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# What is Godly Speech? (Chapter 7 of Redeeming How We Talk: Discover How Communication Fuels Our Growth, Shapes Our Relationships, and Changes Our Lives)

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## Chapter 7

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# What Is Godly Speech?

*The tongue is also a small part of the body, but it can speak big things.*

JAMES 3:5 NLV

**The Bible makes it clear** that the tongue has tremendous power.

James compares it to a rudder, which steers a whole ship. A rudder is only a fraction of the size of the boat it steers. While the rudder may have the power to steer an entire ship, someone is standing at the helm, responsible for the direction of the rudder and ultimately the ship and all the lives on it. We are in control of our tongues, and we are responsible for the direction we turn them.

James also compares the tongue to a bit in a horse's mouth. A horse is a massive, powerful animal. We even measure units of power by it (horsepower). And yet a small bit can control it.

Finally, James compares the tongue to fire. He describes the catastrophic effect a small spark can have in a forest and says that our mouths can likewise destroy a life—unleashing great chaos we cannot control.

Clearly, how we use our tongues—how we speak to one another—is important.

We have looked a great deal at how we use words in our relationships with others, and we have suggested it needs improving. But how? For what specifically are we aiming?

We are not left to guesswork. Through the various authors of both the Old and New Testaments, the Holy Spirit said a fair amount about the tongue. In fact, there are well over one hundred verses in the Bible about it. The Lord knew the impact such a small part of the body could have, and He wanted us to understand this as well. When we know where the dangers and opportunities of speech lie, we are in a much better position to engage in godly conversation: speech that is generous, hospitable, and Christlike.

There is much to say about how to practice godly speech, but we will limit ourselves to five principles. We begin with a foundational and personal truth about words and then spend the bulk of our time on words in community. We finish with reflections on the relationships between words and action, silence, and peace with God.

## You Are Your Words

The foundational truth of godly speech is that it can only come from a godly heart. In Matthew 12, Jesus admonishes the Pharisees that a tree is known by its fruit. This is metaphorical speech. Jesus is comparing us to trees, saying that what we do and say is what defines us. Our “fruit” can range from being excellent to tasteless or full of worms. If words are one type of our fruit, we should care about how it “tastes” to the hearer.

In a digital age like our own, once our words are in the world, there is little hope that we can take them back. We become known for our words. It is not uncommon in our media-driven culture to see videos of celebrities or politicians caught on a “hot mic” saying something that wasn’t meant for public. In many of these instances, the revelation of what someone was *actually* thinking nearly got them fired or at least culturally tarred and feathered. Whole agencies are devoted to protecting celebrities and politicians from any sort of action that might smear their image. A good deal of money is spent every year protecting the world from the actual hearts of the people we adore.

One Sunday morning, I (A. J.) was the guest preacher at a church. Having never preached at this church, I was unfamiliar with the sound system and how they wanted me to turn it off as soon as I finished my sermon. Finishing my talk—which seemed to connect greatly with the church—I went down to the front row, put my Bible on the chair, turned to the senior pastor, and whispered, “Man, I went way too long.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew something was wrong. The hot mic picked it up for all to hear. The laughter was thick. And I have forever been known at that church as the guy who preaches for too long.

Words not only reveal who we are and give shape to relationships, but they become the evidence by which we are judged (Matt. 12:36). Famed theologian Francis Schaeffer used to say that we should all imagine wearing a microphone around our neck that records our every word and encounter. Can you imagine how that would change your conversations if every one of them was caught on a hot mic?

The truth is our hearts do not reflect what we say. Rather, what we say reflects our hearts. If our hearts are deceitful and broken, our mouths only reveal it. If they are good, our words demonstrate it.

In Matthew 12:33–37, Jesus provides a clear picture for this connection between our hearts and mouths:

Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For 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. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

What a terrifying comment to consider. While we may be fearful of people actually catching a glimpse of who we are, be it from a hot mic or a hot-tempered moment, Jesus indicates that we should be more concerned with the judgment of God.

After someone is caught in a sin, it is not uncommon to hear them rationalize it: “I’m not the kind of person who would do that! That wasn’t me! I’m not like that!” Jesus says otherwise. He takes a clear position on the reality of our harsh and empty words. When we use them, a glimpse of our heart surfaces into the world.

