

Lesson 4

Redemptive Communication

Introduction

When I was working on my undergraduate degree in communication studies, the professor had our class perform a simple exercise. He had us all take out a blank piece of paper and divide it into three. On the first piece we were to write down the word of something that *really* scares us. On the second, we wrote down the word of the worst tasting food we've ever eaten. And finally, on the third we were to write down the word of the female person who nurtured, comforted, and cared for us growing up. If you were to do this exercise, what would your answers be? Mine were *snakes; raw bacon fat; and mom*. Next, after having us share our answers, the professor had us all hold up the first piece of paper and rip it up. Easy, huh? Then he had us hold up the second piece and repeat. We all destroyed that paper into little pieces. Then ... he had us hold up the third piece. And he said, *now, ... rip it up*. Amazingly, no one could do it. Why?

There is incredible power in our words. What images come to your mind when you hear: *bigot; narcissist; abuser; or encourager; people-lover; supporter; friend*. Think of the words we use in interaction with each other: *I love you; You did a great job, thanks for everything you do; or ... you are fat; you will never amount to anything; you're dumb; etc.*

What we say is important. *Death and life are in the power of the tongue and those who love it will eat its fruit*, Proverbs 18.21. Words are either tools that will help us accomplish God's word, or they are hindrances to God's work by our poor choice of which ones to use. Words can launch us to new heights... or they can become a trap and a snare. One of life's greatest challenges is to learn the power of our words and the impact they have on our communication.

Jesus Stressed the Power of Our Words

What we say reveals what is on our heart.

"Either make the tree good and its fruit will be good, or make the tree bad and its fruit will be bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. Brood of vipers! How can you speak good things when you are evil? For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart. A good person produces good things from his storeroom of good, and an evil person produces evil things from his storeroom of evil. I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned, Matthew 12.33-37."

Jesus is teaching us that idle words are best left unspoken. Our offhand remarks serve the purpose of judgment in that they are often better indicators of character than carefully designed statements. Jesus is saying we will be held accountable for what we say.

Since that is the case, we must understand the words we speak can defile us:

But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this defiles a person, Matthew 15.18.

The heart is the source of our true character, our true person as we really are, not just as we appear outwardly. What we say gives others a peek into our heart.

What the Holy Spirit Says Regarding our Communication with Others

A thorough examination of Ephesians 4.29-32 is helpful:

No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear. And don't grieve God's Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ, Ephesians 4.29-32.

We should really focus on verse 29. A genuine, in-depth response to Jesus will change our heart. This goes all the way to changing our attitudes . . . which impacts our vocabulary. Our personal transformation process should change how we view godless speech. To us it should become something that is crude or vulgar or insensitive to others. It becomes very clear as to whether God's presence is inside a person by listening to the speech he or she uses.

A worthless person digs up evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A contrary person spreads conflict, and a gossip separates close friends, Proverbs 16.27-28. When he was little, my son was fascinated with flame throwers. *Some have a flame thrower for a mouth.* What is said can have a lasting impact. James said it this way:

And the tongue is a fire. The tongue, a world of unrighteousness, is placed among our members. It stains the whole body, sets the course of life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. Every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish is tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in God's likeness. Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, these things should not be this way, James 3.6-10.

The old saying we all heard growing up, *sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me*, is simply not true. Words can affect people for the rest of their lives.

Instead, it should be our goal to encourage and build up one another with the words we speak. *Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, Colossians 4.6a.* We always look for ways to stimulate each other to love and good works, Hebrews 10.24, and much of this can be done through kind words. We are not talking about trying to mislead a person by telling them what they want to hear, what we are talking about is the commitment to upbuild and encourage others because we care.

Pleasant words are a honeycomb: sweet to the taste and health to the body, Proverbs 16.24. Think of a situation where you have been encouraged by someone else. It makes all the difference in the world.

Before moving on, we should go back to Ephesians 4.30-31 and consider Paul's prohibition. Certain attitudes cannot reside in the heart of a Christian. Bitterness (harshness); wrath (sudden, passionate, anger-filled outbursts); and anger (often a continual state) are not godly attitudes. If they are allowed to

take up residence in our heart, they can produce quarrels and resentment. Words and bad attitudes emanating from a mean heart grieve the Spirit. *Mean hearts produce mean speech.*

All of this is contrasted in v. 32: *And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.* Words and attitudes from a caring heart encourage the Spirit. Caring hearts are tender, kind, and forgiving. This is the spirit of Christ. We must learn to extend forgiveness as God does.

How to Exercise Wisdom in the Way We Speak with Others

Be Slow to Speak

My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, James 1.19.

This involves listening.

The one who guards his mouth protects his life; the one who opens his lips invites his own ruin, Proverbs 13.3.

Do not be hasty to speak, and do not be impulsive to make a speech before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few, Ecclesiastes 5.2

“Shooting from the hip” is not always accurate.

We must remember:

- Know what we are going to say before we say it. *Do I really want to say that?*
- Refrain from speaking with the intention of hurting someone.
- Ask yourself if you would be embarrassed if God heard you say this. (He hears it anyway...)
Obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks, Ephesians 5.4.

Always Speak Redemptively

Once again, think of the principal Paul speaks of in Colossians 4.6a: *Let your speech always be gracious... seasoned with salt.* Don't give into anger, which if left unchecked can produce lasting consequences. We cannot control what others say or do, but we can control how we respond.

Conclusion

What we say will either bind us together with other Christians or dissolve our relationships. Cutting and critical words can be corrosive ... to us ... and to congregational life. Everyone needs to give careful attention to what they are thinking and ultimately, what comes out of their mouth.

Words mean something. We must exercise wisdom with the words we choose. What Paul contrasts in Ephesians 4.29-32 could not be greater. A mean heart is unconcerned about the hurt it causes. It can shout in wrath and be destructively resentful. The caring heart is kind, tender, and forgiving. Its words encourage people.

Your heart reveals itself by your speech. How is your heart?

For Thought and Reflection

1. How have you come to personally experience the power of words? What negative words spoken to you continue to haunt you? What are some positive admonitions you have received that continue to build you up?
2. As you think of your own experiences, in what others have said to you, how are you letting that impact what you say to others?
3. What do the words you say reveal? (Matthew 12.33-37; 15.18)
4. What must happen to change your vocabulary?
5. What type of speech characterizes a caring heart?
6. What type of speech characterizes a mean heart?
7. How can you win in the battle against your tongue?
8. What does all of this have to do with being knit together?