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## Part 1 – A Matter of Life and Death

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We're kicking off a new series called A Matter of Life and Death. When we hear those words – A matter of life and death – we tend to think like physical life and death.

In case you don't know, I am an ear, nose, and throat doctor, so it's often that I'll have people come into my office and see me for something that's been nagging them, a symptom that's been nagging them for a long time. In that, they start to get concerned. You may have had this experience as well. In your waiting for that appointment, what do you do? You Google, don't you? It's interesting to me because I see Google as a funnel. Anything you can enter into the top of Google; Google has a pretty short list of its possible diagnoses and it's cancer and death. That's where your mind goes. So, the vast majority of the time, the conversation is "Look, you're going to be fine, we're going to take care of this, it's no big deal."

But then, every now and then, the opposite scenario happens where someone has a nagging symptom they really aren't concerned about, but you have a spouse or a family member or a friend that convince them to come in to be seen and we have to have a very hard conversation which is this is far more serious than we thought. Those are hard conversations.

Proverbs 18: 21 says, ***The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*** Our words have power, and while we may treat them as this kind of nagging little thing, we need to understand that it could be far more serious than what we thought in the way that we use our words. It should get our attention and that's the purpose of this series. We want everyone, ourselves, to understand the power, the gravity, and the importance of our words.

Let me just say from the outset that communicating is complicated. And all the men said... Because despite what she says, she does care about where we're eating dinner. I'm getting more amens. We have language, right? Thousands, hundreds of languages. Thousands of cultures across the globe. Even within in languages, we have different

dialects. Have you ever heard someone from a certain part of Great Britain or from Jamaica and you're like "What language are they speaking? "That's English." "Really? I didn't understand a word of what they said." Different dialects and cultures. Different generations.

My young adult children are helping me to understand that some of the things that I said 30 years ago would not be very appropriate to say right now because it has a different meaning now. That sometimes comes with some discomfort in situations. Our knowledge and our experience determine what we understand about certain words and certain things. My Grandmother-in-law was sick years ago. She was in the intensive care unit. She was pretty sick. The nurse was trying to start an IV. If you don't know, IVs generally come in sizes starting at about 18 that we use up to about 24 and in increments of two. The nurse was having trouble starting an IV, so she told Nanny, "I'm going to step out. I need to go get a 22." Nanny knew what a 22 was and that they sometimes used it to put down the lame farm animals. So, before the nurse got back, a family member got there and Nanny greeted them and said, "They've given up on me."

Our knowledge and our experience determine what we understand words to be, words to mean. Words we use to inform, to instruct to correct, to encourage, to request, to share feelings, to give feedback, to share opinions, to declare things, to inquire things. And in all of these things that we use words for, they have the power of life and death. Again, life and death sounds a little bit like something of survival. I've laid this out and have explained it to you before that there are a few basic needs that we have to be able to survive – food, water, and air. These are the most important ones. You can go a few weeks without food, a few days without water, a few minutes without air. But when we are talking about words, we can go a lot longer than that without words. Although you may know someone that can't keep their mouth shut for a few seconds. Come back next week for the message titled *The Right to remain Silent*. That's actually the title.

The thing about these things that we need – food and drink, we get to enjoy them too, right? We need them for survival, but we get to enjoy food and drink, and they affect each of us in different ways, and they elicit a response in us when we get to enjoy certain foods and drinks.

How does that work? Our sense of taste plays a role here. When we eat something, the flavor particles in that food or in that drink touch these little papillae, the little bumps on your tongue. On those bumps, those little papillae, you have something that you've probably heard of called taste buds. Those taste buds are little clusters of cells that have

special sensory cells in them that can detect and bind to those flavor particles. From there, those sensations are carried on nerves to four different nerves along with another nerve that controls a sense of texture and temperature and spice. All of those then go to the brain to what's called the gustatory cortex where it's processed. The gustatory cortex in the brain, that the brain processes and elicits those feeling that you might get from certain foods or certain drinks. Even from memories past or experiences you've had eating and drinking certain things. That's how the sense of taste works.

Now why did I explain that to you? Well, Job 23: 3 says, ***For the ear tests words as the tongue tastes food.***

If there were ever a scripture that Gad inspired for the sake of ear, nose, and throat doctors, this is it. We just finished Revelation, where all the symbolism, frankly, was very confusing. This stuff I get. So, we are going to work through some of these things.

