

“Talk Like a Christian”

Pastor Dan Erickson

Ephesians 4:29, 30

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One of my favorite musicals is “My Fair Lady.” If you are not familiar with it, it is the delightful story of Professor Higgins, Rex Harrison, in the movie, teaching a lower class girl, Eliza Doolittle, Audrey Hepburn, “how to walk and talk like a regular lady.” Note the focus on “talking.” The professor is concerned that Eliza learn to enunciate and be able to clearly say, “The rain in Spain, falls mainly on the plain.” Higgins is a linguist who firmly believes that one’s speech, how one talks, is a chief indicator of one’s character. On this point, he agrees with the Bible, which also teaches that the words we speak are very important. Now, God is not terribly concerned with proper pronunciation and grammar, or with extent of our vocabulary. However, He is very concerned about what we say. As Jesus said, what comes out of our mouths reflects what is in our hearts. Or, as the puritan Thomas Brooks said, “We know metals by their tinkling and men by their talking.”

Folks, this morning our text is Ephesians 4:29, 30. During the past few weeks we have looked at changes God says should occur in our lives if we are Christians. Putting on the new, as the apostle Paul talks about in verses 4:22-24, is not just a spiritual theory. It involves practical, daily action. One very practical change in our lives is that we should stop talking like an unbeliever and start talking like a Christian. As we explore God’s word today, let’s pause and pray the Lord would help us become people who utter words that are pleasing to Him and that benefit other people.

Ephesians 4:29 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. Paul begins by telling us what we should not say. “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths.” Other versions say “unwholesome talk” or “foul and abusive language,” but the Greek work literally means rotten or rotting. So the words “rotten” or “corrupting” points to how this speech is both bad at the moment and how it continues to eat away at our relationships and our souls. It is indeed rotten talk. What does Paul mean by this phrase? There are three types of rotten talk that I frequently hear, sometimes from my own mouth.

The first is profanity and crude language. The attitude in our culture concerning this type of speech has changed in recent decades. We regularly hear words on TV and radio that were banned by the FCC not that long ago. An “R” rated movie often contains hundreds of utterances of profanity. Last year a psychology professor, Timothy Jay, wrote an article saying people who use profanity are more intelligent, more honest and better able to manage pain than those who don’t I am a bit skeptical of his claim.

However, because of what the Bible teaches about human depravity, I am never shocked when people sin. That is what sinners do. I am not surprised someone takes the Lord’s name in vain or wears a T-shirt with a very crude slogan. That is what people who don’t know Jesus yet do. However, I am a little taken back at times by the language of some folks who profess to be Christians. Rotten talk comes out of some of these folks and often they don’t seem to have a clue that what they are saying might be offensive to God.

A Christian friend once told me, “Dan, there is nothing wrong with using crude language, just so you don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.” No, that’s not true. Paul’s prohibition of corrupting talk certainly includes crude speech. Certain four letter type words simply should not be part of the vocabulary of a follower of Jesus. Yet, there are also Christian who use the word “god” and the name of Jesus Christ in a less than holy way. That is one of the Ten Commandments. The third commandment; “Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” or as the NIV puts it, “Don’t misuse the Lord’s name.” Now first century Jews and even some Christian in the 21st century refuse to utter the word “god” because they fear they may accidentally use it in vain. When they read the Old Testament and came to God’s name, Yahweh, they would instead merely say, “Adonai” or “Lord.” When Matthew wrote his gospel he had a Jewish audience in mind. Thus, when Jesus speaks of the “kingdom of God” Matthew translates it as “the kingdom of heaven” so not to offending his readers. This may seem a bit over the top to us, but I fear many of us are a bit too casual about this. I hear people, even at church use the term “god” just as a verbal filler. Yet,

friends, that is part of the corrupting, rotten talk that should not be coming out of our mouths.

The second type of corrupting talk is gossip. Remember, Paul says our speech should be building up others, but gossip pulls others down. It is a potent, verbal poison. As Jeff Robinson writes in his book, "Taming the Tongue." Beware the catastrophic sin of gossip. It can kill churches, ruin marriages, destroy friendships-and worse: it can unmask the gossip as one who professes saving faith, but doesn't possess it. That maybe sounds a little strong, but friends, just a few words of gossip can have a devastating effect on someone's life. That is why the book of Proverbs warns us **Proverbs 11:33 Whoever goes about slandering (gossiping) reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.** Or **Proverbs 16:28 A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer (a gossip) separates close friends.** Yet, many people seem to enjoy gossip. They probably agree with this little rhyme: A world with only two people would be dull without a doubt. There'd be someone to talk to, but no one to talk about."

