

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

*Series: The Truth About Words*

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When I was in 6th grade my class did an activity where we were all told to write a short note to each of our classmates. The note could contain a complement, or something we admired about one of our peers, but overall the goal was to pass along some kindness and build each other up.

So, after a few minutes of writing followed by a chaotic few seconds of running from desk to desk to make deliveries, everyone sat down to read through their stack of 30 or so encouraging messages.

As I flipped through my own little pile, I came upon one note in particular that gave me (what I thought at the time was) the greatest compliment I would ever receive:

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

Now there are a couple of reasons why I was so captivated by this particular note:

1. First, the note had been written by the girl I had a crush on. She had even signed it 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 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 became an identity-shaping truth. I loved the fact that I had been noticed for what I believed at the time was a mark of my intelligence and creativity. It made me feel like I was figuring out how to fit into the world.

I was learning that my words could be used to make me look great, and others look bad...and that often, the world was okay with that. Only 12 years old, I was already figuring out that I can use my words in such a way that benefits me first, me most, and me alone. And even better, doing so seems to be worthy of praise and acceptance from the people around me.

Before we dismiss this as a funny little story of preteen immaturity, let's be honest about something: perceiving the purpose of our words as a tool to benefit ourselves, no matter the cost – *or even very intentionally at the cost of to others* – is something the culture we live in today affirms and encourages, isn't it?

*How many conversations do we begin, with the goal of being perceived as the smartest, or the most well informed, the most passionate, the most victimized, or the most righteous?*

*How often are we drawn in by messages and media that hold our attention through the tactics of tearing apart the value, worth, and dignity of “those people” on “the other side” of an issue we are fighting over?*

*How often are we guilty of prioritizing self promotion and consumed by the need to speak in a way that keeps us at the top and others at the bottom?*

Too often we believe the purpose of our words to be our own glory and gain. And this sort of self-righteousness always teaches us that the end justifies any means necessary. If our words hurt others, create enemies out of our neighbors, or contribute to injustice, or spread rumors and lies...well, it'll all be worth it as long as we get what we want.

This is a problem, because throughout Scripture God tells us that He has an endlessly selfless and deeply good purpose for our words.

- God does NOT need us to use our words as weapons.
- He does NOT want us to use them as tools of self-glorification..
- And He absolutely is NOT pleased when we use them to manipulate, belittle, or abuse 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*

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 found in what it can do or accomplish for ourselves. Our words are meant to be a  **blessing to others** , and a testimony to the new way of life we have found in following Jesus Christ.

If we are followers of Jesus, then:

**Our words must be good and build up others.**  
**Our words must meet the needs of the moment.**  
**Our words must give grace to those who hear them.**

I want to dig a little deeper into each of these ideas, but before Paul gets into the positive commands of what our words should be like, he first shares an important warning:

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 it accomplishes nothing of value. Instead, such speech only causes pain and creates division. And if you are a follower of Jesus, “*sapros*” speech will completely discredit your attempts to use your life as a testimony to the love of God.

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...then you should not feel proud, smart, or clever. Because according to what Paul says here, and what Jesus modeled with this own life, your approach to words has a serious problem. It is corrupted, it is useless, and it is full of sin. It needs to be changed, immediately.

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 we are told very clearly and plainly that to do otherwise is to stray into corruption.

So instead of such vile, fruitless talk, we ought to strive to do as Paul says in the rest of 4:29, and have ***good words that build up others, that meet the needs of the moment, and that give grace to those who hear.***

Let’s look more closely at how Paul describes the true purpose of our words in v29.

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

The things we choose to say should be fruitful, beneficial, and full of truth, and loaded with 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 has the potential to help, rather than hurt, 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. They must be said with the desire to share truth, to pass along blessings, and to guide others to greater obedience to God.

Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus encountered people whose lives are full of questionable decisions, bad theology, and murky morals. Despite these flaws, he would speak to them with good words that served the purpose of helping them change their lives and grow closer to God.

Jesus spoke tenderly to people he knew were outcasts, compassionately to people he knew were sinners, and truthfully to people he knew were wrong, even when doing so was dangerous to himself.

He called out to a man named Zaccheus, a despised tax collector and known swindler, and lightheartedly invited himself over to his house for dinner. This radically changed Zaccheus' life forever, as the words of Christ transformed the sinful man's heart and he repented, repaid those he'd cheated, and committed his life to following Jesus.

Even the disciples, who admittedly Jesus is pretty hard on from time to time, are so encouraged by their Teacher's words that they end up devoting their entire lives (and sometimes even experiencing martyr's deaths) to spreading the good news of Jesus to everyone they meet.

