

# THE POWER OF SPEECH

The Potent Force that  
Every Christian Is Called to  
Use Wisely!



R. Herbert

**The Power of**  
**SPEECH**

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# INTRODUCTION

Few things in life are as important as what we say and how we say it. Strangely, this is not commonly understood, and many people do not realize the potential power of their own words. But *what we say, rather than what we actually do*, is often the prime cause of how happy – or unhappy – we and those around us will be on a given day. Many “speak their minds” without any pause to think about the effects of what they say, but that does not mean they and others will not suffer as a result. Psychologists and sociologists know that failure to understand the positive and negative power of the spoken word can lead to ongoing frustration and misery in people’s lives, while those who use speech carefully often enrich and improve their own quality of life and that of those with whom they interact.

For the Christian, there are even more important reasons to carefully consider our speech. The Bible makes the dual power of speech – to hurt and to help – clear when it tells us that “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21 ESV). Jesus himself linked discipleship and speech together (Matthew 5:22, 33-37; etc.) and he left no doubt about the seriousness of the situation when he said “I tell you this, you must give an account on judgment day for every idle word you speak. The words you say will either acquit you or condemn you” (Matthew 12:36–37 NLT). We will be judged, Christ says, as much by what we said as what we did. And the apostle James says this even more graphically: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6). Misused, the power of speech can have terrible consequences. This is why King David wrote “I am determined not to sin in what I say” (Psalm 17:3 NLT), and why we must take the matter of our speech very seriously.

But the same power of speech that is so frequently misused can be used to benefit ourselves and others if we so choose. Many scriptures confirm this. For example, Proverbs tells us, poetically

but clearly, that “From the fruit of their mouth a person’s stomach is filled; with the harvest of their lips they are satisfied” (Proverbs 18:20) and “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Proverbs 25:11 ESV). That is why Luke tells us of Jesus: “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips” (Luke 4:22). It is also why the apostle Paul tells us that we too should “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Colossians 4:6 ESV). The word “answer” in this verse means more than simply to answer a question. The Greek word Paul used refers to ordinary conversation, indicating that everything a Christian says should be gracious and never crude or hurtful – always uplifting and never destructive.

In order to meet this goal, we must consciously think about our speech – how and why we say what we do in everyday life – and that is where this book comes in. *The Power of Speech* looks at some of the most important aspects of what we say – both negatively and positively – and will help you to avoid the misuse of the power of words and more effectively harness their positive potential. Our speech is, indeed, one of the greatest powers we are given to use in this life. As Christians we have the opportunity to use that power daily and the responsibility to use it for good!

# 1. TRUTH: THE ONLY FOUNDATION

We begin this book by looking at truth in speech because truth is the very foundation of every aspect of what we say. If we do not speak truthfully, then the power of our words is short-circuited, twisted, and ultimately used for evil and not for good.

Sadly, much of the modern world has rejected the nature of truth and believes that there are no absolutes, and that all truth is relative or subjective. Of course, some “truth” is subjective – if my wife and I are in our house I may say “It’s hot in here!” and my wife may say “I’m freezing!” Statements like these are obviously subjective and represent relative “truths,” but that does not mean absolute truths do not exist. The statement “the universe exists” is absolutely true, just as the statement “a hot stove can burn you” is an absolute truth. The Bible states absolute truths when it tells us that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16), that God is a “God of truth” (Isaiah 65:16 ESV, etc.), that “it is impossible for God to lie” (Hebrews 6:18), and that God commands us not to lie also (Leviticus 19:11).

Most Christians accept the absolute nature of such truth and God’s insistence that we walk in truth (2 John 1:4). Problems only arise when, through either weakness or lack of understanding, we lie and end up hurting ourselves or others. In this chapter, we will look at how we should handle the truth by examining the three areas covered by the old courtroom protocol of speaking “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

## **Speaking the Truth**

It is no coincidence that in our culture witnesses in courtroom cases are traditionally “sworn in” by having them promise to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” while placing their hand on a Bible. The Bible’s insistence on the evil of lying and the necessity for truth are indisputable. There are hundreds of scriptures which tell us in one way or another that every one of us

must “speak the truth to one another” (Zechariah 8:16 ESV) and “you shall not lie to one another” (Leviticus 19:11 ESV).

The Bible also makes it clear that not speaking the truth is not a small matter. First, because any practice of lying is inherently evil – as Jesus himself emphasized when he spoke of the devil as “a murderer from the beginning. He has always hated the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44 NLT). Notice how Jesus linked Satan’s murderous nature with his lies, as a practice of lying always has harmful repercussions.

It is possible, in fact, that throughout human history more harm has been done by lying than by any other sin. That may be why the book of Revelation flatly states that “everyone who loves and practices falsehood” will have no part in the kingdom of God (Revelation 22:15) and that “liars ...will be consigned to ... the second death” (Revelation 21:8). So there is ample reason to root out lying in our lives and to avoid untruth whenever possible. We must do this in a number of ways – for example:

1. We must say only what we know to be true: “So stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbors the truth” (Ephesians 4:25 NLT).
2. We must not speak one way and act another: “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” (1 John 1:6 ESV).
3. We must keep our word if at all possible when we have promised something: “The one who lives blamelessly ... keeps his word whatever the cost” (Psalm 15:4 CSB).
4. We must not speak differently to what we think: “evildoers, who speak in friendly ways with their neighbors while malice is in their hearts” (Psalm 28:3 CSB).

These few examples show that the simple principle of telling the truth can be applied in a number of ways, and we must all watch

our own lives carefully to see that we are in fact speaking what is true.

## **The Whole Truth?**

The next aspect of truth that we must consider is that of speaking the “whole truth.” It is possible, of course, to not lie in what we actually say, but to speak deceitfully by not giving all the facts necessary for a proper understanding of a situation. If we withhold information that shows the innocence of someone, for example, we essentially lie without even speaking. But this does not mean that we should always speak *all* the truth. Naturally, in a legal situation, if we give our word that we will tell the whole truth that is what we should do, but life is not a courtroom and voicing everything we know is not always necessary.

Some people become proud of the fact that they are “not afraid to speak their mind,” but this is all too often synonymous with not being concerned that they hurt others. The Bible tells us explicitly that “A fool brings out all his mind” (Proverbs 29:11 LSV) so “speaking our mind” is certainly not something of which we can be proud. If what we say needlessly discourages or hurts others, it is often better not to say it. Sometimes this is a matter of timing, and things that may be true may nevertheless be better left unsaid until a better time. We see Jesus himself applying this principle when he told his disciples “I still have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12 ESV).

Sometimes, telling *all* the truth we know may have unfortunate or even serious consequences – as in situations where someone is asked if they know the whereabouts of innocent individuals being hunted by those who want to harm them (as in World War II Nazi hunts for Jews in hiding). Most Christians can see the need for withholding known facts in situations like this, and there are biblical precedents for such behavior.

The story of the midwives protecting the newborn male Israelites in Egypt (Exodus 1:15–21) and the woman Rehab protecting the Israelite spies (Joshua 2:4–6; 6:17, 25) are two such cases which

involve people protecting others by saying less than they actually knew. But the clearest example is where God himself instructed the prophet Samuel to tell King Saul that he was going to Bethlehem to offer sacrifices and to omit the detail that he would anoint the young David as king while he was there (1 Samuel 16:1–5). Had Samuel told all the truth to Saul in this situation, his life may well have been endangered – as well as David’s. A similar situation is found in Jeremiah 38:24–27 where the prophet Jeremiah, although asked, does not repeat all the details of a conversation that could endanger him.

We must realize that some commandments are more important than others (Mark 12:28–31; etc.) and the command to protect others always overrides commandments regarding lesser issues. Sometimes that means we do not tell all we know. We see this careful withholding of information in the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. John’s Gospel tells us that prior to a religious festival in Jerusalem Jesus told his family members: “You go to the festival. I am not going up to this festival, because my time has not yet fully come” (John 7:8). However, a few verses later we read that “after his brothers had left for the festival, he went also, not publicly, but in secret” (John 7:10). The secrecy involved in Jesus’ actions shows that he may well have gone separately in order to protect himself and also his family members from the danger he knew he might bring on them; but John makes it clear that in order to protect them in this way it was necessary for Jesus not to tell them all the truth regarding his plans at that point.

