

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. June Barrow**  
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**Strong Words**  
**Ephesians 4:29 (NIV)**

Words have power. Words are strong – to create and to destroy, to tell truth and to tell lies. Words have shaped you and me. By the power of words, you have believed something, seen something, felt something. By the power of words, you have been shut down, and shut up. By the power of words, your heart has opened, and hope and trust have filled you. By the power of words, your heart has been broken and your hope lost. Words have power.

God the Father spoke and creation came to be: “Let there be light... Let us make man in our own image...” Jesus the Son spoke and there was healing: “Take up your mat and walk.” Jesus spoke pardon: “Neither do I condemn you.” Jesus spoke invitation: “Come follow me.” Jesus spoke identity: “You will no longer be called Simon, but Peter and on you I will build my church.” Jesus spoke peace: “Do not let your hearts be troubled...” Jesus spoke blessing: “Leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing...” And Jesus in fact is called “the Word of God made flesh.”

Words have shaped you, hurt you, healed you, named you, blessed you, encouraged you, taught you. And your own words also have power. Let’s talk about words today – the words you and I speak, as followers of Jesus.

Let’s begin with one verse -- **Ephesians 4:29. 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.**

On the surface this may sound simply like advice to speak nicely, or be positive and encouraging. It does say that – and so do many Hallmark cards. But the Lord has far more to teach us. This verse sits in the middle of a rich passage that has deep guidance for us about the power and the responsibility of our words. In our series on discipleship, we’ve talked about the attitudes of a disciple. Last week Kevin talked about the conduct and character of a disciple. Today we look at our speech.

Paul writes to the Church in Ephesus, to new Christians in the first century. Let’s listen to **Ephesians chapter 4.**

**Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (4:21-24)**

We begin with the “unchanging gospel of Christ.” These new followers of Jesus in Ephesus in the first century learned just what we learn today about the truth that is in Jesus – that he is the unique revelation of the Creator God, that he was one with God, that he came to live among us to show us the face of the Father, that he died and was raised from the dead. And those Ephesians were being taught just as we are now being taught in our sermon series on discipleship, that there is an “old way” to put off, an “old self”

which is not our true or best self, that we must be made new in our attitudes and character. This is just what Kevin taught about last week. And then the passage has advice about our speech. Listen.

**Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. (4:26)**

As followers of Jesus, first and foremost our words must be truthful. We must become more sensitive, more aware, of shading the truth, telling half the truth, misleading another, and of simply lying. The foundation of character is integrity and the foundation of integrity is truthfulness. We must grow in a commitment, in all our speech, to put off falsehood and to speak truthfully.

**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. (4:29)**

Here Paul builds on this foundation of truth. Not only must our words be truthful, they should be helpful, good for building up other people, because all of us need it. We need encouragement, strengthening. We need others to see in us what we can't see in ourselves. "According to their needs" it says; we all need the strengthening words of others that build us up because there is so much to tear us down. Strengthening words, the scripture says, "benefit those who listen." Who among us has not known the power of one encouraging word – "well done" or "that was good."

**Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (4:31-32)**

Here Paul speaks of a particular kind of speech that has something to teach every one of us. Is there anyone here who has not spoken in bitterness, in anger and rage, who has not spoken careless words about another person that were not true (and that is called slander)? This advice does not identify a particular group of people; I think it speaks to our common humanity. Life is hard and relationships are complicated. Opportunities to speak bitterly, to rage, to be habitually argumentative, to be so threatened that we slander another – these opportunities present themselves in the course of ordinary human life. Yet they reflect that old self, that former life that we are exchanging for a new life as we follow Jesus, as we grow in being disciples.

Instead of these old ways of speaking, we are called to speak words of kindness, compassion and forgiveness – in other words, to treat others as God has treated us. We have received kindness, compassion and forgiveness from God and as followers of Jesus we are to offer the same to others. The world is starved for kindness, starved for mercy, starved for forgiveness.

**Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (5:1-2)**

Why must our speech change? Because we have a new and fresh identity. As disciples we are learning, not just that there are now new rules by which to live, but a new identity into which we can grow. We are "dearly loved children." This past Wednesday at our Lenten service, Dee Dee Gowan was our speaker. She is an attorney who left a job at a big law firm downtown to serve our poor neighbors by working at the Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic. She talked about her own coming to faith in Christ, about coming to believe that God saw her, knew her, and loved her, and even delighted in her and sang over her as scripture tells us. She told of stopping in the middle of a conversation with clients –

conversation about legal matters, usually about tax trouble, the IRS, and tax court – and saying, “Do you know that God delights in you? Do you know that God deeply loves you?” And she talked about the power of those words.

**Let your yes be yes and your no be no.** Jesus said: “Let your *yes* be *yes* and your *no* be *no*.” (Matthew 5:37) It’s a command to speak clearly and to understand that there are yes’s and no’s in this life – that we cannot live without making commitments, and a *yes* in one direction is a *no* in another.

For instance, Acts 19 tells the story of the people of Ephesus first hearing about Jesus. Some people believed – they said *yes*. Others did not – they said *no*. Prayers were answered among the new believers and the Bible says: “**The name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.**” (Acts 19:17) It goes on: “Many who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced magic brought their books and burned them publicly.” Ephesus was a center for the occult, and magic and sorcery was lucrative trades. The value of the books was 50,000 drachmas and a drachma was about a day’s wage. The Bible says: “In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”

Do you hear where their faith led them? They had choices to make; yes’s and no’s. All that was in their life could no longer be there. Those who had said yes to being followers of Jesus now had to say *no* to other things in their lives; that’s why they came confessing and renouncing sins in their lives. A *yes* to the Lord Jesus meant a *no* to other practices in their lives. That’s why they burned those expensive books.

