

**OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES:
THE BUTTER BATTLE BOOK, DR. SEUSS
MATTHEW 5:21-26, 43-48
NOVEMBER 4, 2012**

How many of you read to your children or used to read to your children?

Many children's books carry a lesson.

For instance, girls were taught to wish for a Prince to come make their lives good.

Boys were taught to be the courageous prince defending a woman.

Today some of the lessons are different.

This month, I'll be sharing with you some children's books that deliver some lessons that dovetail nicely with Scripture.

I'm calling the series, "Out of the mouths of babes."

That phrase itself comes from the Bible.

In Matthew 21, Jesus has entered the temple

and chased out the money changers and animal sellers.

Disabled people come to him in the temple seeking healing

and saying all sorts of wonderful things about him.

The religious leaders are indignant, maybe a little jealous.

Jesus says to them,

"Do you hear what these children are saying?

Have you never read Psalm 8:2 where it says,

'Out of the mouths of babes and infants

you have ordained praise.'" (Mt.21:16; Ps.8:2)

Out of the mouths of babes became a proverbial phrase

describing when a young person says something wise or true.

Out of the mouths of babes.

This month it will be not quite out of the mouths of babes, but out of children's books.

Today's book looks at how we handle conflict.

How many of you are Dr. Seuss fans?

There's The Cat in the Hat, Horton Hears a Who, The Grinch Who Stole Christmas.

Today I'm going to read from a Dr. Seuss book you may not have heard of,

The Butter Battle Book.

I'd put the artwork up on the screen,

but I couldn't get anyone at the publisher's office to

respond to my request to use the artwork.

So, rather than risk a lawsuit over copyright infringement,

I'll just read you a bit of the book:

On the last day of summer, ten hours before fall,

my grandfather took me out to the wall.

For a while he stood silent. Then finally he said,

with a very sad shake of his very old head,

"As you know, on this side of the wall we are Yooks.

On the far other side of this wall live the Zooks.

Then my grandfather said, "It's high time that you knew

Of the terrible horrible thing that Zooks do.

In every Zook house and in every Zook town
 Every Zook eats his bread with the butter side down!

But we Yooks, as you know, when we breakfast or sup,
 Spread our bread," Grandpa said, "with the butter side up.
 That's the right honest way!" Grandpa gritted his teeth.
 "So you can't trust a Zook who spreads bread underneath!
 Every Zook must be watched! He has kinks in his soul!
 That's why, as a youth, I made watching my goal,
 Watching Zooks for the Zook-Watching Border Patrol!

In those days, of course, the wall wasn't so high
 And I could look any Zook square in the eye.
 If he dared to come close I could give him a twitch
 With my tough-tufted prickely Snick-Berry Switch.

For a while that worked fine. All the Zooks stayed away
 And our country was safe.
 Then one terrible day a very rude Zook by the name of VanItch
 Snuck up and slingshotted my Snick-Berry Switch!

With my broken-off switch, with my head hung in shame,
 To the Chief Yookeroo in great sorrow I came.
 But our Leader just smiled. He said, "You're not to blame.
 And those Zooks will be sorry they started this game.

We'll dress you right up in a fancier suit!
 We'll give you a fancier slingshot to shoot!"
 And he ordered the boys in the back room to figger
 How to build me some sort of a triple-sling jigger.

And thus begins what is in essence, an arms race,
 Yooks and Zooks each responding to the other by trying to build better weapons:
 The Triple-Sling Jigger, the Jigger-Rock Snatchem,
 the Kick-a-Poo Kid, the Elephant-Toted Boom-Blitz,
 the Utterly Sputter, and so on,
 until the climax of the book, when the ultimate weapon is constructed.
 The Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo.
 It is one little explosive device the size of a large vitamin pill.
 But it is so powerful that,
 when it is deployed to the wall,
 all the Yooks are sent to underground shelters.
 Grandpa and Grandson Yook step up on the wall
 with the Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo in hand,
 only to be met by a Zook with a weapon just like it.

The Zook speaks.
 "I'll blow you," he yelled, "into pork and wee beans!
 I'll butter-side-up you to small smithereens!"
 "Grandpa," I shouted, "Be careful! Oh, gee!

Who's going to drop it? Will you? Will he?"
 "Be patient," said Grandpa, "We'll see. We will see."
 And that... is the end of the book.

(The Butter Battle Book, Dr. Seuss)

Some of you are old enough to recognize this is a critique of the Cold War,
 when the US and the USSR had built huge stockpiles of nuclear weapons,
 both reasoning that if they had enough power to wipe out the other side,
 the other side would surely not fire on them.
 It was called the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction.
 It's appropriate acronym was M.A.D.

As you might imagine,
 there were many opinions and perspectives on
 that entire historical era and our approach to foreign policy.
 There were Christians on all sides of that issue
 and plenty of people who didn't know what to think.
 And we're not going to come to a definitive conclusion this morning.

But we do live in a world still torn by conflict and tension.

National leaders in the European Union are squabbling over
 who ought to bail out whose government
 and who ought to make spending cuts or raise taxes,
 with some unpleasant accusations and threats thrown in.