The ear is for hearing, of course. As the ear tests words, the tongue tastes food. It affects the ways that we process them. How do we process them? Well, someone speaks a word with certain volume, with certain inflection, certain tone, in a certain language. And those sound waves travel through the air and into your ear canal, they vibrate the tympanic membrane or the ear drum, that's connected to the three hearing bones that bridge that gap between the ear drum and the inner hearing organ, which is the cochlea. The cochlea makes that sound vibration, that mechanical energy, and turns it into a nerve impulse, which goes through the cochlea nerve into the auditory cortex of the brain. There, because of our memories and our understanding of language, we can take all that information and our body, and our brain processes it and it effects our body in certain ways, it elicits a certain response. In the same way that the tongue tastes food, the ear tests words.

Now, in all of that, how is it a matter of life and death? When we hear certain words, it can elicit certain responses in our nervous system. And after these things hit our brain, can have a certain response in something called parasympathetic nervous system. Part of the autonomic nervous system is the sympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is responsible for the fight or flight response in our bodies. When this happens, when we perceive a threat, epinephrin and Norepinephrine and cortisol, the stress hormones, are released into the body, and they have an effect on our physiology, like pulling blood to the heart and lungs and the muscles and the brain so that we can react quicker. And shunting blood away from other vital organs like the intestines and the liver and the kidneys. Fight or flight. Our physiology can't discern between a real and

perceived threat. So, if we see a speeding car about to hit a child or if we are about to be in a car accident ourselves, or if we see a bear that's coming in our direction, we feel threatened. Our mind and our body will respond the same way when we hear threatening and harsh words. A matter of life and death. Harsh and threatening words can create a steady state of stress that can be like death by a thousand cuts. Our words have power.

As we work through this throughout the series and starting today, we think it's important that each of us should observe God's truth as one who speaks and one who hears, because in all of this, we do both as we communicate. Communication is complicated, and we do both of these things. And we want to understand that this could be more serious than what we thought.

Now, a quick word about speaking words of death, how words can speak death.

1 Proverbs 12: 18 says, ***The words of the reckless pierce like swords.*** This is a metaphor of death. Our physiology, again, can't distinguish between a real and a perceived threat, and those harsh and threatening words will elicit that response. And when we are constantly hearing those words, maybe from you, when you are constantly hearing those words, it's like a car that is constantly revved up. If it's at 5,000 rpm constantly, what's going to happen to that car? It's going to burn out and it's going to blow up. There will be consequences.

Proverbs 15: 4 says, ***A perverse tongue crushes the spirit.*** Here we see that not only are there physical consequences of these harsh words because of all that shunting of blood away from these organs, we can get gastrointestinal upset and pain and other lethargic symptoms, But we see from Proverbs 15: 4 that it goes deeper than that, it crushes the spirit. Words affect the deepest part of our being – our mental, our emotional, and our spiritual being.

Now, let's turn the page here to talk about words that speak life. This is part 1 of our series and we're going to focus on this for the rest of our time today. Words that speak life. For that, we are going to start in Proverbs 16:24 which says, ***Gracious words are like a honeycomb – sweetness to the soul and health to the body.*** See that? Our words can be actual health to the body. How is that? The other part of the autonomic nervous system is the parasympathetic nervous system. In that, we get rest and restoration. We get healing. That's the other balance of the autonomic nervous system. The chemical Acetylcholine predominates in this system. It aids in digestion, tissue repair, memory

storage. It promotes a healthy immune system. You see how that works? Gracious words health to the body. When we hear kind words, there are a few chemicals that are released into our system. This is fascinating to me because these chemicals aren't just unique to hearing kind words. They are also involved in other situations. One of them is called oxytocin. Oxytocin is a hormone that is released in many situations. One of them is when a mother is breast feeding her child. That oxytocin aids in the formation of that bond between mother and child. When you hear kind words, when you speak kind words, you are eliciting oxytocin. It's such a powerful thing that it will create a bond between a mother and a nursing child.

