YOUR WORDS ARE POWERFUL!

The tongue has the power of life and death.
—Proverbs 18:21

Your words are powerful. They can be used to improve or worsen any situation depending on how you use them. Fortunately, the Bible helps us explore the strength of our words and how we should speak—with wisdom. Carefully speaking your thoughts with godly wisdom will encourage others, solve problems, and represent the love of the Lord to everyone you encounter. Allow your words to bring forth life.

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introduction

Words Matter
Speaking with Wisdom in an Age of Outrage

When my brother was little, he was obsessed with superheroes. His favorite was He-Man, an 80s cartoon where wimpy Prince Adam, a simple blond pageboy, transformed into an armor-clad muscleman when evil threatened the kingdom.

Now, one of the complications of being a superhero, especially a secret one, is figuring out how to change into your super-self without
giving away your secret identity. Superman had telephone booths, and Batman had the Bat Cave, but poor Prince Adam had to pretend to be a coward and run away, so he could find a private place to unsheathe his magical sword and yell, “I have the power!”

His words, combined with his actions, transformed him into He-Man. And He-Man was a force to be reckoned with.

We certainly don’t base our theology on superhero cartoons, but like Prince Adam, our words have power. They don’t have magical, mystical power like some Christian and secular self-help books would say. We can’t just strike a power pose, repeat an affirmation like “I have the power,” and become the Masters of the Universe, bending it to our will.

But words are powerful tools that can be used for great evil or great good. Proverb 12:18 says, “The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” That’s just the start of what the Bible has to say about how we wield our words.

*Jenny Rae Armstrong*
contents

one
Speaking with Wisdom .................... 5

two
Speaking with Integrity ................. 17

three
Speaking to Bless ..................... 25

four
Speaking to Encourage ............... 31

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one

Speaking with Wisdom

Beyond Platitudes

My brother loved He-Man, but I was more of a Wizard of Oz fan. I read all the books and watched the creepy, cut-rate sequel, Return to Oz, so often I wore out the VHS cassette. But my favorite part of the classic film was when Auntie Em told off the grouchy, bicycle riding Almira Gulch: “For twenty-three years, I’ve been dying to tell you what I thought of you! And now...well, being a Christian woman, I can’t say it!”

Oh, could I relate! Growing up in a Christian home, I heard a lot about taming the tongue. It was basically a churchy version of the advice Thumper’s mother gave
him in *Bambi*: “If you can’t say nuthin’ nice, don’t say nuthin’ at all.” But there is so much more to honoring God with our speech than being polite, and honest, and holding our tongue when we’d rather let it fly.

**Words and Wisdom**

It is interesting that when the Bible talks about speech, it is often paired with teachings about wisdom, or the Holy Spirit, or the Fruits of the Spirit. Words and wisdom are the milk and Oreos of the Bible. In Genesis, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters, and the world was spoken into being. Proverbs is full of sayings about wise speech, and wisdom is portrayed as a woman who will teach anyone who accepts her instruction how to live a godly life. The Gospel of John talks about Jesus being the *Word* of God. The Greek term John uses for “Word” is *logos*, which can refer not just to the spoken words but may refer to the rational, organizing principle behind those words—wisdom. And in the Epistles, if we pay close attention, we see that advice about how to talk to people often cozies up with a description of the sort of wise, Spirit-filled character we can have in Christ.

This is certainly the case in James 3, the famous “taming the tongue” passage. James talks about the challenge of controlling our words and our actions, and then goes on to describe two types of speech (praise and cursing), and two types of wisdom (earthly and heavenly). Many Bibles contain
subheadings separating these concepts, but don’t let that fool you. They are intimately related. Let’s read what James has to say about the two types of speech and the two types of wisdom.

*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. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

*But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness,* (James 3:9–18).

So, what is the connection between wisdom and speech? One is the source and the other is the product. Jesus once said, “No good tree bears bad
fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briers. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. *For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of*” (Luke 6:43–45 emphasis added). Our words are the indicators of what kind of wisdom is inside us.

Speech that is dishonoring to God—let’s call it “unwise speech”—follows the pattern of earthly wisdom. Wise speech that honors God follows the pattern of heavenly wisdom.

