

FACEBOOK FOOLISHNESS
Ephesians 4:24-32
(Focal Text: Ephesians 4:29)

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When our middle daughter, Jordan, was just six years of age – over two decades ago now – she was developing a habit to which all of us are prone. She was saying exactly what was on her mind – regardless of whether it was helpful or hurtful, whether it was building others up or tearing others down, regardless of whether it was critical or encouraging. After one of her verbal spiels, I sat her down and had a little talk with her. “Jordan,” I explained very carefully to her six-year-old mind, “your words start up here in your mind. They travel down the road, and they come out your mouth. You have to think about your mouth as a gate, and you’re the gatekeeper. You are in charge of the gate. And if some words come down the path that are going to tear others down, that are going to be hurtful – then you must simply refuse to open the gate, and you must not let those words out because they will hurt other people.”

She was listening with big eyes. I wasn’t sure at all whether she had taken any of my “hold your tongue” lesson. A few days later, she came to me, smiling from ear to ear, and said, “Daddy, my mind had something bad to say, and I checked my gate.”

I have thought a lot about Jordan’s gate lately, and I have come to the conclusion that Jordan is not the only one who needs to understand the concept of being the gatekeeper. Just like Jordan needed a gate that stops her verbal pollution, I need a gate to tame my tongue. And you need one, too. We must all be keepers of our own gate. Measure absolutely every word that we speak. And today, measure every word that you type, tweet, or post.

Wasn’t it Calvin Coolidge who said, “I have never gotten in trouble for anything that I didn’t say”?

Unfortunately, I would have to confess that the most powerful words that I have ever spoken are words for which I had to apologize. They weren’t powerful in a good way; they were powerful in a destructive fashion. Words at a funeral that I say can bring powerful comfort. Words from the pulpit proclaiming the gospel can be grace. But despite all the opportunities I have had to do good with the spoken word, the most powerful words, unfortunately, are the ones I wish I had never said.

When we think about Christian speech passages, we usually think about James. But Paul had much to say about the topic as well. In our passage today in Ephesians 4, Paul addresses the issue in verse 29. This is the portion of the Ephesian letter that is the ethical exhortation, where Paul tells the people of God how they ought to walk. He describes what it means to walk in conformity to Christ, to walk as Christ walked.

In verse 24, he calls us to put on the new garment, the godly garment. To put on our new self, which is in the likeness of God. We might put verse 24 this way: “And take on an entirely new way of life, a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct, as God reproduces His character in you.” After Paul tells the Ephesians to put on the godly garment, his first evidence of a holy life is healthy speech habits.

Proverbs 21:23 says, “He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles.” Ecclesiastes says there is a time to rend, a time to sow, a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.

Most people these days are, quite frankly, speaking too much too quickly – whether it’s what they say, what they text, post, or tweet. If you go to the FBI webpage (www.fbi.gov), there is a section entitled, “Think Before You Post.” It’s a video of a college student saying, “At the time, I just wasn’t thinking. I used social media to vent. I wished I would have thought about the effects of scaring people. I didn’t mean for that to happen. People took it as a terrorist threat; the university got shut down; I got arrested by the FBI; and now, I don’t know what my future looks like.”

A few words in anger, typed out in haste. He hit the “send” button, and his life was ruined forever. The FBI was knocking on his door.

We live in a day where everyone thinks he or she is a social commentator, an expert on the issues, and that no one can have an opinion that varies from his or hers. In the political and cultural chaos of our country, the posting and typing and venting has been of very little help and, mostly, a whole lot of hurt.

An article on Webroot.com, entitled “Chances Are You’ll Regret Oversharing Information on Social Media,” says that fifty-seven percent of 18-35 year olds think people share too much about their personal thoughts and experiences, and nearly that many feel technology is robbing them of their privacy.

Some of the oversharing occurs when people just forget their gate. For example:

- “OMG, my mom was just diagnosed with cancer.” Well, does your mother really appreciate your sharing that information on Facebook? Are you going to impact her ability to apply for insurance in the future?
- “Thanks, brother, you saved me with those test answers.” Discovered by your teacher would be bad enough; discovered by the college admissions officer or a potential employer, and you’ve documented that you are a cheat.
- “I am so depressed. I hate my life.” That’s not something to post. Pick up the phone and call a friend, a trusted friend, and open your heart. Or call a counselor. A little emotional bleeding in the social media waters brings out the sharks – the bullies, the sexual predators, and the scammers.
- “I hate XYZ bank. They charge ridiculous fees on those late payments and said my credit score is too low to get a loan. Don’t bank there!” Well, now that everyone knows where you bank, you’ve just made yourself a target for a phishing scam and made it quite clear to everyone that you are not to be trusted with money.

