

## Lesson 15

# Let My Speech Be with Grace

Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us that God may open a door to us for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains, so that I may make it known as I should. Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person, Colossians 4.2-6.

## Introduction

As Paul begins to draw Colossians to a close, he gives, at first glance, what appear to be random instructions and exhortations, but are some of the most important points to be made. All of them are connected to his teaching on the new person he described in chapter 3. Now as he prepares to bring the letter to a close, Paul focuses on prayer, the need to walk in wisdom, and to use speech that is gracious to others. Bios, a wise man of ancient Greece was given an animal to sacrifice. He was told to return to the donor the best and worst parts of the animal. Instead of receiving two body parts, the donor received only one thing: the tongue.<sup>46</sup> Truly, the tongue presents one of the greatest threats to an effective Christian life. *For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart*, Matthew 12.34.

Woven into this section is the practice of evangelism. His mission was to share the gospel. This is his focus. It speaks loudly that he doesn't concentrate on himself in verses 3-4. He could have asked for prayer for his release from prison, relief from the physical pain he endured, or a successful outcome with whatever his current legal trouble was. But Paul's primary focus was on his work in the gospel. This was the mission God gave him and he understood every circumstance he lived within could be turned into an opportunity (a door for the word) to *declare the mystery of Christ*. He wanted the early Christians to be focused on prayer that all the efforts being made to spread the gospel would be successful. We need to be praying for those who are doing the work of reaching others *and* the hearts of those they teach. How often do you pray for opportunities to share the gospel (or for others to do so)?

These verses are specifically concerned with *how* to communicate the message. We must be flexible and adaptive in our approach, 4.4. People are different. Situations are different. Life experiences are unique. It often takes the wisdom from above to apply the most effective approach in reaching someone with the gospel. Therefore, constant prayer, along with proper planning and forethought are all necessary. It is striking that the apostle continually asks for the Christians to pray for him. He has no airs here; he does not purport to have a stronger connection or channel to God, but always desires all to pray for him. It is a powerful example.

---

<sup>46</sup> MacArthur, John. *Colossians & Philemon: Completion and Reconciliation in Christ*. MacArthur Bible Studies. Thomas Nelson, 2007, p. 87.

## Corrupting vs. Gracious Talk

In Ephesians 4.29 Paul directs Christians to eliminate *corrupting talk*. What is that, exactly? It is a mouth characterized by:

- evil (Proverbs 15.28), sexual immorality (Proverbs 5.3), deceit (Jeremiah 9.8), curses and oppression (Psalm 10.7), lies (Proverbs 12.22), destruction (Proverbs 11.11), vanity (2 Peter 2.18), flattery (Proverbs 26.28), foolishness (Proverbs 15.2), madness (Ecclesiastes 10.12–13), carelessness (Matthew 12:36), boasting (Romans 1.30), false doctrine (Titus 1.11), evil plots (Psalm 37.12), hatred (Psalm 109.3), too many words (Ecclesiastes 10.14), and gossip (Proverbs 26.22).

On the other hand, Paul instructs us to speak in such a way that is *good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear*. What is gracious talk? It is a mouth characterized by:

- confession of sin (1 John 1.9), confession of Christ (Romans 10.9–10), edifying speech (Ephesians 4.29), talk of God’s law (Exodus 13.9), praise to God (Hebrews 13.15), blessing of enemies (1 Peter 3.9), talk about God (Psalm 66.16), wisdom and kindness (Proverbs 31.26), and gentleness (Proverbs 15.1). It takes as its model the Lord Jesus, who spoke instructively (Matthew 5.2), graciously (Luke 4.22), blamelessly (Luke 11.54), and without deceit (1 Peter 2.22).<sup>47</sup>

## Colossians 3.5: How to Interact with the Lost

William Barclay has rightly said, *few people have ever been argued into Christianity*.<sup>48</sup> The directive here is for wisdom and tact. We must always avoid making the wrong impression. To *walk in wisdom* conveys that this is to become the usual, normal pattern of our life. It is so easy to get in trouble with our tongue. A great deal of damage can be done in a very short amount of time. It is very easy to forget that others are watching the way we act. Do the things we do match up with the things we profess? Are we giving worldly people opportunities to mock Christianity?

