

Appropriately, the hope for our words comes also through words. The Creator of words speaks words of promise to sinful speakers, thinkers and doers. Christ came to earth as the King's Speech (John 1:1,14) with a message that is conciliatory, accurate, direct, revelatory, thoughtful, loving, interesting and beautiful. Truly communicating like a Christian starts with listening to the King. He says to us in the gospel, "I live, die, and reign for my people. I have overcome your sin and give you a glorious inheritance." Listen to God's words to you. Reflect on his goodness and love. Hear his expressions of eternal commitment.

Apart from regeneration in Christ our hearts overflow out our mouths with "hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, and dissensions (Gal. 5:20).

Through the gospel Christ replaces our speech-damning hostility with peace. The gospel empowers us to speak like our King because at the cross Jesus makes us children of the King. When the Spirit makes his home in our hearts he empowers us to speak with "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). That's good news for us whose tongues are lethal weapons!

Words define us. There's a reason silent films are no longer produced. Words add a rich dimension to life. Our words can commend us to God and others (2 Cor. 8:7); our words can also condemn us (Titus 2:8). The difference between the two is not better communication techniques but the power of Christ in us (2 Cor. 12:9).

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PROCLAMATION

Promoting robust, religious thought in the tradition of orthodox, historic Christianity
February 2012, Issue 32

CHOICE WORDS:

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

Having been out of grade school for a few years I'm not sure if the old saying is still ordinary playground parlance: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." If it is it's still a lie.

The Bible is more honest. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov. 18:21). Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of that Proverb reads, "Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose."

Our word choices can give life to, or kill, our marriages, families, friendships and churches. One of the most common causes of marital failure is poor communication. "He just doesn't talk with me," says a lonely wife. A berated husband says, "She talks alright, I just wish she would let *me* talk." A hurting child says, "I get so embarrassed when my

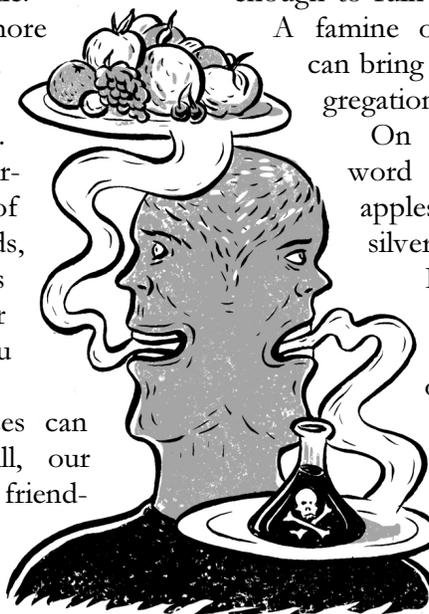
parents talk to others about things that I would like to be kept private." Parents grieve over the disrespectful way their children speak to them. One major breach of confidentiality can be enough to ruin a budding friendship.

A famine of fitly-spoken words can bring death to a whole congregation.

On the other hand, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver (Prov. 25:11).

If we could identify the kind of talk that kills we would be one step closer to using words in the life-giving way God intends.

The following list of word-traps isn't exhaustive but it should help us to examine the kind of communication choices we make. Remember, a strict view of our own sins perfectly compliments a powerful experience of the healing power of the gospel.



Resentment Speech

When we harbor concerns they become deeply embedded resentments. Resentment speech flows from hearts that fail to address conflict biblically. If you get a wooden splinter in your finger, it is best to get it out right away. Embedded splinters get infected. Some infections kill; all are painful. When a splinter is removed quickly the wound heals quickly.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus commands us to reconcile conflicts quickly. He warns us that if we don't we will pay a high price (Matt. 5:21-26). Almost always, the price of resentment is broken relationships.

To avoid resentment, keep short accounts. If someone has hurt you, begin by committing that hurt to the Lord. Say with David, "I am poor and sorrowful" (Psalm 69:29) knowing that God cares for those who cast their cares on him (1 Pet. 5:7). Then decide whether your hurt couldn't better be covered over with love and forgiveness. "He who covers a transgression seeks love..." (Prov. 17:9).

