



Life Under Construction: Ministry of the Mouth

Text: Ephesians 4:17-5:2

Bible Teacher Duffy Robbins

Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that you will know a tree by its fruit. (See Matthew 7:15-20) Therefore, those of us who have embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ are being transformed to become more like Christ, including in how we use our mouths. Transformed hearts lead to transformed mouths.

1. What is the most recent time you said something you immediately wished you could take back?
2. Read Ephesians 4:17-5:2. If you had to come up with one unifying, underlying principle underneath all of Paul's specific commands for how Jesus-followers are to use our mouths, what would it be? (See Study Deeper to help guide your thinking.)
3. Paul says to put away falsehood and instead speak truth to one another because we, as fellow followers of Jesus, are interconnected through our connection in him. Dishonesty robs the church of the unity that Jesus desires for us. What are some ways you've seen falsehood hurt relationships?
4. Read Ephesians 4:15-16. We are called to speak the truth in love. Which is harder for you, speaking the truth or speaking it in love? How can we balance speaking the truth and speaking it in love?
5. Why is it important to connect before you correct? And what are some practical things we can do to earn trust, prove our loving intentions, and connect with someone?

Challenge: Duffy gave three principles for us to consider: (1) We have to earn the right to be heard. (2) It's what you say. It's what they hear that matters. (3) Love doesn't require you to speak every truth that comes to mind. Pick one principle to focus on this week. Decide on a specific action step you can take this week to grow in that area. Is it a relationship in which you want to focus on connecting so perhaps you need to schedule a time to grab coffee or a meal together? Is it consciously softening your tone and ensuring you are communicating from a posture of love, or perhaps do you simply need to explicitly ask someone, like your spouse, how they prefer to be communicated with so you can ensure that what you intend to say is what they hear. Do you need to institute a "wait 24 hours before responding to a social media post" rule?

Prayer: Partner up with someone in your group. Share the action steps you are committing to from the Challenge above. Then close your time by praying for each other, asking God to transform you by his grace into someone whose words speak life and grace into others.

STUDY DEEPER

Why God Made Your Mouth

The average person speaks at least 7,000 words a day, or about 50,000 words a week – the length of a short book. We are authors, all of us, publishing 52 books a year from this printing press called the mouth.

Which should make us pause occasionally to consider what kind of words we're sending out into the world. Is it a better place because of our words, or worse? Do we wound others, or heal them (Proverbs 12:18)? Do we commend the fear of the Lord, or pour out folly (Proverbs 15:2)? Do we refresh others' spirits, or break them (Proverbs 15:4)? For how little we often think of our words, they hold the power of life and death (Proverbs 18:21).

If we're going to steward our speech well, we need to regularly remember why God gave us words at all. Perhaps no one verse captures his purpose clearer than a command from Paul to the Ephesians:

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. (Ephesians 4:29)

Here is a charter for the dinner table, the classroom, the smartphone, the office, and everywhere else we open our mouths: give grace.

Speak Grace

Given all that Paul says about grace in Ephesians, he could scarcely have handed our mouths a higher calling. Grace is that redeeming quality of God by which he saves us, seals us, and sanctifies us. By grace, God has blessed us in his beloved Son (Ephesians 1:6), raised us from the dead (Ephesians 2:5–6), and rescued us from our sins (Ephesians 2:8). God's grace is rich, overflowing, immeasurable. Eternity will not exhaust his storehouses (Ephesians 1:7; 2:7).

Now, Paul says, let your mouth give that. Take the grace you have received from God, and let it change the accent of your soul. Then take your little words, flavored with grace, and use them to carry on Jesus's redeeming work in someone's life.

Whenever God makes someone an object of grace, he also makes them an agent of grace. Just as Paul received a "stewardship of God's grace" to preach the gospel (Ephesians 3:1–2, 7–8), so too "grace was given to each one of us" (Ephesians 4:7). Even if we should feel as slow of speech as Moses (Exodus 4:10), if we have the Holy Spirit, we have a whisper of heaven in our hearts and on our tongues. We have grace to give.

