

Ephesians 4:29 & Lord's Day 40 >> Every Word Encouraging

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If I asked for a show of hands for how many people have ever been hurt by someone else's words, I think it's safe to say that *everyone* here would raise their hands. Those of us who are older can probably think of multiple wounds we've received from the sharp arrows of others' words. But even the youngest here can relate: In surprise I spoke loudly at Jacob for something he did this past week, but he thought my raised voice meant I was angry; with big tears and short breaths, he turned away from me to snuggle with and hide by Monica. No one is immune to hurtful words. There is probably no cliché more wrong than *Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me*.

People have known for a long time that that saying is a lie. Written hundreds of years ago, the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us that the command to "not murder" (Ex 20:13) goes beyond not taking another person's life. When we – with the help of God – agree to live by the sixth commandment, we strive "not to belittle, insult, hate, or kill my neighbour – not by my thoughts, my words, my look, or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds..." (Lord's Day 40, Q&A 105). Human nature – too often my nature and your nature – is that we say nasty things about people, and probably think things that are even worse, regardless of whether or not they're even true. But this is not at all what it looks like to love our neighbours as ourselves (*cf.* Q&A 107).

So, what can we do about this? I suppose one option is to duct tape our mouths shut for the rest of our lives. It's extreme, yes, but it guarantees that we'll never again say something that hurts another person.

Or, perhaps the words of the apostle Paul are more helpful: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Eph 4:29). Here is a better direction in which to take our thoughts and words.

Smelling the Odours of the Text

Before we get to the good sorts of things we're expected to say as disciples of Jesus, I'd just like to point out how seriously Paul takes this problem of "unwholesome talk." This is the only place in the Bible where the original Greek word behind *unwholesome* is connected with talking; in other places it's used to describe spoiled or rotten food and the stench that goes with it.¹ Can you smell it?

It reminds me of an email someone forwarded to me about a scheme one person used to get revenge on another person...

¹ See the entry for σαρπός in Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 913, as well as Dale Cooper, *Ephesians: More Than We Can Ask or Imagine* (study guide; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2006), 66.

It was a terribly messy divorce: She very, very badly wanted the house; the judge gave it to him. After she packed her belongings in boxes and hired a moving company to bring it all to her new, much smaller place, she sat down for the last time at their beautiful dining room table by candlelight, put on some soft background music, and feasted on a pound of shrimp, a jar of caviar, and a bottle of Chardonnay. When she had finished, she went into each and every room and deposited a few half-eaten shrimp shells dipped in caviar into the hollow of the curtain rods! She then cleaned up the kitchen and left.

When the husband returned with his new girlfriend, all was bliss for the first few days. But then slowly, the house began to smell. They tried everything: cleaning, mopping, and airing the place out. Vents were checked for dead rodents, and carpets were steam cleaned. Air fresheners were hung everywhere. Exterminators were brought in. Then they replaced the carpets. Nothing worked. People stopped coming over to visit. The maid quit. Finally, they could not take the stench any longer and decided to move. A month later, even though they had cut their price in half, they could not find a buyer for their stinky house. Word got out, and eventually, even the local realtors refused to return their calls.

The ex-wife called the man, and asked how things were going. He told her the saga of the rotting house. She listened politely, and said that she missed her old home terribly, and would be willing to reduce her divorce settlement in exchange for getting the house back. Knowing his ex-wife had no idea how bad the smell really was, he agreed on a price that was about 1/10th of what the house had been worth, but only if she were to sign the papers that very day. She agreed, and within the hour his lawyers delivered the paperwork.

A week later, the man and his girlfriend stood smiling as they watched the moving company pack everything to take to their new home, including the curtain rods.²

Can you imagine the smell? – no, not just a smell, but a nightmarish stench! That’s how Paul describes the “unwholesome talk” that comes out of our mouths that tears other people down. It sure stinks, doesn’t it?

Now imagine your favourite smell. A survey going around Facebook asks for your five favourite smells; here are Monica’s favourite smells:

- (1) Swiss Army cologne for men,
- (2) popcorn,
- (3) warm homemade bread,
- (4) vanilla, and
- (5) freshly brewed coffee.

Can you imagine the smell? – no, the sweet fragrance making you smile or your mouth water! If words had an odour, *that’s* what saying helpful things that build each other up would smell like.

² I have not been able to confirm whether this story is actually true. A Google search finds variations of it on numerous websites.

That's what Paul commands us to do – to use our words to build each other up according to the needs. We are to be encouragers; we are to encourage.

This is what will be helpful, Paul says. And it will likely lead to even more helpfulness, which will involve effort on our part. You like to encourage someone who just had a baby or just came home from the hospital. The phone call is important. But so is a visit or a meal, which begins to cost us in time and money.

But it's this kind of encouragement – words complemented with actions – that will benefit people, Paul says. Where you read *benefit* in the verse, a more literal translation would be: "...that it may give *grace* to the hearers."³ Because God is gracious with us – saving us from our sin when we deserve to die and rot – we are called to let that grace overflow to others, particularly in our conversations. You could say that "the way to communicate Christlikeness is to reflect something of the character of Christ in our own lives..."⁴ This means that unless we accept God's offer to fill our lives with His grace, we won't be able to be as gracious with each other as we possibly can be. But with God's grace continuously at work in us, grace will overflow to others and be a great benefit.

