

## Trash Talking: When Litterbugs Bug You

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I don't think I made a conscious decision to accept the job, and certainly it wasn't offered or assigned to me. But increasingly I find myself employed as an unsalaried groundskeeper around my neighborhood.

This is not a full-time position. I only put my time in when Deal – my dog – and I take our three-mile run in the morning, and then again during the day and early evening when we go on walks to take care of his business.

My self-appointed responsibilities are to pick up and dispose of the litter that my fellow humans leave behind, although there is an abundance of trash receptacles – in each instance one for general waste and the other for recyclables – about every 50 to 75 yards.

If you sensed that I'm just a little irritated with my fellow human beings for leaving this litter when they could so easily take a quite reasonable number of steps to dispose of their leftovers, you'd be sensing rightly. Sometimes, I confess, I curse them under my breath and once in a while out loud.

But I keep doing the work, I realize, for a number of reasons – or are they rationalizations?

For example: I do it because it makes me feel righteous, even superior and self-righteous in the worst sort of way, which nonetheless brings its own kind of pleasure.

I do it because I love my beautiful neighborhood and want to keep it beautiful for my enjoyment and for people passing through on their way to see the Obamas' old apartment (a couple of blocks away) and their more recent house (a half-mile away).

I do it because it's now become ingrained and habitual. I'd feel unsatisfied and irresponsible if I left an empty plastic water bottle, sack from a picnic, candy wrapper or dirty diaper just lying there.

But the other morning I got really angry and judgmental. Someone had intentionally turned over both the general waste and the recyclable receptacles all along the way, leaving the rubbish scattered far and wide. As I up-righted each bin and painstakingly put all the stinking trash back, I was doing a seething burn. "What kind of irresponsible jerk, what kind of angry nitwit, what kind of anti-social fool had done this?" I kept asking myself.

But somewhere along the way it occurred to me that the perpetrator might not have been a jerk, nitwit or fool. Maybe she or he just wanted something to eat, drink or reclaim.

Was I to stand in judgment of that person if those were the reasons? Or if the person acted out of anger for being homeless or left out or put down or a little "out-of-touch," was I to stand in judgment? Had I misunderstood? Too quick to judge? Jumped to a conclusion because of my pre-judgment and prejudice?

When Deal and I got back to the apartment, I read the nine commandments that are at the end of the fourth chapter of Ephesians and that wind up with the first verse of the fifth chapter.

- Put away falsehood; let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members one of another.
- Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.
- Have thieves give up stealing; rather give them jobs and let them work honestly with their own hands, so they too can share with the needy.
- Do not let evil come out of your mouth, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace and mercy to those who hear.
- Do not grieve the Holy Spirit, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.
- Put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice.
- Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.
- Be imitators of God, as beloved children.
- Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

It was only then that I realized who stands in judgment and in need of forgiveness, and who needs to hear the words of grace and empowerment. As the old camp song from my youth has it: "It's-a me, It's-a me, It's-a me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer."

And maybe it's an American society – or an American Christianity – that is standing in need of prayer and forgiveness: For misunderstanding and for being too quick to prejudge, for letting people go homeless and hungry, left out and out-of-touch, jobless

and joyless, without health care and health care insurance, in jail for low-level crimes (more often because of their racial and ethnic identity than for the severity of their offenses), without a sense of any security because they've crossed a border without the proper papers so they could support their families.

I concluded that we've got a job to do, with some pretty demanding and unusual responsibilities clearly enumerated in Ephesians, and a God of grace to help us along the way.