And the whole world doesn't need to know what you are doing or thinking every moment. Do we all really need a picture of Gail going to the grocery store in search of salmon patties? Me thinks not.

According to SocialMediaToday.com, 57 percent of Americans who use social media have posted or texted something that they regret. And one in six regret a post every week. Verbally vomiting once a week.

What you post can hurt your future employment. It can hurt your friendships. It can hurt your family. The number one mistake is to post in haste. Don't hit "send." Think about it all night long. Is that your best words from your best self? Have you put on Christ when you utter those words?

In 2011, there was a study entitled "I Regretted the Minute I Pressed Share" by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University. One of the most often regretted posts is when one makes public things that ought to be said in private – friend to friend having a conversation in a protected environment of trust versus fighting each other on Facebook. In fact, the Carnegie Mellon study said that Facebook users regret their action instead of inaction. You are very rarely upset over what you did not post. And, likewise, you are very rarely upset over what you did not say.

I found a family that was torn apart by a Facebook political spat. This was published in a recent *Wall Street Journal* – the family has obviously already chosen to share it. The Laurendine-Scanlan family of suburban New Orleans always held differing political views. Some lean liberal and others take up the conservative cause. Like many families, they just didn't talk politics at Thanksgiving and Christmas. But then the 2016 presidential election came, and a flame war erupted among them on Facebook.

Nobody remembers exactly what the first words posted were. But Lisa Laurendine, a 60-year-old registered nurse, made her support for one political candidate known, which offended her sister-in-law, a staunch supporter of the other presidential political candidate. And atomic anger exploded.

A 2016 Pew Research Center study found that 40% of social medial users strongly agree with the idea that people say things about politics on social media platforms that they would never say in person. And that those conversations – political or issue oriented – are angrier and less respectful of others than face-to-face conversation.

How many lives and relationships have been ruined by somebody hitting "send" too soon?

In the Laurendine-Scanlan Facebook family feud, there is still no Thanksgiving gathering. And there is no Christmas. This has kept 20-something cousins apart, not to count the aunts and uncles. Describing her own part, one of the feuding family members named Joan said, "I ripped Lisa to shreds. I just went into complete attack mode. It was awful. It didn't occur to me, 'What are you going to do when you see them at Christmas?'"

When it was over, Lisa unfriended Joan on Facebook. Joan said the whole episode – the family feud on Facebook – has been one of the most regrettable events of her life. “It’s caused me a lot of pain and emotional upset. Maybe it will be our New Year’s resolution to put all of this behind us.” (Julie Jargon, “How a Facebook Political Spat Ruptured a Family,” *WSJ*, 12/10/2019)

In contrast, I was reminded of the healing power of words this week when one of my friends, Steve Wells, a Caucasian Houston pastor, was asked to speak at the funeral of George Floyd. The weight of addressing that family at this time of national division had to be difficult. But he did well. I texted Steve the next morning, Wednesday morning, “The best words spoken the best way. I’m proud.”

Are you proud of the words that you post? That you say? That you text? That you tweet? That you type? Are you being careful? Are you listening to Paul in Ephesians when he says, “Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift” (*The Message Translation*).

Paul must surely have been aware of those powerful words from Proverbs: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.” Are your words a gift, a blessing, an encouragement to others?

There are some good safekeeping principles to follow before you post. Two of them are given here by Paul.

I. Only speak the truth (v. 25)

Casting off that old person, like casting aside an old coat, is to put off deceit, to put off falsehood, to stop our lying. To live as God wants us to live is to speak the truth. In Exodus 20:16, we hear the commandment of God: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” If you don’t know it’s so, don’t say it is so. Or type that it is true.

Are you giving your neighbor the benefit of the doubt?

Proverbs 6:16

“There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil...” and it gets repeated again when he says, “a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers.”

Out of the seven things that God hates, three could be corrected by keeping our gates. What we say is awfully important.

In fact, Paul repeats the proverbial idea in Colossians 3:9, “Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices.”

Jesus says in John 8:44-45, “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there

is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me.”

Here, we see the overarching contrast between Jesus, who is the truth and speaks the truth, and Satan, who is the father of lies and speaks with lies. Put bluntly, when we lie, we’re speaking the devil’s language.