We see the Middle East filled with violence and tension.

Our ambassador to Libya and three other Americans were murdered in the consulate.
 Protesters stormed western embassies in several Muslim countries.
 Syria's dictator president Assad sends his military against poorly armed rebels
 who want a say in their government.
 Christians, once 10% of the Egyptian population,
 are under persecution and many have left for safer lands.
 And it's not just in Muslim lands that Islamists have acted violently.
 Since the original 9-11 attacks,

our intelligence and law enforcement communities
 have broken up over 50 terrorist plots by Muslim fundamentalists.

And right here at home, there's been great tension as we approach election day.

Relationships have been strained because of party affiliations.

How do you deal with it when a relationship conflict emerges and tension is building?

How many children suffer injuries,
 some physical and some emotional,
 because their parents don't know how to deal with frustration?
 How many times do we hear of road rage breaking out in interpersonal violence?
 And how many more times was the rage confined to words and gestures,
 but still very present?

How many couples are just co-existing,
 because old hurts were never dealt with?
 Homes that house their own quiet Cold Wars.

In so many times and places we see conflict not dealt with in a redemptive way,
 but escalating.

Jesus had some pretty straight-forward things to say about dealing with conflict.

Some of the clearest words are found in the Sermon on the Mount.

It's all about dealing with conflict through the lens of love.

MATTHEW 5:21-22

Jesus quotes from the Ten Commandments, "You shall not murder."

And then he moves it deeper, from outward obedience to inward attitude.

"Don't be bitterly angry.

Don't call someone a fool.

Because that's all like committing murder, except it's just in your heart."

That's not what love does.

Then he says, love seeks reconciliation.

Reconciliation is more important than religious rituals.

MATTHEW 5:23-24

Your offering to God is not really worth much

if you don't care for people who are created in the image of God.

If you truly love God,

you'll love those created in his image,

those who are loved by him,

those for whom Christ died.

And that includes just about everyone.

Love seeks reconciliation.

And you should iron things out for practical reasons as well.

MATTHEW 5:25-26

If you don't deal with the issue, it will only get worse.... for you!

A little later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus came back to the issue of interpersonal conflict and seeking reconciliation.

It's almost like he knew this would be a difficult issue for his followers.

MATTHEW 5:38-42

Jesus quoted from the Old Testament the rule known as Lex Talionis, the law of the talion, or proportionate punishment. An eye for an eye.

When God gave that law to Moses it was an act of mercy, restraining people from all-out war.

But now Jesus takes things further.

Love does not seek to get even at all.

Love does not retaliate.

Love turns other cheek.

Love will give more than was taken away.

MATTHEW 5:43-48

Love extends even to the enemy.

The Bible says this is the way God works.

In Paul's letter to the Romans we read,

"When we were God's enemies,

we were reconciled with him through the death of his Son." (Ro.5:10)

God did not wait for us to get our act together before he would love us.

While we were still resisting him,

Jesus willingly gave up his life on the cross to pay for our sins.

He loved us and sought reconciliation with us while we were his enemies.

And Jesus tells his followers, you and me, to reflect the character of God,

the character he himself manifested on the cross,

when he gave his life for us sinners,

when he prayed for the very people who drove the spikes through his hands and feet.

Like Father, like Son.

And so he says it should also be like Father like adopted sons and daughters.
 If you'll actually DO that "pray for those who persecute you" thing,
 you'll be amazed what God will do in your heart over time.
 Pray for those who persecute you.
 Not pray ON them, but pray for them.
 Ask God to bless them,
 to pour out his grace on them,
 to forgive their sins,
 and make whole in them anything that is broken.
 If you do that over time,
 you'll find your own heart toward them changing,
 and you'll actually begin to love them.
 A number of years ago, I was crossways with someone.
 It was a church member,
 someone in whom I had invested significant time,
 so when they accused me of things I never did it hurt deeply.
 I felt betrayed, wronged, slandered.
 It gnawed at me.
 When my body was busy mowing our lawn,
 but nothing occupied my mind,
 I found myself rehearsing how they had wronged me,
 chewing on that bitterness.
 If I saw them in the grocery store,
 I'd detour down a different aisle.
 Eventually I realized I could not let this go on.
 I had to do something about it.
 So, remembering that Jesus said to pray for our enemies,
 I began to pray for them.
 I didn't feel like it; I didn't want to.
 I did it simply as a matter of obedience.
 And over time I found my heart toward them was changing.
 I found my prayers become more sincere.
 I was no longer forcing myself to pray for them.
 I really wanted God to bless them.
 And I no longer carried that bitterness.
 I was the one set free from a little Cold War.
 When you are in conflict and feel your frustration level rising,
 rather than escalating from a tough-tufted prickly Snick-Berry Switch
 to the development of the Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo,
 go talk to God about it.
 And not just once, but as long as there are those dark feelings
 keep going back to him and talking to him about it.
 Pray for them.
 And eventually, God will help you love with Jesus' love,
 to love even your enemy.
 After all, Jesus loved you even when you were his enemy.
 That's how you ended up in his family.