While it is relatively easy to see the morality of withholding information in such cases, what about situations where lives are not endangered, but telling everything we know may cause unhappiness if not actual harm? We must be particularly careful in situations such as these, but as we will see later in this book, there are biblical examples that show it is sometimes not wrong to withhold part of the truth – without saying anything untrue – when all of the truth might be hurtful or distressing. In exactly this way, as parents we might not give our young children all the facts of a medical report

or what a doctor tells us regarding a child's illness. The Bible shows that this, of itself, is not lying.

## **Nothing But the Truth**

When we say we will tell “nothing but the truth,” we mean that what we say will be the truth without any addition or alteration. This is as important in Christian living as it is in any legal context. Unfortunately, it is a human tendency to embellish the details of situations – especially when the embellishment makes us look better in some way.

We have all heard jokes and stories of anglers describing a “huge” fish that they caught or almost caught – that somehow grows with every telling of the story – but we can be just as guilty of exaggeration in the way we describe situations in our lives. Any time we add to, alter, or exaggerate the facts regarding a situation we are just as guilty of lying as if we say something that is completely untrue.

The root of the Greek word that is often used in the New Testament for “lie” (*pseudomai*) carries the meaning of any type of falsehood. But it is frequently used of those who say and do things that give a false impression of themselves – those who exaggerate in order to claim to be something they are not. The root word is used, for example, of false prophets (Matthew 7:15), false teachers (2 Peter 2:1), false apostles (2 Corinthians 11:13), and even false Christs (Matthew 24:24).

Some may do this kind of thing intentionally (as in Psalm 50:19 CSB – “You ... harness your tongue for deceit”), but even if it is not consciously intentional – if we add to, exaggerate, or otherwise change the truth in any way in order to justify ourselves or to make ourselves look better than we really are – in essence we are acting as false Christians. On the other hand, if we think about and control what we say in order to be careful not to shade the facts, project untrue images, or mislead others, we use the power of speech wisely and righteously.

When we do this and we speak the truth in every way, we fulfill what the apostle Paul tells us in an important scripture that we will look at again later: “We will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church” (Ephesians 4:15 NLT). This is a vital lesson that every Christian must learn – if we are to grow more like Christ, we must make truth (as well as love), a deep and essential part of our speech and our lives.

## **2. RESTRAINT: THE ANGER ANTIDOTE**

If you were asked what the single most important aspect of speech is in today's society what would you say? For much of human history perhaps the answer "truth" would have been a good one. Today, however, though truth is just as important as it ever was, "restraint" might be a more appropriate answer.

### **Speech without Restraint**

Sadly, ours is an age in which restraint is becoming increasingly rare and anger is increasingly common. Each day brings news stories of uncontrolled and unleashed anger in the home, in the workplace, and in incidents of "road rage" and other forms of violent anger. Dozens of expressions refer to all this rage around us – from "blowups" to "meltdowns" – and the verbal and physical expression of anger has become so common in everyday life that it is almost an accepted fact of life.

Perhaps this is to be expected in societies where far greater stress is placed on not bottling up emotions and freely expressing them rather than on learning to control them – and this is especially true when it comes to restraint in what we say. The result is unbridled speech that regularly leads to broken families and relationships – and even to assaults and homicides. When the Bible tells us that "the tongue has the power of life and death" (Proverbs 18:21), it is not hyperbole.

The Bible has numerous stories illustrating this truth. In 1 Samuel 25 we read about the rich man Nabal whose lack of restraint was his downfall. When David, whose men had protected Nabal's servants, sent messengers to him asking for food, we are told Nabal (whose name means "fool") "hurled insults at them" (1 Samuel 25:14) or, as the New Living Translation has it "he screamed insults at them." Nabal's lack of verbal restraint was bad enough at this point, but when he later found that his wife, Abigail, had given food

to David and his men, Nabal became so overcome by his own unrestrained anger that “he had a stroke, and he lay paralyzed on his bed like a stone” (vs. 37 NLT).

Not all unrestrained anger leads to such dramatic consequences, of course, but the results of speech without restraint are almost never good – which is why Christ firmly instructed his followers “I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment ... anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matthew 5:22).

Here, Jesus was not speaking of simply experiencing the emotion of anger – which is not wrong in itself as the apostle Paul showed when he wrote “Be angry and do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26 CSB; etc.) or, as the NLT renders this verse, “don’t sin by letting anger control you.”

Rather, Jesus was speaking of unrestrained anger that leads to exactly the kind of verbal abuse – or worse – that we see so often today. When Jesus said “for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment” (Matthew 12:36 NKJV), the word “idle” is translated from the Greek word *argos* which can mean free from labor, lazy - not taking the effort to control.

### **Restraint: The Anger Antidote**

Even if, as Christians, we do not exhibit unrestrained anger to the degree Jesus spoke of, we are all responsible for controlling our anger and not letting it enter our speech – though most of us fail in this way on occasion. We all need to restrain our speech to some degree, and the Bible emphasizes this continually. Consider just a few of the scriptures from the Old Testament book of Proverbs that tell us this:

“When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent” (Proverbs 10:19 ESV).

“The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint ... Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues” (Proverbs 17:27–28).

“Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity” (Proverbs 21:23).

The importance of verbal restraint is made just as clear in the New Testament – for example, in the Epistle of James:

“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (James 1:19–20).

“Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless” (James 1:26).

So how do we restrain our speech? Because most of us speak with others daily, we can and should pray for help with this on a regular basis. As David wrote “Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalm 141:3), and that is a prayer we can all pray. But we also have the responsibility to do what we can in this regard, and there are a number of strategies – habits of restraint– that we can develop.

For instance, simply avoiding anger is a great deal better than trying to restrain it once it occurs. We can do this in many ways if we think about it. For example, consider what the book of Ecclesiastes tells us: “Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you – for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others” (Ecclesiastes 7:21–22).

Although our own situation may not be identical to what Ecclesiastes describes, the principle clearly applies to almost anyone. Sometimes we need to simply ignore things that would almost certainly arouse anger. Thinking of insults or other verbal

provocations as pits or traps to be avoided can often help us to defuse anger before it has a chance to flare. This may not be easy for some of us, but it is always possible.

If we do get involved in a verbal disagreement and feel anger rising, the old advice of counting to ten before answering can often give us time to remember the need for restraint. And we need to continually remind ourselves that when we do answer, we should do everything we can not to escalate the situation because “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1). This takes work. Notice that a “gentle answer” involves multiple words, whereas an answer that makes matters worse need only be a single word!

These examples of things we can do are all basic strategies, but in reality that is all it takes to utilize restraint. The problem is not that the solutions are basic, but that we do not utilize them often enough. Yet when we do, they are almost always effective – the smallest strategy can change the course of our conversations and steer us away from angry speech.

As James wrote: “When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go” (James 3:3–4).

James uses these analogies to describe the tongue, of course, because left alone our tongues will steer us; but if we consciously begin to utilize strategies of restraint, we will find that we can and do steer our tongues and words in the right direction and can begin to use their power for good.

Restraint in our speech then becomes like the line in the center of the highway – holding us back from potentially hurting ourselves and others. Sometimes it is the blanket we throw on the flames of anger, saving us from certain hurt. But we all need to utilize restraint by developing, remembering, and using strategies that suppress and control the anger that can so quickly get out of control in the human mind.

## Restraint in Speech

There are a number of biblical examples of people of God utilizing effective practices in order to restrain improper anger, but the life of King David provides some of the clearest.