And of course we must remember the words Jesus choose to speak over those who had mocked him, beat him, and nailed him to the cross:

*33 And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

Luke 23 (ESV)

If Jesus -- unjustly beaten and bleeding and dying while nailed to a torture device -- can let compassion and forgiveness and love flow from his heart and out his mouth...then I think we can all confess we've got room to grow in using our words in good ways that build others up. Because Christ on the cross is our model. His sacrifice and compassion are what we're called to imitate with our own lives, including what we choose to say to others. We need to learn to build others up with our words.

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

Our words 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.

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.

One of my favorite examples of this from the life and ministry of Jesus is from John 8. A woman is brought before him and accused of being caught in the act of adultery. According to the law of Moses, this is punishable by death. They demand a response from Jesus – what should happen to this woman? Jesus replies by writing something in the dirt (we're not told what), and then telling the crowd that whoever is without sin can be the first to pick up a stone and throw it at the woman. One by one the crowd disappears, until only the woman is left with Jesus.

*10 Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."*  
John 8

This is brilliant mastery of the moment. Jesus diffuses an angry crowd, using good words and sound theology, challenging the accusers to examine their own sin before being so quick to judge another's. They leave humbled and convicted. Then, Jesus turns to the woman with more good words – grace, mercy, and forgiveness! But don't miss the very end – *"and from now on sin no more"*. This is not cheap grace. The woman has an assignment from the Son of God. She's told, perhaps even warned, of her need to repent.

Jesus is honest, clear, full of conviction, and ready to meet the needs of the moment with the power of his words.

As a follower of Jesus you must commit to being students of the moment, and approach both encouragement and rebuke with wisdom, motivated not by your own desire to be right, but by the love you have for those you address. **We should be able to speak in a way that meets the needs of the moment.**

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

A simple working definition of grace 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.

But if you are a Christian, your understanding of grace needs to look not just at how human beings treat each other, but at how God treated us through his Son, Jesus. Paul does this earlier in Ephesians:

*[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...*

Ephesians 2 ESV

Our example of grace -- of how good the unmerited gifts of goodwill we should make it our daily task to give to others -- is this Gospel. We want to give grace through our words in imitation of the way God gave it to us. A way to do this is simply to speak like someone who has been saved by the “immeasurable riches” of God’s grace. Our words ought to make people feel and believe we really care about them. Our words should make it clear to them that we love them, just as we have been loved by God.

Do your words give grace? Do they reflect to others all God has done for you, and all you believe God wants to do for them?

For the past two weeks Pastor Steve has encouraged you all to embrace three simple practices for helping you evaluate your words: ***Pray, Listen, and Treasure.***

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.***

### **How will you pray about your words this week?**

What conversations do you need to bring before the Lord to help you speak truthfully *and* gracefully?

- Perhaps you could pray for the opportunity to share encouragement with your family, friends, or co-workers.
- Maybe you need to pray for discernment in how to apologize for words you said that were hurtful.
- We could all probably develop a practice of prayer that precedes one of the most dangerous places we use our words: social media.
- We’re in a presidential election year...how powerful might it be if every single person in the Faith Manhattan community committed themselves to time in prayer before speaking up about issues or candidates?

I can pretty much guarantee that time spent in prayer over your words, seeking a godly way to use them, will never go to waste. Give it a try.

### **How will you listen in regards to your words?**

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 are constantly speaking 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 brings joy to their souls.

Here's a little assignment you can try to learn more about listening: in the Gospel of John, Chapter 4, there is a story of Jesus meeting a woman at a well. They have a long conversation. This week, read that story a few times and take note of how you can tell Jesus is listening to the woman. Does he assume things about her, or ask? Does he cut her off with corrections, or allow her to share her ideas? Does the woman seem to be harassed by Jesus and his words, or is she helped, healed, and made whole by Jesus' good words spoken with grace at the right time?

Let Jesus teach you about being a listener this week.

### **What will you treasure about your words?**

Does it ever blow your mind that God invites you to be His messengers in this world? To share His truths? To tell others about the live-saving Gospel? I enjoy talking about the "stuff" in life just as much as anyone. If you ask me about the Chiefs in the lobby today, I am fully prepared to overwhelm you with amateur analysis on their chances against the Ravens. That kind of thing is fun, as is talking about your favorite book, where the best coffee is in town, your hobbies, interests, etc.

But these things aren't treasures. These things aren't precious. And we make a mistake, a very terrible and tragic mistake, if we allow them to take such a place in our daily lives that they become more valuable to us than the story of God's work in the world, and in our own lives.

Ask yourself, what sort of words do you treasure the most? May God lead us to a place where we can all respond with a true love and passion for the words of His Gospel:

*16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

Those are words that are true treasures. Those are words that are rich to share. Those are words that I hope you can pass along as good gifts to others, in as many moments as possible, with the hope of spreading God's immeasurable grace throughout all the world.