

***A Vision for Scripture***  
***A Case Study: the Transformation of Our Speech***  
Ephesians 4:29

This past summer I was doing a wedding in another city for a relative. The groom had been married before, and we knew his first wife quite well. During the rehearsal (the night before the wedding), I accidentally called his new bride by his first wife's name. I obviously didn't mean to do this, but it was incredibly hurtful to the new bride. She quickly corrected me and immediately teared up. Her dad didn't look too happy either. I felt horrible the entire weekend, but no amount of explanation or apology could make it better.

That experience reminds me that our words are powerful in the lives of others. Even when we don't mean to, our words can be incredibly hurtful to others. And then there are the times when we intentionally hurt others with our words. We rarely admit, "I was trying to inflict pain by what I said," but deep down that's what we want when we insult, belittle, or "put others in their place" with our words.

I'm sure you can think of words that you wish you could "take back" but can't. And you can probably identify habits of speaking that are unhealthy. Perhaps you are in the habit of criticizing people; you can't turn it off. Or you're in the habit of correcting everybody around you; you just can't let things go. Or maybe you're in the habit of saying angry things to others. Or maybe you're in the habit of going silent - withholding your words as a way of expressing your displeasure with others.

Few people would argue with Proverbs 18:21 which says, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Our words are incredibly powerful for good or evil. This morning I want to talk about how our speech/words might be formed spiritually. Specifically I want us to think about how the Scriptures might be used in the spiritual transformation of our speech.

We're in the midst of a sermon series on Scripture. This is the third message in which we're talking about a **vision** for what the Word might mean in our lives. Unless we have a compelling vision for the difference Scripture might make in our lives, we probably won't expend the time and energy needed for Scripture to have its rightful place in our lives. Today we're going to look at Ephesians 4:29 as a specific example of how God might use Scripture to transform one specific area of our lives, namely our speech. If you see how transformational Scripture could be in this one area, perhaps God would give you a vision for how He might use Scripture more broadly in your life.

**Context.** The book of Ephesians is a classic example of what NT scholars call "the indicative and imperative" in Paul's writings. The first three chapters are "indicative": Paul writes in indicative statements about what is true of the person who is in Christ. Paul makes a staggering series of statements about how we've been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ, how when we were dead in sin God made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with Him. Read the first three chapters of

Ephesians and you'll be blown away at what Paul says of the person who is saved by grace through faith in Christ. That's the indicative.

The last three chapters are "imperative": in light of what is true about us in Christ, Paul makes imperative statements about how we should therefore live. In 4:1 Paul writes, "Therefore. . . I implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called. . ." He goes on to address topics like unity, spiritual gifts, sensuality, and speech. In all these different areas, Paul exhorts believers to "lay aside the old self" and "put on the new self" (4:20-24).

We need to see what Paul writes about our speech in 4:29 in this context. Paul isn't giving us nuggets of wisdom so that we can "win friends and influence people. He's explaining how we should use our words in a way that is compatible with our calling as people who have been made alive with Christ, raised up and seated with Him in the heavenlies. He's explaining how people who are called to show off the glory of Christ should speak. As we'll see, there is a tremendous amount at stake in terms of whether or not we experience spiritual transformation in this area.

Ephesians 4:29 can give us a . . . ***A Vision for the transformation of our "speech."*** (***Ephesians 4:29***) In verse 28 Paul pointed out that our hands can be used for good or evil (for work or for stealing). The same is true of our mouths:

29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, that it may give grace to those who hear.

The word translated "unwholesome" literally means "rotten." On a couple of occasions Jesus spoke of "bad/rotten" fruit coming from a "bad/rotten" tree. Paul uses the term to describe words that are defiled or unwholesome. Such "unwholesome words" could be anything from cursing people to slander to lewd jokes to harsh or unkind ways of speaking to others. Just as you wouldn't intentionally put something rotten in your mouth, you shouldn't let anything rotten come out of your mouth. In the context of the entire chapter, Paul is saying that there were ways of speaking that were normal and accepted before you came to Christ; but in Christ certain the old ways of speaking need to be "put off."

