

WORD POWER EPHESIANS 4:29

What do all of these statements have in common? “You’ll never amount to anything!” “You’re a loser!” “She’s an airhead!” “He’s full of himself!” “Why don’t you grow up?” “He’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer!” “She never does anything right!” “You’re pathetic!” “So and so’s a jerk!”

Those are all *derogatory* statements—statements that are intended to *demean* or *insult* the person about whom they are spoken, and statements all of which have the potential to do great harm.

Whoever coined the phrase, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me”, was either living in serious denial or was utterly clueless. The fact is, words have *enormous* power to hurt, and wounds inflicted by words often take a lot longer to heal than wounds from sticks and stones. Words can crush spirits and break hearts; they can destroy friendships and divide families and communities and nations. Words can oppress, embitter, condemn, shame, frighten, emotionally cripple, and make people feel worthless. Words can kill productivity and stifle creativity; they can ruin reputations, fuel hatred, incite violence, and start wars.

One of the most powerful, effective, and eloquent communicators in modern history was Adolf Hitler.

On the other hand, words can be an incredibly powerful force for good. Words can inspire the timid, encourage the fainthearted, and strengthen the weak. Words can lift burdens, dispel doubt, cure ignorance, build confidence, and shape self-esteem. Timely, constructive words can heal the deepest wounds, calm the most troubled souls, and soothe the most profound sorrows. They can liberate the oppressed, facilitate forgiveness, end hostility, and unite divided peoples.

Another one of the most powerful and effective communicators in modern history was Abraham Lincoln.

The book of Proverbs says, “*The tongue has the power of life and death*” (18:21). Indeed, the tongue can do so much good, or it can do so much harm. Which is why the way we use our tongues is of such great concern to our heavenly Father. Jesus said that we can discern the condition of a person’s heart by what comes out of his/her mouth. And Paul tells us that using our tongues for good, specifically to impart God’s grace, is an evidence that we belong to Christ.

He says this in **verse 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*” (ESV).

Paul’s admonition is very simple and very specific. Since the tongue has so much power for good or evil, we need to be extremely careful how we use it, for our language can either tear down or build up, and only one of those options is permitted. Tearing people down with our words is strictly prohibited. He says, “*Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths...*”

The word translated “*corrupting*” in this version was frequently used to refer to spoiled fish or rotten fruit. On that basis, it seems natural to conclude that Paul is referring to *foul* language or *vulgar* speech. But if you read ahead a few verses you will discover a specific prohibition for that kind of language. Ephesians 5:4 says, “*Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place...*” It is clear that Paul is referring to filthy and vulgar language in this verse, which means that he must be referring to something else in 4:29.

The word “*corrupting*” was also used to describe crumbling stones. And in light of the fact that Paul was contrasting this kind of negative speech with speech that “builds up”, it’s likely that Paul was referring to *destructive* language—words that tear people down.

That would include gossip, slander, spreading rumors, being critical, being judgmental, insults, put-downs, disparaging comments, condemnation, being condescending or patronizing, putting someone in a bad light, throwing someone under the bus, nagging and nitpicking. It certainly includes cursing someone or cussing someone out. It's *any* kind of language that demeans or belittles or tears a person down.

Typically, we learn how to use destructive language at an early age and many of us became proficient at it, using it frequently and habitually because we also learn, early on, how effective it is. We learn that we can get away with it. Well timed destructive words don't break bones, and they rarely break laws, but they can sure inflict deep wounds.

Of course, political candidates know this, too. They spend big bucks running negative ads, that are intended to convince voters that their opponent is incompetent, unethical, untrustworthy, and unfit for public office. And in this day of non-stop media coverage we get to witness the carnage in real time right before our eyes.

But we've all seen and experienced the devastating effects of destructive language much closer to home. A pastor of a prominent church in Salem just resigned this past week, citing verbal attacks as the reason. We have friends who are no longer part of our fellowship, or who are on the fringes of the fellowship, because they have been wounded by hurtful words; in some cases words that were not intended to be hurtful or words that were misinterpreted as hurtful. And in almost every one of the cases I know about, the damage was inflicted with surprising swiftness.

On March 26, 2000 a once magnificent structure, the Kingdome, home to the Mariners and the Seahawks; a structure that, for its time, was an engineering marvel; a structure that took four years to construct, was demolished in a matter of minutes because of some strategically placed and well-timed explosives.

In the same way, strategically placed, well-timed explosive words can demolish a person's self-esteem, reputation, honor, and influence with surprising swiftness. And that is the primary reason it is prohibited. God created every single person in His image, and every person, no matter how odious he/she might seem to us, is loved by God and is precious to Him. To attack that person is to attack his/her Creator. To dishonor or demean that person is to dishonor or demean his/her Creator.