**Unwise Speech**

Years ago, I freelanced as a copywriter, writing print ads and video scripts for small businesses. As anyone in advertising can tell you, there are techniques to creating ads that make people want to buy, whether they need what you’re selling or not. I was careful about my client list, and used my wily wordsmithing skills to sell things like denture liners and freeze-dried applesauce. But plenty of people harness the power of words to promote unholy purposes, not only in the marketplace but in their lives and relationships. It doesn’t matter how clever or convincing our arguments are: if we use our words to lift ourselves up while tearing others down, we are operating out of what James called “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” wisdom,
the kind that springs from envy and selfish ambition.  

When James talks about “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” wisdom, he is not discussing things we learn from nature or from non-Christian sources. Rather, he is saying that envy, boasting, and selfish ambition don’t come from God; they come from the brokenness of our (earthly, unspiritual) human nature, or from (demonic) spiritual forces that are opposed to God.

Paul fleshes out this concept when he contrasts the Fruit of the Spirit with the acts of the flesh in Galatians 5:16–26. It’s easy for us to focus in on the problematic behaviors described in Galatians 5, like drunkenness and sexual immorality, while skipping over the problematic attitudes that enable them tucked in the middle of the passage. But let’s stop and take a good hard look at the heart conditions Paul is calling out: hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy.

These are acts of the flesh—the earthly wisdom that tells us that we should act and speak in the way that feels best at the moment, that we need to fight for what we think we’re due, and that we are justified in lashing out at those who get in our way. These are the attitudes that tempt us to cave in to our innate desire to be right, to be better than somebody else, to have the last word in an argument. These are the obsessions that make us replay slights and insults, real and perceived, in an endless loop in our minds, until we’re roiling with negative emotions that are ready to boil over and
scald anyone close enough to grab our handle. This is a miserable, and miserably common, way to live.

I’m sure we can all think of times when we’ve listened to that kind of wisdom, when the voice that speaks those words, selfish, hurtful, and hateful, is the more enticing and convincing. We’ve not only allowed the weeds of hatred, envy, or factionalism to take root in our lives, but we’ve often tended and nurtured them like prized heirloom roses. Left unchecked, they can choke the joy and beauty out of life, strangle the good fruit growing alongside them, and leave us with a soul full of bitterroot.

Worse, society seems to cheer on these attitudes. Go on social media or turn on the TV, and you’re likely to see exactly the kind of hatred, discord, selfish ambition and factionalism James and Paul warned us against. Outrage has become the new national pastime. I’ll never forget the Sunday when a man came up to me after the service and told me about his elderly mother, who had taken to watching political programming and cable news most of the day. “She was a lot nicer when she watched soap operas.” Ouch! What a sad commentary on the stuff filling our minds.

Wise Speech

If unwise speech feeds our own base instincts and selfish ambitions, often at other’s expense, it seems obvious then that wise speech promotes God’s purposes,
for the good of others. It manifests in the traits described in James 3:17: *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*

It doesn’t take much self-reflection or headline scanning to realize that these characteristics aren’t very popular, or at least not universally practiced. They certainly don’t make us feel powerful and important. Instead they may make us feel vulnerable and insecure, as if people could take advantage of us if we lived that way. But I think we confuse this fruit of the Spirit with the generic niceness so many of us have been trained to display.

There is a difference in **self-induced niceness** and the niceness that flows out of being transformed by the Holy Spirit into a more and more Christlike person.

James penned what many people consider the most demanding book of the New Testament. Like his half-brother, Jesus, he managed to speak hard truths and urge people to take difficult, counter-cultural action, with mercy, consideration, and purity of heart. He submitted to and promoted God’s purposes in his writing, for the edification of all. Proverbs 27:6 says, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” Wise speech is not necessarily speech that makes us feel good—it is speech that *does us good*, whether it is easy to swallow or not. Sometimes hard things need to be said. But they need to be said.
with mercy and consideration, and spring from pure motives that have the recipient’s best interests at heart.

The specific identity of the author of the book of James is not known. One option is that this was James, Jesus’s fiercely opinionated half-brother, the one who thought Jesus had lost his mind when he started performing miracles, and who clashed with the apostle Paul.

The Creative Aspect of Wise Speech

There is a creative aspect to wise speech—not creative in the artistic sense, but creative in the sense of bringing about something good. As James 3:18 says, when we sow peace, we reap a harvest of righteousness. And who wouldn’t want to reap a harvest of righteousness? This creative, productive aspect of our speech is one of the ways that we reflect the image of God, whose words sparked all of creation.

Righteousness is rightness or correctness, especially in relationships, both with God and with other people.

