

Introduction

Just to change things up a little, we are taking a short break from our study of the gospel according to Matthew. We are spending time this summer dealing with what not to wear. We are not talking about fashion but the teaching of the Apostle Paul that disciples of Jesus are to put off the old self and the behaviors that belong to our former manner of life. We are to throw out the patterns of behavior that were ours before we came to faith in Christ. In place of those old behaviors, we are to put on the new self and the new wardrobe with righteous and holy behaviors. We are to put off, for example, falsehood and put on truthfulness. We are to put off anger and put on patience. We are to put off taking from others and put on working hard so that we can give to those in need. And this morning we are going to look at the need of casting off corrupting talk and replacing it with what builds each other up.

[Read Text; Pray]

Language is one of the wonders of the world. It astonishes me how deeply and broadly human beings can express themselves through vocal noises. I am sure we have all at some time or another encountered people speaking a language that is different from our own and one we do not understand. A while back a woman came to the office needing some help. She needed some counsel and some encouragement. But there was a big problem. She didn't speak English, and I don't speak Spanish. So, I called Jesse, who speaks both English and Spanish fluently. "Is there any way you can come to the church . . . now?" I asked. "Sure," he said. When he arrived and began to speak with this woman, her whole demeanor changed. She had been uptight and withdrawn and suspicious. But as Jesse began talking with her in her own native language, she showed marked signs of relaxation and she began pouring out her heart. I was sitting there like, "I don't know what he is saying, but it must be good."

When you hear a language other than your own, it is like, "how can that mean anything?" But when you hear your own language, you can plumb

the depths of theology, philosophy, biology, and technology. We get so used to the wonder of language that we can lose sight of the power speech possesses. With language we can instruct; we can warn; we can bless; we can soothe. With language we can also praise God and speak of His magnificence. Why it is by speaking and preaching Jesus Christ that God is pleased to open hearts and open eyes that men and women and boys and girls might see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ and respond by turning from sin and trusting in Jesus.

But as surely as language can be used to worship God and to save and build up people, it can also tear them down as well. There is language with which God is pleased and that honors him, but there is also language which God deplures. When it comes to our wardrobe, there are definitely articles that need to be cast off from our closet and there are definitely articles that need to replace the cast offs. This need is never more true than when it comes to our speech.

I. What We Say Is Important to God

Surely, you know the old adage about speech, the one that goes like this: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." It first appeared in 1860. And it is not a bad thing to be determined to be strong no matter what people may say to you. However, this adage is patently untrue when it comes to denying that the words of others will not hurt. They may not break my bones; that is clearly true. But that does not mean they can't break my heart. They can and they do because words communicate realities that are just as real as sticks and stones. Love and hate are every bit as real as sticks and stones. So are promises broken and promises kept.

In fact when we look in the Bible, we find that spoken words precede sticks and stones. Before there was light, God said, "Let there be light." Before there was a man who could speak, God said, "Let us make man in our image." God was the first to speak. He invented language, and what is spoken matters to God. It is clear enough here in Ephesians 4:29. On the one hand, there is a kind of speech that corresponds to being alienated from the life of God in ignorance and hardness of heart. It is displeasing and corrupt and unlike God. On the other hand, there is a kind of speech

that corresponds to being created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. This speech is pleasing to God. And this matter is important enough that God inspired the Apostle Paul to tell us to cast off the one and engage ourselves in the other. What we say is important to God.

This is a truth that we see highlighted elsewhere in the scripture as well. The Ten Commandments teach us not to take the name of God in vain. That includes speaking the name of God in a blasphemous way. Another of the Ten Commandments forbids the speaking of lies—"You shall not bear false witness." Proverbs has a lot to say about right ways and wrongs ways to speak. But there is another place in scripture in which we are clearly instructed that what we say matters greatly to God. It is in Matthew 12:36-37. Here Jesus says, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your **words** you will be justified, and by your **words** you will be condemned."

Our words reveal what is inside us. They reveal our hearts. And they reveal us to be sinners. I don't care how careful you have been in your life with your mouth, your mouth has revealed that you are a sinner. James 3 says, "For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. . . . no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

What has come out of our mouths shows us to be impure, defiled, and sinners against holy God. And sinners need much more than reform. We need a savior. Jesus was pure in every way. Peter says of Christ these striking words: "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." Jesus never sinned and that includes never sinning with his mouth. And because he perfectly fulfilled the law of God, he qualifies as a sacrifice without spot or blemish. He is the flawless lamb of God. And by his death he takes away sin. To be reconciled with God, you must turn from your sin and trust Jesus Christ. There is no condemnation for those who are identified with Christ.

