



Lesson 7 *Use Thoughtful Speech*

How we react kindles a fire or defuses a spark. React unwisely and you will not merely fail to solve the original problem, but you will create new ones. Speaking thoughtfully includes not only knowing what to say, but knowing how to say it. You may rightly assess a situation and correctly identify the problem, but it is critical to know next how to proceed.

Jim fails again to keep his commitment to help with an event setup. He said he would come, and as is his pattern, he fails to show up without explanation or apology. Jane is fed up with this behavior and dashes off an angry email to Jim (with copies to church leaders) scolding him for his dereliction of duty. Jim's response is to email back lashing out at Jane for the poor way she manages the whole ministry team. He then lists a number of occasions in which she has run over other people.

Now Jane is right about Jim's irresponsibility. Jim has earned a reputation for not being dependable, and he needs to deal with his sin. He needs to be confronted for his ongoing behavior. But the manner by which Jane reacts to Jim creates more fuel for anger to burn in both of them. A calm voice asking Jim why he had not shown up would have effectively gone straight to the issue.

Let's rewind and start over. Jane calmly asks Jim why he failed to show up. He replies that he forgot, makes a casual apology, and promises to show up the next time. Jane can thank him for the promise and then calmly explain that it would be best for her to avoid having to depend on his commitment. She may then release him from the ministry team or reassign his duties. Jim may not be pleased, but Jane's measured response curtails overreaction on his part. Further, her composure conveys to him that his irresponsibility will no longer be tolerated.

By the way, let me take time here to denote the danger of email. This tool is like nuclear energy; it can be a helpful source of communication or an explosive bomb casting damage deep and wide. Never send an admonition – certainly not an accusation – by email before you have had verbal communication. An email can be read over and over, allowing the accused to stew over the accusation received before he had been given opportunity to explain his side. That email can, furthermore, be passed on to others so



that your reputation is put into question. Never write an email while angry. If you must write something to get the issue off your chest, either delete what you have written before sending it, or save it as a draft to be reconsidered before sent. If you speak in anger, at least the sound of the words diminish in time; but your words written in anger remain as fully potent as when you typed them.

Another problem with email is that you do not know when your reader will read it, nor can you anticipate the circumstances in which he receives it. He may read your email right after reading one of devastating news. He may read it after he has already resolved the issue; your email resurrects the pain that he has just put aside.

There may be times when it is preferable to communicate tough news by email. You do not trust your emotions if you were to talk directly, and it is necessary to communicate sooner than later. You want to be sure that your words are not misheard or misrepresented, and so you write them to be read and reread. You know that the recipient is likely to overreact immediately, but he is also likely to calm down after awhile and consider your words. All the more then, it is critical to consider carefully what you write.

Let's go back to verbal communication. Speaking calmly is more effective than speaking with anger. Calmness denotes self-control and self-confidence. Anger may communicate loss of control, stress, and clouded thinking. A calm voice followed up with resolute action will have a more positive impact than any tantrum.

Speaking courteously increases the power of the calm voice. On the other hand, resorting to profanity or so-called "plain speech" does not make you seem more sincere in your righteous anger; nor does it convey that you are resolved to carry out needed discipline. It is a distraction for Christians who are bothered more by the profanity and daggered talk than whatever other sinful act you are trying to address. As Proverbs 15:1 notes, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

But what if a situation is getting out of hand? You are preparing for a big event; people are not following instructions; time is running out and frustration is building inside of you. What do you do? You first pray to God asking that he grant you control so that you glorify him. That is what the ministry event is supposed to be about – glorifying God. He, in his wisdom, is giving you opportunity in the event's preparation to glorify him by the way you handle adverse circumstances.



(I find it helpful to laugh at myself. I try so hard to have everything done just right, and instead I am caught in a comedy of errors. This may not be theologically accurate, but I think of God and his heavenly audience having fun watching the spectacle.)

I also realize that it is in such situations that true skill and leadership is demonstrated. I then try to spot the real problems. Maybe the problem is one person who is stirring up trouble. I take him aside for a private talk, helping him to understand how he is needed for the moment. Maybe I see that everyone is simply tired, and I call out for a break. Because I have a quiet voice, I may ask someone with a stronger voice to get everyone's attention. Perhaps I then need to urge everyone on to complete the task; perhaps I may even need to reprimand them. Even more than I need to speak with composure.

Scripture makes clear that the tongue is a dangerous organ. Thoughtless words said in a moment can have a lifetime effect. Even when you repent of your words and have been forgiven for what you said, those words linger in the memory of the person offended.

How do words get out of control? One person says or does something offensive. How you react that determines what happens next. As Executive Minister I am often involved in decisions that will negatively impact another person or ministry. It may be (and often is) about space: who gets to use Fellowship Hall, for example. It may be about funding or allocation of staff. I may get a phone call or email from someone advocating his position. He may accuse me of already having made up my mind or of not caring about singles or marriages or adults or children (whoever it the core of his ministry). He may let me know that he's tired of church politics and maybe he'll go somewhere else to church. Needless to say, such accusations and threats do not sit well with me. But how I reply will limit the spark of accusation made or fan it into a devastating fire.

What if I respond according to my initial emotion of feeling offended? I tell other person know that I am tired of being falsely accused. Maybe I should look for a church that isn't filled with problem people. Such a response may make me feel good for the moment, but as a Christian I will end up more bothered by my own reaction than by the words which had provoked me. I will also make the other person angrier and feeling all



the more justified for their accusations. Meanwhile, they pass on to others reports about my sinful behavior. And the fire spreads.

What should I do? I should follow the same advice I give in the other messages. I should listen carefully and ask questions to help him think through what he is saying; I should stick to the issue and not wander into speculating about his motive. And I should do so in a calm manner. Calmness helps me and the other person think rationally. It causes me to measure my words; it allows the other person to quiet down and listen. It is a powerful tool in checking the other person's anger, certainly more so than reacting with anger. Furthermore, by setting a good pattern, I teach him to act in the same way and thus help him mature in his Christian walk.

Note this: It is in adversity; it is in handling conflict (especially conflict directed toward us) that our Christian maturity and wisdom are either manifested or their lack thereof is revealed. Either way, we build our own reputation for good or ill. Our trustworthiness rises and falls according to how we respond to the bad behavior of others. There will always be problems in the church and sinful behavior in the church body. Wishing that problem people would go away is not helpful. Instead you must desire in yourself and pray daily that you will be the kind of person who speaks and acts thoughtfully – i.e. with thought for what honors God and for what builds up the body of Christ (including that particular member of the body who is goading you to lash back). It is the control of the tongue that separates the wise from the fool and marks the righteous. As Proverbs 15:28 says, "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer."