

The Tools of Unity

EPHESIANS 4:29 (NRSV) *Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ...* ³¹*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,* ³²*and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

MATTHEW 12:36-37 (NIV) *I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. ³⁷For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."*

PSALM 19:14 (KJV) *Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.*

Today's Memory Verse: *"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear"* (Eph.4:29)

No evil talk... In the original language, "no putrid words". One obvious application is **Gossip**—idle talk; useless words; rumor, especially about the private affairs of others; spreading dirt and misinformation (especially if there's a scandal).

A second application, especially significant to us today, is Opinion. Wikipedia says an **opinion** is "a judgment, viewpoint, or statement about matters that are subjective, i.e. based on less than absolute certainty; the result of emotion or biased interpretation of data. What distinguishes fact from opinion is that facts are verifiable, i.e. can be objectively proven."

We love our opinions! We cling to them; treasure them; defend them. And we have a right to our opinions; but no one is obligated to share them; in fact, "opinions" have little intrinsic value, and quite often can be divisive. In most cases, opinions would fall under the category of "idle talk;" "useless words."

We have become a script culture: "Words are cheap." Will Rogers said, "The only thing I know is what I read in the newspaper." (I wonder what he'd say about today's "news" media, much of which carries more opinion than the simple reporting of news.)

But in our script culture we devalue spoken words: "If you really mean something, write it down." "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one, any day."

But if you think words aren't important, spend an hour with a middle school child who's been called names at school. "Sticks and stones may break my bones; but words will never hurt me." That's a lie.

Words are important. Words can build up or tear down. In our Gospel text Jesus said, *"by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."*

Let's go back to our memory verse: *"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear."* I find four litmus tests by which we can judge the use of our own words—four ways to help *"the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts to be*
Sticks and Stones

acceptable to (God), our strength and our redeemer.”

Is it useful? One of my primary social incompetence's is that I'm not good at small talk. No, I'm not saying every conversation has to have some deep significance. There's value in chatting with a friend over lunch. That's useful. It has a purpose: it shares information of mutual interest, it strengthens relationships.

But the writer of Ephesians qualifies the usefulness of our words: are they “useful for building up?” Do our words Build Up? Do they edify? Do they make things better? Remember Momma's dictum, “If you can't say something nice...”?

Again, I'm not calling for sugar-coating every conversation or avoiding controversy and disagreement. There are valid times for constructive criticism. Constructive. And whether a criticism is received as constructive probably has more to do with how it's presented than with what is said. Does it build up?

And there are valid times for debate. Disagreement is not, in itself, a bad thing. But in the midst of disagreement, words that are useful for building up are aimed at working together to discover a resolution that meets everybody's needs (not necessarily everybody's desires and preferences). Does it build up?

When I do conflict resolution—married couples, parents and children, co-workers—I always begin with a question: “Do you really want to resolve the issue between you; or do you just want to ‘win the fight’?” Words used to “win the fight” will never build up.

And the writer of Ephesians continues adding layer upon layer to his counsel to let “*the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to God...*” Are they “⁽¹⁾ *useful for* ⁽²⁾ *building up, as there is* ⁽³⁾ *need...*”

And this brings me back to “opinion.” Yes, we have a right to have our opinion; and we have a right to share our opinion. But is there a need for it? Will it be useful? Will it build up?

I've said this many times in recent years. Perhaps by repetition I will be heard. Whenever a need presents itself, in every situation our approach—the words we choose, the strategies we employ—will have one of three effects:

Effective (sometimes the most effective way to respond is simply not to respond. Let it go.) Will it be useful for building up as there is need?

Ineffective. Will it fail to resolve the issue, or even prolong it?

Counterproductive. Will it make things worse?

The writer of Ephesians has one final litmus test by which we can choose words that are useful for building up as there is need: Will our words give grace to those who hear? 17th century poet, François Fénelon, wrote, “Learn to imitate Him who reproves gently...”

Grace is more than a passive refusal to condemn. It's more than permissiveness. Grace doesn't let someone "get away with something."

In permissiveness, something is overlooked; in grace, something is overcome—something is transformed. Paul Tillich wrote, "Grace occurs in spite of separation and estrangement." Henry David Thoreau said most men live lives of "quiet desperation." Grace transforms quiet desperation into bold determination. Grace transforms fate into meaningful destiny; guilt into confidence and courage. There's something triumphant in the word, Grace.

And the writer of Ephesians calls us to let our words be "*useful for building up, as there is need, so that(our) words may give grace to those who hear.*"

One day Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, came to him with a wrathful letter written to a Major-General who had accused him of favoritism. Stanton read Lincoln the letter which was full of sharp retorts and the President told him it was a good letter that the general deserved.

While Stanton, much gratified, was folding up the letter and putting it into its envelope, the President asked him, "What are you going to do with it now?"

"Why, send it, of course," replied Stanton, looking blank.

"Don't do it," said Lincoln.

"But you said it was just what he deserved," demurred the Secretary.

"Yes, I believe he does deserve it, but you don't want to send such a letter as that. Put it in the stove! That's the way I do when I have written a letter while I am mad. It is a good letter, and you have had a good time writing it, and you feel better, don't you? It has done you good and answered its purpose. Now burn it!"

I'm a Rotarian. I haven't been active since I came here; but, I've been strengthened by my association with Rotary International. Rotarians are guided by what we call a "Four-Way Test" of the things we think, say or do. It becomes a moral code for personal and business relationships.

1. *Is it the truth?*
2. *Is it fair to all concerned?*
3. *Will it build goodwill and better friendships?*
4. *Will it be beneficial to all concerned?*

I share this because I see a connection between the "Four Way Test" and our memory verse from Ephesians: *Is it useful? Does it Build up? Is it needed? Does it give Grace?*" Such are the tools of unity.