If you are not in Christ, all the effort you put forth to try to make yourself better is to no avail. In Christ alone can you be justified before God and reconciled to him. If you are not believing in him right now, I urge you to turn from sin and trust in Christ Jesus. If you trust him, he will save you.

Now, those who trust him are made new. And we must bring our living in line with our identity. As he who called you is holy, so you also be holy in all your conduct, including in your speech because what you say is an important matter to the Lord. Further underscoring this fact is Ephesians 4:30. Here Paul explains the consequences of letting corrupting talk come from your mouth. He says that this grieves the Holy Spirit. If you are united with Jesus Christ by faith, you have your identity in Jesus and you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption. That means that he has set on you the mark of God's ownership. You belong to God. You bear the seal of God put there by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit in you is the guarantee of future complete salvation. Yet when your speech is unpleasing to God, you grieve the very one who is the pledge of your salvation. You better know God cares what you say. So it is critical we know what we are not to say and what we are to say.

We next look, then at . . .

II. What We Must Not Say

A. What we must put off from our mouths and from our speech is what Paul calls "corrupting talk." Other translations speak of this communication as "unwholesome" and "foul." The Greek word is *sapros*. It means rotten or putrid. What is rotten and putrid is decaying. It is dead and it is being eaten up. It emits a foul odor. It sickens the stomach and repulses the senses. So the kinds of language we should put off from our mouths are those which bring decay and breakdown. They compromise righteousness. they violate the rule of thought. According to Paul in Philippians 4:8, disciples of Jesus must let our minds dwell on things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy praise. Talk that does not reinforce these characteristics is talk that corrupts. And we should be as determined not to spread corruption as we are not to eat spoiled meat or a rotten egg.

B. Now let's notice how Paul phrases this exhortation. He says, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths." We all have the flesh remaining within us. Every person who has been born again by God is a new creation. Old things have passed away and new things have come. If you trust in Jesus, you are a new creature in Christ. And yet the fullness of God's work of salvation is not yet complete. God has begun a good work in you and he is continuing that work. But that work is not complete until the day of Christ Jesus. And in this process of progressively growing more and more into the likeness of Christ, we still must wrestle against the flesh. And particularly when it comes to speech, we must exercise self-control and guard our lips that corrupting talk does not come out. It is a matter of developing, by the power of the Spirit in us, self-control. These corrupting things are ready to come out but we must not let them.

David said it himself in Psalm 141:3. "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!"

C. So let's consider some of the specific categories of talk that grieve the Holy Spirit and do not belong in the mouth of a new creature in Christ. John Piper has contributed helpfully to this list.

1. One category of such talk is **ungrateful speech**.

In this category we find grumbling and complaining. Complaining is corrupting because it expresses ungratefulness to God and it sows seeds of ungratefulness in the hearts of others. Grumbling is an expression of arrogance. It says, "I deserve better than this!" And the fact is we don't. We never deserve better.

2. A second category of corrupting talk is **inconsiderate speech**.

Gossip is such a kind of corrupting speech. Slander is closely related. These are corrupting because they rot the reputation of others. There is a malicious attempt to defame another or speak with derision of another.

Insults and name-calling to people's face or behind their backs also fit in this category of corrupting speech. Remember Jesus' saying in the sermon on the mount, "whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'you fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." When you

condemn others with words like these, you are also engaging in judging them. It is destructive.

Criticism can also be destructive. We are all going to be criticized and we are going to have to deal out some criticism sometime. But what is the motive? If we are criticizing to put others down and make ourselves feel better, that is fueled by pride not a desire for the person to better themselves. That is corrupt.

The examples in this category demonstrate mean-spirited communication. They arise from a motive to harm others. Bringing hurt and harm to others is abusive. It is foul. It is reprehensible to God and grieves the Holy Spirit.

3. Category number three is **vulgar speech**. By vulgar speech I am referencing talk that speaks of sex and the body in coarse and common and even hostile ways. John Piper says, "With this kind of language people take good things that God has made, and use them like mud to smear on whatever they get upset about. The whole assumption behind the use of vulgar four-letter words is that they communicate scorn or disdain or hate."

Vulgar speech takes the sacred and transforms it into verbal rape.

4. A fourth category of corrupting talk is what I will call **contradictory speech**. It contradicts reality by trivializing the sacred and the serious. Take for example expressions which diminish the awe that should be attached to the concept of holiness. On the opposite end of the spectrum are expressions and utterances which minimize the seriousness of hell and condemnation. Piper makes sense when he says, "It's simply a contradiction to believe in the horrible reality of hell and use the word like a punctuation mark for emphasis when talking about sports or politics." The same might be said for the D-word.

5. The fifth category in the list is **blasphemous speech**. With this category we have descended to the depths of corrupt language. Blasphemous speech includes words and expressions which minimize, trivialize, make common, and abuse the name of God.