True to his pattern, Paul doesn't merely tell us what ***not*** to say; it's not enough to "not sin" with our words. Paul goes on to state positively what our words should accomplish:

29 . . . but [speak] only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Notice the end result: we give grace/gifts to people through our words. This is a challenging idea, isn't it? We don't often think about why we talk. We just talk. We say whatever comes to mind - good or bad, encouraging or sarcastic, shallow or profound. And then we follow up whatever comes out of our mouth with the disclaimer, "I'm just being honest" - as if honesty trumps everything else that's true about our speech.

Paul had a very different vision for what our words should be and do. His vision was for our words to give grace. After a conversation with me, instead of people feeling like I've taken something away **from** them, they should feel like I've given something **to** them.

Specifically, Paul says that we should restrict our words and speak **only** those that are "good for edification according to the need of the moment." To edify means to "build up"; words that edify somehow help build others up into the persons that God wants them to be. Paul clarifies further when he says "according to the need of the moment."

When you think about it, this is an incredibly intentional, deliberate use of words. We first seek to identify the need of the person to whom we're talking, and then we seek to meet that need (partially, at least) through our words. The need may be encouragement; somebody may lack courage to do what is right. The need may be for counsel; the other person might need a wise perspective on how to proceed. The need may be for understanding; they only need to know, "Somebody understands me." They may need correction; their thinking or their behavior may be misguided or destructive. We identify the need and then seek to meet that need through our words. In this way we give gifts to others through our words.

This use of words is strikingly different from the way we normally think about words, but it's incredibly compatible with the rest of the Christian life. Because God has been generous to us, we should be generous to others. Certainly this should show up in the way we speak.

I want to take a few minutes to think about this Scripture in light of the passage we studied last week. We saw in 2 Timothy 3:16–17 that because Scripture is God-breathed, it is profitable in four ways:

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

As I mentioned last week, not every single Scripture is profitable in all four ways mentioned in this passage. But Ephesians 4:29 **is** a Scripture that does illustrate all four aspects of profitability (which is one reason I chose it for this morning's message).

**Teaching.** We've already seen that Ephesians 4:29 teaches or instructs us in ways that we should speak. Instead of being careless or hurtful with our words, we're supposed to meet needs with our words, giving grace to those who hear. And so there's plenty we could learn from a verse like this one. If we keep reading, we'll learn in verse 30 that when we misuse words, we "grieve the Holy Spirit." (How would we ever know this if Paul hadn't written this?!?!?) This passage instructs us in some truths that are vital if we want to bring joy to the heart of God instead of grief.

When I reflect on a Scripture such as this one, I instinctively want to go to other Scriptures that amplify or complement what this Scripture teaches. For example, in Matthew 12:34-37 Jesus said this to the Pharisees:

33 "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. 34 "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. 35 "The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. 36 "But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. 37 "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

Jesus teaches that my words are an accurate reflection of what is in my heart: *the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart*. This is so true that Jesus says that my words will either justify or condemn me. I desperately need to learn this. Jesus is saying that my words reveal whether my heart belongs to God or not. This means that the transformation of my speech really involves the transformation of my heart. This means that if you experience road rage and curse at the person who cuts you off in traffic, it means that there's anger in your heart.

I hope it's obvious that if we want an education about the way we should speak, Scripture is a reliable teacher. Scripture will "school us" in some profound ways concerning our speech ***if we are teachable***. If we never learn from Scripture, we'll remain stuck in immature, sub-Christian ways of speaking.

***Reproof (rebuke)***. A Scripture like Ephesians 4:29 challenges us to evaluate our lives and ask questions like, "Have there been times when unwholesome words came out of my mouth?" Or you might ask, "Have there been times when I had opportunity to build others up and didn't?" God might appropriately rebuke you if you reflect on your speech over the past week - in your friendships, in your workplace, in your family. You may realize that there are unwholesome patterns of speech that you've adopted over the years.

Growing up my brothers and I got into the habit of verbal sparring around the dinner table. It never really crossed my mind, "What can I say that will give grace to my little brother, Tommy?" My thinking was more along the lines of, "What's something clever I can say to embarrass Tommy and make Mike and Jeff think I'm funny?" In my life it has been so very natural for me to use words to impress people instead of to meet the need of the moment. It's a very common but self-centered way of using words. This Scripture has repeatedly rebuked me over the years. As I mentioned last week, rebuke isn't condemnation. Rebuke is a wise, loving heavenly Father reminding me that He has called me away from certain types of speech for higher purposes.

