

## **Sermon 19: Ephesians 4:29: New Speech**

### **OUTLINE**

The heart and speech  
Corrupting speech  
Edifying speech

### **INTRODUCTION**

'There is a story in the Jewish Talmud about a king who sent two jesters on an errand. He instructed them, "Foolish Simon, go and bring me back the best thing in the world. And you, Silly John, go and find for me the worst thing in the world." Both clowns were back in short order, each carrying a pack-age. Simon bowed low and grinned. "Behold, Sire, the best thing in the world." His package contained a tongue. John snickered and quickly unwrapped his bundle. "The worst thing in the world, Sire." Another tongue! (Paul Lee Tan, Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations [Assurance Publishers], # 6387, p. 1422.)' This story makes the point well, that the tongue has an incredible potential for good and evil. Life and death, corruption or edification, reconcile or divide; Proverbs 18:21 rightly says, 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue.'

Today as we continue in our look at Ephesians we come to this issue of the double edged nature of the tongue, 4:29, '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.' Lets remember the context. Paul is talking about being new creatures in Christ. He has told us about how the gospel causes us to be a new person and now in light of that newness we must put off the old man's ways and walk in the ways of the Spirit. We must no longer walk like the Gentiles who do not know God and have not experienced the resurrection power of Christ in regeneration; we must walk in the power of the Spirit and in the likeness of the new man we will one day be in the new creation, like Christ. Paul moves from that general premise of being new to the specifics of the new life. V25 was about putting away lying; v26 anger; v28 stealing and in its place generosity. In v29 Paul returns to the matter of the tongue. What is interesting to note is that the tongue is obviously a big problem that it needs to be addressed more than once. In fact in the immediate context Paul addresses our speech four times. In v25 it is the issue of lying; in v29 the verse we will be considering today it is the double edged nature of corrupting or building up that is in view; in v31 we see Paul having to address further examples of weaponized speech as he talks about clamor and slander; then again in 5:4 he says, 'Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.'

We will have many opportunities to talk about the tongue so we do not need to try and say everything about it today. Today I would like us to zero in on our text and think about three things that relate to the new speech patterns that ought to mark us as new creatures in Christ. Firstly, we want to look at the heart and speech and show how new hearts are necessary for this change. Secondly, we want to think about what Paul means by corrupting speech. Thirdly, we want to be positive and look at the God given purpose for our speech as we consider its purpose for edification.

### **The heart and speech**

Let me begin by asking you, how many of you had your mouth washed out with soap for bad language as a child? Does soap have the power to remove bad language? The answer

is no. That event is likely embedded in your memory and caused you to think twice, at least about getting caught using bad language, but the true cure for bad language is grace not soap. The true problem with bad speech is a bad heart and so if we want to address the matter of speech we have to address the matter of the heart. The last thing we want to do is hang fruit on fruit trees by getting people to clean up their speech without changing their hearts. We do not want to breed hypocrites like the ones Jesus condemns in Matt. 12:34, 'You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.'

Whether it is washing mouths out with soap or applying the rod, let us be clear these do not have the power to change the heart. These things can create fear or punishment which will inhibit people from bad actions but it does not cause them to stop doing them in their hearts before God, nor do they bring about the new birth and secure salvation. This does not mean that we stop biblical discipline, no it means that we do not trust to acts of law but put our trust in the Spirit and the gospel to change the hearts of our children. It means that we don't think that pain is the best parent and changer of hearts but grace. This means that any act of discipline must be accompanied with a clear reminder that the discipline is a preventative not a cure, that it is a mini judgement that points to our need for Christ. Discipline does not end with the administering of punishment but only begins with it.