We see David's restraint in speech on a number of occasions – perhaps never more clearly than the times that he had opportunity to speak to King Saul, who was hunting him to kill him. On those occasions it would have been understandable if David had launched into accusatory and condemning speech, but in each case David restrained himself when he spoke to Saul in these tense and doubtless highly emotionally charged situations (1 Samuel 24:11–15; 1 Samuel 26:18–20).

Even though he was doubtless angry at Saul's mistreatment of him, David gave honest assessments of the situation but remained respectful and did not descend into accusatory and condemning speech. Reading these stories in context and thinking about them, we can only be impressed by David's restraint in these situations. Like all of us, he failed on occasion, but the biblical stories show that he was remarkably successful in restraining his speech.

And David tells us how he did this: "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth while in the presence of the wicked." (Psalm 39:1). David realized that there were times when he needed to be particularly careful ("while in the presence of the wicked"), and his caution at these times sometimes went as far as "I remained utterly silent, not even saying anything good" (vs. 2). In most of the circumstances we find ourselves in we may not need to remain totally silent, but David's example is a powerful one of a person going to whatever lengths are necessary in order not to be drawn into unrestrained speech.

In doing this, David's behavior foreshadowed the restrained speech of Jesus himself. The apostle Peter tells us that Jesus – who had more right to condemn his enemies than any other person ever has had – did not do so: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23).

Jesus Christ was the only person who constantly controlled his speech to this degree – perfectly and without exception. We know that he became angry at times (John 2:13–17; etc.), but the Gospels make it clear that it was always without sin. Not only can we learn from his example, but we can also ask him to help us model our speech after the pattern of his. He chose his words carefully. He spoke kindly, but with authority, and with restraint – even when provoked. And Jesus promised a reward for those who followed his example. Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you” (Matthew 5:11). This blessing was promised in the context of persecution, but it presumes that we will not hit back. In that sense, the blessing applies also to our everyday interactions with others – if we can learn not to respond in kind, even if provoked, and if we maintain restraint in what we do and say. As James tells us: “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). It is only with this kind of restraint that we can use the power of speech for good and avoid the evils of unrestrained speech and action that fill much of today’s world.

### 3. PRAISE: THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE

The longest passage about speech in the whole Bible occurs in the book of James (James 3:2–12). It is a well-known section that we have already quoted from earlier in this book, but there is something interesting about what the apostle says in this passage that few people notice or think about.

Almost all of what James tells us in this section of Scripture has to do with the importance of controlling our tongues because of the potential evils of speech. This strong warning is a general one, however – it can apply to all aspects of speech. But James gives only one specific example in all that he tells us regarding speech rightly and wrongly used. That example is of praise and its opposite, cursing:

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. (James 3:9–10)

While many English Bible versions translate verse 10 as “out of the same mouth come *blessing* and cursing” (ESV, etc.), the Greek word rendered “blessing” is *eulogia* (from which we get our word “eulogy”) and in this instance is well translated as *praise* – as in the NIV and some other recent Bible versions.

#### **James’ Surprising Example**

It is interesting that of all the examples James could have given of the use and misuse of the power of speech, he did not choose truth and lies, humility and pride, or any of the other paired qualities of speech we look at in this book; but he chose praise and cursing. Clearly, James felt that these two opposite attributes were of great significance and perfectly illustrated his point.

Many people would presume that the opposite of giving praise is simply not giving praise, but James saw beneath this superficial view. He also alerts us to the fact that if we do not exercise an

attitude of praise, humans frequently go to the other extreme and their speech is soon marred by curses. But what exactly did James have in mind when he spoke about “cursing”?

Today, most people think of cursing as only referring to the use of profanity or “bad language,” but the Greek word *katara* that James uses has the primary meaning of wishing evil or ruin on something or someone. Sadly, this can be a natural human reaction when things do not go right. People freely disparage or curse not only other people, but even inanimate objects that do not work properly or that get in the person’s way.

Many people curse out of frustration with difficult situations. We see a sad example of this, of course, in the story of Peter’s denials at the time of Christ’s arrest: “those standing nearby came up to Peter. ‘Surely you are one of them,’ they said ... At that he began to curse and to swear to them, ‘I do not know the man!’” (Matthew 26:73–74 BSB). Even the well-intentioned Peter fell to cursing as well as denial in these circumstances.

The problem is especially common when people are verbally attacked or insulted and do not resist the natural temptation to retaliate. That is why Jesus taught “bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:28), and why we are told that he himself, “when he was insulted, he did not insult in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23 CSB). It is why the apostle Paul also tells us “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Romans 12:14 CSB).

Of course, cursing in the wider sense also includes the use of profane, obscene, or vulgar language. Such language has become almost universally common today, to the point that people hardly notice it anymore, but the Christian should remember that the Bible completely forbids all such speech. The apostle Paul tells us, for example, “No foul language should come from your mouth” (Ephesians 4:29 CSB) and “Obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks” (Ephesians 5:4 CSB). Note that Paul contrasts such use of language with thanksgiving which, as we will see, is a major element of praise.

Although it is not exactly cursing, using expressions such as “Oh my God!” or its substituted initials “OMG!” also clearly falls into the

category of speech that is the opposite of praising God. Sadly, some Christians never think about that – which is ironic considering that perhaps the most well-known section of the whole Old Testament, the Ten Commandments, and the most well-known section of the New Testament, the Lord’s Prayer, both show that the name of God should not be used lightly (Exodus 20:7) and should be “hallowed” or kept sacred (Matthew 6:9).

In all these ways, society around us continually uses curse-tainted speech that is the opposite of praise. We should not see these sins as worse than our own, of course, but the Bible is certainly clear that as Christians we should avoid use of such language and that our speech is to be very different.

## **Salty Speech**

The Christian approach to speech is not only to avoid what is bad, but also to utilize and be identified by what is good. It is just as important to realize the kind of speech behavior God wants to see in our lives as to recognize speech patterns that he condemns. So, what kind of speech does God’s word urge us to develop?

The answer is speech that is God-centered. This does not mean that our speech should always be “religious” or full of biblical sounding terms. Paul gives us the overall principle when he wrote “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6). In modern times the expression “salty speech” meant the kind of speech used by sailors (fairly or unfairly equated with bad language), and today “salty” has become a slang term used of someone who snaps back when they feel that they have been wronged; but Paul meant something entirely different from these things, of course!

To be “seasoned with salt,” in the sense that Paul used the expression, our speech does not need to be entirely religious any more than our food should be entirely salt; but an attitude of God-centeredness should be present in our words as much as possible – whatever we say. Salt was a biblical symbol of purity (2 Kings 2:18–22; etc.) and for our speech to be seasoned with salt means that it is pure throughout.

Salt has also been used since ancient times as a flavor enhancer (Job 6:6; Matthew 5:13; etc.) and is even added to sweet things to intensify their sweetness. In the same way, our words – if well chosen – can begin to approximate those of Jesus in his earthly life. As we saw in the Introduction, Luke tells us that “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips” (Luke 4:22), and one of the reasons Jesus’ speech made this impression was that it was never tainted by words that were not God-centered. His words were “salted” to such a perfect extent that it was noticeable to all those who heard him.

This brings us back to the point of this chapter – to what James said about our speech being full of praise rather than being marred by curses of any kind. But what exactly did James have in mind in talking about praise in this context?

## **The Nature of Praise**

When James tells us “Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing” (James 3:10), the word he used for praise, *eulogia* – as we have already seen – means good speech in the broader sense, but it can also mean praise in particular. We can praise anything that seems good, beautiful, or right, and in relation to God praise is the joyful expression of what he is and what he has done, as well as what he plans to do. Praise is thus closely intertwined with thanksgiving as we express appreciation for these things.

The Bible clearly shows this connection between praise and thanksgiving. For example, in the Old Testament we read “Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful to him, and bless his name” (Psalm 100:4 NKJV). In the same way, we read in the New Testament, “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to his name” (Hebrews 13:15 ESV). Both the Hebrew and Greek words used in these verses for “praise” convey the idea of declaring God’s greatness, nature and glory to others in an appreciative manner. Simply put, the biblical concept of praise means to express appreciation to God for his nature and blessings, either privately or to others.

