

LESSON 6

ON THE RECEIVING END

Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 4:6; Proverbs 15:1

EPHESIANS 4:29 · COLOSSIANS 4:6

Reading before class: Colossians 4 and Ephesians 4.

Last week we studied the tongue. This week we are going to stand somewhere else and watch it work: in the ear of the person it is aimed at.

1. Think of something somebody said to you years ago that you still remember. Do not write what it was. Write how long ago it was.
years ago.
 2. In your own words, what makes a word a good word? We will come back to this at the end, so answer it before you read any further.
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THE STANDARD I SENT YOU TO FIND

3. Read Ephesians 4:29. Paul forbids one kind of word and commands another. Write the forbidden kind.

4. Now write out the whole second half of the verse, the part describing what may come out instead. Every word of it.

5. There are three tests in that second half, not one. Pull them apart.
Test one, what it is good for: _____
Test two, when it fits: _____
Test three, what it does to the hearer: _____

6. Look at test two. What does "the need of the moment" do to the idea that there is a list of good things to say?
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7. Now look at test three, and look at it hard. Paul says the word gives grace to those who hear. So where does the measuring happen? In the mouth or in the ear?
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8. In your opinion, could a sentence be true, and kindly meant, and still fail this verse? Give your reasons.
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LET'S SUMMARIZE HERE

1. Paul does not say be positive and he does not say be nice.
2. He gives three tests: it builds, it fits this moment, and it is gracious.
3. The third test is applied at the other end of the conversation.
4. Therefore a man cannot grade his own speech by what he meant. He has to look at where it affects him personally when he truly hears it.

WHAT KIND OF WORD IS FORBIDDEN

9. Go back to the word Paul forbids in Ephesians 4:29. That same Greek word shows up in Matthew 7:17-18, and it is the word describing the tree. Read those two verses and write down what kind of tree it is.
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10. Here is something your English Bible hides. In Matthew 7:17-18 the words "bad tree" and "bad fruit" use two different Greek words. The tree word is the one from Ephesians 4:29. The fruit word is a different one entirely. What might that tell you about leaning on an English word to carry an argument?
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11. Now put all that back into Ephesians 4:29. Paul is not banning crude words only. What is he banning?

12. Read Ephesians 4:31. Paul lists six things to put away. Write them.

13. How many of those six are things that happen mostly with the mouth?

SEASONED WITH SALT

14. Read Colossians 4:6. Write the two things Paul says our speech is to be.

15. Find the word in that verse that tells you how often. What is it, and what does it rule out?

16. Salt does two things to food: it preserves it and it makes it taste like something. Which one do you think Paul has in mind here, or does he mean both? Give your reasons.

17. Read the last part of Colossians 4:6. Paul attaches a purpose. Write it out.

18. Notice the last two words of that verse. Paul does not say respond to each SITUATION. What does he say, and what does that require of you before you open your mouth?

THE ANSWER THAT TURNS IT

19. Read Proverbs 15:1. Write the two halves.

20. Here is what most people miss in that proverb. Solomon is not talking about the man who started it. Look at the word answer. Who is the gentle one in that verse, and what has just happened to him?

21. So Proverbs 15:1 hands the outcome of an argument to which of the two people in it?

22. In your opinion, why is the gentle answer so hard? It costs nothing and it works. Why don't we give it?

THE REWRITE DRILL

Each sentence below is something a Christian might actually say. None of them is a lie. Every one of them fails Ephesians 4:29. Rewrite each one so it passes all three tests, and be ready to read yours out loud.

23. "Well, I hate to say I told you so."

24. "I'm just being honest."

25. "You always do this."

26. "Must be nice."

27. "I'm not trying to be ugly, but somebody needs to say it."

28. Now look back over your five rewrites. What did you have to add to nearly every one of them? There is a pattern and I want you to find it.

WORD STUDY · UNWHOLESOME

The word: sapos, and it is not the word for coarse or vulgar. Its root means decay or rot.

Its one meaning in the New Testament. This word has a single sense across all eight of its occurrences: unsound, that is, "not in good condition (damaged or decayed); hence unsound and useless."

Read that definition again, because it is the whole lesson. Not indecent. Not shocking. Unsound and useless.

Where else it appears: it is the word for the bad tree in Matthew 7:17-18 and Matthew 12:33. A tree that has gone unsound.

Now something your English Bible hides. In Matthew 7:17-18 the phrase "bad tree" and the phrase "bad fruit" use two different Greek words. The tree is sapos, the rotten one. The fruit is a different word altogether, one that means having undesirable qualities. Your English gives you "bad" twice and the Greek never repeats itself. That is the same caution we met in Lesson 2, running the other direction: there, one Greek word wore two English coats; here, two Greek words wear one.

Why it matters here: it widens Paul's command a long way past cursing. A rotten word can be perfectly polite. It can be grammatically clean and technically true and still be exactly what Paul is throwing out, because the test is not whether it is crude. The test is whether it is sound and useful.

Source: Logos, 4 Aug. 2026. Lemma σαπρός, 8 occurrences, root √σηπω "decay; rot," single sense unsound 8 of 8; predicative adjective at Ephesians 4:29, attributive at Matthew 7:17-18. The fruit word at Matthew 7:17-18 is πονηρός, root √πονος "pain; affliction," sense bad. Lexicons consulted: Kittel et al.; Strong. Full entries in Works Cited.

And note this: you can see the point in English. Nobody thinks a rotten tree is a vulgar tree.

BUT SOMEONE MAY ASK...

"Does this mean I can never say a hard thing? Somebody has to tell people the truth."

Somebody does, and this passage is not against it.

Four verses earlier, in Ephesians 4:25, the same paragraph commands us to speak truth with our neighbor. Paul is not telling you to go quiet. And a few verses before that, in Ephesians 4:15, he has already given the pattern: truth spoken in love. The hard word is not the forbidden word.

Read verse 29 again and notice what it actually screens for. It does not ask whether the sentence is pleasant. It asks whether it builds, whether it fits this moment and whether it is gracious on the person hearing it. A hard truth can pass all three. A great deal of what we call honesty passes none of them.

So here is the test I would put on it. When you are about to say a hard thing, ask what you want to happen next. If you want the person built up, verse 29 is on your side and it will help you find the words. If what you want is to be right out loud, that is a different errand and the verse is not going to bless it.

FOR YOUR LIFE

- 29.** Look back at your answer to question 2. Would you change your definition now? What changed?
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- 30.** Go back to question 1. Somebody said a thing to you years ago and you are still carrying it. Now think about whether anybody is carrying something you said.
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- 31.** Colossians 4:6 says respond to each person. Name one person in your life who needs a different kind of word from you than everybody else does.
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- 32.** In your opinion, which fails more often around here: the forbidden word getting said, or the good word never getting said at all?
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THIS WEEK

33. Name one conversation coming this week where you already know the harsh word will be sitting on your tongue.

34. Write the gentle answer now, before you are in it. Proverbs 15:1 works better when it is not improvised.

Bring this workbook back next week. Next Sunday is the hardest lesson in this quarter and I want you here for it.

NEXT WEEK. Lesson 7: Where There Is No Wood.

Read before class: Proverbs 26 and Philippians 2.

One thing to watch for: Proverbs 26:20 explains exactly how gossip dies. Notice that it does not say the fire gets put out. Read the verse and see what it actually says happens.