



Immanuel Baptist Church

PO Box 08327
Chicago, IL 60608

Words

No. 20
Series: Ephesians

Ephesians 4:29-32

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Nathan Carter

Text

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Introduction: The Power of Words

I've been reminded several times lately of the power of words and I was reminded again as I studied this text. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." You've heard this, right? It's not true. Words have immense power; power for ill or for good.

This is a constant theme in the book of Proverbs. Allow me to just give you a sample:

- "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh *word* stirs up anger" (Prov. 15:1).
- "The *words* of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts" (Prov. 18:8, 26:22)
- The allure of the world is personified as a woman who utters "seductive *words*" (Prov. 2:16, 7:5).
- "The *lips* of an adulteress drip honey, and her *speech* is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword" (Prov. 5:3-4).
- "With persuasive *words* she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth *talk*" (Prov. 7:21).

Words have great power to do great harm, to hurt, to deceive, to confuse, to guide you down a path of destruction.

But words also have great power to do good, to heal, to encourage, to clarify, to instruct you in the path of righteousness.

- “Reckless *words* pierce like a sword, but the *tongue* of the wise brings healing” (Prov. 12:18).
- “An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind *word* cheers him up” (Prov. 12:25).
- “A man finds joy in giving an apt reply – and how good is a timely *word*” (Prov. 15:23)!
- “Pleasant *words* are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones” (Prov. 16:24).
- “A *word* aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Prov. 25:11).

Word’s aren’t just words. Words are potent.

Think about this: “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the *word* of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible” (Heb. 11:3; ESV). God’s *words* cause matter to be. “He chose to give us birth through the *word* of truth” (James 1:18). God’s *words* cause new life in people. “Man does not live on bread alone but on every *word* that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Dt. 8:3). God’s *words* cause growth, they sustain and nourish.

God’s *words* recorded for us in Scripture “are not just idle words... they are your life” (Dt. 32:47). They are “living and active” (Heb. 4:12). May his words be received with faith today and sink deep into our souls, challenging us, changing us to be people who in turn use our words wisely. In short, the message of today’s text is simple and it’s just this: **Christians talk differently**. I’m not talking about using ‘thees’ and ‘thous’ and ‘bestows’. I’m not talking about Christianese and insider jargon. But **Christians should talk differently**.

Before we see how, let’s pray...

Rotting Words

We’ve been in Ephesians 4:25ff for awhile now. Here Paul’s giving practical instruction for how Christians should behave, now that they’ve been wrested from the clutches of the adulteress, now that they have heard the word of truth, the gospel of their salvation and been given new life in Christ. All the topics he addresses: truth, anger, work, now words... are done under the heading of not living as the world does, not because you’re better than others, but because God has, of his sheer mercy, rescued you from an empty way of life.

As “the apostle turns from the use of our hands to the use of our mouths,”¹ we must keep that in mind. Last week we saw that Christians are supposed to do something useful with their hands so that they can have something to share with others. The world either doesn’t want to work or just works for themselves; Paul calls for an others-centered view of work and money. That’s countercultural.

This week we see the same thing: Christians should have an others-centered approach to speech. How can you help others with your words, not tear others down to build yourself up? Some people may think that worldliness = wordiness. And there’s a certain sense in which this is true. Proverbs 10:19 says, “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.” But I used to think talking was the

problem. I knew I had a problem of running at the mouth. So I would bite my tongue, make rules for myself that I wouldn't say anything for a whole day. That may be why some people think of me as a quiet guy.

But again we're going to see how God wants way more than for people to just not say bad things. This whole put off/put on motif continues: put off falsehood/put on speaking the truth, put off stealing/put on working for others, put off unwholesome talk/put on helpful talk, talk that builds others up, constructive communication. Let's dive in.

First, I used to always think this verse was just talking about cussing. "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths" (v. 29a). I thought this meant – "Don't have a potty mouth. Don't swear. Don't tell crass jokes." But if that's even in mind at all here, it's a very, very small part of what's going on.

