

## The Purpose of Our Words | Ephesians 4:29 (ESV)

Series: *The Truth About Words*

[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.*

When I was in 6th grade my class did an activity where we were each told to write little notes to our classmates that said something nice, passing along a compliment or word of encouragement to one another.

So we all jumped right in, and after a flurry of writing and delivering, we each sat at our desks to read through our piles of positivity and praise.

As I leafed through my notes I quickly perused the ones from my friends, read through ones from the popular kids, and then I came upon a little piece of paper that gave me (what I thought at the time was) the greatest compliment I could ever receive:

It had one sentence: *“You always have the best comebacks.”*

The writer was complimenting my ability to use my words and my wit as a weapon to fire back at those who came at me with their inferior jabs and jokes. I was a smooth talker, a spin master, a force to be reckoned with on the dueling ground of put-downs.

Now there are a couple of reasons why I was so enraptured by this compliment:

1. The note came from a girl I'd had a crush on for years. She had signed in flowy, 6th-grader cursive, complete with a little heart over one of her letters.
2. But more importantly...I was not a sporty kid, a cool kid, or a super popular kid...I was just sort of around. I didn't have a lot that I felt made me stand out among my peers, so to be told I was “the best” at anything felt great.

This note instantly became one of my greatest treasures, and its message my greatest praise. I loved the fact that I had been noticed for what I believed was a mark of my intelligence and creativity. I kept that note among my keepsakes and special things for years, not only because I liked the sender, but because in a way it confirmed to me that I was figuring out how to fit into the world.

Because everything about our culture encourages us to sharpen our words to a cutting edge, doesn't it? The jokes we often laugh at the most are the ones that make fun of other people. The words that most often grab our attention are the ones that take shots at and tear down the value, worth, and dignity of the people “on the other side” of the issues we fight over. We love to critique, criticize, and condemn, and if it comes off as harsh or lacks love, well...it's really “their” fault; the blame lies on the shoulders of those who were so wrong that we had no choice but to be condescending -- it was the only way, after all, we could prove our point.

And when we're not using our words to bring people down a peg or two (or 10), we then often find ourselves choosing the words that best benefit...us. We prioritize self promotion. We place our opinions on a pedestal and dare the world to just try and knock them over. We get so caught up in what we are going to say next so we can sound smart, important, informed, and so on, that we get into conversations where we spend more time focused on the things we say than we spend listening to or considering the words of another person, trying to speak to us.

This kind of half-hearted, self-centered communication style is pretty common and accepted in our world. But here's the problem: God has a far grander, more wonderful, and deeply loving purpose for our words. He doesn't need us to use them as

weapons. He doesn't want us to use them as tools of selfish promotion. And He absolutely is not pleased when we use them to manipulate, belittle, or demean others.

Instead, God has a very simple, straightforward, yet tremendously powerful and profound purpose for our words. And the Apostle Paul makes that purpose clear in his letter to the Ephesian Church:

*[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.*

*Ephesians 4, ESV*

Oh, how different the world might be if God's people acknowledged and pursued this purpose for our words. If we recognized and cherished the truth that the things we choose to say should...

**Be good and build up others  
Meet the needs of the moment  
Give grace to those who hear them**

This is a radically different purpose for the things we say and the way we say them than the world would have us believe, isn't it? According to Scripture, the power of our speech isn't meant to be spent for our own glory or gain. Our words are meant to be a blessing to others, and a testimony in and of themselves to the new way of life we have found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

If we are followers of Jesus, and if becoming more and more like Him is among the deepest desires of our hearts, then we must become people whose words are ***good and build up others, that meet the needs of the movement, and that give grace to those who hear them.***

I want to dig a little deeper into each of these ideas, but first before Paul gets into the positive commands of what our words should be like, he gives a warning not unlike what Pastor Steve covered last week: we need to keep our tongues in check. We need to keep our words free of evil intentions.

*29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths...*

*Ephesians 4, ESV*

The word "corrupting" is the translation of the Greek word "*sapros*". If something was rotten, decaying, putrid, vile, foul, or unwholesome, then it was "sapros". It is completely useless and only brings harm to those who encounter it.

So to have corrupting, "*sapros*" talk coming from your mouth is to speak in such a way that is so bad that is good for nothing. It is using our words with the primary goal of causing hurt, pain, and shame. Talking to or about someone in such a way that your goal is to diminish their worth, dignity, or value. Corrupting talk is the stuff we say in order to wound others so that we can feel better about ourselves at the expense of someone else.

