

Ephesians 4:29-32
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Hampton Baptist
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"What You Say Does Matter"

"Could I speak to the manager?" Eileen asked.

Her sudden query to the waitress startled Susan. Their dinner at a popular pizza restaurant had seemed uneventful; Susan wondered what Eileen was up to.

The manager appeared at their table a few minutes later. "What can I do for you?" she asked hesitantly, as if she were expecting another reprimand from an angry customer.

"I just wanted you to know that our waitress tonight has been really exceptional," Eileen began. Then she described several things their server had done that impressed her.

The manager was obviously relieved--and delighted. So was the waitress, who was standing nearby. The four of them laughed and chatted for a few minutes. Eileen had made the day of two hard-working women...and left an indelible impression on Susan regarding the power of positive words.

When we think about our words, it's easy to focus on the ones we'd like to retrieve. Fortunately, however, there are certain phrases that are almost always the right thing to say--words that communicate love and encouragement. Here are a few:

"You do that really well." "How are you, really?" "What you said helped me." "I was wrong." "Thanks for the leading/serving." "Have I offended you?" "I appreciate the way you _____." "What can I do to help?" "Tell about your day, job, kids..." "Please forgive me." "I still love you." "God is big enough to _____." "I'm proud of you." "You're really growing." "Please come over for dinner." "I missed you." "I'm so happy for you." "I prayed for you today." "That must be very difficult." "I'll take care of that." In short, if there are words *you'd* like to hear, it's a good bet they would encourage others, too." (More Stories from the Heart, compiled by Alice Gray. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers. 1997. p. 53-54)

What you say does matter. It matters not only to whom you are addressing; it also matters to God. The Apostle Paul was well aware of the value of words. He knew full well that although sticks and stones could break his bones (and they did), that words could hurt a person also. So in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul offered some words on our speech.

The Ephesian church was composed of Jewish believers and Gentile Christians, and their cultural differences were continually challenging the church's unity. There was a certain arrogance among the Jewish believers toward the Gentile Christians, which resulted in the Gentiles feeling inferior. The Gentile brothers and sisters, who were flooding into the church, weren't respectful of their Jewish counterparts' religious heritage. As a result, this lack of mutual understanding and appreciation created conflict. (Interpreting Ephesians, Terry T. Lester sermon, "Escaping the Doghouse." Macon: Smyth & Helwys. 1996. p. 97)

Well aware to whom he was writing, Paul sought to address the Ephesians with some practical tips for living in chapters 4-6; chapters 1-3 had been concerned with belief. In his pragmatic remarks, it is no wonder that his attention turned to speech, because what we say does matter.

Our text began with an admonition: "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth." The Greek word for *unwholesome* actually means rotten or putrid, like fruit. There are times that what we say to another person is as foul as spoiled fruit. That kind of conversation is unbecoming of a believer in Christ. We should have control over what we say.

Some may say, "I just couldn't control myself." What a sad commentary when we have to admit to being controlled by evil. In essence, that is what the person is saying. If we can't control ourselves, then we are not living by Christ's spirit. It is no accident that Paul lists self-control numerous times in his letters as a trait to be emulated. If a person is going to pick up his/her cross daily and follow Christ, then we simply cannot hide behind the statement "I couldn't help myself." And doing so is hiding; there is a reason that we spout off and say things we regret. If that is the case, we need to find out why we do that. We need to uncover what it is that controls us; we need to discover what we have placed before our allegiance to God. In essence, we have allowed whatever it is that

controls us and "makes us say this or that" to be our God. When we allow that kind of behavior to go unchecked, we have communicated to God that we simply cannot surrender all of our lives. Self-control requires work on self; self-control comes only with prayerful reflection. That is why Paul lists self-control as one of the fruits of the spirit in his letter to the Galatians. Words are an index of character. What is inside us will come out, one way or another. So we have to work on what is inside us, our deepest fears, our darkest secrets. We can't conceal those thoughts and feelings forever; at some point, they will present themselves in our speech.

Instead of saying unwholesome words, Paul said to speak words which are good for edification. Seek to build others up rather than tear them down. After all, what you say does matter. There are enough messages from non-Christians to tear at us, let alone having Christians breaking down fellow believers. Remember that Paul was writing to Christians; these were not words to the pagans or non-believers. This instruction referenced daily behavior. Believers in Ephesus were to examine themselves and continue to try to edify or build up each other. Words of encouragement would strengthen them; words of encouragement continue to strengthen all of us.

Good words are to be chosen over evil talk. But how are we to discern the good? The criterion is simple: Do our words build up the hearer's character and make him/her a better person for having heard our speaking? Do the words meet the person's need? And do they in this way "bring a blessing" by supplying the need? (Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 11. Ralph P. Martin. Nashville: Broadman Press. 1971. p. 161)

Encouragement is a ministry: it comes in a spoken word, card, letter, or smile. The need of the moment constitutes an assessment of a situation. Knowing someone's circumstances provides us a better opportunity to encourage someone. Personal encouragement results from someone's response to your situation. To be an encourager, one has to walk with open eyes and listening ears. That is when individuals can extend grace, that unmerited favor, freely offered with no strings attached.

By the fifth grade, Howard Hendricks was bearing all the fruit of a kid who felt insecure, unloved, and quite angry at life. In other words, he was tearing the place apart. However, his teacher Miss Simon, apparently thought Howard was blind to the problem, because she regularly reminded him, "Howard, you are the worst behaved child in this school."

The first day of sixth grade, Miss Noe, his new teacher, went down the roll call, and it wasn't long before she said "Howard Hendricks." She glanced around the room and saw the boy with his arms folded, just waiting to go into action. She looked him over for a moment, and then said, "I've heard a lot about you." Then she smiled and added, "But I don't believe a word of it."