A wonderful example of this can be found in the “song” Mary proclaims while carrying Jesus in her womb (Luke 1:46–55). In this song of praise Mary tells of how great God is and how greatly he has blessed not only her, but also the people of all nations.

But praise should always be a hallmark of our speech, whatever conditions we may face. In Acts 16:25, for example, we read of Paul and Silas praising God while imprisoned. Such speech cannot fail to be noticed by others and is a vibrant form of witness that we too can exhibit whenever we react with an attitude of positive praise-oriented speech rather than grumbling or even cursing when we have problems or things do not go well for us.

In good times or bad, an attitude of thankfulness and praise can and should be reflected in our speech continually (Psalm 104:33; 146:2). In fact, the book of Revelation tells us that at the end of this age, the people of God will rejoice in eternal praise, and that “there will no longer be any curse” (Revelation 22:3 CSB). Curses will finally and fully be replaced by praise!

## **4. HUMILITY: THE PRIDE DESTROYER**

Love, the apostle Paul tells us, does not boast and is not proud (1 Corinthians 13:4), yet humility is not always apparent in what we say even when we attempt to love others as we should. The need for humility in our speech is a result of the fact that ungodly pride lives in all of us and will frequently surface in our speech if we are not watchful to guard against it. There are many ways in which we can exhibit pride through what we say, but some are more obvious than others.

Perhaps the most common cause of verbalized pride comes from self-focus. We all know people whose main topic of conversation is themselves, and we may all be guilty of this on occasion. Matthew 12:34 tells us that the mouth speaks what is in the heart. Certainly the mouth is one of the greatest “heart monitors” and an accurate indicator of where our focus is. We cannot concentrate on our own selves without that fact becoming evident in our speech.

### **Speech without Humility**

The Bible shows this is especially true of boastful and self-elevating speech. When we read scriptures such as Jeremiah 9:23 “Don’t let the wise boast in their wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power, or the rich boast in their riches” (NLT), we may not feel such boasting applies to us as we have no great claim to fame. But the truth is anyone is capable of boastful speech.

That is why the psalm records God’s command “I say to the proud, ‘Do not boast,’” (Psalm 75:4 BSB). All we need to be capable of boasting is even a small amount of pride – and we all have that. Boasting need not involve talking about our own successes and accomplishments. Sometimes it is present in the fact that we talk mainly about ourselves or our families and friends – essentially giving the events of our lives more importance than those of others.

Naturally, there is nothing wrong with discussing our own lives with others when that is appropriate and especially when we are sharing things that are of truly mutual interest or concern. But when our mental focus is inward, our speech invariably prioritizes ourselves in some way – and we fail to hear and interact with the needs, concerns, and interests of others.

In worst-case situations, if we talk mainly about ourselves and our interests, we can cut ourselves off from close and meaningful relationships with others and lessen our ability to help them and to be a light to them.

But a preponderance of personal pronouns is not the only way pride manifests itself in what we say! The traits of self-justification and defensiveness, for example, can make interpersonal misunderstandings and disagreements far worse than they need be and can severely hinder our ability to interact with others in a Christian manner. Even impatience in our interaction with others can be made worse if we are not reminding ourselves of the importance of humility. These problems – and many more – all manifest themselves in our speech and must be actively countered in our lives.

## **Humility: The Pride Destroyer**

We can only counter the problem of pride in our speech through the application of its opposite: humility. We cannot simply decide that we will “not be proud” (as is often said, proud individuals can learn humility, but they will be proud of it!) or that we will not let pride taint our speech. That is because our own human natures do not naturally lean toward humility and – just like the other qualities we discuss in this book – we must make a conscious effort to utilize humility in our speech and in our lives. To do this we must understand what humility really is.

True humility is not the display of personal meekness or self-deprecation that many people think it is. In reality, humility is simply recognizing first that we are not the center of the universe – that God is – and second, that every person in the world is

absolutely as important and potentially interesting as we are! If we develop it, this attitude produces a mental pivot from self-focus to an outward focus on others.

As C. S. Lewis is famously said to have written (though his exact words were a little different): “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less.” This is a simple but profound truth. The more we think about others, put ourselves in others’ shoes, and look at a situation from their perspective, the less pride will enter our speech. Madeleine L'Engle put it this way: “Humility is throwing oneself away in complete concentration on something or someone else” for “One cannot be humble and aware of oneself at the same time.” The apostle Paul explained this attitude when he wrote:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.  
(Philippians 2:3–4)

This does not mean that we somehow negate ourselves as individuals or that we do not have our own interests in life. There is nothing wrong with a healthy self-concept that recognizes the good talents, traits, and opportunities that God has given us, but also sees them – and ourselves – in healthy perspective before God. That is the truth that David had in mind when he wrote:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.(Psalm 8:3–5)

When that is our approach to life, when God is the center of our universe and we see ourselves and everyone else as co-equal around him, we are exercising true humility and that will naturally be reflected in our speech.

## Humility-Powered Speech

Humility-powered speech is easy to recognize. It is obviously never arrogant, insolent, or pretentious. On the other hand, people who exhibit humility in their speech always show interest in others. They are happy to speak about themselves when appropriate, but not excessively, or in a comparative or self-elevating way. A person whose speech is based in humility is also always happy to give credit to others when that is appropriate (something that pride-driven people find difficult or nearly impossible to do).

The Bible contains many examples of speech that is guided and empowered by humility, and these are role models from which we can all learn. In the Old Testament we need only read the Psalms to find many of these examples – as when David wrote “I will boast in the Lord; the humble will hear and be glad. Proclaim the Lord’s greatness with me; let us exalt his name together” (Psalm 34:2–3 CSB). The more humble we are, the more natural it is to praise God and to “boast” of his character and deeds.

In the New Testament, few examples of humility-powered speech are clearer or more beautiful than the words of Mary, the mother of Jesus, when she was told that she would become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary’s song or statement of rejoicing at this news is an amazing picture of true humility that perfectly captures the principles we have discussed in this chapter. Consider her words:

My soul glorifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me ...  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
to Abraham and his descendants forever. (Luke 1:46–55)

Notice how Mary begins with a focus on God. She refers to her “humble state” as the servant of God, yet she acknowledges that all generations would call her blessed and that God had done “great things” for her. She reiterates her own humble situation and ends with thoughts of others – her own nation – and praise of God’s mercy.

In saying these things, Mary shows the perspective of true humility with her focus on God. While freely acknowledging her own lowliness, she also accepts and does not downplay the great things that would be accomplished through her – again with full credit to God. Notice also that in this instance – despite the fact that she is the focus of the annunciation – Mary talks just as much about the importance of the event for other individuals as she does for herself! When we consider these details, we realize what an amazing example this is of speech that is full of true humility.

Our own everyday speech might rarely be so spiritually focused and Mary’s situation was obviously a unique one. But the principles we have talked about in this chapter still apply here. When our inner focus is on God and on others as much as on ourselves, our speech will always show humility. We may have to actively work to maintain that kind of focus in our own lives – to make it a learned habit – but it is the one thing that will always displace pride and prideful speech. Indeed, if we are serious about really controlling our speech and using its power in a positive manner, we should always remember the truth emphasized by the theologian John R.W. Stott – that pride is our greatest enemy, and humility is our greatest friend.

## 5. Respect: Holding Society Together

It is hard to overestimate the importance of the aspect of speech that we will consider in this chapter. Ultimately, respect is the glue that holds individuals and society together – and when it is not present, this causes society to fracture dangerously. We see proof of this every day in the world around us. The absence of respect for parents, spouses, and for others in general – especially for authority figures – has rendered many parts of society increasingly dysfunctional in recent years and has led to an ongoing litany of broken relationships, interpersonal abuses, and crimes.

Every Christian needs to pay particular attention to this phenomenon and to what the Bible tells us regarding the basis and the need for respect in all aspects of life.