Dopamine is another one. You've probably heard about dopamine. It is otherwise known as the euphoria hormone or neurotransmitter. You know how that's going to make somebody feel. And then Serotonin is also a neurotransmitter and that's the chemical inside the nerve that creates the synapse. Some of you might remember from the 90s with the first anti-depressant medication called Prozac. Prozac is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor that keeps the serotonin in the synapsis longer, creating more feelings of happiness because that chemical does not get absorbed but rather remains in those synapsis longer. When you speak kind words, when you speak words of life to someone, you are creating higher levels of serotonin in their brain. How fascinating that these things happen just simply because of our words.

Now, we want to look at a couple of different ways... First, Proverbs 15 also mentions a couple of other ways that words can speak life. ***A gentle answer turns away wrath.*** So, we can see that our kind words can actually be the antidote to anger and also, ***A soothing tongue is a tree of life.*** We've seen many ways already that that can be a tree of life.

Let's talk about two types of words that speak life. We are going to put a couple of different categories of words up here. The first one on top is **uplifting, encouraging, and affirming**. The one on the bottom is **teaching rebuke, correction, and training**.

The reason I separate these two like this is because if we're not careful, we can be trapped into a way of thinking that this top set of words – Uplifting, encouraging, and affirming – are words of life. And that this bottom set of words including rebuke and correction are words of death and damaging. Like the first set of words are productive and the bottom set of words is destructive.

That's not the case. We want to talk about this a little bit because it can be confusing and misunderstood.

Let's look first at Proverbs 29: 5. It says, ***A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet.*** What does it mean to *flatter* someone? Simply put, it's excessive and insincere praise. Just constantly building up. You know when someone has tried to flatter you before. They are usually looking for something in return – to make a sale or get something back from you.

We can see how that top set of words can actually not be speaking life, but rather spreading a net for your neighbor's feet.

Then this second category – teaching, rebuke, correction, and training, which by the way, when withheld, can be a form of flattery. Withholding words of teaching and rebuke and correction and training.

Where do these four words, teaching, rebuke and correction and training come from? They may sound familiar to you because they are in 2 timothy 3: 16 – ***All scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, and for training in righteousness.***

Why is that so important? how can those be words of life because this book has words of life in it. Adhering to the truths of this book is the most important thing when speaking words of life. Would you agree with me that we are in a time where the truths in this book are being abandoned in many ways when people are being taught or corrected. They are veering far from the truth that God gives us in his words.

2 Timothy 4: 3 says, ***For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.*** So, that's how we know that teaching, rebuke, correction, and training can speak words of life.

Remember, we all want to observe God's truth as ones who speak and also ones who hear. So, first we are going to talk a little bit about receiving words that speak life.

So, as we hear words that speak life:

1 Be willing to be uplifted, to be encouraged, and to be affirmed. At surface level, that sounds kind of simple and easy. "Well, yeah, I like to hear nice words about myself." But some of us have a really hard time hearing those words. And I would say all of us, at some point, have a hard time hearing those words and believing them about ourselves.

Someone might say to you, “You’re a really good friend.” And your internal response is *No, I’m not*. Because all that you can think about are the things that you’ve said, the things that you’ve done, or the things that you’ve thought. I want to remind each of us that none of us is righteous, none of us. And when a loved one speaks words of kindness, speaks uplifting, encouraging, and affirming words to you, it’s okay and it’s important to receive that, and to let the Lord breathe life into you through those words.

There are others that it goes a lot deeper. You may have deeply rooted feelings of insecurity, of shame and guilt. That could be because of past, things that you’ve done, things that you’ve said. Or it could be because of something that someone has done to you, some things that someone has said to you. If you are that person or maybe you know a person that’s like that, then we ask the question, “How are we going to speak uplifting words of life to them? What are the words that they need to receive?”

It’s really simple. We go back to the basics. Every person is a human being with eternal value, created in the image of God, knitted together in their mother’s womb, fearfully and wonderfully made. These are the most life-giving words that anyone could hear. If that’s you, you need to hear that today. Now, if you are a follower of Jesus and you’ve placed faith in Christ, it only gets better, because that’s every human being. If you’ve placed faith in Christ, you are child of God. You are an adopted son or daughter of the almighty Creator of the Universe, and you need to know that. Let that sink in, receive those words.