Let’s take a look at John 1:1–5, one of the most theologically rich statements in all of Scripture.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all
mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Remember when we talked about the term for “Word” in this passage being *logos*, meaning the wisdom that is revealed by words and actions? John 1 shows us that the revelation of God’s wisdom in word and deed is the ultimate creative force. It was God’s wisdom that enabled him to speak the world into being, bringing light and life out of nothingness, and it is God’s self-revelation in Jesus, the Word of God, that enables those who receive him to experience the kind of life we were created for. On a smaller scale, our words and actions can bring light and life as well, when they are in line with God’s purposes.

There’s a note, scribbled on the back of a daily calendar page that has been pinned to the bulletin board in my home office for years. It says, “Risley family scholarship for women in seminary,” and was originally folded around a $50 check. That note and check changed my life.

I grew up in a family where education was valued, but college wasn’t the norm. I went back to college in my thirties, after my youngest started preschool, and became the first woman in my family to get a degree. I thrived in school, and it was becoming clear that continuing to seminary would be the best way to get equipped for the work God was calling me to, but the idea seemed so far-fetched that my professors might
as well have suggested I fly to the moon!

But it didn’t seem far-fetched to my pastor, who met with me every week for three years and encouraged me to keep going. It didn’t seem far-fetched to my writing mentors, who pestered me about continuing my education. And it didn’t seem far-fetched to the Risleys, a family from my church who slipped that note and a check into my palm one Sunday. I used the $50 to pay my application fee, and launched into an adventure with God that has paid enormous dividends in my life and ministry. The words and actions of my pastor, mentors, and the Risleys opened a whole new world of opportunities to me, and in turn, I have used that opportunity to encourage and bless others.

God works out his purposes through word and deed, and he does it for our good, to redeem humanity and draw us back to him and to help us flourish. As followers of Christ, we have been invited to join him in that work, speaking wise words that promote God’s purposes and edify those around us.
I’ve always felt an affinity for Timothy, the apostle Paul’s young protégé. Timothy was an important figure in the early church, accompanying Paul on his missionary journeys, co-authoring six of the Epistles, pastoring the notoriously challenging church in Ephesus, the ancient epicenter of goddess worship, and functioning as Paul’s ambassador when stuff needed to get done, and get done right. Paul described Timothy as the best person he had for the
job (Philippians 2:20). Still, it seems that Timothy would have been perfectly happy to curl up and hide under his mentor’s cloak, glad to be along for the ride, but not wanting to be thrust into the spotlight.

I wonder if this was due to a deep aversion to conflict. Paul seemed to thrive on the stuff, writing searing letters, getting in public arguments with everyone from the apostle Peter (Galatians 2:11) to the high priest (Acts 23:2), and insisting on taking his legal case all the way to the highest court in the land. Timothy just got ulcers (1 Timothy 5:23).

Conflict is a part of life in this world, but figuring how to deal with conflict in a way that honors God and others can be a challenge. How can we have the courage to confront the things that need to be confronted, and the patience to do it with grace?

This challenge is heightened by the fact that dealing with conflict isn’t just about knowing the right things. Who we are is formed by our experiences and how we have responded to them in addition to our cognitive capacities.

Too Sweet, or Too Salty?

Engaging conflict well is difficult and often confusing. While there are a number of topics to be considered with how we each handle conflict (nature and nurture, our brokenness by sin and how that effects each of us differently), on the surface, there seem to be two kinds of people when it comes to conflict.
Some of us were brought up on a potent combination of Christian niceness and low self-esteem that makes us doubt our ability to speak up. Maybe we don’t offend anyone, but we don’t do much to address behavior that is offensive to God, either. We need to pay attention to the advice King Lemuel’s mom gave him in Proverbs 31:8–9: “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Keeping our mouths shut and minding our own business may be the most comfortable course of action, but often, avoiding conflict simply enables sin.

On the other hand, some of us seem to be spoiling for a fight and aren’t afraid to use our faith as a weapon to bludgeon anyone who disagrees with us. When I was growing up, there was an elderly woman in my church whose mental capacities had started to diminish. Long experience had taught us youngsters to stay out of striking distance of her cane, but alas, no one had warned the sound tech of the music missions group giving a concert at our church. I watched in fascinated horror as that old saint pulled a hymnal out of the back of the pew and began whacking the guy with it, hissing at him to turn it down. Happily, he was a nice young man with an awesome sense of humor—and it was pretty funny. But unless you are a living caricature, there is no excuse for that sort of behavior, literally or metaphorically, and perhaps the love and wisdom of Jesus may require us to intervene.
in both the moment and the life of those around us. Sometimes confrontation is what love requires. We’re never too old to continue to hear and accept the wisdom of the God who loves us to do what is hard for him but for our best.