If the things you say tend to discourage those around you, cause arguments, tear people down, spread slander or gossip, be full of bragging and bravado, breed bitterness, promote falsehoods, or...give you the reputation of having the best comebacks...don't be proud. Don't feel smug or smart or clever. Because you've got a problem. And you need to repent.

And because I know some of you are either wondering or trying to avoid asking yourself this question...yes, this absolutely extends to the “sapos”, corrupting garbage that is so easy to post, share, or send online without a second thought.

Our words have to be better than this. The things we chose to say cannot be filled with vileness or hatred or false accusations. You need to think before you speak. You need to listen before you respond. You need to check your heart before you open your mouth. Because you are called to take off and leave behind your old life that was lived without Jesus, and instead be an imitator of The Holy God, who speaks the truth in love, always.

You are called to use ***good words that build up others, that meet the needs of the moment, and that give grace to those who hear.***

Let’s take a few minutes to break down these distinctives from v29.

**First, your words should be good and build up others.**

Paul’s instruction for Christians to have “good” words come out of their mouths is a direct contrast to the “corrupting” words he forbade. The things we choose to say should be fruitful, beneficial, and full of the potential for blessing. We want to be people so shaped and transformed by our faith in Jesus that the only speech that makes the trip from our hearts to our mouths and into the world is that which helps, rather than hurts, the people around us.

But the goodness of our words needs to be more than just saying nice things so we can check off that particular box of biblical obedience. They need to be genuine and honest, and given to others in such a way that proves to them what we are saying really is meant to bless and make their lives better.

We see Jesus do just this sort of thing throughout the Gospels. Instead of joining the crowds, who hurl insults and shame and heap derision on people they believe deserve it...Jesus constantly lets flow a torrent of kindhearted, good words that serve the purpose of building them up instead of tearing them down.

He praises the outcast woman who washes his feet. He calls out to Zaccheus, the despised tax collector, and lightheartedly invites himself over to his house for dinner. Even Peter, who Jesus is admittedly pretty hard on from time to time, is more often encouraged and built up by the kindness and goodness of his Savior’s words.

And remember that Jesus, while hanging on a cross, finds the words to forgive the people who put him there and comfort the criminal hanging on a cross to his side.

That’s our example. That’s the God we follow. If Jesus -- beaten and bleeding and dying nailed to a torture device -- can let goodness and compassion and love flow from his heart and out his mouth...then y’all, we ought to be able to find a way to use good words that build others up in our day to day lives.

**We should also be able to speak in a way that meets the needs of the moment.**

They should be good for building up others, *“as fits the occasion.”*

We’ve got to master the art of discernment. We have to know when to encourage, when to guide, when to praise...and when to offer a correction or rebuke. We have to choose our words wisely and carefully, no matter the circumstances.

The purpose of our words is ultimately to guide people toward Jesus. Which means that, from time to time, we’ll have to be honest with folks -- just as we have to be honest with ourselves -- about what is righteous and what is sinful about their lives.

We'll have to challenge them to measure their motivations, actions, and decisions against the truth of God's Word, and then reckon with what lines up...and what does not.

Sometimes, people need to hear a clear statement about Jesus and what He expects of us. Sometimes they just need some encouragement, to know somebody is in their corner, even when their life is a mess. Sometimes they really do need an appropriate rebuke so they can clearly hear a voice of reason warning them that they've crossed a boundary into dangerous territory.

Most of the time...it'll be a mix of all this and more. Every day we all need to hear affirmations and reminders and corrections. This is why it is so important to commit ourselves to using good words that build people up -- because if we get that right then there is a pretty good chance that we may be trusted by others to speak into their circumstances, whether we say things that are encouraging or things that are hard and challenging.

**Finally, our words should give grace to those who hear them.**

The simplest definition of grace I could find this past week is that it is an unmerited act of goodwill from one person to another. It's doing something or saying something nice and kind and good to someone else, just because you want to. And that's a perfectly good way to think about it...unless you are a Christian. Because if you are a Christian, you need to add to your definition of grace a little extra biblical "umph" that changes it from something really good...to something astounding and life changing.