Knowing we are accountable for each and every word that comes from our mouths should make us stop to think about what we are saying. It should make us intentional. Even more, it should make us attend to our hearts.

## **Speak for the Good of Others**

Because words don’t exist in a vacuum but exist primarily in relationship, Scripture has much to say about how we speak to one another. The gist of its message is this: say what’s good for others. This is our second principle of godly speech.

In Ephesians 4:29, Paul writes, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Paul is inviting the church in Ephesus, and us, to consider the impact our words on others over and against our desire to say them. Listen to many of the screeds on Facebook or Twitter about the state of the world and you will find the rationale behind such words is often (though not always) to “get something off my chest.” In these instances, the intent, clearly stated, is not to serve other people or even accomplish something for the betterment of society; rather it is to make the speaker feel better.

While this kind of speaking is appropriate to a degree, it is not a good ethic for healthy conversation. We don’t speak merely because we will feel better for doing it but because it is better for others. Paul urges us to recognize how powerful our words are and to use them to build healthy individuals, families, and communities.

If we are to accept Paul’s invitation, we must focus on the other before even opening our mouths. This is because we must know something about the other before we can effectively encourage him or her. When we know a person’s strengths and struggles, we can offer authentic encouragement.

One of the disciplines we need to recapture in the West is that of verbally honoring or blessing others. Publicly blessing or honoring others creates positive space and leverages the power of words to reinforce relationships and structures within communities.

In many cultures, those worthy of honor seem to receive the respect they're due. When I (Ken) have traveled to Africa, I've noticed something really interesting in remote villages and cities teeming with energy. When someone gets up to give a speech, they name and show respect to a host of individuals before they get into their speech. I've seen it in Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Ghana.

Now we know some of this can be political—a form of patronage—but a lot of it is cultural. Recently, I was interviewing a young Latino worship leader at our church. He took about five minutes to introduce his whole band, as well as his family, before talking about himself. Only when he started naming the remaining people who had traveled with him to our church did I realize what he was doing. He wasn't the oldest one in the room or the one who deserved all the credit for his band, so he was making sure to name everyone. Out of his cultural values he intentionally honored others.

I remember a specific fundraiser where I forgot to mention two friends—both cofounders of the organization—because of my overzealousness to engage the audience. I regret missing the chance to show two longtime friends how much they meant to me, but the night provided a good lesson. I learned that I need to slow down and be more intentional about honoring those who deserve it. I need to be intentional enough to express the respect I feel. And, if needed, I need to make a list of who needs to be honored before I speak. Even though those two friends would have been on a list of people to honor, I didn't make such a list. I was more mindful of the urgency of the event than for the potential of my words to encourage or honor others.

Words really matter. And intentional words matter all the more. Just as Jesus was intentional with His words, we as believers are called to intentionality in ours. We cannot be careless. We need to speak and be distinguished by *careful* words—literally, words that are *full of care*.

Here are a few helpful tips to promote the kind of positive speech that Paul admonishes us toward and that we desire in our relationships and encounters with others:

### ***1. Think about what you want to say before meeting with others.***

Prepare for the encounters you want to have. Do you want to jump into your lunch meeting or date night, simply react, and walk away wishing the conversation had gone in more meaningful and spiritual directions than simply talking about fantasy football or the latest gossip from your day at work? If so,

discipline yourself to think it through before going out. In fact, bring along a note with a few things you want to discuss. Business meetings become a train wreck without an agenda, and even though they don't need to be as formal, our relational encounters can likewise lose focus if we don't tap into our deeper desires for conversation.

## ***2. Practice passing along good news.***

We can become habituated to focusing on the negative. We all know people who seem particularly negative, and we don't enjoy spending time with them. We also know people who seem to always be positive, and spending time with them is life-giving. Some of this positivity is born of personality, but much of it is how your brain is trained to interact with others. Our habits define us, but we also have the power to shape our habits. If we didn't, Paul wouldn't have encouraged us in the verse above to speak in a way that was helpful for building up others. Again, making notes or reminders might be a helpful way to change patterns until they become more natural.

