the relationship.

So if you and your spouse have trouble talking about money, that doesn't mean you should just never talk about it. Avoidance can't always be the answer if we want healthy, close relationships. Consistent avoidance is another one of the four destructive communication patterns the book's researchers found. So sometimes we need to talk about a difficult issue. Thankfully, when we do, there is another option besides escalating or always avoiding.

Help get everyone off the ladder – Let's see it in chapter 15, verse 1, Proverbs 15:1. Say you're talking about an important issue, and the other person steps on the escalation ladder. Let's see how we can respond in wisdom in verse 1.

A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

When escalation is short-circuited, it's usually because one person backs off and says something gentler that helps everyone get off the ladder, themselves included.

A gentle answer that turns away wrath could look like acknowledging the other person's point of view before sharing where you disagree. Starting with something like, "I can see why that was frustrating to you..." Rather than starting with, "Well you're wrong because..." which sounds more like a harsh word that could stir up anger.

Or a gentle answer in the spirit of verse 1 could look like stating your desire in a positive way rather than a negative one. Like "I need some time to myself, come ask me in 15 minutes please." Rather than "Would everyone in this house stop bothering me for one minute!"

Or a gentle answer could look to encourage more kindness and a way forward together. A response like, "I'm feeling defensive right now, can you please try to say that in another way?" Rather than stirring things up by responding with, "What you just said was really rude, you're such a jerk."

Or a gentle answer could look like being the first to apologize, even if the other person has more to apologize for. So something like, "I could have listened better when you were sharing and I shouldn't have yelled, I'm sorry." Rather than requiring the other person to apologize first, or giving a vague, "Sorry."

Each of these examples of gentle answers can turn away wrath and open space for everyone to get off the ladder. These gentle answers also teach our watching kids or grandkids some really valuable skills to learn how to deescalate also.

The researchers in the book say of Proverbs 15:1, quote, "That one verse, put into practice, would make the whole world a much better place to live." I want that better for us, as we live in God's communication principles, like the ones we've seen this morning.

Next Step

Both Scripture and research show that how you speak when tensions rise, whether or not you climb up the escalation ladder, has a lot to do with how your relationships will be in the years to come. That's why God's Word warns us about the foolishness of escalation and points us to His wise ways to communicate.

But it's tough, when tensions are high, and you're feeling tense, anxious, angry, to not start up or join someone on the escalation ladder. And it's really hard to speak in ways that help everyone get off the ladder. We're all in this together, facing this challenge, even newlyweds driving to their honeymoon. ☺ Thankfully, we are not left to ourselves in living this out.

God has given us His Word. Just the book of Proverbs alone has tons of wisdom on communication, we just scratched the surface this morning, and there's lots more wisdom in the rest of Scripture too.

God has not only given us this wisdom, He's given all who believe His Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to have love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in our speech. So as we listen, respond, and submit to God's Word and God's Spirit, we're empowered to communicate more in His ways, even when tensions are high.

On top of all that, to help us communicate well, God has given us His heart. Because of our sins and everyone else's, we've created this huge mess, foolishly escalating things with God and each other, bringing so much pain. In this relational crisis that we all totally created, as we rushed up the ladder, Jesus did not join us up there. No, Jesus instead came down here in our mess to deescalate our conflict.

Jesus came and took the penalty for everything, though nothing was His fault. It was all our fault, yet Jesus came and passionately fought for our relationship, giving us His very heart, dying on the cross for our sins and rising from the dead.

He paid it all so that He could bring us back into relationship with Him. And then keep extending grace, deescalating things, every single time we foolishly go up that ladder again. Grace we did not and do not deserve, and yet He says, "I forgive you for your escalation."

As we let that touch our hearts, just how much Jesus fought and paid so He could completely deescalate our conflict and restore us, this helps us to have the heart to help everyone get off the escalation ladder.

That's our next step this morning, help get everyone off the ladder. There's nothing good at the top, only pain for you and those you love. So by God's grace, let's help get everyone off the ladder and get back to enjoying our relationships.

Let's pray...

Dismissal – Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.