Earlier in the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul gave us a detailed description of what grace truly means to those who follow Jesus. It's from 2:4-10. Listen for when grace is mentioned and pay attention to just how good it really is:

*[4] But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, [5] even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—[6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. [8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

(Ephesians 2, ESV)

Our example of grace -- of just how good the unmerited gifts of goodwill we should make it our daily task to give to others -- is the Gospel. That's our standard. That's our goal. We want to give grace in imitation of the way God gave it to us when he saved us from sin and death through the sacrifice and resurrection of His Son, Jesus.

So when it comes to our words, the things we choose to say, and the way we choose to say them, it is as simple as this: our words ought to make people feel and believe like we really care about them. Our words should make it clear to them that we love them. Because as Christians, our words are always an example and declaration of having been saved by grace through faith in Jesus.

So speak like someone who has been saved. Like someone whose life has been touched and transformed by the "immeasurable riches" of God's kindness and Christ's love.

For the past two weeks Pastor Steve has encouraged you all to embrace three simple practices for helping you evaluate your words, learn how you might grow to use them better, and confess the ways you may have used them poorly in the past. I'd like to once again suggest those practices as you move forward into this week, seeking to **use good words that build up others, that meet the needs of the moment, and that give grace to those who hear.**

First, you absolutely need to **pray**. Pray that you might learn to speak in ways that encourage, affirm, and build others up, and offer correction balanced with compassion and grace. There are probably hundreds of passages in Scripture you could use to help you pray about finding good and grace-filled words, but I'll suggest a classic that has blessed Christians for ages:

[14] *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

(Psalm 19:14, ESV)

May that be the goal for all our words, each and every day.

Second, you need to **listen**. Here's the truth: you cannot use **good words that build up others, that meet the needs of the moment, and that give grace to those who hear** if you speak before truly hearing. You are far less likely to bless others with your words if you don't know what is really going on in their lives, what is troubling their hearts, or what most brings joy to their souls. This week I challenge you, ask someone to share with you something they feel is important to them. Listen fully to what they say, emptying our mind of how you might respond, and then, only when they have finished, take a moment to think and pray about how to reply. I'd be really surprised if your response wasn't filled with meaningful, grace-building words.

Finally, **treasure** the gift God gives us by inviting us to speak good words to others, especially those words that are filled with the promises and truth of the Gospel. Really take some time to praise God for how incredible it is that we can use our words to bless others with life and love and the salvation story of Jesus. It is an incredible honor to speak in such a way to each other. Treasure this gift. Treasure this blessing. And use it to build up others, meet the needs of the moment, and give lots and lots and lots of amazing, God-inspired grace.

Not long after I became a Christian in middle school, I came across the note, "*You always have the best comebacks*" tucked into the top catch-all drawer of my dresser.

I remembered why I had saved it. I remembered how much I had loved what I thought it said about me at the time.

And I began to cry. Because all at once the Holy Spirit convicted me of the foolishness of my pride in such awful, rotten, corrupting talk. I repented right at that moment, threw out the note, and made a commitment to speak in such a way that future notes might not praise me for my comebacks, but instead might wonder at the grace, compassion, and love in my words...and ask what happened in my life that made me speak that way.

Because then I'd get to say "let me tell you about what Jesus has done in my life. It's a great story. And the best part is that it can be your story, too."

Those are, after all, some of the best words we ever get to say.

### Communion

As we turn our attention to communion, I'd encourage you all to take a few moments to consider how you might use your words -- today, tomorrow, each and every day hereafter -- in such a way that the people around you always receive the kind of grace that leaves them thinking not about you...but about the God who gave you such wonderful words to share.

At our church anyone who has confessed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior is welcome to join in the celebration of communion.

In just a moment we will all, together, take our bread and after some words from Scripture, eat together. We'll then take our cup and, again after a reading from Scripture, drink together.

If you've joined us in-person today you've been provided with individual communion servings. The top simply tears away twice, once for the bread and again for the juice. If you're watching at home, please feel the freedom to use whatever elements for the food and drink you have on hand.

If there is anyone joining us today that does not believe in the Gospel or has not confessed Jesus as their Savior, we want you to know that we are so glad that you are here today and honored that you would allow us to be part of your journey in seeking truth and learning more about Christianity.

During this time, we'd simply ask you to reflect on what you've heard, and maybe even use the time to share a simple prayer with God. And if you have any questions about the service, about communion, or about Christianity in general I'd love the chance to chat with you or even meet with you in the coming week.

Would you please pray with me?

**Distribute the Elements:**

“The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘this is my body which is [broken] for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”

“In the same way after supper he took a cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

*Pray*