

“BAD TALK, GOOD TALK” (Ephesians 4:29)

This morning I want to talk to you about how we talk and the power of words. Perhaps you’ve heard the joke about the young man working in the produce department of a grocery store. A lady approached him and asked if she could buy half-a-head of lettuce. He kind of laughed at her and said, “We can’t sell you a half-of-head – you have to buy the whole head.” The lady persisted and the young man said, “If you would like me to, I will go and ask the manager.” She said she would and he walked to the manager’s office at the front of the store.

He found the manager and said, “You won't believe this, but there's an idiot lady back there who wants to know if she can buy half-a-head of lettuce.” He noticed the manager gesturing, and turned around to see the lady standing behind him. “And this nice lady,” he said, “was wondering if she could buy the other half.” After the lady had left the manager said, “That was the finest example of thinking on your feet I've ever seen! Where did you learn that?” He said, “I grew up in Grand Rapids, and if you know anything about Grand Rapids, you know that it's known for its great hockey teams and its ugly women.” The manager said, “My wife is from Grand Rapids!” Without missing a beat the young man said, “And which hockey team did she play for?”

All of us can point to a time, I’m sure, when our words got us into trouble. It would be nice to have the skills of the produce man to dig ourselves out of trouble, but once words leave the door of our lips it’s too late. The Bible has a great deal to say about how we talk, and Jesus indicated that what we say is a signal of what is going on inside us. He said, “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45).

Another reason our words are so important is because talking is the primary way we relate to each other. God made us relational beings and without communication there would be no relationships. Researchers estimate that we use about 16,000 words a day – some speak more than that and some less – but a lot of words come forth from our mouth and each word carries potential for good or harm. Proverbs 18:21 says, “The tongue has the power of life and death.” I’m sure all of you can remember a negative comment, even years ago, that has stuck with you to this day, and at the same time you remember a positive comment that made a huge difference.

We’ve been in Ephesians 4 for some time now and the basic theme of the chapter is living out our calling as believers – now that we’re born again and made a new creation, we are to fully be who God made us to be. In verses 17-24 the Apostle Paul tells us to put off our old self and our old way of life and put on our new self and live a new way of life.

In verses 25-32 he gets very practical about what this looks like and gives five negative behaviors we are to put off and five positive behaviors we are to put on. Last week we looked at the first three commands in verses 25-28... First, put off lying and put on truth; second, put off sinful anger and put on self-control; third, put off stealing and put on working with your hands. These three things mark us as people who have been transformed by Christ’s power.

Today we’re going to look focus on the fourth behavior and look at just one verse... Verse 29 which says, “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.”

One of the main differences that marks us as Christians is the way we talk. Let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouth. The word “unwholesome” or “corrupt” was used to describe fish or fruit that was rotten. The image is of something unpleasant and foul and disgusting. It’s like when you clean out your refrigerator and you find tucked in the back corner a carton of leftover food from a few weeks earlier that has turned into a science project. That’s the idea. Just as you would get rid moldy, contaminated food, now that you’re a Christian you should get rid of any kind of rotten speech coming out of your mouth.

We naturally think of unwholesome talk as swear words or foul, crude language – it is certainly that, and Paul will address this kind of talk in chapter 5, but in the context of verse 29 he’s talking about unwholesome talk in terms of relating to others – do our words bring death or bring life, do they tear down or build up? This verse applies directly to our relationship with each other in the body of Christ, but can also apply to how we talk to our spouse, to our kids, to our parents, to our classmates, to our co-workers – anyone with whom we have daily contact.

There are several examples of unwholesome talk, but let me give you three categories that are common to everyday life. The first category includes **words that tear down another person’s character and reputation**. This kind of character assassination takes place all the time the social media age where people choose sides politically or culturally, and if you’re on the wrong side you’re labeled as dangerous and evil, and your name is slandered. Before you have a chance to defend yourself, the damage has already been done. This is what the world does, but it’s not what Christians do.