**Conflict Management Lessons from the Apostle Paul**

Since we’re talking about conflict, I’m going to let you in on one of my admittedly immature pet peeves: those Bluetooth phone headsets that wrap around your ear. They’re fine for certain situations, but there’s always that one guy who insists on wearing his all the time, making it impossible to tell whether he is talking to you or someone on the other end of the line.

Reading the New Testament can feel a lot like that. In fact, many scholars have speculated that 1 Timothy was written in response to a letter from Timothy asking Paul to let him leave the conflict-ridden Ephesian church. I’ve got to say, if I was dealing with some of the issues Timothy was, I would be tempted to jump ship too! Predatory false teachers, gossipers, not to mention the theological and cultural challenges of running a baby church right on the doorstep of the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

We can read Paul’s response to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:3–7.
As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God’s work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

If I were Timothy, I’d be thinking, *Gee, thanks Paul. Tell me something I don’t already know.* But actually, Paul is giving his protégé some excellent advice about dealing with conflict, advice that we get to benefit from as well.

**Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing**

Over the years I’ve gotten into some pretty silly debates with fellow Christians. Most of the time those arguments accomplished absolutely nothing except to raise everyone’s blood pressure and create unnecessary division in the body of Christ.

In 1 Timothy 1, Paul warns Timothy that he needs to put a stop to all the meaningless tongue-wagging going on in the church and help his parishioners keep the main thing the main thing—Jesus and the
difference the gospel makes. Now, I love to geek out about theology, but the Ephesians were taking it overboard, embroiling themselves in controversial speculations instead of advancing God’s work. They were enamored with their own wisdom and wanted to impress others with their theological wrangling. It was distracting them from the real focus of their faith: what God had done for them in Jesus. If we read further, Paul advises Timothy to kick out the worst offenders and not allow the people they had targeted to teach until the situation was resolved. This was serious business.

We could debate theology, or politics, or the relative merits of organic produce until the cows come home, and some of us might even enjoy that. These are even ways that we can live and work for the kingdom of God. But sometimes these things can become distracting and divisive; sometimes we have differing ideas on how Christian living looks (especially when it comes to politics, policy, and laws). Sometimes trying to address God’s work distracts from doing God’s work.

**Go Ahead, Get Judgmental**

Avoiding meaningless chatter and controversial speculations is one thing, but when people are teaching heresy (not just theological differences, but true, Christ-denying heresy), hurting others with their attitudes and behaviors, or living in bald-faced rebellion to God,
retreat is not an option. We need to—dare I say it—get judgmental. That’s not to say that I don’t have my opinions and actively disagree with some positions, but I try to do so in constructive ways and for everyone’s benefit. Time to time though, we need to stand firm and stand against. As Paul tells Timothy, “command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer” (1 Timothy 1:3). These words were written to Timothy, who was entrusted to teach and lead the church in Ephesus and part of that meant confronting false teaching. While we are certainly not Timothy, one point for modern readers is that false teaching exists and presents a danger. We must exercise wisdom and a great deal of humility when it comes to confrontation.

“Judge” is a loaded term for Christians. On one hand, Jesus warned us not to judge others. On the other hand, Jesus told us to make disciples, to teach people to obey God’s commandments, and to confront those who fall into sin. And Paul writes to the church in Corinth that they should judge some but not others (see 1 Corinthians 5). What gives?

Part of this is a linguistic problem. In Greek, the root of the words we translate as “judge” can mean either condemn or discern. God does not want us to judge people in the sense of condemning them in our hearts or minds (Matthew 7:1–2). Only God knows what is going on in a person’s innermost being, and only God can judge them fairly. But God does want us to judge in the sense of discerning whether certain
things are right or wrong, so we can deal with the situation in a way the honors him.

Thayer’s Greek Lexicon explains that “krino,” the Greek verb often translated “judge” or “discern,” literally means “to pick out by separating.” In John 8:15–16, Jesus tells the Pharisees that he passes judgment on no one, but if he were to judge, he would judge rightly, because he stands in agreement with the Father. Translation: Jesus can clearly pick out the difference between right and wrong, but he doesn’t use that knowledge to condemn, because that is not his role—at least not during his time on earth. It’s not our role, either. (Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. Copyright © 2002, 2003, 2006, 2011 by Biblesoft, Inc.)

