“Paul’s Proverbs”

Romans 12:9-21

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August 31, 2014

I couldn’t believe it until I saw it. And even then it was only a YouTube video, so I wasn’t sure about it. A friend of mine told me about this experiment that you can do with jars of rice. She claimed that if you yell at the rice or speak negatively, it will get moldy. But if you sweet talk and encourage it, it will stay fresh. Like I said, I needed to see it in order to believe it.

There are several YouTube videos with this experiment, and after watching several of them, I became convinced that it is true. In each of these videos, rice is cooked and then three jars are filled. The third jar serves as a control, with nothing done or said to it. It merely shows the natural decline of cooked rice that is left in a jar at room temperature.

The experimenter then takes the other two jars and treats them differently. To one jar, they shout at it. They talk down to it. They tell the rice that it is no good. In some of the videos the person says words not appropriate for a sermon, I’ll let you use your imagination. This jar of rice only “hears” bad things for the weeks that it spends sitting on the counter. The person will tell the jar of rice that they hate it. They loathe its very existence. In each of the videos, the rice in this abused jar molds after just a few days. The rice transforms into a green, inedible mass. The control jar has a bit of mold, but not nearly as much as the hated rice jar.

The other jar receives a very different experience. This jar is loved and coddled by the experimenter. Often the jar is even given a name like “Sweetie Pie” or “Darling Angel.” The experimenter offers words of encouragement to this jar of rice. Telling it that it is beautiful. That it is so sweet and a blessing. The person will sing to the jar. They will tell the jar of rice that they love it. In each of the videos I watched, the jar that was loved did not mold until three weeks into the experiment. It was astonishing to see the difference between each of the jars of rice. The words said to them and the thoughts sent to them affected their outcome. The jar that was hated responded by molding. The jar that was loved responded by staying healthy and mold-free.

I’m sure you could try this experiment with the rice jars if you are skeptical of the results. For me, seeing a few versions of it was enough. Plus I’ve seen the reality of this experiment in real life. When I have worked with children, I’ve been able to tell which kids are told they are loved and special. They tend to do well in life. They do well in school, they get along with others, and they behave well. The children who are not told these loving things interact with the world quite differently. They struggle at school, they bully others, they misbehave and are labeled “problem child.”

I’ve heard that a person needs to hear 6 positive, affirming statements to make up for one negative, demeaning statement. 6 statements! It takes a lot to erase the pain that hateful words can cause.

As I think about those rice jars and their different outcomes at the end of the month, I’m still a bit surprised. I mean, they’re rice jars. They don’t have feelings or brains to process what is being said to them. But there’s something about the energy that is being directed toward them that matters.

As I did a bit more research, I learned that many gardeners and farmers know this trick well. They will talk to their plants, or sing sweet songs to them. They will encourage their fields to yield good harvests. They understand the power of positive thinking. They know that putting love into the world results in good things.

This applies to people as well. The thoughts and words and energies that we emit to the world impact those around us. Given all of the violence and strife of the world, we seem to struggle with this exercise. For us, it is much easier to say mean things than nice things. We’re quicker to gossip about our neighbors, than we are to offer praise about them. We point out each other’s weaknesses, forgetting to lift up strengths.

We tend to turn this world into the jar of rice that is hated. The one that is yelled at. The one that is told it is no good.

The early Christians in Rome struggled with this too.

They had a lot working against them. They lived in a challenging time of poverty and strife. It was difficult to have hope in the midst of that mire. The fact that they followed Jesus didn’t help their situation. They were labeled freaks and were oppressed because of their faith. Being surrounded by so much negativity made it hard for them to be optimistic. It made it hard for them to act in loving ways when they did not feel loved.

Paul addresses two struggles this church was dealing with. First, how they were treating each other. Believe it or not, the early church was filled with conflict. They weren’t treating each other nicely. They were on the defense because their faith was fragile. They turned their anxiety on each other. So Paul addresses this issue within the church and then moves to the issue outside the church. These early Christians faced oppression from the hostile world. Those outside could not understand why they chose to follow this rebel leader who died for his cause.

Paul responds with a list of proverbs. It feels like those times when I take a generous handful of those Dove chocolate candies – the ones with the inspiring sayings inside the wrapper. I’m sure they’re meant to be eaten one at a time and the messages savored. But sometimes when you need a chocolate fix, a handful is more appropriate.

Paul offers a handful of proverbs. In rapid fire succession he tells the church how to deal with their anxiety within and their fear of those outside.

Paul’s answer? Love.

He says let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hate isn’t quite a strong enough word. It’s more like loathe evil with every fiber of your being. He goes on: Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo each other in honor. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Show hospitality.

And this is just the list of how to treat those inside the church. The ones they fellowshipped with nearly daily.

He has more words for how to respond to the hostile people making their lives difficult. He tells them to bless the ones that hurt them. Show them empathy. Be humble. Don’t’ even consider vengeance an option. Instead, hope for the best for enemies. Pray that they find good fortune. Overcome all of that evil with love.

Paul takes that notion of “kill them with kindness” and kicks it up several notches. Don’t just kill them with kindness, drown them with love. Make them feel so loved they won’t even know what to do in response.

All of this ties into what Paul was saying about being a living sacrifice. That role that Christians are called to is challenging, but we must remember it is based on love. Love for those within the church. Love for those outside the church. Love for those who are easy to love. Love for those who are more difficult to love.

I’m still thinking about those jars of rice. It is just amazing to see how the jar that was loved and cared for molded significantly slower than the control jar – the one that was not loved or hated. That loved jar of rice reveals much about the power of our language, our emotions, our actions.

If we are speaking love into the world, we’ll notice a change. Smaller issues like road rage and neighborly feuds might disappear. Instead of yelling at each other, we might stop to listen to each other. We might take the time to understand the other person’s actions, rather than jump to anger.

Enemies of the State would be a thing of the past. We would no longer harbor hatred and distrust, instead we’d see each other as global citizens. Neighbors from various corners of the world.

This might sound lofty and out of reach, but Paul seems to suggest that there’s no conflict that cannot be solved with love.

It’s all about an attitude adjustment.

A few weeks ago Jimmy Fallon did a bit on the Tonight Show in response to all of the bad news that fills our world. He called the segment “I’ve got good news and I’ve got good news.” He had real news anchors read these fake headlines of stories we all wish were true.

One said that Vladimir Putin is over this whole being evil thing and has decided to write a children’s book called “The Happy Octopus.” Another said that a new phone app for helping people get through divorce was not selling well. This was due to everyone being happily married. The segment closed with the news anchor looking into the camera and telling the viewer “I love you. Yes you. I know we haven’t met yet, but I think about you all the time. We’re in this together. It’s us against the world buddy.” As the segment closed out, Fallon asked the audience “Don’t you feel better?”

It would be nice if these headlines were true. If more good news filled our news outlets than bad.

We as Christians have a role in making that a reality. Imagine if the Church took the lead in filling the world with love. What if we took that love we receive from God, shown through Jesus Christ and transmitted through the Holy Spirit? What if we took that and shared it with everyone we encounter. The change would start small, but eventually we’d find our news headlines transforming into good news and good news.

All because we are loving our neighbors as ourselves. Showing them the love they deserve. Making the peaceful kingdom of God present in our world.

What a love-filled headline that would be. Let us pray….