The word for 'unwholesome' is a word that means 'rotten'. The ESV translates it as 'corrupting'. Paul's speaking of words that cause decay, that spoil community, that poison perceptions, that eat away at relationships. One scholar said it is "any talk that works to the detriment of the persons addressed or of those who are spoken about."² Get a picture in your mind of putting a mushy, moldy, shriveled up, rotten apple into a basket full of apples. That saying, "One bad apple spoils the barrel," didn't just come from nowhere. It's based on a truth of nature.

So now do you have a better idea of what Paul's talking about here? Have you ever been talking with someone or some people and you leave feeling icky, like you just threw up all over everyone, started venting frustrations, started sharing something you knew about someone not there, started just saying how you felt and before you knew it your vomit started making other people vomit and you leave covered in vomit and feel, justifiably, dirty?

This happens all the time in the world, right? People gather around someone's desk at the office – "Hey, have you heard what the office manager made Sue do?" People get together for drinks after work and talk about how annoying so-and-so is. Groups of friends always have drama fueled and furthered by long talks about the drama. Larger networks always have cliques that get together to talk about others. Talks with family members always move to talking about family members who aren't there and what they've done. Have you ever gotten together with someone and not known what to talk about, except gripes and complaints and gossip?

Gossip. That's the big one. Gossip is the epitome of rotting words. Nothing will erode friendships and trust and community like words of gossip. One pastor describes gossip this way:

Gossip is our dark moral fervor eagerly seeking gratification. Gossip makes us feel important and needed as we declare our judgments. It makes us feel included to know the inside scoop. It makes us feel powerful to cut someone else down to size, especially someone we are jealous of. It makes us feel righteous, even responsible, to pronounce someone else guilty.³

Do you see how self-centered it is? St. Augustine hung this motto on his dining room wall: "He who speaks evil of an absent man or woman is not welcome at this table."⁴

Paul is laying out the same rule and warning us of the allure and the affects of unwholesome talk. It's what dominates the world, but it will destroy the church.

Upbuilding Words

Instead we should say “only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (v. 29b). Our words should be aimed not at ourselves but at others; not for tearing them down, but for building them up. We must be intentional about discerning how we can use our words, our powerful words, to encourage others, to ask reflective questions which show we care and are listening and want to get to the bottom of people's problems, to instill confidence in God into people. We shouldn't waste all our words on frivolities, not that there's something wrong with humor or recreation, but those topics can often be a way to keep others at a distance. We should even use our words to quiet gossip or to steer the conversation another way when we see it coming. We can't just bite our tongues.

Christians should communicate constructively. Words have the power to either rot away or reinforce. And Paul says here that all rotting words must be avoided and only good words must be spoken, in order that it might benefit, literally 'give grace' to the hearers. Remember that: 'give grace'.

The Holy Spirit

The next verse – v. 30 – parallels the injunction not to give the devil a foothold that was found in v. 27 in that it brings up the invisible realities at work here. Satan, this invisible enemy, wants to use anger to invade and overtake people. But Paul reminds his readers here that they house the Holy Spirit in their hearts – the third member of the Godhead. “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (v. 30).

The language takes us back to the beginning of this book. 1:13-14 – “Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession.” All those who are true Christians have the Holy Spirit in them, guaranteeing that they belong to God. And in chapter 2 we were told that Christians form a holy temple “in which God lives by his Spirit” (2:22). Christians take God with them wherever they go.

The Holy Spirit's the one who is always there in every conversation telling you, “Don't say this, don't say this, don't say this... Don't go there.” Or prodding you to say something useful, something that will counteract the gossip, something that will help people grow in their appreciation of God or come closer to knowing him.

And when you ignore him, when you go along with the world and use your mouth for corrupting talk you grieve the Holy Spirit. He's right there with you. You can't shake him. He hears all, sees all. He's spirit, but a person, so he grieves when you betray him. Think about that for a moment. Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher, exclaimed, “It is an inexpressibly delightful thought, that He who rules heaven and earth, and is the creator of all things, and the infinite and ever blessed God, condescends to enter into such... relationships with his people that his divine mind may be affected by their actions.”⁵

He's a holy spirit, so unholiness/worldliness grieves him. When we speak just like the world which he has marked us out from, it hurts him.

There's one Spirit who indwells each Christian, so words that divide and sow disunity are like ripping him up. Paul is reminding us of the seriousness of words which fail to love others. They break God's heart.