This is a tricky line to draw. As handy as the adage “love the sinner, hate the sin” can be, it doesn’t work out very well in practice—probably because if we’re referring to a person as a sinner, defining them solely by their sin (as though we don’t have the exact same sin problem they do), they are going to feel condemnation, not love. We could try “love the beloved of God who coaches pre-k soccer and calls to check on his ailing mom every morning, but hate the infidelity to his wife and have compassion on the deep insecurity that led him to do it,” but that’s a mouthful. It would probably be best to just drop the platitudes, and do the hard work of distinguishing between our disapproval of a person’s behavior, and our love and deep respect for that person’s sacred being. Again, we need the wisdom from above to do
this. Wisdom that is “pure,” not contaminated by selfish ambition, envy, or self-righteousness. The wisdom that helps us see people as God’s image and not just as their actions is peace loving and considerate. It engages for the good of the other and seeks what is best for them; it’s submissive and full of mercy. That means that wisdom from above places itself second, willing to forgive and look for healing and not retribution or vindication.

We can’t just say we love them either—we have to really, truly, clearly, actively love them. We were all created in the image of God, and though we all sin, we should not make sin the root of anyone’s identity. And God’s fundamental orientation toward those who bear his image is one of deep, compassionate affection.

**Speak with Integrity**

Like it or not, there will be times when we need to confront others, whether that’s calling your child out on a lie, asking your co-worker about a discrepancy in the books, or standing up in court and telling the truth about what someone did to you. In those situations, I like to remember Paul’s encouragement to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:7: “The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline.” With God’s help, even the most conflict averse among us can find the courage to speak the truth with power, to speak the truth with
love, and to speak the truth by the strength of the Holy Spirit.

Paul reminds the Galatians of the risk and difficulty of *speaking the truth* when he says, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (GALATIANS 6:1–2)
was scrolling through Facebook and saw an article about a high-profile pastor who had been caught in sin. What grabbed my attention wasn’t the subject, but the author’s absolute glee at this man’s downfall—and the author was another Christian leader! The disgraced pastor belonged to a faction of Christianity that had been riddled with accusations of abuse and misuse of power, and the author had been so wounded by his experiences in that environment that he saw anyone associated with it as an enemy. So when this pastor’s sin hit the news waves, he wasn’t grieved by the sad news—the column read more like he was happy that the bad
things he believed about “people like that” were being vindicated.

Before we clutch our pearls and tsk- tsk about the author’s unchristian behavior, we should do some introspection. Take a moment to think about a politician you really dislike. Now, name three wonderful qualities that person has, or three wonderful things that person has done, without any “buts” or snarkiness.

I don’t know about you, but that’s a hard exercise for me.

It’s important to ask: Why is that so hard for us? Issues like this may point to other things to look at within ourselves. Helpful questions to ask are: What’s going on inside of us that needs further attention? What emotions, images and body sensations get triggered in us? Where does it take us back to that remains unresolved and needs attention?

Or what about that person in your life who just seems out to get you? The coworker who is constantly undermining you, the teacher who is unfairly singling out your child, or the in-laws who seem intent on reminding you that you aren’t quite up to their standards? How do you respond to them?

It’s easy to talk about loving our enemies when it’s some generic, over-spiritualized enemy far removed from our daily lives. But when we’re faced with someone whose thoughts or actions could have a real negative impact on us, our first inclination isn’t usually to bless them. It’s to lash out in self-defense.
What does it mean to bless our enemies? One place to start is what Jesus says in Matthew 5:43–48.

As natural as that reaction feels—natural because it’s immediate and unplanned; it just seems to happen—it is totally contrary to the way of Christ.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary:

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:14–21)

Yikes. This Christianity stuff is hard! It’s like Jesus expects us to pick up our cross and follow him, or something.

Since it doesn’t come naturally to most of us, we need to spend some time thinking about how to live out the New Testament’s instructions about how to
treat our enemies. What does it mean to bless them, instead of curse them?

Blessing and cursing aren’t some magical incantations we speak over people—Paul isn’t telling the Romans to put away their pointy hats and quit hexing their enemies! No, I suggest that blessing is wise speech, which promotes God’s purposes in a person’s life and works for the edification of all. Cursing is unwise speech that promotes our own purposes, and hurts those we perceive to be a threat to our purposes.

