



Life Under Construction: Speaking to Build Up – Speaking to Blow Up

Text: Ephesians 4:17-4:32

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Words have power. They can be used for good. Or they can be used for evil. If our lives have been transformed by the grace of Jesus, then our words should give grace to others.

1. What words spoken to you in the last week have stuck to you the most? What words gave you the most life? What words tore you down the most?
2. Read Ephesians 4:22-24. Underlying Paul's commands for how we use our words are the overarching commands to put off the old self – *our pre-Christ ways of being and living* – and to put on the new self – *the part of us in submission to Christ being transformed by the Holy Spirit*. What are practical ways you can wage war against your “old self”, including your old self habits of speech?
3. Read Ephesians 4:26-27. Why should we not let the sun go down on our anger? What would be a more constructive way to express our feelings that bottling it up with bitterness and resentment? Who is a specific person you need to seek out and with whom you need to pursue reconciliation?
4. Read Ephesians 4:29. Have you ever experienced encouragement so surprising and impactful that it changed the way you think and live? If so, what was said? How did his/her words change you?
5. Read Ephesians 4:31-32. We can only extinguish the fire of the tongue when our hearts are transformed by the grace of Jesus. How can we constantly remind ourselves of the grace we have received to ensure our words are always edifying?

Challenge: Write Ephesians 4:29 on a sticky note and stick that note on your bathroom mirror. Each morning this week, read it out loud, and ask God to give you open eyes to see opportunities to speak life into people. Then each night, read the verse out loud again. Thank God for the opportunities he gave you to speak life. And ask God to reveal moments when your words tore someone down. Confess those things to God. And then personally seek those people out, confess to them and ask for forgiveness.

Prayer: Close your group time by encouraging one another. Partner up with someone in your group. Take turns looking each other in the eye and directly speaking to that person about the things you see the Lord doing in their lives for good. What gifts do they have? How have they been a blessing to you? How do you see the fruit of the Spirit – *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* – being manifest in their lives. Then pray for each other, thanking God for the ways he is working in and through that person.

STUDY DEEPER

What Does 'Unwholesome Talk' Really Mean?

“And they will know we are Christians by the words that we use.”

That’s not a literal translation of what Jesus said, but it does convey the common perception of the Church. We spend a lot of time focusing on keeping our vocabulary clean.

Growing up in Sunday school, we were taught certain words were bad, and that good Christians don’t use bad words. In talking about explicit language, we were often pointed to the first part of Ephesians 4:29: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths.”

We learned to change the way we speak. We steered clear of music and other media that uses “obscene” language.

But, at the same time, we developed clever euphemisms that allowed us to say bad and hurtful things in ways that sounded nice. In so doing, we followed the letter of the law, but not the spirit, ignoring the second part of the verse:

“...but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Like the Pharisees before us, many of us missed the point of this teaching completely. While we should be careful with what we say, simply cleaning up our words doesn’t clean up our hearts.

THE SPIRIT OF THE COMMAND

Unfortunately, some Christians can be negative, hostile, critical and cruel people to talk to. There are times when we say inexcusable things to and about each other, often over different views on theological nonessentials.

The truth is, unwholesome talk is about more than how many four-letter words are in our vocabulary. It’s about our heart attitudes, which, as Jesus points out in Luke 6:45, inevitably come out in how we talk.

Too often, we use nice words to say cruel things. Even “Bless his heart” can be used in a way that tears people down instead of building them up. Some of us have tendency to talk about things that aren’t our business. We share things that we haven’t even confirmed to be true.

Gossip is unwholesome. It’s also sinful. Any time we engage in a conversation where we seek to build ourselves up or make ourselves look good by making others look bad, it is unwholesome.

Here’s the basic rule: If the person were in the room with you, and you were talking about them to their face, how would you say it? If it doesn’t encourage or challenge them to grow in a positive way, then it isn’t wholesome.

When we talk about people behind their backs, when we speak down to people, when we degrade others with what we say, when we give pat answers to other people's pain or dismiss their feelings—that's unwholesome talk. We're not "building others up according to their needs" or "benefit[ing] those who listen." Words are powerful tools. We can use them to build each other up or to wage war.

CONVICTIONS

I'm not suggesting Christians walk around cursing like sailors. But I do think God cares less about the words we use than He does about the heart we have in using them.

Tony Campolo famously is said to have begun speeches to Christian audiences with this opening: "First, while you were sleeping last night, 30,000 kids died of starvation or diseases related to malnutrition. Second, most of you don't give a s—. What's worse is that you're more upset with the fact that I said s— than the fact that 30,000 kids died last night."

I'm not necessarily advocating using this method. However, Campolo used profanity in this case for a purpose. It may be controversial and shocking, but he used it to expose how far our hearts had drifted from the heart of God. It's memorable. It's challenging and transforming. One of the reasons it's so effective is that he brings our attention to the fact that sometimes we care so much about our understanding of how to be holy that we forget to love people in the process.

There is nothing wrong with having conviction to not use profanity. However, sometimes, if we aren't careful, our personal conviction can become a sinful judgmental standard. One of the blatant weaknesses in Christian behavior comes when we expect others who don't believe what we do to behave in a manner that we consider appropriate.

It's one thing to avoid using "bad" language or subjecting yourself to it willfully. It's another thing to look down on others who do not share that same conviction. Sometimes, we spend so much time trying to avoid "unwholesome" words that we hinder our ability to witness to the people who use them.

I think God is more concerned with our reaching those who are far from Him and demonstrating His love than He is about our exact word choice. Maybe sometimes, as Christians, we care too much about looking holy and not enough about loving the people God loves.

What it comes down to is what Paul writes in Romans 14. He says different people, in Christ, have different convictions. In his day, it was about eating meat sacrificed to idols. That's less of an issue in the modern world. The overall point he makes is we should not quarrel over disputable matters. We have freedom in Christ. That freedom is not an excuse to judge or to try to change the convictions of others. While one person's faith may allow them to use certain language, another's will not. It is not our place to judge others. Nor should we behave in a manner that causes them to struggle with their own convictions.

If the people of God spent as much time trying to love the world the way Jesus did as we often do worrying or arguing about minor issues of faith, then the world would be a very different place. We might be viewed in a very different light. I'm not saying these issues aren't important. I'm saying we often make them more important than they need to be when we consider the ultimate mission that we have.

In the end, what is in our hearts will affect what comes out of our mouths. What we say is a good gauge for the condition of our hearts. We should guard against all sorts of unwholesome talk by asking God to transform our hearts.

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