

Each Word A Gift!

Ephesians 4:29

Imagine this scene: It's dinnertime, and you call your family in to be seated at the table. They each sit down at their regular places, and you begin to serve their plates. The menu is really nothing fancy—just something you kind of threw together—decomposing meat, rotting vegetables and moldy bread—all washed down with sour milk. The combined stench overwhelms everyone sitting at the table. Can you imagine ever serving your family such a scrumptious feast? No, of course not.

Now imagine yourself walking into your school or your place of employment, or even into your church's worship service, with a great big bag of rancid garbage. As you pass other people, you reach into that bag and pull out handfuls of putrid, rotting, decaying garbage, and you toss it onto those people. Can you imagine ever doing anything like that?

You may say, "No, of course not! How terrible to even suggest such a thing!" And yet I would like to suggest that that is the very thing many of us are engaged in every day of our lives. "Surely not, Pastor! Are you suggesting that I would serve my family rotting food for dinner, or that I would throw garbage on other people?" While we may never do such a thing literally, in a figurative way we may do that all the time, in the form of the words that we say—the parent who constantly criticizes a child; the husband who verbally abuses his wife; the employer who constantly finds fault with his employees, rarely expressing appreciation; the wife who nags her husband; or that guy who is never satisfied with anything anyone else does. They're all guilty of spreading garbage around on everyone they meet. Are *you* guilty of such a thing?

In 2005, an Algerian man named Ahmed Salhi, 24, was found guilty of breaching immigration regulations. He was sentenced to a nine-month house arrest with his Italian wife in northern Italy. But after only one week he went back to court and begged to be taken into custody because he said he could no longer bear her nagging! He said he would rather be behind bars! He said: "I need some peace." The court agreed, and he was jailed for the rest of his sentence. I read that story, and I wonder if anyone has ever been willing to do anything—even go to jail—to escape my unkind words? A good question for all of us, I suspect!

Let's review for a moment. Remember that Paul has been drawing a comparison between the way we used to be before we met Christ, and the way we should be now. He says, "You used to be this way; now be this way instead." *"Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"* (Ephesians 4:22b-24).

He is emphasizing the change that should occur in the life of any believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. There are no exceptions here. Not one of us is exempt. What he says to one of us, he says to all of us. These are areas of our lives that every one of us should examine, and re-examine, to make sure that we are living according to the teaching of Scripture. And we've seen several of them already. Beginning in verse 25, Paul outlines for us the various areas of transformation that occur when Christ comes in. First, we stop speaking falsehoods, and begin to tell the truth. **Verse 26** tells us that we deal with unresolved anger instead of harboring it in our hearts, and in **verse 27** we learn that the transformed believer refuses to give Satan a beachhead from which he can advance his attacks in our lives. Then **verse 28** tells us that we are transformed from takers into givers when Christ takes charge of our lives.

But now in **verse 29**, we learn once again that the words we say are very, very important. As followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are to stop using destructive words, and begin using constructive words. Look at what Paul wrote: *“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”* We might look at that verse and think to ourselves, “Well, that verse doesn't apply to me, because I don't curse and swear.” But this verse is talking about much, much more than swearing or using obscene language. We might get a good sense of what this means by looking at the ways it is translated in various versions:

“Watch the way you talk.” (The Message); *“You must let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth.”* (The NET Bible); *“No rotten talk should come from your mouth.”* (HCSB); *“Do not use harmful words.”* (GNB); *“Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth”* (KJV)

It doesn't have to be what our society or any other considers obscene. It refers to anything we might say that would harm someone else. Take a closer look at the word Paul used for “unwholesome,” or “corrupt.” It means anything decayed, putrid, or rotten. It was used to refer to rotting fruit or vegetables, or to describe decomposing fish. It includes the stench that would fill your nose should you suddenly come upon a big pile of rotting garbage. And here Paul uses that kind of word to refer to the things we say. “Make sure no garbage comes out of your mouth.” There's one other possible meaning of the word, but we will come back to it in a few moments.

