

No Complaining for How Long?

By M. Regina Cram

It was the summer of 2006 in Kansas City, Missouri, and the Rev. Will Bowen was delivering a sermon that turned his congregation on end.

Pastor Bowen described the downward spiral caused by negative speech. He estimated the average person complains 20 times a day. Multiply that across an entire workforce or family, and the effects are staggering.

Rev. Bowen admitted that he, too, was guilty of complaining. So he issued a challenge: swear off all negative speech for 21 days. No complaining, no criticizing, no gossip, no sarcasm. None.

Pastor Bowen assured parishioners that he was taking the challenge as well.

The ushers handed out brightly colored rubber bracelets for people's wrists. Each time a person complained or criticized, the bracelet was to be switched to the opposite wrist, and the counting began again. The goal was to make 21 consecutive days with the bracelet in place.

"Join me," he urged his congregation. "If it takes three months or three years, your life will be greatly improved. Stay with it."

Before the pastor finished his sermon, he had to switch his own bracelet after complaining about the Kansas City Royals.

A few weeks later, a reporter asked Rev. Bowen how he was faring. "Well, after two weeks of really trying, I've made almost six hours," he replied honestly.

Slowly, however, he began to make progress, and it led to an interesting observation. Rev. Bowen said, "I found I could do very well around some people but not so well around others. I realized that my relationships with some people were centered on complaining about everything. I began to avoid them, and I noticed my bracelet stayed put. More importantly, I found myself feeling happier."

Rev Bowen said the average person who really gives it his best completes the challenge in about five months.

One woman who completed the challenge was a teacher, and she invited her grade school pupils to take the no-complaint pledge as well. She reported, "My life is a whole lot better than it was six months ago."

As for me, it's been six weeks since I began the challenge to eliminate negative talk. So far, I've made it nearly two days. To my surprise, I'm most likely to fail while driving. This is true even when I'm alone in the car because I criticize other drivers. And yes, this counts as negative speech. The fact that no one can hear me doesn't change the fact that it has a negative effect on me.

Here's the challenge: go 21 consecutive days without complaints, criticism, sarcasm, or gossip. Use a rubber bracelet, wristwatch, rubber band or piece of jewelry. Do it with a friend, or as an office project, or as a family.

Then watch God transform not only your lips, but your heart as well.

“If anyone thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue . . . this man’s religion is in vain.” James 22:26