



YOU'RE WRONG!

IT'S GOD'S WILL!

YOU DON'T HAVE ENOUGH FAITH.

HERE'S WHAT GOD WANTS YOU TO DO!

YOU JUST NEED TO PRAY MORE!

YOU'RE OVERTHINKING IT!

IF YOU REALLY LOVED GOD...

YOU NEED TO LET GO AND LET GOD.

THAT'S A LACK OF DISCERNMENT!

YOU'RE TOO SENSITIVE!

PAUSE.
PROCESS.
CHOOSE WISELY.

SLOW TO SPEAK
THE POWER OF PAUSE IN A LOUD WORLD
JAMES 1:19

Speak well.

Listen well.

Love well.

Speak well—

Words that make whole.

Ephesians 4.29

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out (proceed from) of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit (minister grace to) those who listen.

Ephesians 4.29

The big deal about words—

For He spoke, and it came to be;

He commanded, and it stood firm. (Psalm 33.9)

Speech and words are noteworthy on the very first page of Scripture. Eight times we read, “And God said . . .” Twice we read: “God blessed them and said . . .” When God spoke, it had an effect. We may not think of our words in the same way, but according to Scripture, every word we speak is doing something and it is having a lasting internal impact on someone else.

The word unwholesome means: that which does not make whole.
According to Scripture, our words are either—

- ▶ making someone whole or taking something away from them;
- ▶ building someone up or tearing something down;
- ▶ giving life or causing death;
- ▶ adding dignity or stripping it away;
- ▶ strengthening the relationship—or weakening it.

There is no neutral.

What's behind our words?

“Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Luke 6.45)

Behind our words there is substance. God spoke, and out of the substance of His infinite nature, “it came to be.” We are formed by a variety of factors: genetics, environment, culture, relationships, experiences—good and bad. All of this is “stored up” in us and shapes us into the person we are when we open our mouths. In the language of Jesus, we speak out of what is accumulating in our hearts that, over time, has formed us.

The issue is not just what we say; it is who we are. It is: what is in our heart when we say it? The truth is that we are always speaking from somewhere:

- ▶ out of grace or feeling offended;
- ▶ out of peace or stress;
- ▶ out of security or feeling disrespected.

Words reveal formation. As a follower of Christ, am I being deeply formed into a person of love who does not take offense (1 Peter 4.8), who speaks with grace (Colossians 4.6) and restraint (Proverbs 17.27), or am I more deeply formed by other factors?

The weight of our words—

Death and life are in the power of the tongue,
and those who love it will eat its fruits. (Proverbs 18.21)

Every word carries weight and every word does something. Words are catalogued by the brain and stored away—they don't simply evaporate. The human brain has a built-in cognitive bias that gives greater weight to negative words. This is why people remember criticism for years and compliments for days. It's just the way our brains work.

And that's the reason Scripture tells us to only speak "what is helpful for building others up according to their needs."

The fact is that when we speak, our words are either—

- ▶ strengthening someone or weakening them;
- ▶ adding peace or adding pressure;
- ▶ building trust or breaking it.

With our words, we are literally shaping what happens inside of someone; we are activating neurological responses that are life-giving or life-crippling.

That makes every word that we speak a matter of spiritual responsibility. Jesus said—

“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.” (Matthew 12.36-37)

Such is the weight of our words; they effect life or death in the present and accrue for accountability in eternity. As those made in the image of God and recreated in the image of Jesus, our words literally have eternal impact.

Speak to build up . . .

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. (Ephesians 4.29)

What is our motivation when we speak? If we are honest, we speak to win. We want to correct someone, make our point, prove we are the one who is right. But Scripture doesn't say "speak so you can win," or "speak to prove your point." It says to speak "only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs."

The issue isn't what ***I*** have to say but, is what I am about to say actually going to help this person? Is it going to build them up?

Because:

- ▶ You can be right and still tear someone down.
- ▶ You can correct someone and still take their dignity.
- ▶ You can win the argument but lose the relationship.

When that happens we have not made someone whole but left them less—and it is the antithesis of Jesus who came to give life to the full (John 10.10). You made your point but what did you win?

From impulse to intention—

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. (Ephesians 4.29)

David prayed:

Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord;

keep watch over the door of my lips. (Psalm 141.3)

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, David was articulating a principle of emotional intelligence and the insights of neuroscience.

Harmful responses aren't a knowledge problem but a regulation problem. Many times we react because we were triggered. Deep in the brain is a part called the amygdala, part of the limbic system. The limbic system processes and supports emotions, behaviors, motivations, memories, and the automatic nervous system. When you feel triggered, the amygdala fires rapidly, pushing you toward quick defensive speech—sarcasm, snapping, interrupting. The regulation system, the prefrontal cortex, takes a bit longer to engage.

When we react this way, we aren't building—we are releasing emotion. Like David, James is articulating principles of emotional intelligence and neuroscience when he writes, "Be slow to speak." Self-control in speech is literally the act of letting that higher system come online before you respond, regulating things like: empathy, insight, response flexibility, and body language. That pause lets you speak intentionally, controlling what comes out of your mouth, enabling you to formulate a response that will build that person up—because *Scripture always points our speech toward the benefit of the other person.*

It's not just what you say . . .

A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15.1)

It's not just what you say; it's also *how* you say it. People don't hear well when they feel unsafe, and we create that environment in different ways: tone, volume, intensity, posture. The same words will have the opposite effect when spoken with gentleness vs. harshness. Gentleness lowers defenses while harshness creates a threat environment.

You may be speaking the truth but the **way** you speak it may cause that person to feel they are being verbally assaulted. In that moment, you have communicated that the relationship is not what is important to you—being right matters more to you.

Neurologically, the amygdala registers fear, causing the automatic nervous system to release cortisol and elevate blood pressure; in the hippocampus, that moment is stored as a threat and you begin to avoid speaking with that person. Speaking well builds up—it doesn't fracture the relationship.

Speaking well—

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** (minister grace) **those who listen.** (Ephesians 4.29)

There is a double intentionality meant to insure that we speak well: (1) speaking only what is helpful for building up others according to their needs, and (2) benefiting those who are listening. Tens of millions of unchurched Christians are the tragic consequence of communities failing to minister grace when they spoke.

The physiological reality is that our brains are wired to remember negative words more than positive ones—it's simply a human and scientifically verified reality. One harsh moment can outweigh many good ones—which means that speaking well and building up has to be intentional, not occasional. We should always be looking for opportunities to affirm, encourage, and minister grace.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “Let your conversation always be full of grace” (Colossians 4.6). “Grace here is a reference to “graciousness”—intentional, grace-filled interactions should be the hallmark of every Christian community. Unfortunately, millions have found that Christian communities are not where “mercy triumphs over judgment.”

What are you and I doing to intentionally build a grace-filled community? What are we intentionally saying to reflect Jesus who came “full of grace and truth?”

Speaking well—like Jesus.

“For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.” (John 9:49-50)

John 1:14 says that Jesus came “full of grace and truth.” Not just truth — grace *and* truth. Jesus had a lot to say but he also said that he only spoke what the Father told him to say and **how** the Father told him to say it. That means everything he said was intentional. He spoke the truth and he spoke it well.

Jesus didn't just say the right thing. He said it:

- ▶ the right way,
- ▶ at the right time,
- ▶ for the right purpose.

“I only speak what the Father tells me to say — and how to say it.”

Jesus never spoke impulsively, never to win an argument, never to overwhelm. He spoke life-giving truth from a heart full of grace.

And people — especially sinful, broken people — were drawn to Him; they heard Him “with delight” (Mark 12.37).

The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.
He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

Isaiah 50.4