The Heart

The Holy Spirit's desires for how Christians use their words are broader than just not cussing.

They're more than just refraining; they have a positive spin to them.

And now we see that his desires go deeper than just the surface of what we say. He wants nothing less than to see deep transformation of the heart take place. He's in you. He owns you. He will get you to where he's promised to take you. And in the meantime he's in the process of cleaning out your heart.

Did anybody here ever get their mouths washed out with soap? My parents did that a couple times when I or my brother said something really foul. I think it can be a helpful punishment, but nobody really believes that it solves the problem. The problem of dirty talk comes from a dirty heart. Jesus put this principle plainly – “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt. 12:34). The mouth is the release valve for the heart. Your words will betray what's in your heart.

That's why Paul says in v. 31 – “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” These are, for the most part, sinful attitudes, feelings, thoughts. There are two exceptions. ‘Brawling’ actually refers to shouting/raising your voice and ‘slander’ is as you know a use of words to defame someone else's character. The inclusion of these two here are to remind us that Paul is still talking about words. But the others – bitterness, rage, anger, malice – are included to situate the problem firmly in the heart.

You can't keep rotting words from coming out of your mouth unless there are no rotten emotions in your heart. Until our hearts are free from bitterness we won't be able to stop spewing bitter words out when we talk and start spreading sweet words. Until our hearts are free from anger and rage we won't be able to stop ranting and start peacemaking. Until our hearts are free from malice we won't be able to stop gossiping and start encouraging. Until our hearts are rid of self-centered and hateful desires we won't be able to “be kind and compassionate to one another” (v. 32a) with our words.

So how do we have our hearts changed? I'm picturing here those commercials for Alkaseltzer or something like it – this pill or tonic that comes in and counteracts the acids giving you a sour stomach or heartburn. Our souls are churning burning bubbling boiling with selfishness and all kinds of wickedness that we continuously belch out at other people. What will neutralize this? What will get rid of the putridity in our hearts that erupts in rotting talk so that we can erupt instead with helpful, edifying, kind, compassionate words?

Well, it's a word, actually. Go figure! It's a word from God called the gospel. It's the good news that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them” (2Cor. 5:19). It's the declaration that God made a way for our sins against him to be forgiven – by absorbing them into himself on the cross. What grace!?

Most religions will have some form of the ethical teaching we're looking at here in Ephesians. Mohammed says don't steal.⁶ Confucius said, “To indulge in gossip and

spreading rumours is to abandon virtue.”⁷ This is often why you hear people say that all religions are essentially the same. But what no other religion has is a God taking on human flesh and dying in the place of people.

And so what’s different here is that Paul doesn’t just say, “Be kind and compassionate to one another.” No one can just do that. What’s inside us is unkindness, compassionlessness. Paul calls us to be “forgiving each other *just as in Christ God forgave you*” (v. 32). It’s not the regular word for forgiveness, it’s a broader word that means something like ‘gracing’, ‘extending grace’, ‘dealing graciously’... “give grace to each other, just as God in Christ gave grace to you.”

Remember how earlier I told you that ‘benefit’ in v. 29 meant ‘give grace’? Paul comes back to that and ties it all together. Our mouths are to be conduits of grace to others, as Christ – the Word made flesh – was a conduit of grace to us. Paul brings this up in order to remind them of the gospel because the gospel is the only thing that will cause people to **talk differently**. I love how the gospel gets the last word here in this section. Spurgeon once said, “I fear my people will grow weary of me hammering the same nail every week, but hammer I will.” Hammer Paul did.

Hearing, pondering, meditating on, rehearsing the gospel again and again is the only way that our hearts can be changed. Until our hearts are filled with grace we won’t be able to speak grace. An ungracious heart is an un-graced heart. Experiencing God’s grace in Christ is what quenches the bitterness, rage, anger, and malice that bubble up to the surface as brawling and slander.

Romans 5:5 says that “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” It’s like God’s love in the form of the gospel is dropped into a glass of the Holy Spirit and drank and that elixir neutralizes the sour stomach. The analogy breaks down, but humor me: it’s kind of like as you drink more and more of his love and are filled more and more with the Holy Spirit when you open your mouth you then throw up love instead of venom.