### **The Foundation of Respect**

The biblical foundation for respect for others is found in the first chapter of Genesis – in the Bible’s first mention of human beings:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26–27)

These words have long been understood as the very basis of all human dignity, equality, and worth (see also Genesis 9:6), but it is interesting that in their original context they carried even more meaning.

In the ancient biblical world, the statement that all humans are created in God’s image would have been seen as revolutionary. The only things that were believed to bear the image of the gods were

the kings of the ancient societies – who were believed to be the chosen representatives of the gods – and the idols that represented the gods in their temples. While God’s words in Genesis thus conveyed a sense of rulership being given to all humans (as Genesis 1:26 clearly shows), they also had a fascinating further implication.

The Hebrew word *selem* meaning “image” that was used in the expression “God created mankind in his own image” is often translated “idol” in the Bible. While God forbade his people to make idols that represented him, he nevertheless made humans as images of himself. We must understand why. The idols that were placed in temples were not usually thought of as the actual gods, rather they were understood as depictions that *represented* the gods and that functioned on their behalf. When the Bible tells us that humans were made in God’s image, it is stressing the awesome potential that God was giving all humans as his representatives and appointed rulers of the earth. That is why the Psalmist could write:

Lord, our Lord ... what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands. (Psalm 8:1, 4–6)

This understanding of the divinely granted position of humankind is the basis for the biblical teaching on respect in the Old and New Testaments alike. It is the basis of the apostle Peter’s plain words that we should “Show proper respect to *everyone*” (1 Peter 2:17). If we respect God, we must respect all who are created in his image.

## **Cracks in the Foundation**

But humans themselves have short-circuited the respect God intended for all people by accepting two spiritually flawed concepts which the Christian must work to reject in his or her own life. These flawed concepts are that others must be worthy of respect to

be respected, and that others must give respect to receive it. We will look briefly at both of these errors in thinking.

Respect and honor are virtually identical concepts in the Bible – both English words are often used to translate the same underlying Hebrew and Greek words. So when the Bible commands us, for example, “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12), it is the same as saying “Respect your father and mother.” In commands like these we are never told to respect our parents if they are worthy of respect – the command is binding on us whether they are “sinners or saints,” respectable or not. And the same is true of the respect we are told to give *all* people, as we saw in 1 Peter 2:17.

In the same way, what Peter wrote clearly tells us that we must respect others whether they give us respect or not. A good biblical example of this principle is seen in the stories of how, when King Saul became jealous of David and attempted to kill him, on two different occasions David had the chance to kill Saul but did not and spoke to him respectfully – regardless of the fact that Saul devalued him and was intent on his death (1 Samuel 24 and 26). Today, by contrast, it is not uncommon for people to attack, injure and even kill others because they felt someone “did not show them respect.”

Because of these two faulty ways of thinking, it is so easy for respect to evaporate in our society. If we believe we need only respect those who deserve respect and who show respect to us, we will not be left with many we feel we need to respect, and the underlying glue that holds society together disappears quickly. We need to reject these two common errors if we are to show respect to others as God, in his wisdom, tells us we should.

## **Applying Respect**

So far, we have only looked at the blanket statement by the apostle Peter that we should show respect to everyone, but the Bible breaks this principle down into specific instruction in numerous areas of human interaction.

The Scriptures tell us, for example, that we should show respect to those in authority (Romans 13:1), to parents (Ephesians 6:1–2),

employers (Ephesians 6:5), employees (Ephesians 6:9), and many others. It is important to understand that every class of people we are told to respect is, in turn, told to respect those commanded to respect them. In other words, *respect should always work in two directions*. For instance, wives are to show respect to their husbands (Ephesians 5:33 “the wife must respect her husband”) and husbands are to show respect to their wives (1 Peter 3:7 “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect”).

These and other commands reinforce the general principle that we are to show respect to all. As the apostle Paul also says: “Give to everyone what you owe them ... if respect, then respect” (Romans 13:7). This does not mean that we owe respect only to some, but that we owe and should give everyone respect.

It can be helpful in this regard to think about the fact that we owe respect to all people based not on what they are or do, but for their God-given potential. In that sense, we must learn to see others more as God sees them. Consider the Old Testament story of Gideon. Gideon was evidently a man who lived in virtual hiding from the enemy (Judges 6:11); who was naturally fearful (Judges 6:23); and who needed considerable encouragement to fight (Judges 6:36–40) – someone we would hardly think of as a hero.

Yet when the angel of God appeared to Gideon, he spoke to him with respect and greeted him by saying: “The LORD is with you, *mighty warrior*” (Judges 6:12). This example is all the more powerful because the Bible shows the “angel of the LORD” was actually the Lord himself (Judges 6:14 and following verses). God knew Gideon’s weakness and faults, yet the Lord addressed him according to his potential – just as he did many Old Testament prophets, Peter after his denial (John 21:15–17), and Paul when he appeared to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–6). God clearly expects us to keep people’s potential in mind when we interact with them, just as he does.

So what are some of the ways that we can treat everyone with respect based on their God-given potential? We most often show respect or disrespect not through our actions – which may remain

totally neutral – but in what we say to others and how we say it. As such, it is vital that the Christian understand the effects of this important area of speech.

## **The Many Dimensions of Respect**

Respect is one area in which our words often speak louder than our actions. We show some level of respect or disrespect in almost everything we say to others. Consider the following random situational examples.

1. Do we speak one way to some people and another way to others? We should not, as James 2:1-13 teaches. That is a principle Albert Einstein wisely followed when he said: “I speak to everyone in the same way, whether he is the garbage man or the president of the university.”

2. Do we teach our children respectful speech? As evangelist Billy Graham noted: “A child who is allowed to be disrespectful to his parents will not have true respect for anyone,” and this is just as true in speech as it is in actions.

3. Do we remember that respectful speech sometimes means *not* speaking? Sometimes we need to show respect by simply listening to what others have to say, especially if their point of view is different from ours.

4. Do we disrespect others by expressing harsh criticism of a group or category of people? We may not agree with the teachings of other religions, for example, but this does not mean we need not show respect to the followers of other faiths.

5. Do we use disrespectful words when speaking to, or about, others? This is a more serious problem than many people realize. Jesus himself said: “anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be

in danger of the fire of hell” (Matthew 5:22). This warning does not only apply to the use of certain words – it is a warning against any words that are used to disrespect and devalue others.

6. Do we keep in mind the subtleties of the language we use in our everyday speech? For example, the expression “Whatever!” can often be a thinly veiled “I don’t care what you think!” that signals lack of respect even when disrespectful words are not used.

7. Do we use irony and other speech forms carefully and respectfully? If it is used carefully, sarcasm, for example, can be effective in helping people understand things (Jesus and Paul both used sarcasm in this way), but such speech can easily be misused and hurt more than it helps.

Seeing how these few examples might apply in our own lives might take a little thought on our part, but it requires even more thought and watchfulness to avoid the dozens of other ways we can fail to show proper respect in our speech – whether in person, in our correspondence with others, or on social media. However, letting our speech always be respectful is worth the effort this kind of thought requires. And we are not left to do these things on our own strength alone. If we do our part, God will answer the psalmist’s prayer that should be our prayer also: “Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalm 141:3).

## 6. THANKFULNESS: THE “NO COMPLAINTS” DEPARTMENT

It would be nice if we only had to consider thankfulness in this chapter and we could just stress the need for expressing gratitude in our speech. Unfortunately, we must also look at gratitude’s “evil twin” – *unthankfulness* – and its frequent manifestations in not appreciating what we have and complaining about what we do not have. But examining all of these human responses to what we have or don’t have can help us better understand our Christian responsibilities in this important area of speech.