That moment was a fundamental, turning point for Howard Hendricks, not only in his education, but in his life. Suddenly, unexpectedly, someone believed in him. For the first time in his life, someone saw potential in him. Miss Noe gave him special assignments. She granted him little jobs to do. She invited him to come in after school to work on his reading and arithmetic. She challenged him with higher standards, so much so that Howard had a hard time letting her down. In fact one time, he got so involved in one of her homework assignments that he stayed up until 1:30 working on it, much to the surprise of his father. What was the difference between the fifth and the sixth grade? The fact that someone was willing to give him a chance, (More Stories, p. 46-47) the fact that someone offered a word which was good for edification, according to the need of the moment, which gave him grace. What we say does matter.

On the other hand, when we utter unwholesome words, when we spew foul words at someone, we distress God. Paul wrote, "Do not have the habit of grieving the Holy Spirit." Before Christ left this earth, he told the disciples that he would not leave them comfortless. He said that he would send his spirit as a comforter. Therefore, it is only logical to read Paul's words that it grieves the Holy Spirit when we do not encourage others.

The Spirit moves us to encouragement; when we don't respond, we grieve God's Spirit. When we acted contrary to the counsel of our parents when we are young, we hurt them. Similarly, to act contrary to the guidance of the Holy Spirit is to grieve the Spirit and to hurt the heart of God, who through the Holy Spirit, has sent us instruction, motivation, and direction. (William Barclay. Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians, rev. ed. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1976. p. 158)

What you say does matter. In verse 22, Paul advocated the laying aside of the old self. When a person becomes a Christian, the new believer must put off the old life as one takes off a coat for which there is no further

use. Regarding our conversation, Paul listed what we need to shed. He began with the rags of bitterness, that long-standing resentment which refuses to reconcile. So many of us have a way of nursing our wrath to keep it warm, of brooding over the insults and the injuries which we have received. We are also called to discard wrath and anger. Wrath, denoted as outbreaks of passion, was seen as the kind of anger which is like a flame which comes from straw; it quickly blazes up and just as quickly subsides. On the other hand, habitual anger should also be held in check. So both the burst of temper and long-lived anger are forbidden. Clamor and slander were also to be scrapped. Whenever, in any discussion or argument, we become aware that our voice is raised, it is time to stop. It would save a great deal of heartbreak in this world if we simply learned to keep our voices down, and if, when we had nothing good to say to a person, we did not say anything at all. The argument which has to be supported in a shout is no argument; the dispute which has to be conducted in insults is not an argument but a brawl. (Barclay, p. 159)

So Paul comes to the summing up of his advice. He tells us to keep on being kind to each other. When I was growing up, my mom told us, "It doesn't cost anything to be nice and friendly." It's an attitude that if practiced can change one's outlook on life. Being kind is a step beyond that. The Greeks defined this quality as the disposition of mind which thinks as much of its neighbor's affairs as it does its own. Kindness has learned the secret of looking *outwards* all the time, not *inwards*. (Ibid., p. 159-160)

Our conversation should reflect kindness toward each other. Our attitude should be tender-hearted; instead of being hard-hearted, we should be open to other's hurts and pains. Finally, we should be forgiving, even when someone else exhibits bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice. We are to live our lives in response to God's love *for* us, not in response to what humans have done *to* us. Retribution is foreign to the Christian lifestyle.

Paul reminded his readers to forgive just as Christ had forgiven them. We say it every week, but do we realize what we are saying when we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgiveness is a double-hinged door. Each week, we ask God to forgive us in the same manner that we forgive others. That can be a sobering thought.

We are to practice forgiveness daily. More than anything else, forgiveness sets us free. Forgiveness breaks the rusty chains of old anger and resentment. It releases us to live in relationship again. If we face ourselves, each of us will find that we all need to forgive someone at some time, and we all need the forgiveness of God. Lewis Smedes observes in his book Forgive and Forget that for most people, "The healing art of forgiveness has to be practiced a little at a time." (Interpreting Ephesians, p. 100-101)

Patience and persistence are also components in the forgiveness equation. If we harbor anger, it is hard to speak an encouraging word. If we speak maliciously, it is hard to speak an encouraging word. If we don't forgive, it is hard to speak an encouraging word. But what we say does matter.

Edward Chinn, pastor of All Saints Catholic Church in Philadelphia, has noted a striking point of contrast in the lives of two individuals of notoriety. Near the beginning of the twentieth century in a country church in a small village near Croatia, an altar boy named Josip Broz served the priest the Sunday mass. The boy accidentally dropped the glass vial of wine, shattering it into pieces. The priest struck the boy on the cheek and angrily demanded, "Leave the altar and don't come back." The boy never returned to church. He grew to become Tito, the leader of Communist Yugoslavia after World War II. At about the same time, an altar boy named Peter John also dropped the wine vial while serving the priest at Mass in St. Mary's Cathedral in Peoria, Illinois. The boy later recalled, "There is no atomic explosion that can equal in intensity of decibels the noise and explosive force of a wine vial falling on the marble floor of a cathedral in the presence of a bishop. I was frightened to death." The priest, though, with an understanding smile gently whispered, "Someday you will be just what I am." That young man, who dropped his first name "Peter" and began to use his mother's maiden name "Fulton," became in adulthood Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, a prolific writer and pioneer in religious broadcasting. Chinn concludes, "What a difference the words of those two celebrants at mass made in the lives of those boys." (A Cloud of Witnesses, c. Douglas Weaver, editor. Macon: Smyth & Helwys. 1993. p. 166-167)

You see, what we say does matter. It has mattered in your life from the receiving end as well as from the giving end. May our very lives be examples of encouragement, knowing that what we say *does* matter.