

GATEKEEPER
Ephesians 4:25-5:20
(Focal Text: Ephesians 4:29)

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Words can be so very hurtful or so very healing.

When our middle daughter, Jordan, was six, she was developing a habit to which all of us are prone. She was developing the habit of 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 to your mouth. You have to think about your mouth as a gate, and you’re the gatekeeper. You’re 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, and I wasn’t sure at all whether she had taken in 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, but I checked my gate.”

I’ve thought a lot about Jordan’s gate lately. I have come to the conclusion she is not the only one who needs to understand the concept of being the gatekeeper. Just like little Jordan needed a gate that stopped her verbal pollution, I need a gate to stop my verbal pollution. And you need one, too. We must – as keepers of our own gates – measure absolutely every word that we speak. Wasn’t it Calvin Coolidge who said, “I have never gotten in trouble for anything that I didn’t say.”

It is absolutely amazing that in any given day, we, as mature Christian people, continue the verbal spillage at such a rate that most of us could – or ought to – apologize several times a day for not measuring our words, for being careless instead of being an alert keeper of the gate.

When we think about Christian speech patterns, 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 our issue in verse 29. This portion of the Ephesian letter 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 has walked.

In verses 17-19, he describes what life on the other side looks like – pagan life, life before they profess the Lordship of Christ Jesus, their evil ways of old. The evil walk of the Gentiles is painted in the blackest of colors. The Gentiles walk (verse 17) in the futility of their minds. Paul says there is another way they walk – being darkened in their thinking (verse 18). They are (verse 18)

separated from the life of God. Morally, they live lives that are bankrupt. They live lives of licentiousness, of impurity, immorality, greediness.

But they shouldn't live that way anymore, Paul says, because now they have learned a new way of life (verse 20) in Christ. Like someone takes off an old garment, they, in Christ, have taken off their old lives, their old way of walking (verse 22). And like putting on a brand new garment, pristine, in verse 24 they put on a new self which is the likeness of God. It's in holiness and truth.

In the earlier part of this section, Paul has told us what the old way of life looks like. It's a way of life that is futile. It is a way of life that is described by darkness. It is a way of life that is described by rampant sensuality. If that is what the Ephesian Christians were not to be – if that's what you and I are not to be – then might we ask Paul, "What does it look like to live in Christ? What does it look like to put on our new self, to learn from Christ?"

Don't worry. Paul has the answer. And while we can't look at all of his answers in this one sermon, it is interesting to note that premier among the descriptions of what it means to walk in Christ is the gatekeeper. What it means to walk in Christ is to measure each word. What it means to walk in Christ is to have control of your tongue. Of all the things that Paul could have picked as a good measure of the spirituality of a Christ-like walk, he picked our speech patterns as a measuring rod.

I. Paul says as we are keepers of the gate, we must speak the truth (verse 25)

Putting off the old person, like casting aside an old coat, is to put off deceit, put off falsehood – to stop our lying. To live as God wants us to live is to speak the truth. Back in Exodus 20:16, we hear the commandment of God. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." In other words, it was said to Moses, "You shall not lie."

In Proverbs 6:16 we hear "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil..." And it gets repeated again when he says, "...a false witness who pours out lies and a person that stirs up dissension among the brethren." Out of the seven things that God hates, three surround the idea of not keeping the gate – how we talk, whether we tell the truth.

Paul says again in Colossians 3:9, "Do not lie to one another since you've laid aside the old self with its evil practices."

For Paul, lying or any form of destructive speech isn't a bad habit or a human frailty. He sees that kind of speech as representative of the life of darkness.

Jesus says in John 8:44, telling us about the origin of lies, the seedbed of lies, "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 is the father of lies. Because I speak the truth, you do not believe me."

You see the overarching contrast between Jesus, who is the truth and speaks the truth, and Satan, who is the father of lies and speaks always with lies. Put bluntly, when we lie we're speaking the devil's language. Yet we live in a day when lying is more acceptable than it has ever been before.

A study of University of Virginia college students found that when they talk to their mothers, college students lie 50 percent of the time. If there is any consolation, those same college students lie to strangers even more. The college students didn't talk enough with their dads to permit any separate analysis of their lie ratios to their fathers. Seventy-seven students recorded their conversations and highlighted the times that they actually told a lie. That group of students — in one week — lied on 1000 different occasions, an average of about two lies per day per student.

Among the lies told to dear mother are,

- The textbook cost \$65 (when it really cost about \$25) so they'd send more money.
- They were studying for a test.
- Getting out of a babysitting request by claiming an prior commitment to avoid the "brats."
(*Waco Tribune Herald*, August 16, 1995)

David Lieberman, who wrote a book in 1998 entitled *Never Be Lied to Again*, concluded that in marital relationships we lie to each other 10 percent of the time. Dating couples lie to each other 30 percent of the time. Lieberman's book suggests ways you can determine when someone is telling the truth or not. (*Houston Chronicle*, March 23, 1999)

The psalmist declared in Psalm 51, "God, surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the innermost place."

We're drowning in a sea of lies.

A judge claims to be the brother of a civil rights murder victim – but he isn't. A news anchor boasts of a war record – that existed only in his imagination. Even Miss Virginia has to give back her crown for "padding" the facts.

In the first case, it was Federal Judge James Ware of San Jose. He often, but falsely claimed, to be the older brother of Virgil Ware, a 13-year-old shot to death off the handle bars of a bicycle by two white teenagers on the day in 1963 when four girls were killed in the bombing of a black church in Birmingham, Alabama. Ware used to say the experience made him "hungry for justice." The deception led to his withdrawal as Clinton's nominee for an appeals court seat.