## ***3. Say you're sorry quickly and for simple things so you can start over.***

We are trained as children to apologize when we do something wrong. Rarely is someone taught to say sorry for missing the mark on what they *wish* they would have done. Ironically, this kind of apology (e.g., "I'm sorry that I didn't start out better tonight; I really wanted to steer our conversation into a deeper place so that I could hear your heart, but somehow I was really distracted by work. Can you forgive me?") is much easier to give than when we *really* did something wrong. It also allows for a reset and the ability to pivot the conversation quickly into more healthy forms of dialogue. Plus, it's incredibly disarming and invites others to become more vulnerable with their weaknesses as well.

## ***4. Speak to carry others' loads, not add to them.***

Because we teach from the pulpit, it is easy for us to look at our own experiences to guide our preaching. Spurgeon had a beautiful principle here: Don't preach to save yourself. Don't speak in order to work out your own problems. Rather, speak something if you know it helps the other person and frees them to live more authentically before Jesus.

It is helpful to remember that we are described in the Bible as sheep, not camels. Sheep are weak, sensitive, and often very scared. We must be mindful to speak to one another in ways that will not make us more weak and scared. People are sheep, not camels. A camel's job is to carry your junk for you.

The Pharisees spoke to people as though they were camels. Jesus said of them,

“They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (Matt. 23:4). In contrast, we can speak to help liberate and free each other, not further weigh one another down. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t speak hard things or even process the challenges we are going through with people we trust. Of course we should. But we must use discernment in knowing when to speak heavy things to people who are already carrying much in life. Our goal in speech should be to build one another up, not unburden ourselves.

A little earlier we looked at Jesus’ words in Matthew. Luke’s version reads a little differently: “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45 ESV). What is the abundance of your heart?

Luke’s version underscores the need for us to be in right relationship with the Lord. We want to encourage you to explore that relationship in an effort to produce better relationships here, on earth—so that the words you speak are full of love and life.

What is godly speech? It is the manifestation of a heart that seeks to glorify God and bring about good in this world. It is speech that comes from trained patterns or habits of communication that rein in destructive talk and promote healthy conversations. Godly speech occurs when we’re acting like sprinklers—taking the grace of God in our hearts and distributing it widely into the world around us, making it green.

“If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God” (1 Peter 4:11).

## **Words and Actions**

Another principle of godly speech is that our words match our actions. This begins by remembering the words of Jesus’ brother James: “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom” (James 2:12). It is critical we learn how to not only speak but make our words echo throughout our lives. Otherwise our words are hollow, and we will be judged not only by fellow humans but by God Himself.

James addresses empty words in his epistle. He asks us to imagine being approached by someone who is in obvious need, lacking food and clothes. Do we simply smile, wave, and wish the person well? James asks what good it is to wish the person well and then to do nothing to help provide for their needs (James 2:14–16). All our speech should be run through a filter that asks:

- “Am I about to offer healing or harm?”
- “Will these words draw in or turn away the child of God who stands before me?”
- “As Christ’s ambassador to this person, how can I frame my speech to be honest, inviting, and to lead him or her to a closer relationship with the source of true and abundant life?”

To be sure, our words must be accompanied by behaviors and actions that testify to Christ’s transforming power in our lives. Our actions ought to underscore the meaning of the words we speak. Without actions, words become empty. Without actions, our words may be as lovely as an iridescent bubble floating in the air, but they are void. Perhaps this is precisely what James has in mind when, later, he warns that not everyone should become a teacher: “Not many of you should become teachers ... because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). A teacher’s vocation is about words, helping others learn through the sharing of ideas and concepts. But a teacher can easily be deceived that sharing information and knowledge is enough. It is true, after all, that most things are better caught than taught: better taken by someone’s example in addition to words than words themselves. This higher standard is why James says we should all be cautious to become teachers, because teachers will be held to a higher standard by God.

Words are checks. Actions are cash. Words are what we give others with a promise that there is action behind them. But sometimes our words are more than our lives match up to. And then what happens? Our words bounce, letting others down and ultimately hurting others’ trust in us. Actions are cash—they become words incarnate. Actions are words fulfilled.

Being a Christian does not mean we simply act. We must speak too. But words without action are simply a check doomed to bounce.

## **Silence Speaks**

A fourth principle of godly speech is that it embraces godly silence.