Among my grandmother's memories of her dad was a day he cried in great brokenness. Before he came to faith in Christ, he cursed like a sailor. Blaspheming the Lord was second nature to him. That all changed when he was saved. But one day shortly after trusting Christ, he took the Lord's name in vain. That was the day she saw his tears flow like a river, and he never cursed again.

Piper writes, "It is a great contradiction of who we are as Christians if we [utter our Lord's name] just because we are mad or surprised or amazed. No one with a good marriage would stomp on his wedding ring to express anger. It stands for something precious and pure. And so does the name of God and Jesus Christ."

6. The final category is an ironic one; I call it **speechless speech**. You can speak corruption apart from the words themselves. It is your tone, your posture, the accent you place on certain words resulting , for example, in sarcasm.

All in all, these categories reveal that certain words are simply off the table for everyday use or angry use or with hurtful intent. But it is certainly more than just words that matter here. Specific kinds of intent by the use of speech are what Paul is urging his people to put off, to cast aside, to throw off. These characterize the old self, the darkened understanding, alienation from God and hardness of heart. But this is not how we have found Christ to be. And it is not how we are to talk, . . . ever.

So we look next at . . .

III. What We Must Say

"Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear."

A. As opposed to corrupting talk, the kind of speech that believers should let out of their mouths is good. It is helpful not hurtful. It is gentle not harsh. It is true not deceptive. It brings joy not pain. It preserves peace rather than fostering conflict. It is good. That word means useful, beneficial, helpful, pleasant, upright, and honorable.

B. Paul mentions three characteristics of good communication. These will guide us as we seek to guard what comes out of our mouths.

1. First of all, good communication builds up. It is edifying. It brings strength and health. It looks out for the growth and well-being of others. We should speak words that will assist each other in our pursuit of Christ.

2. Second, good communication is not only about what we say but when we say it and the way in which we say it. It is as fits the occasion or according to the need of the moment. Gentleness and sensitivity are essential for good communication. We put ourselves in the shoes of others and ask what do they need and in what way do they need to receive what they need.

3. Third, good communication is marked by its effect. Its intended effect is to give grace. One of the great temptations in human communication is to give people what we think they deserve. However, Paul strongly objects. Good human communication does not set itself about giving justice but about giving grace. Our communication is to reflect the grace of God. What a great example is our Savior. As Peter said, when he was reviled, he did not revile in return and when he suffered, he did not threaten. We need to meet each other with words that reflect love and mercy and patience and good, not words that retaliate or injure or get even.

Have you ever noticed how people set each other off? A disagreement emerges one moment and the next you can tell in the voices of people that they are offended, defensive, and then accusatory? And there is anger and hostility. There is power on the tongue. And we need to control that tongue to reflect the mercy and grace of God.

IV. How to Say What We Must

As I have said, I am attempting to be highly practical in this series. So how do we move from being instructed what we must not say and what we must say to actually saying only what we must? The Bible gives us two crucial elements for God-honoring speech.

A. Be slow and controlled about what you say. You can't bring your speech into conformity with the new self without exercising control. And you cannot exercise control without putting a stop to auto-pilot. All kinds of corrupting speech are sitting on the launchpad just waiting to escape our lips. They are put there by our flesh. If we are going to only let out what is good, it all starts with restraining what is corrupt. James accurately instructs us that godliness involves bridling the tongue. He wisely advises in 1:19 that every person should be quick to hear and slow to speak. We have got to put the brakes on the tongue to get it under control. That is step one. Even practice stopping your tongue from speaking to get it under control. Getting control of the tongue will enable you to think carefully about what it is you most need to say and what it is others most need to hear. It will enable you time to check your spirit, your motives, your purpose, and your manner of speaking. Pray that God will enable to you to become more and more disciplined and exercise that discipline for his glory and the good of others.

B. Discipline yourself for intentional contemplation of good things. Just as we have pointed out in regard to anxiety, it makes all the difference what you think. Let your mind dwell on godly things and your speech will be transformed. In Luke 6:45, Jesus teaches that what is in the heart is what comes out. He says, "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." So we must fill our hearts and minds with an abundance of good if good is to come out.

Conclusion

I close this morning by pointing us to Jesus. He always pleased God with his speech. In fact, he only spoke what the Father told him to speak. But more than that he himself is the speech of God to us. John refers to Jesus as the word. The writer of Hebrews explains that "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." God's words are pure. They are holy. His speech brings life and gives life. Psalm 119 is all about the worth and value of the words of God. They are clean and pure and they do good to those who listen. Jesus is the preeminent example of God's good, edifying, appropriate, and grace-giving language. The language Christ's

followers use is a reflection of him as well. Let us be sure that our words do not corrupt but build up, bless, and supply grace to those who hear.