As we approach the matter of our speech we must be careful I want to approach it the way Paul does not the way the Pharisees do. The Pharisees are concerned to stop the manifestations of sin but do not address the heart. They are content with performance but not heart obedience and agreement with God's laws. They believe that being good is all about being able to put on a good act and convince others but they do not address the heart. The Bible teaches us that our speech is a symptom of our heart's condition, the heart is the wellspring of every aspect of our lives including our speech. So please notice in the context how Paul maps it out. In 4:17-24 he talks about putting off bad ways but he roots this new life not in simply trying to better and keep more laws but sees this new life as flowing logically from the being found in Christ. It is because we have put off the old man at the moment of our regeneration that we go on in the power of the Spirit to put off the old man's ways. We are no longer in Adam but we are in Christ, we are no longer dead in sin we are alive in the Spirit, we are not in the place of not being able to obey but because of the new birth and the indwelling Spirit we can now obey, and this includes new speech patterns. Ephesians 4:29 is not prescribing the way to get to heaven--go to heaven by your good speech; no, Paul is describing those who already going to heaven--all born again people speak out of their new hearts. He is calling us to live out the newness that we have experienced. So in this sermon hear me carefully, I am not saying stop saying bad stuff and start saying good stuff. No I am saying, be born again and in God's power show this newness by not indulging in the speech of those who are still dead in sin, and allow your speech to be an instrument of God's blessing to others as He intended it to be.

### **Corrupting speech**

'Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths.' In this imperative Paul uses the word 'corrupting'. This is from the Greek word *sapros*. It is only used in 5 places in the NT. All the other times are by Christ and are only in reference to rotten/bad fruit or rotten or bad fish. The word can mean bad, worthless, rotten, putrid, diseased. Here are its uses in the NT:

Matt. 7:17-18, 'So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the *diseased* tree bears bad fruit.

<sup>18</sup> A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a *diseased* tree bear good fruit.'

Matt. 12:33, 'Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree *bad* and its fruit *bad*, for the tree is known by its fruit.'

Matt. 13:48, 'When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the *bad*.'

Luke 6:43, 'For no good tree bears *bad* fruit, nor again does a *bad* tree bear good fruit.'

It is no mistake that Paul uses this word to describe our speech for it was the primary way Jesus described our speech. And as we have already pointed out, Jesus connects good hearts with good speech and bad hearts with bad speech. And since we now have new hearts we should not speak as if our hearts were still dead.

What are some examples of corrupt speech? Puritan Thomas Watson when talking about the world of iniquity in the tongue describes the many ways in which sin uses the tongue. There is the silent tongue which does not speak when it should; the earthly tongue which is full of crass references and humor; the angry tongue; the vain tongue which is taken up with inane things; the judgmental tongue; the slanderous tongue; the lying tongue; the flattering tongue; the boasting tongue; the oath-breaking tongue; the seducing tongue; the cruel tongue; the murmuring/complaining tongue; the scoffing tongue; the blasphemous tongue and the unjust tongue. Each one of us depending on our personality types, preferences, the bad habits we developed, and the people we hung out with, will have different areas of weakness and temptation when it comes to corrupt speech. Think deeply about the ways in which being dead in sin manifested itself in your life before you knew Christ and ponder whether you are indeed putting off those corrupt patterns of speech.

Let us say a few words about the impact of bad speech. Our words generally affect God, ourselves and the person we are speaking to, and where it applies the person we are speaking about or is affected by our words. We are made in God's image and are to use our tongues in a way that reflects His own truthfulness, kindness, love, holiness, grace etc. Our witness, our testimony, our representation of God before the world can be made or broken in how we use our speech. Today we live in an age of online communication where the sins of the tongue/keyboard have been multiplied tenfold. The basic rule with public communication is that you have to be twice as careful. When in private conversation you only have to take one person/audience into account as you speak. You can watch their body language, evaluate whether you are being understood, and have engagement with your hearer. Online our words go out without a proper context into many different situations that we did not foresee when we wrote them. This should lead us to be very hesitant to broadcast our views publicly, less is more in this case. We should double check that we have understood those who are engaging with taking the bible's advice to be slow to speak and to think before we speak. When we speak online we should not have a false sense of bravery and imitate the rude and discourteous way people now speak to each other, we should be countercultural. We should be able to spot a Christian engaging online by their courtesy, Tit. 3:2, 'to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.' We should avoid the typical anger and being triggered that happens online, we know that the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Most public platforms are people speaking and appealing to their own tribe not engaging in discourse to learn. We have to be sensitive to see whether there is teachability and not give our pearls to swine.

