

Speaking the Truth in Love 2024
Ephesians 4:1-6, 14-16 James 3:2-5, 10

Ephesians 4:1-6, 14-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

James 3:2-5, 10 (New Revised Standard Version)

For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

A teenager, our pastor asked me to help lead our Sunday worship,
to read some of the liturgy and lead the unison prayers that week,
and despite my discomfort and trepidation, somehow I did it.

The following week I received a note from a woman I didn't know,
who complimented me with some very kind and generous comments,
and suggested that she could see me becoming a pastor someday.

I still have her note, I've kept it all these years,
and perhaps for better or for worse,
her words may be a part of why I am standing here today.

Our words can have an inspiring effect of hope and affirmation,
that can encourage toward our best effort, courage & perseverance,
& provide stamina to achieve far beyond what we thought possible.

The right words can significantly turn a person's direction in life.

For example, consider the powerful words of Martin Luther King's
"I have a dream" speech that altered our hope and vision on race...

... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where
they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

He placed a vision of racial equality before the American people,

that at least for my generation, spoke most powerfully to help transform the sort of nation we wanted our country to be.

Yes indeed, our words can inspire, affirm and change lives,
encourage and enhance achievement beyond our expectations.
In your past, haven't there been teachers, coaches, mentors,
whose words motivated and propelled you toward excellence?...
... who inspired you to develop your best, your talents and abilities?

Isn't it often the encouraging and inspiring words of others
that can powerfully lead us to invest ourselves more fully
toward accomplishing the things most worthwhile in life?

What a wonderful gift and instrument God has given to each of us,
that by our words, we can bless, encourage and inspire other people,
to help them accomplish their goals, to improve their lives.

Can you think of any talent, interest, skill or ability you have,
that was not first noticed & affirmed sometime by someone else?,
or that was not encouraged at some point by what someone said?

**Our words can have impact to call people to greatness & excellence.
Our words are a powerful instrument, are truly an opportunity
through which we can inspire and even bless someone's life.**

Consider what timely, right words well-spoken can accomplish.
But regrettably, we don't always use that tool for good & blessings,
or to offer hope, help, affirmation and encouragement to others,
but rather sometimes we bring harm & havoc to our relationships,
with words that cannot be unsaid, for the damage has been done.

**Our words are a part of our fallen and corrupted human condition,
and our words can have a devastating effect on someone's life.**

Do you remember the late 1970's pop-singer Karen Carpenter,
whose early & tragic death was the result of an eating disorder?
Apparently she became obsessed with weight loss, trying to look thin
after a critical review of her music appeared in a pop magazine,
in which the author referred to her as "Richard's chubby sister."
Those words had a disastrous impact on her self-image.

And can't we all recall cruel and hurtful words that crushed us,
words written and spoken causing wounds and scars we still bear,
and perhaps even worse and even more tragic, our own
harsh, angry and thoughtless words toward others.

How many of God's chosen servants, workers and volunteers
have been harmed, attacked, discouraged and driven away
by the harsh criticism of a **bitter, vindictive & hurtful tongue?**

Listen to how James describes our problem with words, vs. 2, 5, 10

For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! **From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.**

Our words under stress can reveal a wounded heart & brokenness within
like fetid and foul gas escaping from a sewer of sin & shame within.

At issue is **the motivation behind speaking our critical judgment**,
and how are our words & deeds are being received by other people
the same ones that Jesus calls & commands us to love and serve,
and allow for God's Spirit to speak to them
through our faithful & gentle words & example.

It is a challenge to control and always get our words right.
We've all said & written harsh and destructive words of attack,
sent an email or text or written something cold on social media
that runs counter to grace & faith, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I cannot totally eliminate all of my mis-spoken and hurtful words,
but I can seek to grow, to change and adjust my focus & perspective,
which then makes more space for God **to change my heart and nature.**

I can change my habit & tendency to complain, criticize & be negative
by looking instead for what is good, to encourage and affirm others.

Our **power-of-word** can be used to encourage and offer grace and hope.
We can tell others about God's love and faithfulness with our words,
remind them of who they really are, i.e. God's precious children,
and our words of grace can help **change our own hearts and nature**,
as we seek opportunity to deliver **a timely and kind word of hope.**

I can refuse to dwell in fault-seeking and **critical-attitude-mode**
but rather strive to appreciate the good **by looking to focus on it**, and as a spiritual discipline,
by my choice of attitude,
strive to find something kind to say that encourages.