But I believe there is another reason why we are prohibited from using destructive language. It is the very antithesis of God's nature, the very nature He imparted to us, when He made us alive in Christ. It is an evidence that we reverting back to our old nature—the nature that is in opposition to Christ. It's an evidence that nature is rearing its ugly head and operating in us once again.

Therefore, we need to renounce *every* kind of destructive language. Look what Paul says. "*Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths...*" It is never permitted and it is never appropriate for the child of God, no matter how cleverly it is disguised or how subtly or humorously it is delivered; no matter how many other people are doing it, no matter how much it is done to you, no matter how acceptable it is in our culture.

Some of us, I'm pretty sure, are in the habit of using destructive speech. Some of us participate in gossip, when we're with our closest friends, and we are so comfortable doing so, that we're not even aware that it's wrong, or that it is doing an incredible amount of damage.

Some of us say damaging things to our spouses or our children, when they push our buttons, and we are so accustomed to doing so, that our consciences don't even bother us about it. Some of us use disparaging language when we're talking about the president or the governor or politicians we don't agree with, and some of us think we have a right, maybe even a responsibility, to verbally bash them, because free speech trumps this commandment. But it doesn't.

There are no exceptions for using language that tears down. And that means if you are using that kind of language, you need to renounce it, repent of it, and then, with God's help, apply the second part of this verse. Paul says, *"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"* (ESV).

You might remember from verses 11-12 of this same chapter that God's purpose for His church is that we might be "built up". Verse 29 tells us one of the ways this is done. We are built up, we grow and become strong, solid, and mature through the timely, constructive words of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And just what *are* constructive words? First, let me tell you what they are not. Constructive words are not merely words that make people feel good or feel better about themselves. That's flattery, and flattery is like soft-soap; it's about 90% lye. And because of that flattery is actually destructive.

What is more, constructive words are not words that stroke or massage a person's ego. That's manipulation, which is dangerous and destructive.

Constructive words are always truthful, and always helpful. They are words that meet a person right where he is with the truth he needs to keep pressing on and moving forward.

Let me say it again. They meet a person right where he is—not where we *think* he should be, not where we'd *like* him to be, but where he *is*—and then giving him what he needs. It is helping a person who is stuck become unstuck. It is assisting a person who is paralyzed by fear or guilt or doubt or self-condemnation or whatever, to walk, to move forward, to climb, to overcome.

The Bible has a word for this kind of constructive language. It's called *encouragement*, and we are commanded numerous times in Scripture to encourage one another. In fact, so necessary and urgent is the need for encouragement that the writer of Hebrews says, **Verse 13**. *"But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness"* (Hebrews 3:13).

I'd like you to consider something for a moment. Every single person in this room is going through a situation or encountering something in which they need encouragement. Some are tired and worn out, and perhaps feel like giving up. Some are feeling alone or afraid. For some, God feels distant and unconcerned, and they're not sure how to connect with Him. Others are struggling with some nagging temptation and just can't seem to find victory. Some are stuck in a rut, and don't know how to get out. There are more than a few who are facing some distressing circumstances right now. All of us need encouragement, and some of us need it yesterday.

The word that is translated "*encourage*" in my version was a word used by the Greeks in a military context. It was used to describe the speech an officer made, when he wanted to rally the troops before going to battle. You talk about a job that requires extraordinary skill and wisdom. What do you say to people who are preparing to go out onto the battlefield and face the possibility of imminent injury or death?

What would *you* say?

I'd tell them who they were fighting for. I'd tell them how important this battle was and what could be accomplished with a victory. I'd tell them how valuable each and every one of them was to fulfilling that goal.

That's encouragement. It's helping someone to think clearly and correctly. It's providing hope, even when things look very bleak. It's imparting truth that assures, inspires, and empowers.

It's no different in the context of the Christian community. We are in a spiritual battle where each of us is a soldier of Christ. We are fighting to advance His kingdom and the stakes are the souls of men and women, boys and girls who are bound and imprisoned by the prince of darkness,

people who will either populate heaven or hell based on what they do with the truth about Jesus. And we are the ones who have that truth that can set them free, and the enemy is unleashing his fury at us, attempting to prevent us from giving them the truth. And sometimes we get injured by one of his fiery darts, and we feel discouraged and defeated and despondent, and we forget who we are and what we are all about, and we feel like quitting.

That's why we need encouragement. We need to be reminded that Jesus is Lord. That Jesus has already won the victory and is now sitting at the exalted place at the right hand of the throne of God. We need to be reminded that Jesus loves us, that Jesus cares, that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us, that nothing can ever snatch us from His or His Father's hands.

We need encouragement. Encouragement is meeting someone where he is with the truth he needs to keep pressing on and moving forward.