Can you identify how you tend to use words in ways that fall short of what Scripture teaches? Remember that it's a matter of the heart; our words flow from whatever fills our hearts. In the SoM, for example, Jesus pointed out that angry words (such as "You

fool!") flow from an angry heart; anger is murder "of the heart" (Matthew 5:21-22). And so if God convicts you of angry speech, don't respond in a superficial way. Admit to God that your angry words flow from an angry heart.

**Correction.** As we've already seen, Ephesians 4:29 is a powerful corrective to the way we commonly speak. It points to a correct way of using words. Perhaps you could identify one specific relationship or one specific situation in which you need to employ words to meet needs and give grace. It might be profitable to look up related Scriptures to get more specific insight on various options you have for meeting needs. (If you need help in finding such Scriptures, ask a friend for help with this.)

For example, Proverbs 15:2 says, "The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, But the mouth of fools spouts folly." (This is a basic variation on "speaking the truth in love.") This means that if you're wise (skillful in living), you won't merely think about *what* you say; you'll also think about *how* to say it. It's not very wise for a parent to say, "Quite being mean to your sister, you idiot!" Out of frustration, parents sometimes say the right thing in the wrong way. A correct way of speaking is to say the right thing in a way that "makes knowledge acceptable." As a parent, you could tell your child about a time when you were mean to somebody else; you could describe how you felt justified at the time but how you regretted it later. Perhaps your vulnerability would make that knowledge acceptable.

Or in a completely different situation, the need of the moment might be to say almost nothing. Proverbs 10:19 says:

19 When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable,  
But he who restrains his lips is wise.

Some things need to go unsaid. I know that for me, my daily "word count" would go way down if I limited myself to "only those words that give grace to those who hear." Sometimes the need of the moment is fewer words.

Scripture is profitable for showing us the correct way to use our words. As we've seen, this will require great discernment. This will require being led by the Spirit in specific circumstances and relationships.

**Training in Righteousness.** Over time the Scriptures train or equip us to to speak in ways that are compatible with our calling in Christ. Even if our normal way of speaking is currently selfish and hurtful, by the grace of God, the Scriptures can train us to the point where we instinctively speak in ways that are gracious and helpful. This is the result of allowing God to be God in our lives: we are equipped and trained for every good work. Many of those good works involve words.

In every other area of life - athletics, career, hobbies, etc. - we accept the fact that training takes lots of practice and lots of time. I'm currently trying to teach my "little brother" (with BBBS) how to shoot a basketball. I'm reminded how complicated and frustrating it is at first to get everything right: you need the right grip, you need to square

your feet, you need to bend your knees, you need to keep your elbow in, you need to time the release of the ball with the peak of your jump, you need to follow through, etc. It's often frustrating for a twelve-year-old kid to try to remember all these things. But if he tries hard and practices for thousands of hours over several years, he'll have sweet jump shot. It will be instinctive; he won't have to think about the mechanics every time he tries to shoot the ball.

That's the prospect for us if we allow Scripture to train us in righteousness. Eventually - after thousands of conversations over many years - we will instinctively give grace to those who hear; we will instinctively use our words to meet the need of the moment. Hebrews 5:14 tells us that "solid food is for the mature, who because of **practice** have their senses trained to discern good and evil." If we practice we will be trained.

That's the vision for how comprehensively Scripture can train us in the ways of righteousness. If the "word of Christ" richly dwells within us, our hearts will want the things Jesus wants, we will have the mind of Christ, and we will instinctively speak in ways that further the purposes of God.

Hopefully this case study is helpful in terms of giving you a picture of how Scripture might actually transform a specific area of your life. If your speech reflected the things we've been discussing today, you would bring life to the people with whom you live, work, and worship. Instead of trying to avoid you, people would seek you out because you are bring armloads of gifts (grace) every time they talk to you.

In coming weeks we'll be talking about how to make it our **intention** to experience these things through Scripture and how to employ effective **means** of training ourselves through the Scriptures.