

EDITOR'S ETC.

BY DEAN MERRILL



The Joy of Zingers

Have you noticed how hard it's getting to buy souvenirs for kids?

You're on a trip somewhere, and you'd like to pick up something that'll say, *I was thinking about you while I was gone.* You stop at the airport gift shop, the roadside stand, the hotel boutique to survey the array of mugs, buttons, posters, T-shirts and other easy-to-carry items.

What do you find? Here's a sample:

"You've obviously mistaken me for someone who cares."

"If all else fails, lower your standards." (Just the thing for your son struggling with algebra.)

"My lawyer can beat up your lawyer."

"In search of the eternal buzz."

"Nobody is ugly after 2 A.M." (How's that for a teenager just starting to date?)

"When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping." (Another real motivator.)

"As a matter of fact, I do own the whole — road."

"To err is human; to forgive is out of the question." (A lovely boost for family harmony, right?)

"Ex-wife in trunk."

"Go ahead—make my day."

Our culture in general has an ever-growing appetite for what I call The Joy of Zingers. The one-liners. The fiendishly crafted sentences that go *ka-boom!* at the end. They're so much fun. So witty, so wonderful, so worldly.

Television thrives on these put-downs, and with the TV going 51 hours a week in the average American household, it's no wonder we've gotten hooked. But even before the electronic age, one-liners were esteemed. Winston Churchill flung some of the best at Adolf Hitler, but he could also zap his fellow Britons. Once a Tory chancellor of the exchequer, Sir Stafford Cripps, who was known as a teetotaler, announced he was also giving up cigars in order to reduce the need for wartime imports. The prime minister eyed his opponent narrowly and cracked, "There but for the grace of God goes God."

Words are like hydrogen; if you know what you're doing, you can make quite a bang. But you can also blow up innocent bystanders. I must confess, we journalists are especially prone to verbal terrorism. We get such a kick out of putting words together, making the sentence turn out just right, that we easily suc-

cumb to the temptation to zap.

Did you know the Bible has its own collection of one-liners? It's called the Book of Proverbs. But it contains, in fact, a number of good antidotes for sarcasm. Consider these:

"He who guards his lips guards his soul, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin" (13:3).

"Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows is a man who deceives his neighbor and says, 'I was only joking!' " (26:18-19).

That's the modern excuse, isn't it? "Hey, lighten up; I was just kidding." The wounded look on the other person's face is written off as bad sportsmanship, the inability to take a friendly punchline.

My question is: Why punch at all? Why jab at those we profess to love (and for Christians, that includes everyone), simply to gain the momentary thrill of landing a zinger?

"Reckless words pierce like a sword," says Proverbs 12:18, "but the tongue of the wise brings healing." Come to think of it, that last part's not a bad way to make anybody's day.

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