Second is that as we receive words that speak life, we need to be willing to accept teaching, rebuke, correction, and training. So, we just wrapped up the summer Olympics and the Paralympics are underway. And in all of those, we have a lot of water events – swimming, triathlon, synchronized swimming, water polo. If you watch really closely in these events, you might not see it, but if you pay close attention, you’ll see something that looks like this. It seems really silly, doesn’t it? We’re talking about the Olympics. In all of these water events, these are the best in the world at being in water. Yet, these events are lined with lifeguards. Why? Because, frankly, something could happen. What’s the point here? No matter how mature you think you are in your faith, no matter how fortified you think you are, resistant to the schemes of the devil, you need to open yourself to teaching, rebuke, correction, and training. Each one of us does. In the same way that these world class athletes have pools that are lined with lifeguards.

Psalm 141: 5 says, ***Let a righteous man strike me. that is a kindness. Let him rebuke me. That is oil on my head (speaking of an anointing). My head will not refuse it, for my prayer will still be against the deeds of evildoers.***

We need to receive words that speak life, that are both uplifting and encouraging and also for rebuke and correction.

Let's turn the page to speaking words that speak life. Ephesians 4: 29 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.*** That's a very important part – according to their needs.

As many people that are listening right now there are different situations in someone's life. Everyone has different needs. Someone who is suffering with that shame and guilt and is at the bottom of the bottom, then is not the time for rebuke and correction because it can be far more damaging. So, knowing the right time and being perceptive, and I think this is a very overlooked character quality that we have. Being perceptive is understanding around you – their current condition, their current emotions, what's going on in their life. Sometimes we get so locked in to our own situation that we fail to look up and see the world around us and the people that are around us because there are a lot of needs and we need to be speaking life according to their needs, being perceptive.

Now, speaking words of life first, let's talk about the uplifting, encouraging, and affirming.

First of all, not flattery. Not incessant and insincere praise. Not to get something in return, but just simply because now you know what you can do for a person psychologically, mentally, when you speak these uplifting words to them, you can speak life to them. Words like *I respect you. I appreciate you. You're impressive. Great job. I'm proud of you. You really helped me. I admire you. Can I ask your opinion?* How about that one? How much does that build someone up? *You want my opinion? You think I'm important enough that you want my opinion? And my opinion matters? You are important.* Then of course, *I love you.* When we say these words, remember what we do? We elicit a response of the oxytocin and dopamine and the serotonin – that connection, that euphoria and that happiness that we can speak into someone's life

Now second, let's go to speaking life through words of teaching, rebuke, correction and training. This one is very tricky, and we have to be very careful with it.



But here's the thing too, when we just kind of rely on our nature, don't we really want to speak these words. Aren't we ready to speak these words to anyone that will hear? I want to teach these people something. I want to correct something. I'm going to do a little training here. We tend to be loose with those words so why is it that we are so stingy with the other kind, the uplifting, encouraging, and affirming. We want to do this, but the fact is this is far more complicated – speaking these types of words because although we might be right, in what we're rebuking and what we're correcting we can be highly unrighteous in the way that we do it. Remember, reckless words pierce like a sword. And we speak these words, yes, according to people's needs because done improperly, then we can be like the nurse stepping out of the room and they think that we are going to get the 22 gun instead of the 22 gauge IV. By the way, that IV through which we are going to give them medicine. If not done probably, it can be very damaging.

Proverbs 25: 11 says, ***A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.*** Look at the value that's assigned to these types of words – fitly spoken, the right time, the right place, the right circumstances to the right person... very valuable.

So, as this is complicated and can be tricky, let's practically walk through what this might look like as we think that we are supposed to speak some words of teaching, rebuking, correction, and training to someone.

I think one of the first questions we have to ask ourselves as we feel prompted to do this is ask the question, Is this my role? Because even though you think you have some rebuke you can hand out or some teaching you can do, this might not be your role for that person. There are a couple of ways we can have these roles. And I think they are this – assigned or assumed. Assigned or assumed roles because in this it sometimes is our job to speak up. And the assigned would be something like our young children. If you are a work supervisor and you have people that you are responsible for.

