

The Right Word At the Right Time

Listen to this beautiful, inspired advice:

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those that hear (Eph. 4:29).

The adjective “unwholesome” is the Greek word *sapros*, which literally means “rotten, putrid, decayed, of poor quality, unfit for use” (Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, p. 317). It is found outside the Bible to describe grapes that fell off the vine and began rotting on the ground, or stones that were crumbling causing a wall to lean. Inside the Bible, it is used of decaying logs and fish.

Thus, this passage does not really address vulgarity, slander, angry outbursts, lying, or gossip (all of which are addressed elsewhere in Ephesians). Instead, this passage addresses words which are unhelpful, that provide no benefit, or cause the hearer to recoil or perhaps even stumble.

Paul says that we must learn to speak words that are “good for edification.” That word is *oikodomeo*, and by the literal roots means “to build a home” (Vine’s *Dictionary of New Testament Words*).

Clearly there is a difference between words that build up, and words that tear down—though sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference from one situation to the next. In hopes of improving, I offer this prayer:

Dear Lord, please help me to “set a guard on the door of my lips,” (Psalm 141:3), that I might pause to weigh my words while they are still in my mind, before I have spoken them. Help me to issue a challenge to my thoughts, and determine whether or not they should be allowed to proceed from my mouth in the form of verbal communication (or, for that matter, allowed to flow from my hands in the form of Facebook posts or e-mails). Help me to consider whether or not they will be helpful. I read that “the heart of the righteous ponders how to answer” (Prov. 15:28), so help me to be less hasty in my speech.

Dear Lord, please help me to figure out what is good “according to the need of the moment.” Help me to figure out what to say, and when to say it. Help me to stop whining about my own anxieties and concerns and instead sit patiently with others; to weep with those who weep, to rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom. 12:15).

I know that the need of the moment may be for comfort. “Anxiety in the heart of a man

weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad” (Prov. 12:25). “Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones” (Prov. 16:24). Help me to be the one to offer uplifting words on those occasions.

I know that the need of the moment may be for silence. “There is one who speaks rashly, like the thrusts of a sword” (Prov. 12:18). Sometimes new Christians are still maturing and learning what’s expected; help me to pick my battles well, as Your Son picked them (John 16:12). Help me not to be that person who guffaws at a funeral, who crushes the spirit of rambunctious children, who blames a person’s sufferings on what I perceive to be his inadequacies. There may be a time for these things, but help me keep my mouth shut when I should sit still and offer the gift of tranquility.

Lord, I do not deny the fact that the need of the moment may be for stern confrontation. I know that you wrote these passages for me to read and follow:

My brethren, if anyone among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19-20).

If anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted (Galatians 6:1).

Help me have the courage to speak up when I should, but always in a way designed to bring a person to understanding and repentance. I want them to honor You, not me. Help me never to speak in order to make myself appear significant or feel vindicated, especially when I am the target of antagonism (2 Tim. 2:24-26). I remember how this got Moses into trouble (Numbers 20:10-12) and I will do my best not to repeat his mistake.

Lord, You can read the heart (John 2:25), and I cannot. So, help me to sort it all out—to “admonish the unruly, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak” (1 Thess. 5:14)—all at the appropriate times.

Dear Lord, in all these encounters, please help me to be a channel of Your blessings, to “give grace to those that hear.” Paul said it in another way:

Conduct yourself with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person (Colossians 4:6).

Help me to use my speech to improve people’s lives, as salt improves people’s food, especially when it comes to presenting the gospel to those who have not yet come to know Your truth and grace.

Dear Lord, please help me to realize that speaking grace-filled words according to the need of the moment doesn't mean I'll always be loved or praised or thanked for it. I remember how in just one sermon in the synagogue, people went from "speaking well" of Your Son and "wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips" (Luke 4:22) to suddenly being "filled with rage as they heard these things" (4:28). They tried to kill Him, and all He did was pointedly read Scripture! I hope it won't come to that, but I also hope I will be willing to endure any persecution or difficulty in order to stay true to His example. Even during the abuse of the cross, "while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats" (1 Peter 2:21-23). I would rather comfort the afflicted than afflict the comfortable; but I know I must do that too sometimes. Help me remember that love demands it.

Finally, dear Lord, while it's on my mind, help me to learn to receive correction too. You have said plenty about that. "Let the righteous smite me in kindness and reprove me; it is oil upon the head; do not let my head refuse it" (Psalm 141:5). "He whose ear listens to the life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. He who neglects discipline despises himself" (Prov. 15:31-32). Help me to prefer an honest scolding to insincere flattery, and to realize that "faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Prov. 27:6). Help me avoid defense mechanisms. Help me to appreciate the courage of those who point out faults in my character, and never retaliate against those who have my best interests in mind.

Amen!

—John Guzzetta