The news anchor is Brian Williams, who fabricated and exaggerated his service record in the Iraq war, claiming his was a helicopter hit by enemy fire. He made it all us – lies. (updated Google story)

The beauty queen in question was Andrea Ballengee, who was stripped of her Miss Virginia title in 1995 after falsely asserting she was a law student at the University of Miami. (*Amarillo Daily News*, December 6, 1997)

Potential employers see so much lying on resumes that now call it the “canned ham” version resume. You just inject water into it until it fills the space that is required.

A fellow won the award for the best lie in 1997 when he pulled into the Yankee Stadium VIP parking lot. The driver claimed to be a friend, a personal friend, of George Steinbrenner. But, how embarrassing – the parking lot attendant was Steinbrenner. He just happened to be working the parking lot that night. “He looked at me, surprised, and said, ‘Guess I’ve got the wrong lot,’” said the Yankees’ owner. Steinbrenner was working as the world’s highest paid parking lot attendant to personally investigate traffic problems at the stadium. He said he was appalled by the double parking, illegal parking, and people wrongfully slipping into VIP slots. (*Parade Magazine*, December 28, 1997)

Paul says that lying is part of our old self, part of our old garment. Our new garment requires us to speak the truth.

Paul is saying not only must we speak the truth, but

II. We must employ speech which builds up and gives grace.

Paul says more about keeping our gates, about measuring every word we speak, in 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, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

As we are to be keepers of our gate, we must speak words in a constructive fashion. We’re to be encouragers, not folk who set ourselves up as judge and critic of the other members in the body of Christ.

There are certainly many patterns of speech that do not edify or give grace.

A. Innuendo is one that comes to mind.

A pastor friend of mine, Bobby Dagnel, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Lubbock, was formerly pastor of the First Baptist Church of Hemphill. While he was pastoring there in Hemphill, a lady came into his office to declare 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.”

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.

B. Second, there is flattery. Flattery is saying to a person’s face what you’d never say behind their back. There is certain nothing wrong with giving compliments. That’s building-up speech. That

should allow you to open your gate wide and say “ahhh.” But if you wouldn’t give that same compliment behind that person’s back, do not give that compliment to their face.

C. A third form of destructive speech is gossip. If flattery is saying to a person’s face what you’d never say behind their back, gossip is saying behind their back what you’d never say to their face.

We’re so subtle in our gossip. “Did you hear about...?” “Now, I know you won’t tell anyone, so I can share this with you...”

We gossip because we want to appear to be in power. We want to appear to be in the know.

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 isn’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.

Beware – he who gossips to you will gossip about you.

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. What he found was that as you gossip about others, people associate the negative message with 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. Likewise, 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. We’re going to remember it as your saying it about yourself.

Check your gate. Is it true? Ask that question before you say it. Is it necessary to say this? A third question: Is it helpful? If it isn’t, don’t share it.

Solomon, himself, in all of his wisdom, calls for us to be gatekeepers. “When there are many words,” he says, “transgression is unavoidable. But he who restrains his lips” – that is, he who keeps the gate – “is wise” (Proverb 10:19).

D. There is another form of destructive speech that does not meet Paul’s criteria of being words of grace, words that build up and encourage. Those are words of criticism.

I’ve discovered it is much easier to criticize someone else than it is to take their resources and accomplish the task assigned to them. We’re generally over critical of persons in authority. We’re

over critical of our children. We're over critical of our spouse. We're over critical of those around us.

So many people that come in for counseling suffer from low self-esteem. Low self-esteem finds its roots, most often, in parental expectations that were never met. "My dad always wanted more than I could do." "My mom was never satisfied." They heard words like this growing up as a child: "Can't you get anything right? You're so stupid."

There are better words for our families. Words like

- I'm proud of you.
- Way to go.
- I knew you could do it.
- What a good helper.
- You're really special to me.
- I trust you.
- Hooray for you.
- You're a real trooper.
- Well done.
- You make my day.
- Give me a big hug.
- You're such a good listener.
- You figured it out.
- I love you.
- You remembered.
- You're the best.
- You sure tried hard.
- I couldn't be prouder of you.
- I'm praying for you.
- I'm behind you.

Words that build up those whom God has entrusted to us.

The same words can be used for those in our church family.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, in his book *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, speaks to groups about words, language, and communication. He asks, "How many of you here can go 24 hours without saying an unkind word to someone or about someone?" Think about that question. If you can't go 24 hours without a drink, you're an alcoholic. If you can't go 24 hours without 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. You're not even keeping the gate.

I have a feeling that six-year-old Jordan is not the only one that has trouble keeping the gate. I have a feeling that my then six-year-old daughter was experiencing a problem that we all wrestle with. The temptation to tear down with our tongue. The temptation to use innuendo and flattery and gossip and criticism. The temptation to tell a lie, to cover up, to protect, to make others think better of us. The temptation to leave the gate unmanned, unchecked.

It's an irony. When Paul says you have to put on the newness of Christ, the new garment of being a disciple, a follower of Jesus, he says if you live life like this, you'll be a keeper of the gate – one who watches and measures every word that's said.

What about last week? Even as I prepared this sermon, I said something inappropriate the day I was writing the sermon. I apologized to someone for not watching my gate. Was I alone last week? What about you? Did you measure the words that you spoke?

Have you been standing guard at the gate? We will give an account of every word that we utter. When we look at it that way, we'd better measure now. Ultimately, we're always sorry later.