There are less overt ways to verbally tear down someone’s character and reputation, and one of those is gossip. Anyone here a gossip? We all are to some degree – we love to talk about people – we love information and details about the personal lives of others – we love the power of knowing things that other people don’t know and then sharing that information with others. Proverbs 20:19 says, “**A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.**” How many times have you said something like, “I shouldn’t say this, but…” or “Don’t tell anyone else, but…” Those are signals that we should stop and assess what we’re about to say. Gossip about someone else, even innocent banter, can begin to erode someone’s reputation.

Closely related to gossip are rumors. Rumors are when we speculate about what others are doing and why they are doing it, and we casually pass our speculations on to others. It’s like the game where you whisper something into someone’s ear and then they whisper what you said into the next person’s ear, and by the time the message gets to the tenth person down the line it is completely different than the original message. Rumors are like that and very dangerous.

Whenever you’re tempted to say something about another person, it’s good to ask three questions: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? There would be a lot less gossip and rumors if we used those three questions before speaking.

Another category of unwholesome talk are **words that tear down another person’s trust in you**. Trust is the glue that holds relationships together and without trust you can’t have a true relationship. The most obvious kinds of words that destroy trust are lies – which we talked about last week in verse 25. Paul says, “**Put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor.**” Relationships cannot survive without truth, and God wants us to be straight-up in what we say to others. Josh McDowell stressed the importance of truth-telling this way, “**If you tell the truth all of the time, I can trust you all of the time. If you tell the truth some of the time, I can’t trust you any of the time.**”

Flattery is another way of breaking someone's trust in you – where you compliment someone insincerely in order to gain an advantage. Proverbs 29:5 says, “Whoever flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his feet.” Honoring someone is one thing, but flattery manipulates someone for our own purposes. If you find out someone was just trying to butter you up, you're not likely to put much trust in whatever else they have to say.

Boasting and bragging can also breed distrust over time. Proverbs 25:27 says, “It is not good to eat too much honey, nor is it honorable to seek one's own honor.” No one likes to be around someone who is always talking about themselves and saying things that inflate their ego. If someone finds out that you are stretching the truth to make yourself look good, it becomes difficult for them to take what you say at face value.

A third category of unwholesome words are **words that tear down the value of someone made in the image of God.** Every human being is a person made in the image of God, and when you when you attack someone with your words, you're attacking God. Imagine you're in the grocery store and someone says something derogatory to your child... “You dumb kid, watch where you're going!” It doesn't matter how big the other person is, you're ready to go at them because your kid is a part of you and you're protective of them. Every time you say something derogatory about someone God created and loves – that bears His image – it's a direct assault on God.

One obvious way to devalue someone is by ridicule and put-downs. All of you, I'm sure, can still remember something someone said to you on the playground about your appearance or your intelligence or your competence. We say, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me,” but we know that's not true. Negative words you hear early in life stick with you and can even influence the direction of your life.

Bill Glass, who was a prison chaplain for many years, once asked a large group of prisoners how many of them were told by their parents that one day they would end up in prison. Every hand went up. Proverbs 12:18 says, “Reckless words pierce like a sword.” I read one time about a suicide note left by a young woman that contained only two words, “He said.” Someone said something that brought this woman to the point of taking her own life. The tongue has the power of life and death.

Unwholesome talk has no place in the life of those who've been transformed by God's grace and love, and we are to put off any kind of talk that tears down another person. Instead, verse 29 says, we are to speak “only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” Doesn't that sound better? Imagine what churches would be like, what families would be like, what communities would be like if everyone did what this verse says. As Christians we are to lead the way.

This verse gives us three grids for filtering our words: Do my words build others up? Do my words fit with what others need? And are my words spoken with grace?

Let's look at the first grid: **Do my words build others up?** Notice Paul says, “*Only speak what is helpful for building others up.*” If it tears down, don't say it – speak only what builds up. One of the themes of chapter 4 is each member of the church using their gifts to build up other members so that that they can reach their full potential in Christ. As a church we are to look less and less like the world and more and more like Christ, and each of us has the responsibility to speak to one another in a healthy, life-giving way.