It is a life-giving practice to give yourself times of silence—not just getting to a place where you aren’t distracted by the noise of life but where you do not speak. By quieting yourself, you generously welcome the Spirit of Jesus to speak to you so that your words might be more fruitful. This intentionality of speech is also found in the wisdom of Ecclesiastes:

Do not be quick with your mouth,  
do not be hasty in your heart



to utter anything before God.  
God is in heaven  
and you are on earth,  
so let your words be few. (5:2)

Certainly, the advice here is pertinent to our prayers before God. But they are appropriate before people as well. In relationship, it is impossible to avoid words. Even if you are silent, words roll through your mind. They convey our thoughts.

Our Christian faith enjoins us to be generous and hospitable, and every conversation represents an opportunity to practice these virtues. But sound comes out of silence, and our efforts at godly conversation will suffer if we do not first understand how to be at peace with or handle silence.

Sometimes silence can be unwelcomed or misunderstood. Since childhood, I (A. J.) have assumed that if there is silence in conversation, there is something wrong in the relationship. Constant contact was the sign a relationship was good, and if there was no contact, something was wrong. This has created grave challenges in my adult years, especially in pastoral work. I constantly catch myself assuming if someone in the church is not responding to me, that person must be angry with me.

When I began to realize this pattern and correct it, I felt more liberated in my relationships than ever before. Now, silence can also be a sign we are in healthy relationship. We don't need to be constantly in touch for our relationship to be okay. Silence can define a relationship for months, and I can trust that the other person will, out of integrity, communicate with me if something is wrong.

If you cannot handle silence in your conversation, ask yourself: Why do I assume someone must fill the void? What in my heart makes me feel insecure when there is not constant reassurance?

We have learned that there is a drastic difference between what one might call a cold silence and a warm silence. Cold silence is the kind of silence that exists between bitter enemies—people at war with one another. This kind of silence is characterized by anger, bitterness, and resentment. But warm silence is different. Warm silence is the kind of silence that exists between two people who love and respect each other. Do you have any relationships that are so deep that you can be together and not speak and still be okay? That is warm silence.

More often than not, we allow cold silence to dictate the relationship. Warm silence is the silence of lovers who don't need to fill the space with needless noises. But cold silence is different. We should seek, in all instances, to cultivate the kind of relationships that can withstand warm silence. But because of our lack of trust and social capital with others, we let cold silence win the day.

Our healthiest relationships are always the ones where no words are needed for there to be loving intimacy.

That is why Paul can say we should “pray continually” when he clearly had times he was not on his knees presenting his requests before God. Prayer transcends being on our knees. For Christians, prayer is a life with God and toward God. And so we can withstand silence from God and with God. We don’t always need to speak to God to be connected to Him. We can be okay with silence from God. Why? Because silence from God is not always a cold silence. If God is silent, it may very well be a warm silence.

## Solitude and Godly Conversation

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton once wrote, “We cannot be at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we cannot be at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God.”<sup>1</sup> What Merton helps us understand is that our relationships are, by and large, reflections of our relationship with God. They flow from one heart. If we are not at peace with God in our hearts and minds, then it will be incredibly challenging to be at peace with people in our lives.

For example, we’ve all walked away from a party and felt as though, somehow, despite our best intentions, our interactions that evening were more marked by our insecurities and loneliness than by our sense of security and desire to have encouraged or shaped those in attendance.

Why does this happen to us?

We are in exile. Ronald Rolheiser describes this well:

All of us live our lives in exile. We live in our separate riddles, partially separated from God, each other, and even from ourselves. We experience some love, some community, some peace, but never these in their fullness. Our senses, egocentricity, and human nature place a veil between us and full love, full community, and full peace. We live, truly, as in a riddle: The God who is omnipresent cannot be sensed; others, who are as real as ourselves, are always partially distanced and unreal; and we are, in the end, fundamentally a mystery even to ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

People who do not find themselves in God cannot truly find themselves in life.

I (Ken) remember in graduate school being shaped profoundly by the writings of two authors I happened to be reading at the same time. They both spoke to the issue of solitude and the need to be grounded in our conversations with God before we can truly and in a healthy way add to the conversations within our communities. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together* and Henri Nouwen in his book *Reaching Out* both do a masterful job articulating the spiritual underpinnings necessary for both beginning and sustaining healthy relationships.

So we've put their voices in extended dialogue together below.