When the Scriptures are opened to us like this, we begin to realize that we can have a “garbage mouth” without using four-letter words or telling off-color jokes. We are dumping garbage on others when we are critical of their motives, even though we do not know all the facts. We are serving decaying meat to others when we judge them unfairly without knowing the entire story. We are dispensing rotten vegetables when we crush their dreams with an unkind word without thinking too much about how it will sound or who will be hurt. And we are doling out

decomposing garbage whenever our behavior is unkind and hurts or embarrasses others. No, that is not the way we are to be! We did not learn that from Christ!

For example, can you imagine this scene? The disciples come to Jesus after a very long day. The crowds have followed them out into the countryside and it is approaching mealtime. They say to Jesus, "Send them away, so they can get something to eat." Jesus tells them, "You give them something." And the disciples say, "Well, here is a little boy, but all he has is just a little bread and a little fish." Can you imagine Jesus looking down at that little boy with scorn and contempt and saying, "Is that all you can come up with? Don't waste my time!" Or what about the woman at the well? How about the woman caught in adultery? Or the father whose son was possessed by demons that threw the boy into the fire? Can you imagine, in any of those situations, Jesus acting with contempt or scorn towards them, or using language that would belittle them? No, that's not what Jesus would do at all. So when we are acting like that, we know we are not acting like Jesus. We know we did not learn that from Him.

Where does it come from? The Scriptures make it clear that what comes through the mouth originated first in the heart. The mouth and the heart are connected! J. Vernon McGee wrote in his commentary on Ephesians that "What is in the well of the heart will come up through the bucket of the mouth." This is the way Jesus put it when He was speaking to the Pharisees: *You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.*³⁵ *The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.*³⁶ *But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.*³⁷ *For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.* (Matthew 12:34-37)

Someone has traced the word "mouth" through the book of Romans and made some remarkable discoveries about how Christ makes a difference in a man's speech. We find in Romans 3:13-14 a vivid description of the sinner's mouth: *Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.* But when he trusts Christ, everything changes. Romans 10:9-10 reads, *That if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*

We read in Romans 3:19 that the mouth of the sinner is silenced before God. *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.* But as a believer, his mouth is opened in praise to God. Romans 15:6 reads, *So that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul tells us three things about the speech of the Christian.

1 Paul says first of all in Ephesians 4:29 that we are to say *“only what is helpful for building others up....”* Remember that I said there was one other possible meaning of the word translated “unwholesome” or “corrupt”? It was used to refer to a decaying animal carcass or rotting vegetable matter. But it was also used to refer to stones that crumble. That is important, because if we consider that possible translation, then we see that what Paul could be saying to us is that the follower of Christ should always be involved in building others up through what he says, not tearing them down. Do your words build others up or tear them down?

Proverbs 12:18 (NASB) reads, *“There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”* Sometimes we use words that pierce like a sword on purpose to intentionally inflict hurt on others. And we would certainly agree that those are unwholesome words. I wonder how many times we stab others with our words and don’t even think anything of it. But we really need to think about how our words might hurt others, even if that is not our intention. Our words are a lot like toothpaste that’s been squeezed from the tube – once they’re out, there is no way to put them back.

Pay very close attention to this. When Paul used the word translated “building” or “edifying” he used a word which meant to build a house. Do you see why that is important? This verse certainly has application in our daily lives, but nowhere is it more appropriate than in our homes, and in the house of God. We should always be concerned with how we can spiritually benefit others by what we do or say—especially when we are home with our families, and when we are in worship with fellow believers.

2 Paul also tells us that our words should be appropriate, that our words should be the kind that builds others up *“according to their needs.”* One version reads that we should only say what *“fits the occasion,”* while another says that our words should be *“according to the need of the moment.”* Proverbs 25:11 reads that *“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.”* In other words, it is appropriate for what the other person needs at that moment in time. There may be a time for correction, but not in front of others. There may be a time for encouragement, and there may be a time for discipline. It takes wisdom to know the difference.