Sometimes, a spirit of love and willingness to forgive are not enough to keep us from living with a burdened conscience. Major offenses need to be dealt with in the light. If true reconciliation is desired and pursued in a biblical way you can have good hope for healing.

Gossip Speech

One danger of communicating our hurts is that we sometimes talk to the wrong people. Misdirected communication can erode confidence; lack of confidentiality can destroy a relation-

ship. "Debate your case with your neighbor and do not disclose the secret to another; lest he who hears it expose your shame, and your reputation be ruined" (Prov. 25:9-10). "He who repeats a matter separates friends" (Prov. 17:9).

To avoid gossip speech observe the principles Jesus gives in Matthew 18:15-20. First, keep as small as possible the circle of those who know about an interpersonal conflict. Others should be brought into the matter on a strictly, "need-to-know basis." It can be appropriate to bring other people into the conflict provided you have a very constructive goal in mind in doing so (vv. 16-17) and that you commit to portraying the offender in the most charitable light possible.

Second, talk to the offender "in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal. 6:1) with a desire to win him or her over to the truth (Matt. 18:15).

Closed Speech

One of the sad realities of life after the fall is an unwillingness to open up our hearts. Like Adam and Eve we prefer to hide in the shadows of privacy over entering into relationships marred by the fall (Gen. 3:8-10). Like our first parents we try to cover our emotional private parts (v. 7); we put on a show that everything is okay. We come to church after having a family fight en route. Yet, when the first person we meet says, "Good morning how are you?" we answer, "Great! How are you?" The problem is we don't mean a word of it.

When our words conflict with the reality of our heart's condition, what

is it other than hypocrisy? Closed speech can also be an example of idolatry. We can think so highly of ourselves that we refuse to open ourselves up to the hurt (and blessing) that relationships can produce.

Obviously openness requires trust. But building trust requires assuming some level of risk. The stakes of that risk increase as trust develops and the relationship deepens.

Hasty Speech

The opposite of closed speech is hasty speech. Sometimes we speak before our hearts are right and ready.

In my grandfather's day water had to be coaxed out of the well-shaft by "priming the pump." Today, when you turn the knob on your outdoor faucet the hose instantly pours forth water. Our word-wells need to be primed with time and thought. "The mouth of fools pours forth foolishness" (Prov. 15:2; Cf. Prov. 29:20). God says "Let your speech always be seasoned with grace" (Col. 4:6). The best seasoning takes time to marinate. Likewise, godly communication takes time to marinate in the grace of God.

We engage in hasty speech when we speak before listening, thinking and controlling our emotions. Quick words are often harsh words. "Reckless (or thoughtless) words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." (Prov. 12:18; NIV)

Paul Tripp says that, "Many of our problems with words would be solved if we simply paused and asked ourselves how God would evaluate and respond to the present situation. [Instead, we let our] thoughts run

without challenging them. But if our interpretation of events is wrong, our words will not be right."

Lazy Speech

Not all ungodly speech looks dangerous. Sometimes it's so banal that it looks harmless—and that's the problem. Sometimes our speech becomes so trivial and repetitive that it can kill; like death by a thousand cuts.

Do we labor to converse about things that are substantive, eternally significant and interesting? Do we truly share meaningful hopes, fears, and desires?

Why can newly-acquainted people sometimes speak on a profound and personal level when those who have known each other longer struggle to maintain vibrant conversation? They don't simply have more to talk about. Typically they are putting real work into the conversation.

We need to spend time with each other learning how to communicate. We also need to use our time well. We don't necessarily need more talk; we need better talk. Communication requires boldness. It takes risking the possibility of rejection. True conversation is a two-way street which requires persistence. When conversations don't go well don't give up. Ask for God's help and keep talking.

Gospel Speech

Our speech habits can present a pretty dark picture. So grim is the situation that James can lament, "No man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison: (3:8).