What is especially disturbing is that Christians sometimes seem at least as likely to gossip as other folks. There is a story of three pastors who went on a camping trip together. As they sat around the fire talking, the Lutheran pastor said, "I have a confession to make. I have a real problem with gambling. I have lost so much at the casino lately that I am going to have to dip into my retirement account to pay my bills." The Methodist pastor said, "Well, since it is confession time, I have something to share. I'm afraid I am addicted to porn. I have been watching X" rated videos for years." The Baptist pastor said, "Well, I'm not perfect either. The sin I struggle with is gossip, and I cannot wait to get back to town and tell everyone what I have learned." Unfortunately, that story is sometime not too far from the truth. Oh, as Christians we can disguise our gossip in religious language. "Would you please pray for Joe and Mary. I guess they are having serious marriage problems. Sue told me she heard them arguing out in the parking lot after church last Sunday. And Sally told me..." Folks, that sounds a lot more like gossip than a prayer request.

Now, I don't think we have an epidemic of gossip in our congregation. It is kind of cool when

someone calls me and says, "I suppose you have heard about the problem we have in our family," and I can honestly say, "No, I didn't know. No one has said anything to me about that." Usually when folks in this church share information about each other they do it out of sincere love and concern. But not always. How do you determine whether it is right talk about a third party with someone else? Well, first of all, we need to make sure what we share is a fact, really true, not just a rumor. Then we need to check our motives. "Why am I going to say this?" As someone said, "The difference between a gossip and a concerned friend is like the difference between a butcher and a surgeon. Both cut the meat, but for different reasons." Then we need to ask ourselves, "If what I'm going to say is negative about someone, is it really helpful that I say it?" Educating your friends on faults of other people is probably gossip, and it is corrupting talk. And those words should not come out of our mouths.

A third type of corrupting talk is what I call "destructive words." Many folks think being blunt and frank with other people as a virtue. Some claim it is okay to say anything you want about someone, as long as you say it to that person's face. Yet, critical, cutting and sarcastic remarks can be destructive. Yes, it is important to be honest. We need to learn to give and receive constructive criticism. Yet, as James 1:9 says, we should be slow to speak. We should think before we open our mouth and ask ourselves, "Why am I saying this? What effect will this have on the person to whom I am talking?" Sometimes, our words are like shot gun blasts. We quickly shoot off our mouths in a general direction and we don't care what or who we hit. That is not a good thing...

However, God expects us to do more than just keep our mouths shut. Trappist monks are known for their vows of silence. Not speaking allows them to meditate and insures that they utter no corrupting words. Some of the early Trappist's have their tongues cut out to keep them from that sin. Yet, God expects more from us than silence. So, what should we say? We need to stop speaking rotten words and instead speak encouraging words. Listen again to our text **Ephesians 4:29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasions, that it may give grace to those who hear.** Christians need to work on this.

I need to work on this. You probably do as well. We sometimes struggle with speaking words that build others up. An old song says “Where seldom is heard a discouraging word” describes a home on the range, but it is not about the Iron Range. Some folks around here can be pretty negative. There are some churches where “seldom is heard and encouraging word.” That is not good. When a Christian opens his or her mouth, compliments, expressions of thanks and words of appreciation should come out. Now, we should not try to flatter people or attempt to manipulate them with our compliments. I had a friend in college who would go up to girls and say, “Hey, I heard you are a great cook.” in an effort to get an invitation to dinner. Not good. But keeping that in mind, we still need to speak words that benefit and build up others, especially to those who are in need of encouragement.

Do you know some people who are in that boat? Maybe it is your wife who is at home all day with the kids. She spends many hours doing housework and caring for the children, but never gets paid a cent for it. Guys, if you are married to a woman like that, sometimes, many times, you need to say, “Dearest, (or whatever term of endearment you use) I want you to know that I really appreciate all you do for our family.” Or maybe your spouse has just come home from work. All day he/she has had to listen to people complain about things. Your spouse doesn’t need to hear any more complaints, but need some encouraging words. For those of you who are in school, you can encourage other students. I know kids can be pretty mean to each other. They have learned from adults. When you see someone being ridiculed by other students, maybe you can go to that person and say, “Hey, don’t let it bother you. I know you didn’t deserve that.” Teachers can do that too. Teachers at school or at church who speak timely, encouraging words can have a tremendous impact on students. And parents, when your kids come home from school, it sure won’t hurt them to hear the words “I love you” come out of your mouth.