Bonhoeffer and Nouwen argue that the way to escape the traps associated with the neediness of purely human love is to, in solitude, encounter God and His divine love for us in Christ. As Bonhoeffer says:

Human love makes itself an end in itself. It creates of itself an end, an idol which it worships, to which it must subject everything. It nurses and cultivates an ideal, it loves itself, and nothing else in the world. Spiritual love, however, comes from Jesus Christ, it serves him alone; it knows that it has no immediate access to other persons.<sup>3</sup>

Nouwen echoes Bonhoeffer. He explains the effects our insecurities have on our relationships:

Without the solitude of heart, the intimacy of friendship, marriage and community life cannot be creative. Without the solitude of heart, our relationships with others easily become needy and greedy, sticky and clinging, dependent and sentimental, exploitable and parasitic, because without the solitude of heart we cannot experience the others as different from ourselves but only as people who can be used for the fulfillment of our own, often hidden, needs.<sup>4</sup>

For Nouwen, solitude is the spiritual discipline whereby we learn to stand naked in our insecurities before God yet find love and acceptance through His grace, which creates and renews a healthy humanity within us. It is where God speaks the word we most need to hear in our most vulnerable state, such that we learn—have to learn—to embrace it. Nouwen writes:

Instead of running away from our loneliness and trying to forget or deny it, we have to protect it and turn it into a fruitful solitude. To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude.<sup>5</sup>

Bonhoeffer, with his Lutheran background, had an easy time picturing the primacy of Jesus with regard to understanding the foundations of community. And Nouwen, having studied spiritual disciplines so deeply, understood that if we don't have our insecurities met through the grace of God, then we will poison community through desperately seeking to secure ourselves in ways that will never fully satisfy our loneliness.

Bonhoeffer puts our dependence on Jesus very succinctly. We are dependent on Him not only for our salvation but also for the ability to set self aside in order to empathize, love, and serve our brothers and sisters:

Without Christ we should not know God, we could not call upon Him, nor come to Him. But without Christ we also would not know our brother, nor could we come to him. The way is blocked by our own ego. Christ opened up the way to God and to our brother. Now Christians can live with one another in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only by way of Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one, only through him are we bound together. To eternity, he remains the one Mediator.<sup>6</sup>

It is only through Jesus—through His mediating grace—that reconciliation and salvation are available to us. When our egos get in the way, it is only through quieting ourselves in “garden[s] of solitude” that we are able to grow in relationship with community, without seeking community to satisfy our needs. Rather, imitating Christ—as servants—we can love our neighbors and seek to help meet their needs instead of expecting them to meet ours.

Nouwen’s counsel was to settle ourselves in prayer with God first (the internal conversation), otherwise we come to community (our external conversations) as those trying to take from it. We become destroyers of community by having no give-and-take, only an insatiable need to be filled and made secure. But when we refuse to find ourselves in Christ, we are filled with what Friedrich Nietzsche called a “Dionysian frenzy,” going to and fro in a quest for the experience of intimacy. We search for an experience of intimacy with others, without ever entering into intimacy with God.

Solitude is where we learn to hear from God. And through solitude we come to a healthier place, able to enter external conversations grounded and with an abundance to give, rather than with an insatiable need to take.

More than anything, our words reflect the wellness of our hearts. This brings us to a critical conversational conviction: to speak well to others with generous hospitality, we must do the work—joyful work, if we would only do it—of being welcomed by the Father and being at peace with Him. Our prayer and conversation with God takes precedence over our words with others.

There may come a moment when you are faced with a crisis in a relationship. If you are like most people, you desire to quickly bring about resolution to the problem. Your desire for right relationship is good, and holy. But often it is important for us to stop, pause, and silently give our heart space for honest self-reflection. *What do I think about this? Where is my hurt? What sin lurks in my intentions? What are my intentions?*

We should be making sure we are in right relationship with God before we seek to address even casual matters in our lives. The condition and intentions of the heart shape our conversations more than anything else. So, next time you find yourself in a situation where you need to speak, aim to be self-aware and Christ-oriented before you let the words out of your mouth. The hard thing about words

is they are like writing with pen—they can't be erased. In fact, some believe the sound waves continue on throughout the universe. This image serves only to underscore the fact that there is no taking back spoken words. May we commit to seeking security in the in-between times of solitude with God before rushing to uncap the pen of our tongue with others. For from the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.