

What French term does practically every American boy over the age of 5 know and use? It's *en garde*. Granted, they may not know exactly what it means, but they know it's something to shout as they leap toward an opponent, broomstick sword, or plastic lightsaber in hand, for an energetic, if friendly, duel. *En garde* means "on guard," and in fencing, it's used to warn an opponent to prepare for a duel.

The fact is most young boys are fascinated by swords. But did you know that for some people, the fascination continues into adulthood? Sword collecting has been, and continues to be, a popular hobby among some grown-ups these days. In fact, there are a number of Web sites and blogs devoted to the subject, including darksteelreplica.com and fireandsteel.ca, just to name a few.

Now, sword collectors typically fall into two major groups. One collects *historical* swords. Some of these folks seek authentic antique swords, while others are happy with replicas. Among collectors of historical swords, some people specialize in blades from specific eras of the past, such as the medieval period, or from specific cultures, such as Japanese samurai swords. The other major group of collectors seeks *fantasy* swords, such as those used in movies like *Lord of the Rings* or in TV shows like *Game of Thrones*. But there's a specialization found in this group also, with some folks collecting *futuristic* swords, inspired by science fiction.

Ok, many of us may not get the point of collecting swords, but then others would probably have difficulty slicing through, or understanding, some of our hobbies or interests, as well. According to Wikipedia.com, swords were first used in the Bronze Age, before 1200 B.C., and one also appears in the very first book of the Bible. When Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden of Eden, Genesis tells us, God placed a cherubim and a flaming sword at the entrance of the garden to guard the Tree of Life.

In fact, the Bible itself can be said to be a collector of swords of sorts, for all but three books of the Old Testament mention swords. Nine New Testament books also refer to swords. Of course, not all the references in either testament refer to literal weapons, but some do. The passage before us from Hebrews this morning is one place in which a sword is used figuratively; it's a metaphor for the "word of God," which, according to the passage, is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword."

"Word of God" is sometimes used in the church as a synonym for the Bible as well, but here in Hebrews, it means not only the Scriptures but the living voice of God — all that comes from God to communicate to us. In fact, the book of Hebrews opens with a reference to how God speaks: "Long ago," said the writer, "God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son"

But... the reason the writer of Hebrews compares the word of God to a two-edged sword is because that instrument was the sharpest, most piercing weapon in the armory of the soldiers of his day. The writer viewed what God says as being just as penetrating. The word of God — or call it "the Lord's Sword" — is so piercing that it figuratively "divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow." And in case his readers didn't quite get the metaphor, the writer then states his point plainly.

The word of God "is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." To say it yet another way, the writer adds, "And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." In other words, before God, we have absolutely no secrets. And because we cannot hide our actions or our motives from him, we are accountable to him for how we live. And that knowledge isn't just saber-rattling, its soul slicing and heart piercing.

It's important that we hear today's message about accountability, but also important that we don't assume the writer of Hebrews was talking about the final judgment. Yes, of course, we will all stand before God in the end, but the author was talking about living accountably to God in the present. He was implying that the speech-act of God takes our ordinary days and makes them times when God's glory can be shown. If we live that way, the final judgment won't be a problem. Another way to look at it, is that, our state in the next life isn't determined after we die, but by how we live now.

The fact that nothing about us is hidden from God means it's important that nothing about us be hidden from ourselves either. If we are to be accountable, then we need to be aware, insofar as possible, of why we take or avoid the actions we do. It has been wisely said that "denial is not a river in Egypt." Perhaps we might also add that it does not flow to the place called accountability either.

Certainly, one form of denial that our second lesson pushes us to think about is *rationalization*, the devising of self-satisfying but incorrect reasons for our behavior or attempting to justify our conduct that is not justifiable. This text forces us to that topic because rationalization is a primary way by which we try to duck accountability. It isn't that we usually set out to deliberately hide from the truth about ourselves; it's that sometimes things happen requiring a response, and without much thought, we respond in less-than-commendable ways. But then, because it's painful to see ourselves in that light, we come up with a more acceptable way to explain our reaction.

That's rationalization, and in psychology, it's called a "defense mechanism," meaning it's a way we protect our inner being from shame. A memoir by author Augusten Burroughs provides a glaring example of rationalization. Back when he wrote for a New York ad agency, Burroughs and a coworker named Greer had to go to Los Angeles to oversee the filming of a commercial.

One morning, as they were standing on a street corner waiting for a light to change, they saw a bus heading toward the intersection. It was empty except for the driver and a single passenger in back. Scrolling across the bus marquee above the windshield were the words “HELP ... CALL POLICE!” The bus ran a red light and kept moving.

Seeing that, Greer uttered an obscenity, pulled her cell phone out of her purse and made a call. “Sharon? It’s Greer,” she said. “Listen, remind me to have the Wirksam outdoor ad resized to fit buses. I totally forgot to do it before we left. Talk to you later.” After the call she snapped her phone shut.

Burroughs then asked Greer what she was doing. “I thought you were calling 911,” he said. “We need to call the cops about that bus.” “Oh,” Greer responded. But just then, the bus turned the corner, and she added, “Well, it’s too late now.” And as Burroughs stared at her, she said, “Don’t look at me like that! ... I’m not the only person in L.A. with a cell phone. Somebody else will call.”

“I can’t believe you,” Burroughs replied. “That was really horrible.” “Look,” Greer answered back, “Commercial shoots are stressful. My mind is focused on work. When I saw the bus, it reminded me of something, that’s all!”

“But, didn’t you see the sign lit up in front of it?”
“I can’t take care of everybody,” Greer responded. “What do you expect me to do? ... I can’t be Florence Nightingale.”

Now, it shouldn’t be lost on us that Burroughs himself didn’t do anything to report the bus hijacking either. But Greer’s defense of her indefensible behavior is a classic example of rationalizing. And yet, perhaps this is such a blatant example that we can’t identify with it. Our rationalizations may be about more mundane stuff, such as telling ourselves we “need the protein” to justify eating a third piece of sausage or bacon. One danger of rationalization as a routine practice, however, is that it can make it seem natural not to look very hard at reality, to avoid the truth

of our motivations, and thus miss the opportunity to grow closer to God, who is the very essence of truth.

Our rationalizations seldom fool others for long though, but we may hold onto them long after others have seen through them. And the sad truth about rationalization is that in the long run, the person it hurts most is the rationalizer. It's an impediment to personal health and spiritual wholeness. Of course, when we begin to think about rationalization, it's easy to apply it to others. You might even be sitting there thinking, "I wish so-and-so could hear this." And we may even be right that so-and-so does rationalize a lot and could benefit from a dose of honesty with self. But, of course, thinking only that so-and-so needs to hear this is a way of saying that we don't need it. And that can be a rationalization in and of itself.

That cuts, doesn't it? Maybe that's even why Hebrews calls the word of God a *two*-edged sword. While we are thinking about how the topic applies to so-and-so, it's filleting us at the same time. The point is this: The word of God is the word of truth. Growing closer to God, who is truth, starts when we are willing to be honest with ourselves and honest with others. Thankfully, we can ask God for help in this endeavor. And if we need a model prayer, we can read Psalm 139. Here are its closing verses: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting." Thanks be to God. Amen.