

Guest Opinion Article First Published in Loveland Reporter-Herald 4/7/2025

By Don Overcash

Name-calling can be effective

Name-calling has pervaded human communication across cultures and time. Currently, it is a common blemish on social media. Name-calling resorts to using harsh, offensive, or insulting words to address another person or groups of people. It is a poor substitute for a reasoned argument and a form of verbal abuse. Name-calling reveals more about the one doing the calling than the target. Those who suffer low ego strength build themselves up by tearing down others. Unable to deal with their own insecurities, displaced aggression, or the need to dominate and/or control others may be underlying motives for such venomous treatment of others.

Scripture contains examples of name-calling with warnings to avoid such speech. In Matthew 5:22, Jesus addresses the serious implications of calling someone a “fool.” In this passage Jesus details the perils of anger, insults and judging others unfairly. In this case the calling of someone a fool is a shortcut to casting final judgement and signaling that the person is unworthy of even existing. Words of anger, insult, and hate towards the recipient put the speaker in grave danger.

Jesus though was quite a name-caller. What is with the dogs and the pig’s phrase from Matthew 7:6? Here Jesus is warning the listeners about a group of people unable and/or unwilling to engage appropriately. Beginning with Matthew 7:1, Jesus begins a discussion with these listeners about judging and fleshes out giving unwanted advice especially without first practicing self-examination. Jesus is now making the point of what value giving advice to someone who is unwilling or unable to appreciate it. These people have made it clear that they are not interested in the advice you are willing to offer. The dogs and pigs are incapable at this point of valuing anything you might offer. Also, the one offering the advice should not be surprised when attacked for persisting. Jesus is also saying, get over the pride of insisting that you win the point by forcing your will. There is a time to just stop it, leave the discussion unfinished, and walk away as those involved are coming from such a different place that no matter what you say or do at this point, nothing will change for the good. Sometime ago, I offered words in private to encourage an individual to accept that a group held such a position. I created a name-calling phrase, without naming individuals, hoping to illustrate why it was no longer wise to fret over those that did not want to engage in a productive discussion. It was time to stop trying and just move on.

In scripture we also read of situations where Jesus and his disciples used name-calling to get the attention of certain groups of people on critical issues. For example, Jesus referred to the Pharisees as “hypocrites” and “whitewashed tombs” (Matthew 23) to highlight their hypocrisy and misguided teachings. Passages like Galatians 6:1 encourage believers to restore those caught in sin gently, but it also acknowledges the need to identify

wrongdoing. Clearly naming sinful behavior can help individuals recognize their actions and encourage repentance, leading to restoration. Jesus was also fond of using “Woe” statements (see Matthew 23) to highlight the seriousness of the issues at hand and prompt immediate change.

Is there a place for such harsh language today? If so, it is crucial to approach name-calling with caution and a clear focus on the intent. If one intends to destroy an individual without having to engage in a substantive discussion, or if one wishes to communicate contempt and disgust, or damage relationships beyond repair, destroy trust and practice verbal bullying; then name-calling will be effective.

If addressing groups of people or warning others of groups demonstrating hypocrisy in leadership, issuing warnings against falsehoods, or condemning immoral behavior, then a brave soul of humble spirit might consider the tool as name-calling can be effective when applied with discernment and a focus of restoring individuals rather than condemning them. A couple of last thoughts the first from Romans 12:18, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Finally, sincere compliments are more powerful and uplift others. Use compliments in abundance, name-calling rarely.