Words of encouragement would head the list of words that build up. Encouraging each other may be the single most important thing we do in relating to one another. The word encourage means “to put courage in.” There are many times in life when circumstances crush us and we’re tempted to give up, and someone comes alongside us at just the right time and speaks words that brings life to our souls – that lifts us up and gives us hope. Proverbs 12:25 says, “An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.” Galatians 6:2 says we are to bear one another’s burdens and help lighten their load.

Another way we build others up is speaking positive words of affirmation. Whether it’s at church, at home, or at work, everyone loves being in a positive atmosphere, and it motivates you to do your best. Mark Twain said, “I can live on a good compliment for two months.” A well-timed positive affirmation gives life – you savor it – you replay it in your mind – it inspires you and emboldens you to do what God has put you on earth to do.

When Abraham Lincoln died, five items were found in his pocket: a handkerchief, a penknife, a glasses case, a purse containing \$5, and some newspaper clippings. One of them was a speech highly praising Lincoln as one of the greatest men of all time. Today we consider Lincoln as one of our greatest presidents, but at the time of his death millions of people despised him, and Lincoln bore the wrath of their criticism. The words he kept in his pocket brought encouragement to stay the course and unify the nation.

Someone might say, “We shouldn’t depend on other people for encouragement – we should find it in the Lord alone.” It sounds very spiritual, but why then does the Bible command us “encourage one another?” We are the body of Christ on earth – we are His hands and feet – and He uses us to be His instruments of encouragement.

The problem is that we often fail to express encouragement – we think it, we appreciate someone, but we don’t take the time to actually tell them. We should always be looking for ways to verbalize encouragement to others – it could be through a card or a text, it could be through a gift – any way to build up someone in the body of Christ to be all that they can be. One little, positive comment may lift them up for two entire months.

A year or two ago I got a phone call out of the blue from someone who used to be in my youth group. He said, “Hey, this is Rick Beach, do you remember me?” I hadn’t seen or talked to Rick in over 30 years. I said, “Sure Rick, I remember you, what’s up?” He told me he was living in Spokane and was a volunteer youth pastor, and he just wanted to thank me for my influence in his life, and that he’s thought about me a lot over the years – especially since he started working with youth – and he just wanted me to know. Wow! I was good for two months following that call. Whenever I might get discouraged serving the Lord, I remember comments like this and it keeps me going.

Perhaps there’s someone the Lord is bringing to your mind that you need to track down and call. They influenced you in some way and you think about them a lot, but you’ve never let them know. Pick up the phone and give them a call, and you’ll bless them beyond words. While you’re at it, think of two or three people here in church that you could encourage this week – your words will mean more to them than you’ll ever know. The goal is that we use our words to build one another up to be like Christ.

The first grid for filtering our words is: Do my words build up others? The second grid in verse 29 is: **Do my words fit what others need?** “*But only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs.*” Another translation says, “As fits the occasion.” This means that we need to be students of other people and perceptive to what they need. Some are naturally good at this and others need to develop their skills of observation.

Just this week I heard about a lady years ago who went to her pastor to talk about sexual abuse she had suffered in the past, and as the lady poured her heart out, the pastor – rather than listening empathetically – jotted down notes and interrupted her with unnecessary questions. She left feeling angry and hurt because the pastor seemed emotionally disengaged with what she was saying.

The same thing happens men, when our wives share a problem or concern with us and our natural impulse is to what? Fix the problem. Sharla sometimes will preface her words by saying, “I’m not looking for a solution, at least not right now, what I’m looking for is for you just to listen.” The general principle of communication is, as Jesus said, to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. In other words: Adjust your emotions to match their emotions.