Now, one more thing, that some of us need to hear. Me especially. Joking and teasing don’t equal encouraging words. Now, some joking and teasing is hurtful. We need to avoid that. We have to work on being sensitive enough to know when our teasing words are upsetting or harming someone. However, often there is nothing wrong

with those words. People who care about each other, love each other, often tease each other. That is okay. These words can strengthen relationships. But building up another person requires more than that. The Lord wants us to speak serious words intended to help that person grow to be more the individual God has called him/her to be.

So we need to replace our corrupting, rotten talk, profanity, gossip, and destructive words with truly encouraging speech. Now, I realize I have not said anything very profound. Many of you are thinking, “Pastor Dan, you are tight. I should probably watch what I say a little more closely. But these are minor problems compared to Covid and all the crazy things going on around us. Aren’t you being a little picky?” Well, maybe so, but I want you to listen to the next verse, Paul writes, **Ephesians 4:30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.** Now, it is unclear if the “and” connect this to just verse 29 or the entire previous paragraph. Yet, either way, “and” does link verse 30 to our text today. When we use our words the wrong way we grieve the Holy Spirit. That doesn’t mean He “feels bad,” like a child does when a toy is broken. Rather it means that rotten speech is a serious sin in God’s eyes. Listen to what the Lord tells us in **James 1:26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.** Friends, all our claims of faithfulness to God are pretty empty if we are speaking words that are not pleasing to Him. If on Sunday morning you are singing hymns and worship songs, but Monday at work shotgun blasts of rotten talk are coming out of your mouth, James asks, “What good is religion?” And Paul says you grieve the Holy Spirit.

Now, I suspect some of you feel a little uncomfortable because you know you are guilty of some of these sins of the tongue. Maybe when you are angry, profanity flows out of your mouth. Or maybe it sometimes slips out even when you are not angry. Perhaps you are someone who finds a juicy bit of gossip almost irresistible. When you hear someone else is having a problem you quickly call a couple of friends just to keep them informed. Or maybe snide and sarcastic remarks just come naturally to you, and it’s a real struggle to not share them when they come to your mind. Or maybe you are the silent type and it is just hard

for you to express words of encouragement to another person. I think of an Ole and Lena story where Lena complains, "Ole you never tell me you love me anymore." He responds, "Lena, 28 years ago I told you I loved you and if I every change my mind I will let you know." Those of us who are men, and/or Scandinavians, can be especially guilty of failing to build up others. Whatever the case, if rotten talk has been coming out of your mouth, or if you have not been speaking encouraging words, you should feel guilty. You have not been talking like a Christian should. But it is good to remember that you are not alone. Listen to what **James 3:2** says **For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.**

Folks, every single human being, except Jesus Christ, has spoken rotten words that do not honor God. One of the purposes of this passage is to help us see that we need to seek the Lord's forgiveness. As Martin Luther would say, "This command is law that leads us to the gospel." Maybe you have always thought you were a pretty good person. I hope this morning, as we have talked about corrupting and rotten words, you have realized you are not living up to the standard God has set. That is why **Romans 3:10** says **There is no one who is righteous, no not one.** As a result, you need the forgiveness He graciously offers through Jesus Christ. Friends, if you have not experienced that forgiveness, if you are not trusting in Jesus as your Savior and Lord, I urge you to turn to Him. If you are not sure what that involves or what that means, please make sure you talk to me really soon.

Now, if you are truly a believer in Jesus, you have already received God's forgiveness for your sins, including the rotten words you speak. Yet, to fully experience that forgiveness, you need to, as 1 John 1:9 says, "Confess your sins to the Lord." I think we each need to frequently take a spiritual shower and get rid of the grime that profanity, gossip and other rotten words leave on our souls.

And then we need to ask the Lord to help us talk like a Christian. I suggest this assignment: Identify one way that you are prone to fall into rotten talk. It maybe profanity, crude speech, gossip, sarcastic or cutting remarks. Or your problem might be that you are usually silent when you should be encouraging someone. Identify one

way that you are prone to misuse your mouth. Then each day this week, pray the Lord would help you to speak in a way that please Him. I encourage you to tell to at least one other person what you are working on and ask that individual to pray for you and hold you accountable. Folks, I have always believed that the pen is mightier than the sword, and the tongue is even stronger than the pen. Our words are powerful. Very powerful. May the Lord help us to be speaking words that honor Him and help others.