II. We must employ speech which builds up and gives grace (v. 29)

Just because it’s true doesn’t mean you should say it. I know a lot of true things that would be very destructive if I uttered them. So I shall keep my gate.

Verse 29

“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 who hear.”

Are you speaking your words in love and grace? Are you being constructive in your comments? When someone doesn’t see things as you see them, do you go into a mad rage immediately, ranting against your friends and family?

A pastor friend of mine, Bobby Dagnel, now pastor of the First Baptist Church of Lubbock, was in his first pastorate at the First Baptist Church of Hemphill. While he was pastoring in Hemphill, a lady came into his office and declared to her pastor that she had seen so-and-so go into the liquor store that day. The pastor turned to her and said, “Yes, ma’am, that’s true. I know he was in the liquor store because it was from there that he called me to come pick him up because his car had broken down in the vicinity of that location.”

It sort of backfired on her, didn’t it? Innuendo is destructive. It projects onto others more than we know. It claims to have the facts when, in reality, it’s nothing but a smear. Are you talking or typing before you know the whole story? Have you heard the other side? Have you given anyone else a chance to be heard?

And, even when things are true, they may, indeed, not be helpful. Paul didn’t say, “If it’s true, declare it.” He said use words that build up. *The Message* translates it as “say only what helps, each word a gift.”

Are your words a gift of grace, carefully checked at the gate?

Donna Eder, a sociologist at Indiana University, did a three year study on the dynamics of gossip. She discovered that the starting point for gossip wasn’t the initial negative statement that is made about a person. It’s when someone agrees or seconds the negative statement that was made. That’s when gossip really begins. If there is no second or no agreement, then the conversation changes direction. The moral of the study is that you can end gossip-filled conversations by quickly affirming the person who is being targeted for negative comments.

He who gossips to you will gossip about you. In other words, when you give an inappropriate comment or a social media “like,” it’s the beginning of bad communication. In fact, sometimes it is best not to correct the caustic statement. Just let the fool sit in his folly.

Don’t hit the tennis ball back over the net. Silence. Have you ever read the gospel accounts concerning the trial of Jesus? They accuse Him and curse Him, but Jesus stands in powerful silence. The High Priest says, “Do you make no answer concerning the accusations against you?” And Mark records, “He kept silent and made no answer.”

To Herod, Luke says, “Jesus answered nothing.” To Pilate, Mark says, “Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.”

In fact, Dr. John Skowronski, a psychology professor at Ohio State University, was the lead author of a study that assessed the effects of gossip. He found that as you gossip about others, people associate the negative message you – the messenger. If you talk about someone who is dishonest, the person hearing you tell the story will associate the characteristic of dishonesty with you as well. If you sing the praises of someone who is getting a degree from Harvard, you will be remembered as intellectual. Dr. Skowronski said, “It’s a memory mistake. You listen to the descriptions of others’ actions without thinking much about it. Later, when you search your thoughts about the person who told you, you subconsciously associate them with their description of someone else.” (*Prevention*, August 1998, p. 40)

Be careful what you say about others because people are going to remember as you saying it about yourself.

Solomon was right when he said in Proverbs 10:19, “When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable. But he who restrains his lips” – that is, he who keeps his gate – “is wise.”

What kind of words are you posting, texting, and tweeting? What kind of words are you speaking to your children?

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, in his book *Words That Hurt; Words That Heal*, speaks to groups about words, language, and communication. He asks “How many here can go 24 hours without saying an unkind word to someone or about someone?” If you can’t go 24 hours without a drink, you’re an alcoholic. If you can’t go 24 hours with a cigarette, you’re addicted to nicotine. If you can’t go 24 hours without saying an unkind word, you’ve lost control of your tongue.

It’s an irony. Paul says when you put on the newness of Christ, the new garment of being a disciple, a follower of Jesus, he says you’ll live life like this: you’ll be a keeper of the gate.

Our country has never needed better gatekeepers than at this very moment. Are your words true? And are your words helpful, encouraging, and building up? Do they respect people whose ideas are different than yours? Are you qualified to comment on the topic at hand?

What about you? What about last week? Even as I prepared this sermon, I became convicted of something I had said to someone close to me that I wished I’d never uttered. Thank goodness I

didn't post it. Was I the only one last week who let a word that didn't build up and encourage pass my gate?

Of all the words Jesus ever uttered, the ones I like least are these: "Every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified. And by your words, you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:34-37). Go look it up.

Pastor and scholar Darin Davis says the famous last words of a fool are, "I have a few more words to say."