### **Complaints, Complaints, Complaints**

It has been said that after having a good time, the next thing people like to do most is to complain. Despite the probable exaggeration of this saying, it is certainly true that complaining is a very common phenomenon that seems to be tied to the human condition. According to the Bible, the first complainer was Adam who, after he and Eve disobeyed God’s command not to take from the forbidden tree, complained that “It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it” (Genesis 3:12 NLT) – which is clearly a complaint as much as it was an excuse.

Many biblical stories record people’s complaints. Job, of course, although he did not sin at first (Job 1:22; 2:10), was eventually worn down by his terrible trials and began to complain to and against God (Job 7:11; 21:4; etc.). Moses complained to God (Exodus 5:22–23), and Miriam and Aaron complained against Moses (Numbers 12:1–2) and were punished for it. David’s psalms record numerous complaints to God (Psalm 13; etc.), as do many verses in the prophetic books.

But there is a clear difference in these stories between those who complained *to* God and those who complained *about* God or others. God does not deny us the right to complain to him – as David clearly showed us when he wrote “I pour out my complaints before

him and tell him all my troubles” (Psalm 142:2 NLT). But complaining about God or others can be problematic. Even righteous Job had to eventually repent of this (Job 42:5–6).

In the New Testament, the Greek word that is translated “complainer” (*mempsimoiros*) means “one who complains about his fate” or “one who is discontented with his lot in life.” It suggests a selfish focus on one’s own desires above all else – as we see in what Jude says “These people are grumblers and *complainers*, living only to satisfy their desires” (Jude 1:16 NLT).

As a result, believers are told not to complain bitterly. Paul tells us, for example: “Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine as lights in the world (Philippians 2:14–15 BSB). If we read these verses carefully, we see the great importance Paul is placing on this.

Complaining speech not only erodes our witness to others, but also leads to a great many problems in our own lives. It can lead to arguing and fighting, as Paul says, because ultimately complaints come from unfulfilled desires, which result in feelings of envy and eventual conflict, just as James also tells us (James 4:1). So, complaining speech can signal deeper problems and is itself often a rejection of God’s wisdom and control of our lives. As such it is vital that we avoid this kind of negative complaining in our speech.

## **Ingratitude: The Most Common Sin**

Even if we do not actively complain about things we do not have or about problems in our lives, we may be guilty of ingratitude by simply not expressing thanks when we should. It is sometimes said that ingratitude is both the least recognized yet the most common sin – and there may be a great deal of truth in that observation.

Ingratitude has certainly filled human history, and it is frequently decried throughout the word of God. In the Old Testament we find an excellent example in the story of the royal “cup-bearer” who was imprisoned with Joseph and who Joseph helped – but who immediately forgot his helper when he was freed

and had opportunity to help Joseph in return (Genesis 40:23). Likewise in the book of Judges, we are told that the whole nation of Israel “failed to show any loyalty to the family of Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) in spite of all the good things he had done for them” (Judges 8:35).

In the New Testament, we have only to look at the well-known story of how Christ healed ten lepers and only one of the ten returned to thank him (Luke 17:11–19). We may read that story and think that Jesus was surprised by this lack of gratitude, but it is more likely that he was teaching a lesson by pointing out the fact that only one in ten individuals who were helped – even to this miraculous degree – expressed gratitude for what they received.

This situation is clear in the writings of the apostle Paul. Looking back in time, Paul wrote of humans: “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God *nor gave thanks to him ...*” (Romans 1:21, emphasis added). Looking forward in time, the apostle predicted it would only get worse. Writing to his co-worker Timothy, Paul stressed that a time would come when: “People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, *ungrateful...*” (2 Timothy 3:2, emphasis added).

We have only to look around us to see that we live in such an age as Paul described; but while we may not be able to change the world around us, we can individually come to better see the importance of gratitude and to more fully make it part of ourselves.

## **Turning Ingratitude Around**

How do we begin to turn around the natural human tendency to complain about what we don’t have and to be unappreciative of what we have been given? There are several things we can and must do.

First we must get gratitude itself in perspective. Gratitude has been defined as “a thankful appreciation for what an individual receives, whether tangible or intangible” (*Harvard Medical School Health Newsletter*). While the Bible helps us to understand that

God gives all of us the capacity for such gratitude, modern psychology helps us to see that appreciation is nevertheless not innate – it is a learned behavior. Gratitude is something we must develop just as we must learn to walk, talk, swim, drive, or to do many other things. We learn thankfulness through the example of others, by instruction, and by focusing on what it means that we have received something. But some people do not learn gratitude early or well – and that is something we should be aware of. Most people think they are appreciative, but as we will see, what we say is the best indicator or whether this is true or not.

Next, we must begin to see that everything we have is a gift that has been given to us and that not everyone has. The apostle James wrote that “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father ...” (James 1:17), and we should remind ourselves of this fact frequently. Seeing everything we have as a gift from God is vital in helping us not to feel unappreciative. We may not have many things that others have, but when we are continually aware of what we have been given, we begin to realize how much we have and we begin to develop a more thankful attitude.

But true gratitude is more than experiencing and expressing thankfulness only occasionally, when we are particularly aware of some blessing. We must learn to make appreciation an ongoing and constant way of thought by developing what we might call a “gratitude reflex” whenever we receive something or think about what we already have. This involves both motivation and practice on our part, but it is surprising how quickly a gratitude reflex can be formed or further developed if we try.

Finally, we must learn to connect feelings of appreciation with the *expression* of gratitude. It has been said that no one is truly thankful for what they do not give thanks for. But although they may see the things they have been given – both tangible and intangible – some people don’t learn to verbalize thanks to others for what they do for them, or to the One who ultimately gives us everything. We need to do both, of course, and expressions of gratitude need to replace the expressions of complaint that are more naturally part of everyone’s speech.

## Living Thanks and Giving Thanks

A thankful life will always be expressed in thank-filled speech, and the two cannot be separated. That means we become more aware of what other people do for us and give us – including intangible gifts such as time – as well as what they add to our lives by simply being themselves, and we make a point of thanking them. It means that we become increasingly appreciative and express thanks to God for the life and health we have, for every necessity, and for every added blessing.

The apostle Paul shows us that expressing thanks to God is just as important as asking him for our needs, and that we should: “not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with *thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6 ESV, emphasis added). Paul clearly saw the need to offer thanksgiving along with our requests – a principle he reinforced in saying that our attitude of prayer should be one of: “giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20 ESV).

Paul expands our understanding of the need to give thanks in his letter to the Colossian Christians by saying “*And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all ... giving thanks ...*” (Colossians 3:17). We may feel appreciative and express thankfulness when we receive new blessings – especially if they are “major” ones – but gratitude at that level can miss much of what Paul was really talking about and what God intends in our lives.

Notice that Paul does not say “Give thanks when you receive something” but “give thanks *whatever you do.*” In other words, he tells us that gratitude should be a part of every aspect of our lives – that we should make thankfulness a part of living, breathing, eating, talking: a part of whatever we do and who we are. If we begin to do this, we will find that we more deeply experience and express gratitude. Only then do we fully honor the One who has given us everything and who calls us to a life of living and giving thanks. As Psalms so eloquently puts it, God tells us: “The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me” (Psalms 50:23 ESV).

## **7. ENCOURAGEMENT: THE POWER OF UPLIFTING WORDS**

The Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. contains many fascinating historical documents. Among them are the personal effects Abraham Lincoln had with him on the night he was assassinated. One of those items is a well-worn newspaper clipping that had obviously been carried for some time and which celebrated Lincoln's accomplishments as president. The clipping contains the statement: "Abe Lincoln is one of the greatest statesmen of all time." It may seem amazing to us that a man as great as Lincoln needed this kind of positive reinforcement in his life, but the apostle Paul needed encouragement at times (Philippians 2:19; etc.), and the truth is we all need encouragement from time to time. Thankfully, encouragement is free and easy to give, but few give it and many pour out only its opposite – criticism.

Proverbs 12:18 (GNT) tells us, "Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword, but wisely spoken words can heal." Proverbs 15:4 similarly says, "Kind words bring life, but cruel words crush your spirit" (GNT). Every Christian must search their own words and seek to replace the negative criticism that comes to our lips so easily with more positive criticism – and even more frequently with encouragement. To do this effectively, however, we must first understand the proper use and misuse of criticism.