**Coming off the Offensive**

Sadly, it’s not only our enemies that we curse. Some of us curse the people we love. Life has made us harsh and cynical, and that hurt can cause us to live our entire lives on offense, believing that to be the best defense against the pain and disappointment we’re sure will come.

A couple years ago, I was interviewing a couple for an article about domestic violence among Christians. The husband had grown up in an abusive home, and as an adult, he became emotionally and verbally abusive with his family as well. Grappling with his behavior, he got the help he needed to change, and now he helps other men who are serious about working through their issues so they don’t hurt others.

One of the things he explained is that when children grow up in an abusive environment, they learn early on to suppress their feelings, especially
“weak” emotions like grief or fear. As they grow older, “strong” emotions like rage help them survive. When these children reach adulthood, they are often unable to identify the emotions they suppressed for so long—they can’t tell whether they feel sad, or lonely, or guilty, or disappointed, and what the appropriate response might be. Instead, they’ve been conditioned to respond to any painful emotion with anger, combined with a need to control the situation to keep themselves safe. That makes sense when you’re a nine-year-old-boy dodging your father’s fists, but not when you’re a forty-something man towering over your wife and children.

In this man’s case, he had become exactly what he was trying to protect himself against. It took him years of hard, focused work—addressing his own past and developed patterns to cope—to change.

We all do this to some extent. When we allow our actions to be motivated by the person we are reacting against—by our enemy, instead of the Spirit of God—we wind up becoming what we are trying to protect ourselves against. Someone throws a punch, and we punch back. Someone says something nasty, and we respond in kind. Someone slanders us, and we try to discredit their words by slandering them.

It’s a vicious cycle, and it needs to stop somewhere.

**Ending the Cycle**

The good news is that the cycle *can* stop. It was stopped 2,000 years ago, when Jesus took the all the sin, and
shame, and brokenness the world could throw at him, and instead of retaliating, absorbed it into himself and dealt with it once and for all. When he cried out “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” (Luke 23:34) offering us the blessing of grace instead of the curse we deserved.

As Christians, we are called to follow Jesus’s example. This doesn’t mean that we just roll over and give bullies reign over our lives. God hates injustice, and he wants us to speak out against sin, even sin that is committed against us. But it does mean that whatever happens, we stop allowing our baser instincts to “respond in kind”—eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—refusing to add our own chemicals to the poisoned relationship. When we trust God to vindicate us, just as he vindicated Jesus, we can offer our enemies grace—the other cheek or the extra mile—knowing that they don’t control our future, God does.

**To Bless or to Curse?**

When we feel threatened, we can respond out of earthly wisdom, which tells us to protect our own interests, or we can ask God to help us respond with the counter-intuitive heavenly wisdom Jesus displayed on the cross. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, and trusting our future to God, we can bless, and not curse.

To read more on anger in the Christian life, visit

https://discoveryseries.org/courses/when-anger-burns/
Speaking to Encourage

Abraham Lincoln consistently tops the polls as the most popular U.S. president of all time. That would probably shock him, since he was also the most embattled U.S. president of all time, presiding over a nation that was literally at war with itself. His troubled presidency came on top of a lifelong struggle with depression so severe that he suffered at least one nervous breakdown, and his neighbors were known to set suicide watches over him in his youth.

So how did he do it? How did this severely depressed man soldier through the turmoil surrounding his presidency? History has left us an intriguing clue. On
the night he was assassinated, Lincoln’s pockets were stuffed with newspaper clippings that praised him, his leadership, and the positive impact he was having.

We all need a little encouragement every now and then. Let’s look at what the author of Hebrews says in 10:23–25.

_Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching._

We need each other. We need to be reminded of the beautiful characteristics we carry as image-bearers of God, to have the courage to live into the high and holy calling God has laid on every human life.

**Life-Giving Fruit or Bitterroot?**

My friend Natasha says she wants to eulogize people before they’re dead. This doesn’t mean she resorts to flattery or warm fuzzies—the lady is a former marine officer who worked hard for her goals and expects no less from others. But Natasha calls out the best in people, inspiring them to live up to their God-given potential as she strives to live up to hers. The seeds of encouragement she sows into people’s lives bear wonderful, life-giving fruit. When she sees something that is praiseworthy in someone else,
she doesn’t wait to tell them (and others) about it.