Speaking words that fit the occasion are especially important when speaking to someone who has lost a loved one and is grieving. Our naturally instinct is to comfort them and make them and us feel better, and in doing so we say things that are not comforting... “It’s not the end of the world, things will get better... God wanted them in heaven more than you wanted them here... you’re still young... you’ll have other babies... all things work together for good.” And you go, “That doesn’t help me – what I need most is your sympathy.”

Joseph Bayly was a writer who wrote extensively about suffering and grief after burying three of his sons. In one of his books he wrote: “I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God’s dealings of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly, he said things I know were true. I was unmoved except to wish he’d go away. He finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, and left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go.” Encouragement may not be as much what you say, but your willingness to be there in the moment of pain and to feel the hurt in the person’s life.

I’ve found one of the best things to say to a grieving person is, “I know how much he or she meant to you and I know you will miss him or her greatly. I will be praying for you. I’ll come by with dinner tonight.” Rather than give them answers, simply enter into their world and show them your love and support.

There are also times when it’s fitting to confront or correct someone. Because we don’t always see ourselves correctly, we need others in the body of Christ who will lovingly point out where we are going wrong. Proverbs 27:6 says, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted.” Having others speak correction to us can keep us from slipping into bad habits, and doing things that are inconsistent with our commitment to Christ.

The prophet Nathan confronted David over his adultery with Bathsheba. Nathan was a friend who cared deeply about David and his goal was not to humiliate David, but to bring about repentance and restoration. It’s clear that Nathan thought about his words before he went to David, and they were firm but loving, and they moved David to repentance.

In Galatians 2 the Apostle Paul confronted Peter for not acting in love towards Gentile believers out of fear of what Jews would think. It was a blind spot and Paul called him out on it because Peter’s actions were causing division in the body, and words of correction were needed on that occasion.

The main principle is that we are to be in tune with what people need, and then speak into their need words that will build up and restore.

The third grid for filtering our words is: **Are my words spoken with grace?** The last line of verse 29 says, *“that it may give grace to those who hear.”* Grace, as we’ve seen in Ephesians, is undeserved kindness. God demonstrated grace when He saved us, and we are to show the same grace to others.

Colossians 4:6 says, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt.” This is a good reminder that *how* we say something is just as important as *what* we say. The tone of our voice, the words we use, and even our body language should all communicate the same warmth and grace God showed to us.

Just as food tastes better with salt, so do our words. Words like “Please” and “Thank you” communicates respect, and shows that you are treating others like people and not things. Saying “I’m sorry” melts tension and paves the way for conversation.

A warm greeting lets people know they are significant. Having been a pastor for years, I know how important it is just to remember someone’s name. I know people who have made this their church home because someone remembered their name.

When we speak to others, we should remember the golden rule to do unto others what you would have them do unto you. Nobody likes to be talked to harshly or rudely. The tone we use when speaking makes a huge difference in how your words are received. When our kids were little, we encouraged them to use melody in their voice when they asked something. Instead of saying, “Mom, would you come here,” in a flat, demanding tone, you could say, “Mom, would you please come here,” with melodic tone. I remember one time when Matt didn’t get what he wanted, and he said, “But my words were melodic.” Tone matters.

Some people could care less about how they say something – what does it matter? It may not matter to the world, but if you’re saved by grace, your life should be exemplified by grace in the way you talk to others. As a community of believers we have the responsibility to speak words that build others up, that fit the need of the moment, and are filled with grace.

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, we remember grace and kindness the Lord showed to us – grace and kindness we did not deserve – but given to us freely through God’s love. Any transformation that takes place in our lives – including our words – only comes through Christ’s work in our hearts. We’re all a work in progress, but we have the power to change because of what Christ did for us on the cross. On the cross He took our old way of life, all of our sinful tendencies, all of our unwholesome words – He took them all upon Himself and died in our place in order to give us new life.

If you have put your trust in Christ and been born again to new life, we invite you to partake of the bread and the cup that remind us of Jesus’ death on our behalf. As we enter into communion the Lord would ask you to examine your heart and confess any sin that might be present. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.