This was a tremendous challenge in first-century Greco-Roman culture and now more than ever, it is of great importance in our quickly growing post-Christian culture.

“Early Christians were a minority group in a largely hostile world, and ill-judged attempts to assert their faith or impose it on others were not likely to be productive. In the words of Ecclesiastes 3.7 there is a time to keep silence and a time to speak. That is an age-old lesson which some in our modern world have still to learn. Ill-judged or badly timed efforts to promote some perfectly valid cause have sometimes only made things worse.”<sup>49</sup>

The *wisdom* in verse 5 is not rooted in a human source. Rather, it is a grace we receive. It comes from our close association with Christ, the fullness received in him, *‘in whom are all the treasures of wisdom, 2.3*.

---

<sup>47</sup> MacArthur, *ibid.*, p. 92

<sup>48</sup> Barclay, p. 194.

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, R. McL. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*. Edited by G. I. Davies and G. N. Stanton. International Critical Commentary. London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2005, p. 293.

This is a virtue we receive so that we may be effective and productive in our work of evangelism. We receive it by allowing God's word to dwell richly within our heart. As we do, the more Christ will be revealed on the outside.

The thinking here is that *who* believers are brings credibility to what they communicate. Everything we do (or don't do) speaks powerfully about our character and our beliefs. A careless or haphazard lifestyle or a legalistic approach to life can greatly hamper the effectiveness of our influence with unbelievers. Bruce writes:

It remains true that the reputation of the gospel is bound up with the behavior of those who claim to have experienced its saving power. People who do not read the Bible for themselves or listen to the preaching of the word of God can see the lives of those who do, and can form their judgment accordingly.<sup>50</sup>

So how do we act or behave when the world we live in is mostly hostile to Christianity? The 4<sup>th</sup> century scholar Ambrose has rightly said,

Paul admonishes us to use religious speech opportunely both as to time and place. But if anyone is difficult, be silent. Different courses of action are suitable for dealing with powerful people, with people of middle or lower stations in life. One deals one way with gentle persons, another way with those who are filled with anger. This is what it means to redeem the time.<sup>51</sup>

This was especially important in the Greco-Roman world where already by this time, distorted and outright false representations of Christian conduct and belief were widely circulated. Christianity was seen as a "depraved and excessive superstition" that had to be dealt with. In Bithynia during the dawn of the second century, Christianity had grown to the point where its influence caused temples to be deserted, sacred rituals to be neglected, and the meat of sacrificial animals to go unbought. The Romans countered this with torture and persecution, pressuring Christians to recant and "repent."<sup>52</sup> It was important that Christians not act in a way that would bolster the false allegations being made against them, but to speak loudly and clearly by the way they lived their life.

Today, we must always be careful. People can hold on to the things we say, even though at the time we feel what we said is relatively benign. I know of a person who walked away from his commitment to God decades ago. In a more recent conversation with him over a matter of judgment, I remarked that I agreed with him. He couldn't believe it. Then he explained a conversation he had over twenty years ago with a preacher who had a differing judgment from him but condescendingly made it a matter of sin. While

---

<sup>50</sup> Bruce, F. F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984, p. 174.

<sup>51</sup> Gorday, Peter, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, p. 55.

<sup>52</sup> In a letter from Pliny the Younger to Roman Emperor Trajan, Pliny says: "For this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts; it seems possible, however, to check and cure it." 'Tis certain at least that the temples, which had been almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred festivals, after a long intermission, are again revived; while there is a general demand for sacrificial animals, which for some time past have met with but few purchasers. From hence it is easy to imagine what multitudes may be reclaimed from this error, if a door be left open to repentance." See Pliny, *Letters* 10.96. Pliny. *Letters, Vols. 1 & 2*. Edited by T. E. Page, E. Capps, W. H. D. Rouse, and W. M. L. Hutchinson. Translated by William Melmoth. Vol. 2. The Loeb Classical Library. London; New York: William Heinemann; The Macmillan Co., 1931.

time has revealed that this person would have probably walked away from the Lord anyway, he held on to the unwise statement and bad attitude he witnessed and continues to use it as justification to have a hostile viewpoint toward the church. Great harm can be done when we fail to employ wisdom in our speech.