We do have considerable power and control to choose with intent & care
and we can use God's gift of our words to accomplish good & blessing.

Our words can become for us an authentic place of spiritual growth,
so that the fountain of my thoughts will lead to speech
that then flows with kindness, gentleness and grace,
- as we read in Ephesians 4,1~3, 15~16

I beg you to **lead a life worthy** of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, **bearing with one another in love**, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ... But **speaking the truth in love**, we must grow up in every way into Christ, joined and knit together as equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in **building itself up in love.**

That church was trying to make sense of their unity amid diversity,
and trying to figure out what God was up to in bringing together
Christians from both Jewish and gentile ethnic backgrounds.

The first 3 chapters of Ephesians focus on God's gracious love,
and how in Jesus Christ, God desires and calls reaching out to
all of humanity to walk in grace & faithfulness with the Lord.

Chapter 4 begins with the word "therefore",
creating a link between what God has done and what God is doing,
and the ethical demands described in the next chapters, vs. 1,
... **to lead a life worthy** of the calling to which you have been called.

Live life as an appropriate response to God's grace and blessings.
**The author is describing the unity in Christ that we all share,
that each one is a uniquely beloved child of God by grace,
each with gifts given by God to do the mission of the Church.**

And all of the remaining chapters of Ephesians
each describe the practical implications of God's gracious love,
that 1st God loves us, then we recognize it, believe & respond.

**This Ephesians text is saying that despite all our differences,
we are of the one body of Christ, all of the one Spirit,
called to the one hope, of the one Lord, one in faith,
one baptism, and one God who is Father of us all.**

**Our unity, however, does not mean uniformity, and does not deny
or obliterate our distinctions, differences and variances,
but celebrates our uniqueness as God's gift toward mission.**

One of the ways we rightly respond to God's gracious love
is by looking for the good, worthy and hopeful in others,
and choosing to encourage and affirm our family in faith.

We're called to build up others of the body of Christ, the Church,
as a reflection of God's love flowing in and through each of us.

Consider the amazing potential of our words to accomplish good,
to inspire great deeds and faith, to encourage and affirm,
to bring healing, reconciliation and new life,
for our words can be the very life blood of hope & blessings.

Today, we are headed toward some extremely contentious times,
filled with bitterness, deceit, hatred – it all surrounds us.

The politics of the upcoming election will be harsh & overwhelming,
with almost unlimited resources spent fostering hatred & attack.

We can choose to carry all that within us and allow it to dominate us,
which will then surely spill and overflow, infecting others,
adding to the rancor, distrust, resentment and hostility
that may well spread, crush and destroy us, and our land.

We live in a world desperate for a word of grace and hope.

We must decide now, not to allow that depravity to happen here,
among this church, those we've grown to know, work with and love,
or to pollute this holy place of sanctuary and welcome,
where by the grace of God our lives have intersected,
or to infect this community of faith formed by the Lord, vs. 15-16,

**But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head,
into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is
equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.**

Here in this place, our focus must always remain on Jesus Christ,
God's grace & the promised Kingdom of God that awaits fulfillment,
for then in God's Kingdom or there in God's Kingdom,
none of this world's stuff will go with us or matter.

Earlier in the last century, Rev. A.W. Tozer pointed out,
that if 100 pianos are all tuned to the same tuning fork,
then they will all automatically be in tune with each other.

So too, if our focus always remains on Jesus Christ,
then that will keep all of us in tune with each other.

The power of words that can do so much damage, hurt and harm,
also has the power that can usefully bring healing and hope.

In Ephesians, as we realize and recognize how very much God loves us,
we respond by living within the context of a faith community,
where together we are called to proclaim the Good News,
by living lives of useful & faithful service, hope & joy,
lives of love that strengthens & encourages the weak & wounded.

Our call and task is to be a people who uplift, affirm and encourage,
who look for opportunities where we can build others using
this gift & tool of words to accomplish blessings & good.
For by the choices we choose to make,
we can help reshape a destiny by offering support and hope.

We can be encouragers, who bring out the very best in others
whose words who lift-up the discouraged, broken and wounded,
and who help those who have fallen to get back up again
by looking for any opportunity to offer hope & praise.

Honestly, I am deeply concerned about the world around us,
the foul, defective and depraved winds of our media and culture,
that tries to blow divisive trash and polarizing rubbish
into and among this beloved & precious family of faith.

But I do have an idea of something that might help us.

I suggest that we each of memorize & repeat these verses often,
that we pray this prayer each time before we speak or write,

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 51:10 & 19:14)