

# KIRBSTONES

## ALONG THE NARROW WAY

**curb-stone** (kürb'stön') - *noun* - one of the stones or a range of stones forming a curb, as along a sidewalk or roadway. Historically, the curbstones were placed vertically along the edges of the roadbed and the paving material was backfilled against the row of curbstones. The curbstones served <sup>(1)</sup>to hold the material in the roadbed, <sup>(2)</sup>to prevent the scattering of the material along the edges, and <sup>(3)</sup>to define the road itself from all the adjoining areas.

<sup>13</sup> "ENTER THROUGH THE NARROW GATE. FOR WIDE IS THE GATE AND BROAD IS THE ROAD THAT LEADS TO DESTRUCTION, AND MANY ENTER THROUGH IT.  
<sup>14</sup> BUT SMALL IS THE GATE AND NARROW THE ROAD THAT LEADS TO LIFE, AND ONLY A FEW FIND IT." - MATTHEW 7:13-14 - NIV

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**I**s this *helpful*? Is this *useful*? Might I be more *helpful*? Might I be more *useful*? In our twenty-first century English vernacular we tend to apply the words *helpful* and *useful* interchangeably in our speaking and in our written communication with one another.

Setting vernacular aside, let us examine each word. Dictionary definitions may harden the confusion in concrete, as we become mired in synonyms of each referencing the other. That is not *helpful* or *useful* for our purpose.

The dictionary states that *helpful* is an adjective meaning giving of aid or assistance. The aid can be given to individuals or groups of people. *Useful* is defined as an adjective producing results or serving a purpose. We can add "supplying common needs" to our definition of the word *useful*.

Rachel Remen, a hospice care director, says helping, fixing, and serving are ways of seeing life. She continues: *We help* the weak. *We fix* the broken. *We serve* the whole. Fixing and helping are about power.<sup>1</sup>

John Whittington says that to talk about helping and fixing, we need to talk about power. He teaches that we ought to be more about being *useful* than being *helpful* to others.<sup>2</sup> More often than not, people and organizations do not need to be fixed. They need to be heard, and they need to experience what is useful to them.

This is more than semantics. While our twenty-first century dictionaries list the words *helpful* and *useful* as synonyms, this is not either *helpful*, nor is it *useful*. The more we abdicate our responsibilities for choosing the right words for the appropriate occasions, the more we blur the lines of meaning that have steered our conversations throughout history.

While I was an English major at Marshall University in the 1960s there was a metaphorical war raging between the English and speech departments on campus. One department was preserving, while the other was evolving.

***20 You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.***

***Acts 20:20 – NIV***

When Chris and I show up on the doorstep of our next appointment my first order of business, as it has been in each of our other congregations, will be to let them know that I am not there to fix them. Only they can fix themselves, and they will accomplish it by carefully and intentionally placing Jesus at the center of all they are about, all they plan, and all they do executing those plans.

The next time we have an opportunity to come along side someone, let us be aware of what we are doing. Are they broken, and do they need us to fix them, or do they simply need something that is useful for them in that moment to see them through?

God sent his Son to fix a broken world, a world that had become broken by the poor choices of humanity. Let us allow God to be God, and, in the meantime, may we provide something useful to persons in need, on the edge of society, and in our families and congregations.

When we reach out to folks in our local communities, are we looking to provide something *helpful* to them in their broken states, or are we desiring to give to them something *useful* that will allow them to retain their dignity as being whole human beings?

When people are broken, as many of our professionals encounter them, it is important to provide the help that these folks require to change their course or to reverse direction. We must recognize the differences in each individual case.

Preserving our English language is not the goal of this column. Providing some useful information, which, if we are up for the challenge, will give our outreach a new focus. It just might also enable us to be more effective in our work in both *mission* and *witness*.

<sup>1</sup> Pedrick, Claire, *Simplifying Coaching*, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Whittington, J., *Systemic Coaching...*, 2012.

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