### **The Two Sides of the Critical Coin**

The difference between positive and negative criticism is, of course, the way in which the message is conveyed: whether it is given with no thought for the feelings and dignity of the other person, or with care and a desire to help them. Unfortunately, negative criticism is so much more common that when we think of the word criticism, this is almost always what comes to mind.

Negative criticism has been described as the easiest job in the world – it requires no training, and the work is not difficult to perform – but it is equally true that this kind of criticism is the least rewarding and potentially most damaging of all the uses of speech. We only need consider a few scriptures to see this. The book of Psalms tells us, for example, how damaging yet easy to fall into criticism is: “Like a sharpened razor ... You love any words that destroy, you treacherous tongue!” (Psalm 52:2, 4 CSB).

Finding fault and dwelling on imperfections in others rarely changes them and more often results in anger, defensiveness, depression, estrangement and in some cases, even suicide. While positive words may be difficult to remember, negative criticism can be hard to forget. We need only watch the daily news to see cases of young and even older people who tragically ended their lives because of peer criticism and ridicule, especially on social media. While these cases may be extreme, they show the very real misery and psychological injury that excessive criticism can cause. That is why the Bible condemns heartless criticism as frequently and firmly as it does.

Many also fail to realize how we not only hurt others, but we also hurt ourselves through negative and destructive fault-finding. Unchecked criticism of others almost always leads to further negative speech and actions that have repercussions on speaker and hearer alike – as we see in the story of Miriam and Aaron’s criticism and resulting spoken resentment against Moses:

Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses because he had married a Cushite woman. They said, “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Hasn’t he spoken through us, too?” But the LORD heard them ... And the LORD said to them ... why were you not afraid to criticize my servant Moses? (Numbers 12:1–2 NLT)

Notice how the criticism leveled by Moses’ siblings quickly grew into open resentment and near rebellion. As a result, Miriam – apparently the main instigator – was punished for this (Numbers

12:10). We may not see immediate and obvious punishment in our own lives in quite the same way if we indulge in harmful criticism, but the New Testament shows we become guilty of wrongful behaviour nonetheless:

Don't speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God's law. But your job is to obey the law, not to judge ... what right do you have to judge your neighbor? (James 4:11–12 NLT).

Another aspect of criticism that we should understand is that of gossip. We may not always connect the two, but gossip is simply criticism done anonymously, though it may sometimes be spoken to the person involved in an attempt to hurt them. We see an example of this in the life of Jesus when the Jewish leaders told him “We are not illegitimate children” (John 8:41), showing the underlying gossip that had persisted for years since Mary became pregnant with Jesus before she and Joseph were living as man and wife. By contrast, the psalms tell us that only the individual “who does not slander with his tongue, who does not harm his friend or discredit his neighbor” (Psalm 15:3 CSB) may enter God's presence. Negative criticism has no part in the Christian's life – whether spoken directly to someone or spoken to others.

## **The Christian and Criticism**

On the other hand, although every Christian should strive to avoid *negative* criticism of others, *positive* or constructive criticism is an important part of life that should not be underestimated. There is nothing wrong with explaining a problem to others, though some shy away from doing this. However, as parents, or friends, or perhaps as supervisors or employers, most of us have a responsibility to offer guidance in the form of constructive criticism from time to time.

There is certainly nothing wrong with this. Proverbs tells us “The wounds of a friend are faithful, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Proverbs 27:6 BSB), and Jesus himself tried to help many of the religious people of his day by constructively criticizing their ongoing errors. Offering correction with the best interest of the other person at heart is what the apostle Paul had in mind when he encouraged others to “correct ... and encourage” (2 Timothy 4:2) and when he wrote that we should always “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15 NLT).

Wherever possible this means we offer encouragement – even if it is only the verbalization of our concern for the other person – along with criticism, no matter how well-meaning we feel the correction we are giving may be. This is what is often called the “feedback sandwich” – which is ideally two parts encouragement with some necessary criticism in the middle!

When offered this way, constructive criticism is right and healthy, as are certain forms of speech which may help people see things they need to understand. Irony and sarcasm, for example, are not always bad. The Bible frequently uses both, and Jesus and Paul each used sarcasm effectively when they felt it was necessary to convey a point (for example, Matthew 12:3–5; 1 Corinthians 4:8–10) – but like any form of criticism, these kinds of speech must be used with caution. It is our job as Christians to always use them carefully, wisely, and with love.

A final aspect of criticism that every Christian should keep in mind is our responsibility to accept and work with criticism when it is aimed at us – whether it is carefully given in love or not. The book of Proverbs tells us “If you listen to constructive criticism, you will be at home among the wise. If you reject discipline, you only harm yourself; but if you listen to correction, you grow in understanding” (Proverbs 15:31–33 NLT). It is part of our Christian calling and witness that we listen to and respond humbly to criticism when it comes to us. Even if we feel the criticism we receive is unfounded, that does not give us the right to ignore it or not be responsive to the fact someone is trying to communicate with us.

## **Encouragement: Priceless but Free**

But if the Christian has a responsibility to offer only constructive and helpful criticism, how much more do we need to be givers of actual encouragement. Psychologists know that encouragement is a vital part of child development and adult health alike. Encouragement helps us all in the development of proper self-esteem, confidence, motivation, and happiness.

Additionally, encouragement helps us to persevere, overcome difficulties, and succeed in fulfilling goals and aspirations. From a Christian perspective this is a vital function of encouragement – that we fulfill our God-given responsibilities and opportunities – so it is perhaps not surprising that the Bible places so much emphasis on our responsibility to use speech to encourage each other. In fact, the Scriptures are full of commands to encourage others and examples of individuals doing this – doubtless because God himself is a God of encouragement (Acts 9:31; Romans 15:5 ESV; etc.). He encourages us, just as much as he urges us to encourage others.

For every scripture that speaks about criticism in the Bible, there are probably ten that speak of being encouraged and the need to encourage others –but the apostle Paul is the New Testament’s “Encourager in Chief.” He has more to say about encouragement than any other biblical writer and reading some of his epistles – like his letter to the Philippians – can be among the most encouraging things we can do. Despite – or perhaps because of – the many things he suffered, Paul continually hammers away at the need to encourage each other. Notice just a few examples: “give encouragement” (Romans 12:8); “encourage one another” (2 Corinthians 13:11); “encourage one another” (1 Thessalonians 4:18); “encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11); “encourage the disheartened” (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Paul knew that everyone needs encouragement, but encouragement is not only the gift that everyone needs, but it is also the gift that we all can give. There are dozens of ways we can do this. Sometimes it may be helping someone who is overwhelmed,

sending a quick email to someone who doesn't have a lot of friends, or a get-well card to a sick neighbor, or even just a smile offered to a stranger who looks worried. But the greatest encouragement will always be that which is spoken – words that are given in love and which carry the power of speech to connect, to communicate, and to show concern.

The power of the spoken word is seldom so clearly seen as it is with words of encouragement or their opposite. Positive or negative words have the power to encourage or discourage, build up the spirit or tear it down. It is every Christian's responsibility – and God-given opportunity – to use that power wisely.

## 8. WITNESS: COMMISSION TO SPEAK

*“... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8)

Jesus' final words before his ascension, as recorded in the book of Acts, make it clear that his followers were commissioned to serve as witnesses of his life, death, and resurrection – and the significance of these events for all people. This does not mean Christians today are called as witnesses in only a legal sense – testifying that these things actually occurred – but also that we are called to convey the good news about Jesus Christ and his message.

Fulfilling Christ's commission to be a witness by speaking on his behalf is certainly one of the most significant uses of the power of speech and one of the greatest ways we can help people, but it is not a responsibility that should be taken lightly. When Jesus gave his disciples this great commission, they had already studied with him for some three years, they had heard the gospel explained and expounded by Jesus himself, and they were well prepared to convey the message that had been given to them.