Do you remember the moment in the movie *Fireproof* when the young husband carries his computer to the driveway and smashes it with a baseball bat? It’s a very dramatic *no* to the habit of internet pornography and a clear *yes* to becoming an honorable man, a clear *yes* to his marriage.

So it was for these new believers in Ephesus. They confessed their sins as a way of renouncing and turning from them. And then they burned their books on magic even though those books were worth a fortune.

Now, in the advice Paul gives these new Ephesian Christians about how they should speak, there is a pattern: a NO, followed by a YES, followed by a WHY. No, yes, and why.

For instance, ***Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.*** The NO is to everything false, every lie, every shadowing of the truth that may seem convenient or easy. The YES is to truth. We are to speak truthfully. The WHY? Because we are members of one body. We belong to one another. You affect me and I affect you. For our common good as well as for our individual spiritual and moral health, we must be truthful.

***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.*** The NO is to words that tear others down. The YES is to speech that builds up others, that gives them courage as they need it. WHY should we do this? It genuinely benefits them.

Do you know those words: *Speak the truth in love*. Mostly we believe that if we were to hear the truth, it will be a list of our shortcomings and sins. And often deep down, we already agree. Yet the truth in love that is harder for us to hear is this truth: God says, “You are my delight. You are fully forgiven. You are my own beloved son, my own beloved daughter.” It often takes more courage to believe these words than to believe the words that we are sinners.

*Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.*

That's the NO. It may sound simple on the surface – who wants to claim this one – that they choose to speak with bitterness, rage, anger? That with their words they cause conflict to increase – that's brawling – and that they speak unfairly and untruthfully about others – that's slander? But friends, in times of hurt and pain, in times of stress and struggle, in times of genuine conflict – this is entirely “natural” behavior. Most of us have to claim some of the terms on this list.

Though it is natural, it is not the speech of a disciple. As we grow to be more like Jesus, as we follow more and more after him, as we grow in our character, confess our sins to God and one another, as we learn from each other and from God's Word, we are to live in a different way. So that someone who was famous for bitter, angry, raging words begins to speak.... Well, how? Let's look at what Paul writes.

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

There is the YES. Someone who was known for speaking bitter, angry, raging words begins to speak words that are surprisingly kind, genuinely compassionate, and is forgiving of others, perhaps even before they ask.

WHY is this right? Because in Christ, God forgave you, it says. We do not receive anger, bitterness, or rage from God – not even for our worst moments, but rather we receive love, mercy, kindness, compassion, and grace. Because that's how God treated us, that's how we are to treat others. This is the gift Jesus won for us because of the cross.

*Speak with an accent.* Now, what if you became such a follower of Jesus that your speech changed? That people noticed? It would almost be like speaking with an accent. When Bob Clark speaks, I can hear the North Carolina coast. When Andy and Gail Crawford speak, I can hear New England. They sound like those places because they spent so much time there. Some of you have spent so much time following Jesus, learning the truth in Scripture, pouring out your heart in prayer that you speak with an accent. When you speak, I can hear Jesus. I can hear hope and courage, love and blessing, mercy and a call to integrity.

*It starts in the heart.* Jesus said, **“It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.” (Matthew 15:11).** He also said that **“out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:34)** Psalm 19:14 says: **“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”**

How can you make your words a means of grace for others if you don't hope in the grace of God for yourself? It is from hopeless, discouraged, and frustrated hearts, bitter and resentful hearts, that harmful and hurtful language comes. But when we as believers remember that Christ has died for us, that the Sovereign God has promised to work all things together for our good, that we are sealed for heaven someday, then a deep and confident hope grounds us, roots us. And out of that confidence and hope come gracious words that can build up and strengthen and heal other people.

**Know the power of your own words.** When one of our members, Karen Buttrum was a girl, she dreamed of becoming a nurse. Later on one day she was called to the office to meet with her high school guidance counselor to discuss her future. When she said she planned on nursing school, the counselor looked at her doubtfully and suggested that she might want to set her sights lower, because her grades in

Latin weren't high enough. (Decades later Karen found her high school transcript and she had a B in Latin.) The power of words to crush a dream! She didn't even apply to nursing school.

During her adult years, Karen's faith in Christ took root and those roots grew deep. They began to change what she believed about herself, about who she was, about what God might have for her. And for decades that dream of being a nurse kept whispering to her. Finally, one day in her 50s she announced: "I'm going to become an RN." Now nursing school is grueling at any age. As Karen endured years of lectures, exams, and hospital rotations, she regularly received cards of encouragement from one woman in our congregation. The cards simply said, "You can do this." Karen isn't here this morning because she is working. She is a cardiac nurse at Methodist Hospital.

Friends, words have shaped you, for good and for ill. Words have blessed you and hurt you. Words have opened and closed doors for you. Words have healed you and cut you. As followers of Jesus, we are to own the power of our words. We are to speak truth, blessing, healing, encouragement, strength, and hope. We are to speak of Jesus, of his forgiveness and mercy and his call to live with courage. This very week you may speak words that build up and strengthen, that heal and help someone else.

Let's pray together the words on the screen:

Gracious God, Thank you for each person in my life whose words have strengthened me. May I bless others with my words. Help me to remember that the fleeting words I speak today may lodge forever in the memory of my child, my friend, my spouse. May I choose words of grace, mercy, kindness, and blessing. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer." I pray in the strong name of Jesus.

Amen