Unfortunately, there’s another way we Christians try to spur one another on: shame. This is short-sighted, arrogant, and dangerous. We can pressure people into behaving the way we want them to behave for a little while, but good deeds motivated by anything but love, for God and for others, will eventually turn toxic.

I was in first grade when I was diagnosed with dyslexia. I still remember how devastated I was when I got a spelling test back with bright red check marks next to every single word—I had spelled them all correctly, but written the letters backward. But math was my real nemesis. I couldn’t get the numbers to line up in my mind, and copying problems out of the hardcover text into my notebook felt like trying to build the Taj Mahal with toothpicks, a jumble of disconnected shapes that had to be painstakingly pieced together. After being kept in from recess enough times, agonizing over problems other kids had long since solved, I developed the belief that I was hopeless at math and should quit trying. Sometimes, I scribbled random numbers in my notebook just to end the misery. Though they were trying to help, all the “help” did was make me feel bad about myself. To this day, I dislike math, and nothing shuts me down faster than a page full of numbers.

Shame does not motivate people to try their best, and keep trying, even when the going gets tough. Shame tells us we’re not good enough and motivates
us to give up once we realize we can’t meet the requirements. This is a problem for Christians, because when it comes to our walk with God, none of us can meet the requirements. That’s why we need Jesus.

In many ways, this is the flip side of speaking with integrity. When we judge people (not just their behavior), it’s like we’re holding a cracked, dirty mirror in front of them, affirming the idea that they’re bad, and broken, and wrong. While it is true that we all have been broken by sin, God’s invitation to us in Jesus is to come out of the shadow of the curse, and live in the light of the resurrection. Our goal should not be to pressure people into fixing what’s wrong with them. They might not even be capable of the sort of change we hope for until Jesus returns to set all things right. Instead, our goal should be to point people toward Jesus, who not only shows us what humanity is supposed to be like, but transforms us, re-creating us in his image as we surrender to him.

Focusing on sin and failure only leads to despair. Focusing on Jesus leads to victory.

“One Thing I Appreciate About You”

Ephesians 4:29 is one of my favorite verses. It says, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” Isn’t that good? Can you imagine what
could happen if we were able to live up to that in our homes, churches, and communities?

Years ago, when my husband and I were working in youth ministry, we discovered an exercise we call “One thing I appreciate about you.” Everyone sits in a circle, with one person in the hot seat. Then, each person takes a turn looking that person in the eye and saying “One thing I appreciate about you is . . .” followed by whatever they appreciate about that person, especially focusing on traits like the fruit of the Spirit. No silly or backhanded compliments are allowed, and the person in the hot seat is only allowed to say “thank you” in response.

That simple exercise turned out to be a life-changer for some of the kids. Imagine being an awkward, insecure middle schooler, and having your peers not only accept you, but affirm what is good and godly about your character. They were holding up the Jesus mirror, and pointing out the family resemblance! I’ve used this exercise with almost every group I’ve worked with since then, teen and adult. Once, a lady from an evening Bible study I was teaching showed up and said, “Can we affirm me again tonight? It’s been a rough week, and I really need it!” We laughed with her, but we did it! We all need that from time to time.

**Don’t Go It Alone**

As a teen, I had the opportunity to participate in several short-term mission trips. One of the things
that always struck me was how much easier it was to tell people about Jesus when I was part of a group. I was a pretty evangelistic kid anyway, always on the lookout for opportunities to talk about Jesus, but my bold-o-meter went through the roof when I was immersed in a community that prayed together, planned together, and was committed to living out Jesus’s mandate to go and make disciples.

Hebrews 10:25 warns us not to give up meeting together. I’ve often heard it used as a “quit skipping church” clobber verse, but there is so much more to it than that.

The Christian life isn’t meant to be lived alone. We were created to be in community with God and others, and when we isolate ourselves, physically and emotionally, we become unhealthy. Not only that, but the whole body takes a loss. We need one another, to cheer each other on in the work God gave us to do and encourage one another when we are tempted to despair. Even Jesus didn’t go it alone—he gathered a group of people to share life and ministry with, and asked his closest friends to watch and pray with him when he needed it most. If Jesus sought out that kind of support, certainly there is no shame in us doing so as well!

To encourage literally means to give courage, and we need all the courage we can get to live the lives God has called us to. With God’s help, we can tame our tongues, and use them to bring life, not strife.
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