The point for us today is that we too need to be prepared if we are to properly fulfill the commission of witness. Sometimes, although with good intentions, people who are new to the truth do not convey the gospel message properly because they do not yet fully understand it. The New Testament story of how Priscilla and Aquila had to instruct the enthusiastic but not completely prepared Apollos is a perfect example of this fact.

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native Alexandrian, an eloquent man who was competent in the use of the Scriptures, arrived in Ephesus. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately about Jesus, although he knew only John's baptism. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. After

Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately. (Acts 18:24–28 CSB)

This is why Paul impressed on the young Timothy the importance of “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15 ESV) and why it is important that we understand the essential aspects of the gospel before we attempt to share it. On the other hand, we do not need to wait until we have achieved “perfect” understanding before we begin to witness to the gospel – we are all (or should be) growing continually in knowledge (2 Peter 3:18), so no one has “perfect” understanding.

In the same way, we should never feel that our own lives and behavior are not perfect enough to tell others the good news of salvation. We should always be careful not to speak hypocritically – saying one thing and doing another – but Jesus nowhere said his followers must be perfect to serve as his witnesses – in fact, our own imperfection and Christ’s perfection is part of the gospel message we are called to share.

So Jesus’ command “let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16) does not mean that we must be spiritually perfect for our actions and behavior to influence others for good, and it certainly does not mean that if we are imperfect, we are unworthy to witness verbally.

## **Witnessing with Words**

You have doubtless heard the saying “preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words” but while that thought may be well-intentioned it can be a misleading idea. Our lives certainly should witness to the work of Christ's Spirit in us, but unless others know we are Christians we may only appear as “good people” to them. This is why the apostle Peter could write:

Wives ... submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. (1 Peter 3:1-2)

In situations like the one Peter describes, the unconverted people know that their mates are Christians. In any case, what he says and Jesus' stress that our lives should be lights do not negate the fact that complete evangelism takes place only when the message of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is conveyed.

We see this fact continually in the Scriptures, but nowhere more clearly than in the writings of Paul. The apostle tells us, for example: "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Romans 10:17). Paul also stresses: "It is written: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak" (2 Corinthians 4:13). A final example from Paul's writing undeniably shows the necessity of proclaiming rather than simply living the gospel: "just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak" (1 Thessalonians 2:4 ESV).

While it is true that actions sometimes speak louder than words, in other situations words are our best option – or even the only way we can convey the gospel. So we should let our light shine in words as well as in actions. The act of witnessing is not only about the message of the gospel, but it is also about how that message is conveyed.

## **Witnessing with Wisdom**

While it is not wrong to share the gospel with others in whatever setting we may find ourselves, it is usually better that it is not done indiscriminately. The book of Ecclesiastes tells us there is a time to be silent and a time to speak (Ecclesiastes 3:7), and that certainly applies to Christian witness. Jesus talked about the principle of not giving sacred or spiritual things to those who are obviously going to reject them (Matthew 7:6) and it is clear that he often did not

preach to people when he had opportunity to do so (Matthew 5:1; Luke 5:16; John 11:53–54; etc.). It is better to choose the time, place, and opportunity to share the gospel carefully rather than to feel that if we are simply around people, we should be witnessing to them.

A related principle to keep in mind is that it is preferable, whenever possible, to use a natural conversational opportunity to talk to others about Christ rather than to suddenly accost them with religious statements or questions. Extreme examples of this (such as “Repent or you will go to hell” or “Have you given your heart to the Lord?”) frequently arouse hostility in people and doom the effort to introduce them to the gospel. The apostle Peter doubtless had this fact in mind when he wrote: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).

Here, Peter places the emphasis on letting the unconverted person be the initiator of the discussion, and while that is not always necessary, it is certainly an ideal situation. And, of course, answering with respect – as Peter urges us – precludes berating people about sin or the kind of “in your face” presentation of the truth of salvation that many well-intentioned believers participate in.

Reading how Jesus guided his conversation with people – such as the woman at the well in Samaria (John 4:4–26) – can teach us a great deal about how we should present the truth to others. We can also lead conversations toward the point where others will ask questions. In any case, a great many natural opportunities arise in everyday conversation. For example, to a coworker offering condolences when they heard we had lost a relative we can say “Thank you, but as a Christian I believe that just as Jesus was resurrected, so my relative will be – so I do not grieve as many people do who do not have this hope.” That kind of statement gives a totally natural opening for a conversation about the gospel if the other person seems interested. In the same way we can bring up

some aspect of our beliefs when discussing books, activities, or in dozens of other ways.

Yet we should not feel under any kind of pressure to try to bring people to Christ quickly. The book of Acts gives us a good example of that fact when it records an important conversation between Paul and the Jewish king, Agrippa:

Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.” (Acts 26:28 –29)

In saying this, Paul showed that he felt no urgency to bring Agrippa and others to Christ – just a desire for that outcome, however long it might take.

## **Witnessing with Joy**

Our efforts at evangelizing may never be as successful as those of Paul, or someone in our own day like Billy Graham; but God still expects us to do our part. And this should be a labor of love that is not driven by feelings of guilt or desperation.

Ultimately, we cannot convert people – only God can do that. In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul tells us: “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Nevertheless, despite the pervasive spiritual blindness, God frequently chooses to empower our efforts when we desire to help others to come to the light. We are all called to share what we have been given, and the truth of the gospel is certainly the most valuable gift that we can share.

This can be done in dozens of ways, so it is always possible to find a way that works well for our own situation and the circumstances around us. Apart from simply sharing the gospel verbally when that is appropriate, we can invite people to an

outreach event or a service at our church, or give them a book about Christianity and offer to discuss it. We can mention a website that teaches the Bible and that we have found helpful. We can start a social media account and use that as a venue to spread the word. The possibilities are nearly endless, so we should never feel we lack opportunity to witness with words as well as through our actions.

Just as the Son of God is a “faithful witness” for God (Revelation 1:5), so we are commissioned to witness for him: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21), and we are sent, above all, as witnesses. Witnessing is an inherent and essential part of being a Christian and one of the most worthwhile opportunities we have to use the God-given power of speech. If it is done with care, witnessing can be successful, and it can be done not only with joy on our part, but also in the eyes of God (Luke 15:7).

# CONCLUSION

Throughout this book we have continually stressed the negative and positive aspects of the power of speech, but there is so much more that could be said regarding speech and how we as Christians use it. In fact, this book could easily have been made twice as long and still all the possibilities would not have been covered!

Do we, for example, ever use speech in order to manipulate people, or do we only use our words for the benefit of others as much as for ourselves? What about flattery – which both the Old Testament and New Testament condemn? The difference between flattery and encouragement can sometimes be small – it depends not so much on the words used as whether we seek to help another or to get something from them – and whether, as the apostle Paul tells us, “we speak, not to please people, but rather God, who examines our hearts” (1 Thessalonians 2:4 CSB).

We have not been able to consider many such questions, but what we have done in the preceding pages is to examine some of the most important overall aspects of speech to see how they can be used both negatively and positively – applying the power of speech for wrong or for good uses. This potential for the good and evil use of speech is something we must never overlook. It is the basis for the words of Jesus himself – who told the outwardly religious people of his day:

the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. (Matthew 12:34–35)

Those words were the context for Christ’s powerful reminder that:

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matthew 12:36–37 ESV)

But as we have seen throughout this book, what we say need not hurt us or others. For every potential negative use of the power of speech, there is an equal or greater potential for its use for good – as a source and a cause of guidance, support, and encouragement. Paul emphasized this in writing “Don’t use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them” (Ephesians 4:29 NLT).

Our speech can also be a powerful witness for our beliefs and way of life – just as we saw that Luke tells us of Jesus: “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips” (Luke 4:22). This should, indeed, be the goal of every Christian – and it is one that we can attain if we continually choose to use only the positive power of speech!

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