Organizational leadership. Either in a ministry or in a church. How about teachers? You just got a classroom full of kids and this is assigned to you to teach and to correct. There are right and wrong ways that we can speak these words that we are assigned. Like say, Report cards are going to be coming out before we know it. We get a bad report card on our child. We could speak words like, "Stop being lazy. You need to get your act together. "You need to step it up." Can you feel that sympathetic response? You can feel it, can't you? When I say those words.

Another way to approach it is, “You are a bright young man.” “You are a bright young woman. I know you can do better.” The first thing you do is elicit that dopamine and serotonin and the Oxytocin so that it can be better received.

I want to take a moment here to say that if you are a parent, you have failed in this before. I am a parent. I have failed in this before. We have all failed in this before because none is righteous. We have all spoken harsh words to our kids inappropriately. And let me just say that the Lord can redeem that, and he will redeem that. And it’s important for us to ask forgiveness from our kids when we do that, letting them know that we are broken too and that we make mistakes too.

How about someone at work or other organization that you have oversight of that you could say something like, “You better start pulling your weight. I know you’re new here, but you need to step it up. I just want to let you know, here are some ways that I think our team can be better with your help. With your help is uplifting, you’re important, you matter. And here are some ways that we can be better.

Now, let’s look at assumed. Not assumed like to take for granted but like to take upon yourself or to take responsibility for. This would be like friends, or coworkers, adult children, other relatives. I hesitate to but I think we could put spouse in this frame because... I hesitate because we have to remember that God didn’t give your spouse to you to correct and train and rebuke them constantly. They are your partner for life to go through the grind of life with, not to constantly be rebuking and correcting.

The important thing with all of these – friends, co workers adult children. Just because you have that title doesn't mean you have that privilege to speak these types of words into their life. Just because you have the title doesn't mean you have the privilege.

This takes us to something that we need to be aware of and that’s relationship equity. Have you established trust with this person? Do they know you and you know them well enough that this can be approached. Is there mutual respect? If not, then it is going to be quarrelsome and it’s not going well.

That is how we at least need to enter into these conversations. Any kind of an entry question I believe in these hard conversations can lead out with a simple question. “Can I share a thought with you?” “Can I share my opinion with you?” “Can I share an observation with you?”

With that, you have put the ball in that person's court to either invite you in or to deny you access. Because it's going to be pretty clear usually. That you've got something that you need to share and that you want to share. And if it's a no? What should you do? Back off. Respect it. If you do that relationship equity, then their might be a time a little bit later, Days, weeks, months, years, that you can approach them again about it. But you need to back off if it's a no and if it's a yes, you've opened up an opportunity for apples of gold in a setting of silver. Fitly spoken words to a person that needs to hear it. They need teaching, rebuke, correction, or training done properly. And if so, then you share in a way that's life giving. Again, some of us have blown it in this area and we have broken relationships, people that we haven't spoken to for years, maybe because we didn't handle this very well. Again, we say that Jesus can redeem broken relationships. And your role here is to continue speaking words of life and being open to reconciliation.

Finally, for those who wonder *why aren't my words speaking life?* You know if you've been here long enough, we are not into behavior modification. The "Tell you're sister you are sorry." Because if you say that, that means it happened. No. We are far more concerned about deeper issues than that.

Matthew 12: 33-35 <sup>33</sup> ***"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. <sup>34</sup> You brood of vipers... This is Jesus to the Pharisees. ...how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. <sup>35</sup> 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.*** It begs the question what is good in us? Because none of us is good apart from Christ and apart from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit of Almighty God. And each of us that have placed faith in Jesus Christ has the Holy Spirit in us and that is the good in us from which we should be speaking words of life. So then we know the best way to speak words of life is to allow them to flow from The Word who is The life.

***In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the word was God.*** And that is Jesus. And Jesus said, ***I am the way and the truth and the life.***" May our words be speaking life. If you've not placed faith in Christ, as we wrap up here today, the teaching team will be down front to pray with you about that or about anything else. We invite you to participate in that with them.

And, church family, may we be respectful of our words and that it can be a lot more serious than what we think it is. And respect the power of our words as we seek to speak life to others in all that we do.

Father, we love you and we are grateful for your word and for your son, Christ. We pray that as we receive him and we have the indwelling of your Holy Spirit, that he would be the good in us from which we speak words of life. We love you and we give you praise in all things. In Christ's name, everyone agreed and said... Amen