Built Up in Jesus

Practically, giving grace means speaking words that are "good for building up" (Ephesians 4:29). Gracious words straighten bent-over saints, strengthen tottering legs, bind up bruised arms, and grow each other into "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

"Give grace," in other words, is a call to imitate the God whose words make worlds bloom into being (Psalm 8:3). Give life. See the image-bearer in front of you, and skillfully apply "the truth . . . in Jesus"

(Ephesians 4:21). Match specific words from God to specific needs in others. Give your words weight; make them meaningful; say something worth saying. All to the end that others might grow up into Jesus – protected from lies, established in truth, rooted and grounded in grace.

Such grace is not confined to the sermon or the Bible study. Paul's command rests over every Christian and every conversation. Give grace when you kneel beside your child's bed, when you eat lunch with coworkers, when you sit around the campfire with friends, when you walk with your wife in the evening, when you stand in line at the grocery store, when you send your thirtieth email of the afternoon.

Lest we misconstrue the character of these gracious words, let's add two qualifications: gracious words are not always nice, and gracious words are never easy.

Tough and Tender Grace

First, gracious words are not always nice. Despite the testimony of many thousands of cross-stitched pillows and greeting cards, grace is not the fluffy thing we sometimes make it out to be. Grace is not always comfortable, not always cozy, not always nice. Whereas nice words aim to make us feel good, gracious words have higher ambitions: to make us actually good – actually Christlike.

At times, then, gracious words will be tough words. The same apostle who told us to “give grace” did not refrain from reminding us that we were once dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1), nor from exhorting us to stand firm against the devil (Ephesians 6:10–11), nor from warning us of God's wrath (Ephesians 5:6).

Neither did our Savior, the man whose words were ever “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Sometimes grace fell from his mouth tender as the dew, and sometimes it thundered with the force of a prophet. Sometimes it bound up bruised reeds, and sometimes it pruned vines with a slice. Sometimes it said, “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20), and sometimes, “Take up your cross” (Luke 9:23).

We too must sometimes broach conversations that make us feel like running away. For if our words are always nice, always pleasing, always politically correct, we are giving no more than half a grace.

What Gracious Words Cost

For all their variety, however, gracious words are not capricious, as if we speak a tough word here, a tender word there, hoping to strike the balance. No, grace tailors its words to the needs of the moment; it searches for speech that “fits the occasion” (Ephesians 4:29). Which means such words never come easily.

Gracious words are always specific words – words that match this situation, not that one; words that fit this person, not another. We must move beyond our favorite promises and favorite stories to ransack “the truth . . . in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:21), applying appropriate parts of God's multifaceted truth to our multifaceted experience. As we talk with others, we must go to work in the mines of our mind, passing words through the fire of careful thought, and smelting from them fresh, pointed truth.

Too often, my words fail to give grace because I haven't first given due attention to the person in front of me. I drift in and out of the conversation, my mind drawn to all manner of irrelevancies: What's for lunch? What am I going to do tonight? I'm not sure that shirt fits him. Words that come from a distracted mind are graceless words, words as weightless as the air that carries them.

Our tongues do not drift into giving grace. Words worth speaking come at the cost of fully engaged attention, wise discernment, creative thought, emotional investment. But oh, what a reward they bring! Gracious words drop from someone's mouth like fruit from a tree of life, satisfying giver and receiver alike (Proverbs 15:4; 18:21).

Question and Prayer

How shall we cultivate this kind of speech? We know from Jesus that grace will come out of our mouths only if grace is already living in our hearts (Matthew 12:34). But even when grace is doing its work of demolishing, building, and renovating inside us, learning how to package that grace into words often takes practice.

As a simple first step, consider stopping for a moment the next time you are about to enter a conversation, and take up a question and a prayer.

Question: What does this person need? What kind of words will "fit the occasion"? The need will not always be obvious, but even asking the question can posture us to pay attention.

Prayer: Lord, keep corrupting words from coming out of my mouth. Fill my mouth with grace.

Then walk into the conversation, remembering (wonder of wonders!) that you – weak, struggling you – have grace to give. In God's hands, your words can become a means of carving a brother or sister into the image of Jesus Christ. Then listen, give your attention, ask perceptive questions, activate the gears of your mind. And when the time comes, open your mouth and give grace.