We may be right in what we say, but we need to always remember *how* to communicate it. Sometimes the *how* in communication may be *to say nothing at all* because the timing or situation is not right. This is where we employ wisdom, patience, and the long-term view. Not every matter is a “hill to die on,” and some things will clear themselves up over time.

## Gracious Speech

*Gracious speech* describes that which is attractive, inviting a favorable reaction.<sup>53</sup> It is spiritual, wholesome, fitting, kind, sensitive, purposeful, complementary, gentle, truthful, loving, and thoughtful.<sup>54</sup> It looks for a positive response that results from our genuine goodwill. Christians need to have an answer ready for those outside of Christ, and they need to proclaim their faith as opportunities arise, but it is to be done in wisdom, not with aggressiveness.

I really like Dunn’s writing on this verse:

The final exhortation explicitly envisages a church in communication with those around it, not cut off in a “holy huddle” speaking only “the language of Zion” to insiders (contrast Eph. 4:29), but engaged in regular conversation with others, and in such a way as to allow plenty of opportunity to bear testimony to their faith.<sup>55</sup>

We are to speak with the consciousness of how we are using our time. How are we spending our time with those who don’t believe? What should our relationships with people who don’t believe in Jesus look like?

## Seasoned with Salt

Our speech should also be effective, i.e., thoughtful, interesting, filled with content, joyful, and even with wit. In Paul’s day using speech seasoned with salt carried the meaning of making a conversation interesting, rather than being bland. The ancient writer Timon called the speech of the academics unsalted or insipid. In other words, their talk was *boring!*

What Paul has in mind is the type of speech that is lively and engaging on topics with unbelievers and conducted in such a way that generates a positive response. It displays an attractiveness of character that looks like Christ. It also views Christians as being in active relationships with members of their community where their conversations are open and natural . . . not defensive or confrontational.

---

<sup>53</sup> BDAG, p. 1079.

<sup>54</sup> MacArthur, John F., Jr. *Colossians*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Press, 1992, p. 187.

<sup>55</sup> Dunn, James D. G. *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996, p. 266.

Christians should be able to hold their own in all their social settings and gain favorable attention through their attractive character and speech.

### ***Ready with an Answer***

Positive and effective interaction with unbelievers will generate opportunities to explain our faith and the lifestyle of Christian living. In every case we should be ready with an answer.

but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, 1 Peter 3.15.

As we live our life, our faith should be integrated into our work life and social life. It is not just about the silent testimony of our character, it is also about giving testimony of our faith in conversation, being mindful of the way we speak. Tone, volume, facial expression, etc. are all important as we become more and more sensitive to the kind of answer each person requires.

### **Conclusion**

Charles Spurgeon, one of the greatest communicators of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was criticized by a woman who thought he was too witty. Spurgeon replied, “Madam, if you knew what I *didn't* say, you wouldn't say that!”<sup>56</sup> Believers and the gospel they share are to be interesting. What they say should relate to where people are, according to their interests and needs.

Our hearts need to be continually connected to God through prayer, vigilance, and thanksgiving. In turn, we must allow our hearts to overflow with the gospel in clarity, grace, and salt.

### **For Thought and Reflection**

1. What are some specifics in Colossians 3.5-6 as to how to interact with unbelievers?
2. When it comes to general conversations, what are the standards we must practice?
3. How can a careless lifestyle render our testimony to unbelievers useless?
4. What does it mean to use speech that is *seasoned with salt*? In what ways is your speech salty (in a good way)? How does your tongue serve as a purifying influence, differentiating it from so much of what we hear today?

---

<sup>56</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. *Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ*. Preaching the Word. Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989, p. 139.