So you don’t use your words to retaliate because you know God hasn’t retaliated against you. You don’t just blab and blab and blab out of insecurity because you’re stilled by the loving embrace of God in Christ. You aren’t tight lipped because of shyness either because you know God doesn’t laugh at you but loves you. You don’t use your words to jockey for position because you know you have a standing in Christ. You don’t talk because you need attention because you know God looks at you with delight. You’re not going off due to impatience with other people’s faults because you are stunned by God’s patience with you. You’re not so bored that all you can talk about is what other people have done, because you are obsessed with something grand – what Christ has done. You don’t spill the beans in order to feel important by what you know because your worth/importance comes from being known by God. You don’t repeat racial slurs, because you’re firmly convinced that you are no better than anyone else and yet God has spoken kindly to you.

Conclusion

Let’s try to walk through this. Jesus says, after talking about how out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks, that we will be judged by our words. He says, “I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken” (Mt. 12:36). You can’t take back your words. Every

thoughtless, careless, casual, word that passed over your lips will be replayed before the judgment seat of God as a sure indicator of the sin that was in your heart. What do you think God's verdict will be?

When Isaiah in a vision stood before the Lord who was on his throne and surrounded by seraphs screaming – “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty.” He saw the Lord in the full array of his purity and holiness and glory and he cried, “Woe to me! I am ruined!” Why? What did he say next? “For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Is. 6:5).

“Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman” (Ps. 15:1-3). Are you able to stand before God? How can you come into his presence at all? If you really saw him in his utter holiness and then saw yourself – your wicked heart expressed in wicked words – you would say with Isaiah, “I’m undone! It’s over! I’m toast!”

But the beautiful thing is that “God did not leave Isaiah in his sins. Isaiah knew that he was a sinner – [a man of unclean lips and] that he was too unholy to stand in the presence of the thrice-holy God. But once Isaiah confessed his sins, he received abundant grace and mercy: ‘Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for”’ (Isa. 6:6-7).

“This was a powerful demonstration of saving grace,” says Philip Ryken. “The angel took a coal from the altar. In other words – and this is the important thing – the coal came from the place of sacrifice, the altar where a lamb had been offered to atone for sin. Therefore, Isaiah was reconciled to God on the basis of a blood sacrifice. This is fundamental, for without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin (Heb. 9:22).

“It does not require much imagination,” Ryken says, “to see how all of this points to the grace that God has given in Jesus Christ. Christ’s death on the cross was a guilt-removing, sin-atonement sacrifice.”⁸

Now when we see our sin and confess that we are people of unclean lips God, by the Holy Spirit, applies the blood of Christ to our unclean lips, forgiving us all our vile gossip, insecure boasts, mean-spirited put-downs, angry utterances, dishonest words, covering over our ungraciousness with his grace. And then, then, just like Isaiah, we can, amazed by his grace, say, “Here am I. Send me!” (Is. 6:8) and be sent out as God’s mouthpiece to speak his words.

The Lord’s Table

Stand in awe. Repent of your careless words. Recognize that you stand condemned before God on your own. There’s no hope for you. Your heart is full of all kinds of ugly emotions. And then look to the beautiful Christ and believe that he was sacrificed for you. His body was broken and his blood was spilled as the atonement for your sin. And if you believe that then come and take this bread and this wine, symbolic of Christ’s sacrifice and touch it to your lips, your tongue, your mouth. See, your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for! In Christ God has graced you.

Now you can begin to use your words to grace others and praise your God...

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, June 21, 2009. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The vision of Immanuel Baptist Church is to transform sinners into a holy people who find eternal satisfaction in Christ.

End notes:

¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979), 188.

² F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 363.

³ From Ray Ortlund's blog, *Christ is Deeper Still* (<http://christisdeeperstill.blogspot.com/2009/05/gossip.html>).

⁴ Found in R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 153.

⁵ C.H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Volume 13 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1974), 121.

⁶ Qur'an (5:38) – "As to the thief, Male or female, cut off his or her hands: a punishment by way of example, from Allah, for their crime: and Allah is Exalted in power."

⁷ Confucius, *The Analects*, ch. 17.

⁸ Philip Graham Ryken, *What is a True Calvinist?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 14-15.