This is not something we're allowed to leave for just a few people in our church to become really good at. No, "graciousness ought to mark the speech of every person maturing in Christ."⁵ The apostle Paul addresses the entire church of Ephesus and of Telkwa in his letter when he writes, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Implications

Larry Crabb wrote an entire book about encouragement that some of us read last summer when Ken Penner offered a counselling course here at Telkwa CRC. In it, he suggests that "in this [one] verse [in Ephesians], Paul introduces us to a solution for relational problems that is so radical, we stumble over its simplicity. ...Paul's words [tell us how] nothing less is required of us than that every word out of our mouths be consistent with the purpose of building up our listeners. We are permitted to utter nothing that compromises or interferes with that single, comprehensive objective."⁶ I repeat: "Every word out of our mouths [must] be consistent with the purpose of building up our listeners."

In our relationships, it's important to share what's going on inside of us as is appropriate. It's even more important to speak what builds others up in Christlikeness. Paul "instructs us to understand the fears and defences and needs of other people and to become committed, not to [just] sharing ourselves, but to sharing the Lord by ministering to those needs."⁷

³ Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 251.

⁴ Donald L. Bubna, *Building People Through a Caring Sharing Fellowship* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1978), 63. I am indebted to my mentor Bob Mitchell who lent me his copy of this book. See also Larry Crabb and Dan Allender, *Encouragement: The Key to Caring* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 58.

⁵ Cooper, 66. See also Snodgrass, 264.

⁶ Crabb, 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

Larry Crabb suggests that “all our purposes [in our words and actions] can be sorted into two categories: Either we *manipulate* for our own self-enhancement or self-protection, or we *minister* for the glory of God and the wellbeing of others.”⁸ The apostle Paul tells us that our manipulating needs to decrease while our ministering increases.

I remember clearly the illustration Larry Crabb gave in the video during the first session of the “Counselling by Encouragement” course: A father who was head of a large corporation repeatedly told his son – even on his deathbed – “Son, when you inherit the family business, I expect that you will ruin it.” That’s serious and painful manipulation: Perhaps the father was trying to use reverse psychology, hoping for the exact opposite to happen. Or, perhaps the father wished for no one else to run the business like he did so that people would forever see how invaluable he was; if his son succeeded, too, it might make the father look average.

The father’s words stung painfully, and

“when his father died, the man felt driven to work unreasonably long hours to prove his [father’s] prediction wrong. The pressure to avoid failure that relentlessly gnawed at him was quieted only by alcohol. Soon a serious drinking problem developed. His wife threatened to leave him. Finally he succumbed to ongoing depression for which he could find relief only in drugs. His life was devastated by the power of his father’s tongue.”⁹

Contrast that with a seminary student fearful of how well he’s doing in the academic world, wondering if he’s even going to make it to graduation, let alone becoming a pastor. The path is often dark and uncertain. And then a respected professor of worship and preaching comes along and says how he hears the seminarian speak God’s Word in a way that reminds him of a famous Christian author that the seminarian has admired for years. Now papers and sermons are written with more enthusiasm and hope; graduation is no longer the impossible pipe dream it sometimes felt like. In his words, the seminary professor ministered for the glory of God and the wellbeing of that seminary student. I empathize with the seminarian, largely because it was me at Regent College who benefited from this professor’s encouragement!

So now I ask myself and I ask you, *How are my words, how are your words regularly ministering for the glory of God and the wellbeing of others? How am I, how are you honouring God’s command to love one another by being an encourager?*

This goes way beyond mastering any encouragement techniques you can get in a self-help book. This is “a sensitivity to people and a confidence in God that [can] be nourished and demonstrated” each day of your life beginning right now.¹⁰ The *very first words out of your mouth* as you exit this sanctuary today will demonstrate whether you are listening to the apostle Paul’s words, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” Listen for it (or the lack thereof) in yourself and in others.

I admit, this is a daunting thing, making sure that “every [single] word out of our mouths [is] consistent with the purpose of building up our listeners.” Thankfully, we have a perfect

⁸ Ibid., 96.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Ibid., 80.

model to follow, namely Jesus Christ Himself. His example is recorded for us in the Gospels, and the implications explained in the rest of Scripture. We have a guide in Christ and in the Word.

We also receive nudges and help from Jesus' Holy Spirit. He seeks to cultivate our thoughts, our actions, our words so that they become more and more Christlike. He works in our hearts, helping us grow in loving our neighbours as ourselves, helping us be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly to them, protecting them from physical or spoken harm as much as we can, doing good even to our enemies (*cf.* Q&A 107).

And if the ears could smell, what a pleasing aroma our words will be as we live like this! Yes, we still live in an imperfect and sinful world; we will still raise our hands if asked whether someone's words have ever hurt us. But as we follow Jesus and are filled by His Holy Spirit, more hands than ever will shoot up in the air when we ask whether people are being encouragers and are being encouraged. And we'll all be listening to and obeying Paul's words, that we "do not let any unwholesome talk come out of [our] mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" to our words... And not just to *our* words, but, really, to *Christ* speaking His words of encouragement through us.

Prayer of confession and assurance

Hymn of response: "Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak" *Trinity Hymnal* 560

After the prayer and hymn, the congregation was given time to fill in encouragement cards to distribute following the service.