Life can be very hard sometimes. It doesn’t really matter who you are, how old you are, or how you fill up your time. Life can be very hard. And while it is true that it can be hard for us, we need to realize that life can be very hard for that other guy, too. We Christians of all people should be most sensitive to the needs of other people. He or she may be going through some

things in life that we don't know anything about, and the right word, at just the right time, may be just the thing needed to turn life around. None of us fully realizes the power our words can have if directed at the right person at the right time. They can turn a person's life in one direction nor the other.

In his book *The Weight of Your Words* Joseph Stowell tells this story:

My junior high school had scheduled its annual operatic production. Talented students were quick to try out for the various parts. I was not so certain of my abilities and had decided that singing in an operetta wasn't really for me.

Then Mrs. Wilson, my music teacher, asked me to try out. It was not a coveted role, but it did have three solos. I am certain that my audition was only mediocre. But Mrs. Wilson reacted as if she had just heard a choir of heavenly angels. "Oh, that was just beautiful. It was perfect. You are just right for the role. You will do it, won't you?" I accepted.

When the time came for the next year's operetta, most of the students who had played the leads the year before had graduated. And Mrs. Wilson had transferred to another school. In her place was a rather imposing figure who had an excellent singing voice and a sound knowledge of music theory.

As tryouts began, I was ready. I felt confident that my talent was just what the operetta needed. With approximately 150 of my peers assembled, I knew everything would go well. But if I live for an eternity I will never forget the words spoken on that day. When my audition was completed, the teacher asked, "Who told you you could sing?"

The timid youth of a year earlier was suddenly reborn. I was totally destroyed. Harsh words are bad enough under any circumstances. To a young idealistic boy, they can be devastating. From the time those six words were stated, it took eight years and coaxing of my fiancé before my voice was raised in song again.

That is a negative example, of course, but it demonstrates how important our words are. Scripture says that our talk should only be that which is useful for building others up, according to their needs of the moment.

3 But Paul also says that our speech should be gracious. The end of verse 29 reads in the NIV, "*that it may benefit those who listen.*" But listen to the magnificent words of the King James Version: "*that it may minister grace unto the hearers.*" Think about that just a moment. The Scripture says that we are to **only** speak what will minister grace to those who hear it. Then think about the things you say in the course of a day. Do those words "minister

grace” to others apply to you? What about that word “only”? If you cut out everything except the words that fit that qualification, how quiet would your day be?

Let’s expand our understanding of the phrase here by looking at a few other translations. One reads, “*that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.*” Encouraging others is one very good way to minister grace. Another translation reads that if you say only what others need, the things that will help them grow stronger, “*then what you say will do good to those who listen to you.*” One paraphrase puts it this way: “*Say only what helps, each word a gift.*”

How do we accomplish that? We can read in Proverbs 16:24 that “*Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.*” Does that describe the way you speak to others? There are some who say, “Well, I was thinking it, so I might as well say it.” But not according to Psalm 141:3, which reads, “*Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.*” Perhaps we’ve said to someone, “Now take what I’m going to say with a grain of salt.” But that’s backwards, as the ways of the world usually are! Here’s what God’s Word says about it: Colossians 4:6 reads, “*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*” You see, **we** are the ones who are to put the salt in, not our hearers! Our words should be gracious, a gift (!) to everyone who hears them.

Actress Kathy Bates won an Oscar for her role as an obsessed fan in the motion picture *Misery*. In that movie Bates plays a nurse who encounters her favorite author at an accident scene in a remote location in Colorado during a fierce snowstorm. With severe injuries, the crippled author is taken home by Bates to be rehabilitated. Just as he is about to stand on his own two feet, she realizes that she will soon lose him. Unable to cope with that outcome, she brutally smashes his feet with a sledgehammer. Then, she turns to him tenderly with, “I love you!”

Sadly, we Christians are often guilty of similar behavior. We profess great love for others, but then, without thinking, we crushingly slander, offend, or judge them. You don’t need a sledgehammer to knock one’s feet out from under him—just one thoughtless word. Remember to ask God to guard your words so that others can stay on their feet!

(From *Timeless Reflections*, Spring, 1999).

Make each word a treasured gift! *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen (Ephesians 4:29).*