We can attract or repel others by the way we speak. The bible has much to say about the negative effects of the tongue. James 3:6, 'And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.' The entire course of our lives or

another's life can be changed with one lie, one insult, one broken promise. Proverbs 11:9, 'With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor, but by knowledge the righteous are delivered.' 12:18, 'There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.' 15:4, 'A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.' 16:27-28, 'A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.' 18:6-8, 'A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating. A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul. The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.'

Alan Redpath has a helpful acronym that might help with regards to putting a filter over your mouth. He using the letters of the word THINK. And so before you say what you are about to say ask yourself is, T, true; is it H, helpful; is it, I, inspiring; is it, N, necessary; is it, K, kind? If not then it is probably not worth saying.

### **Edifying speech**

'But only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.' Paul says much more about the positive use of the tongue in this verse than what we should not say. Paul brings into view one of the God given purpose of our tongues. The first and main purpose is to praise God, but our tongues not only serve the first and greatest commandment but the second as well, in loving our neighbour. Paul tells us that God has positioned our tongues as His instruments of grace. Our speech brings God's grace into other's lives.

We live in an age of the right to freedom of expression. Especially in light of the pronoun wars, and the desire on the part of believers to call out certain sins in being faithful to the Bible, even Christians are using this political principle to defend their Christian speech. This verse reminds us that this can be wrong headed. We must speak the truth in love not because we have the right to express ourselves freely, but because God commands us to only say those things that build up. Our tongues, contrary to modern political theory are not our own, our bodies are not our own, we are God's and He has a purpose for those gifts that He has given us. When exploring the relationship between the state and the individual, freedom of expression is a good principle, but when exploring the relationship between God and the individual things must change, it is no longer about my rights among equals but my duty before my Creator. So listen then to the emphatic nature of Paul's words, 'but only such as is good for building up.' These are worldview adjusting words that remind us that loving our neighbour is a duty that must govern our speech, and that God is allowed to demand that you use your speech for His purposes. Now before you get the impression that we are setting up a new bondage, we must remind ourselves that our true happiness lies in doing what we are made for, our hearts are happiest in holiness and in giving love, and this applies in using our speech to bless others.

Firstly, consider what sorts of speech edify. We could make a long list here, but here are just a few. One of the most obvious is encouragement, this is a spiritual gift, and something every person needs to thrive. Instead of a constant stream of telling a person how useless they are we are to encourage them. Not in dishonest ways like many modern psychological schools teach but speaking the truth to encourage. Husbands and wives need this, children and parents need this, employers and employees, teachers and students. Our relationships thrive when we invest in them with encouragement. There is appreciation. This is showing your gratitude and thanks. There are words of gentleness, love, patience, and kindness. Speaking the Bible to each other and instructing each other. There is praying for each

other. There is preaching the gospel and gentle words of correction. When we speak the truth in love God uses this to bless others.

Secondly notice that Paul says, as fits the occasion. This means that we need to think carefully about the person we are speaking to and not speak at them with slogans but craft the message for them that they need to hear at this time. A young Christian needs different words than an older one, a person in mourning needs different words to those who are rejoicing, a hardened backslider needs a different message to the one with a wounded conscience. Some of us are guilty of applying the truth insensitively, our speech must be fitting.

Thirdly, what does it mean that our speech will give grace to those who hear? It means that we speak on the basis of grace and not merit. In other words, we don't only speak nicely to those who speak nicely to us but our speech is driven by the principle of grace. This will ensure that we speak lovingly to our enemy as well as our friends. It means that we speak in tones that are influenced by the principle of grace. Grace remembers that we are all sinners and does not take on the strident tones of the self-righteous; grace remembers that it speaks with God's own willing invitation to the sinner, as God beseeching the sinner through us, and so does not speak in such a way as to drive off the sinner in fear or anger. And of course giving grace to those hear includes speaking about the message of grace. The gospel should be the constant centre of our talk as Christianity, the gospel is an endless fountain of joy, conviction, satisfaction and all that we need. Let the gospel of grace be on your lips as you speak.

The tongue can be a tool of construction or destruction, as Christians we have been brought out of darkness into light. The devil is no longer the master of our mouths Christ is. We should speak in such a way as to reveal the work of grace within us no longer doing the devil's work but God's with our speech. '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.'