Of course, this passage presupposes that if we are going to do this, we need to know each other. We need to know what is going on in each other's lives. We need to know each other well enough that we know when something's wrong. We need to be tuned in enough that we know when someone is hurting or someone is struggling, and we need to care enough to address that hurt or that struggle, because this is God's way of strengthening us, healing us, and restoring us when we are discouraged.

But it also means that we love each other enough and have enough courage to say hard things, if necessary. Sometimes a word of encouragement involves confronting sin in a person's life; or warning a person who is heading down a path of destruction; or exposing a false teaching or a wrong perspective or a bad attitude. In such cases, the *truth* the person needs may be difficult for him/her to hear; it may not be received well or it may be misinterpreted. But we have an obligation to give that word in love nonetheless, because otherwise our brother or sister will be stuck or harmed.

As always Jesus is our example. He knew when to weep, and He knew when to crack a whip. He knew when to call someone "blessed", and He knew when to call someone a "hypocrite". But even in the latter circumstances, it was always what the person needed to get better, go deeper, and climb higher.

How important is it that we give consistent encouragement to each other? I submit to you that encouragement is absolutely essential—for all of us. So desperately do we need encouragement that the author repeats himself in order to stress the urgency of this matter. **Verse 13.** *"But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Hebrews 3:13).*

"Give to each other each day your daily encouragement". Don't procrastinate. Don't hold back. Don't be stingy. If the opportunity lends itself, encourage. If the opportunity doesn't lend itself, encourage anyway. In other words, make the opportunities, take the initiative, go out of your way if necessary, make it a priority. Don't rely on someone else to do it. Don't assume that it doesn't need to be done. Don't let differences or grievances prevent you from encouraging a person that needs it. And don't assume that when a person comes to your mind, that it's just coincidence. It may well be the Holy Spirit bringing that person to your attention, so you can respond to his/her need.

This is an urgent matter. And this is something that all of us are asked to do—not just the ones who have the gift of encouragement. All of us need to be involved in this ministry of encouragement. You know why? Because so many people need it. But the good thing is that it's usually not that difficult to give. It just requires thoughtfulness and sensitivity and wisdom.

The fact that wisdom is required is implicit in Paul's statement in Ephesians 4:29, when he says, *"...as fits the occasion..."* The timing of our encouragement is so important. Someone

wisely said, *“The real art of conversation is not only to say the right thing at the right time, but to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment”* (Dorothy Nevill).

There have been numerous times when I have said something that is true or right, but said it at the wrong time, or in the wrong way. And more often than not, it seems, those words backfired. They were received begrudgingly, or they weren't received at all.

We are commanded to tell the truth. But we are also commanded to be wise. A couple was going through a very difficult time with their children because of some poor parenting on their part. And in a tense moment they asked, “Do you think we're bad parents?” And I told them the truth. And my words affected them like that dynamite affected the Kingdom.

What I said might have been true, and perhaps they needed to hear it, but not in the heat of the moment; not at the time that I said it, and probably not in the way I said it.

Because words are so powerful, we have to rely on the Holy Spirit not only for the right words to say, but the timing in which to say them. After all, it *is* the Holy Spirit who wants to use our words to impart grace to those who hear them. Look at what Paul says at the end of **verse 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”* (ESV).

We impart God's grace when, through our words, people get to encounter the Lord and His truth, and be blessed by Him. That is *His* goal! He wants to use us to bless others.

May I ask you to do something? I'd like you to think of your brothers and sisters sitting in this room, or maybe someone who is not here today. There are some who are ill, and are sick of being ill. There are some who are very tired. Some are terribly lonely. Some are going through a tough time in their marriage or family. Some are feeling alienated from God or disappointed in God and are afraid to admit it, because they don't think anyone would understand. Some have been hurt and can't let go of it.

You know, it's easy to say to people who feel this way, “Hey, you shouldn't be feeling this way. Snap out of it!”, or, “If only you spent more time in the Word or prayed longer”, or “let me tell you what your problem is...”

Listen, chances are they don't need advice. They don't need to be scolded. They certainly don't need our pious platitudes.

They need someone who really cares, someone who's willing to listen (perhaps without even commenting), someone who's willing to bear their burdens along with them, someone who loves them like God does, and who can communicate God's love by speaking a timely word, or maybe just being there. They need to encounter Christ, and it's quite possible that God intends for them to encounter Him through *you*.

Our words are powerful! May God give fill us with His Spirit and His grace, so that we might be a blessing to everyone around us!

WORD POWER
EPHESIANS 4:29

MAIN IDEA: *Our words are to be exclusively constructive so those who hear them can grow in grace*

CONTRASTING KINDS OF SPEECH

DESTRUCTIVE WORDS

THE MEANING OF THE WORD

DESTRUCTIVE MANIFESTATIONS

A HEART ISSUE

CONSTRUCTIVE WORDS

THE MEANING OF THE WORD

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

IMPARTING GRACE

APPLICATION