

**Words That Are Worthy**  
*Leviticus 19:9-18; James 3:1-12*  
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Today there is a great deal of interest in and commitment to the cause of cleaning up the environment, to ridding it of the pollutants making their way into our streams and rivers and oceans and fowling the very air we breathe. This is certainly a noble cause and even a Godly goal because we are stewards of the earth which God has committed to our care.

And yet, there is one pollutant which we have largely ignored that is a greater threat than the carcinogens and poisons seeping into the earth, the air, the water and even the residents on planet earth. It may be more problematic for the present and future generations than any other pollutant. It goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden where the serpent lied to Eve, and Adam carefully evaded a direct question from God.

If you have not guessed what this deadly pollutant is, then let me resolve the mystery. It is the corruption of language, the use of human speech to confuse, to deceive, to distort, to evade, and to divide. It is the continuing erosion of honest, candid, and constructive communication, the inability or unwillingness of people, even people of faith, to say what they mean and mean what they say, and the practice of using ambivalent, confusing or deceptive words in the pursuit of one's own purposes. And why should this concern us as God's people today?

Words matter! They especially matter to God and to God's people. The words we use to communicate with others, be they written or spoken, the words we choose to express feelings, convictions, ideas, and opinions have a power and importance that we often overlook at our own or another's peril. Many of us grew up chanting the childhood maxim: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." How often did we say those words to some tormentor only to turn aside to our private tears and shame? You see, the truth is that words do hurt. Any person, young or old, who has been the victim of verbal abuse, who has had to endure constant criticism or hateful humiliation, who has been called derogatory names, who has been the victim of rumors, gossip, lies, or slander know all too well that words hurt every bit as much as sticks and stones. The resulting injury may not be as visible as physical abuse, but the wounds inflicted are much deeper and take far longer to heal.

Words matter! Words have the capacity to bless or curse, to move heart and mind, body and soul. Words can make us laugh and cry. They can cause us both to fight and to fall in love. Words have the power to create and destroy, to produce faith and doubt, hope and despair, trust and suspicion, joy and sorrow, and to express practically every human emotion and conviction imaginable. And we treasure those people who are wordsmiths and whose writing and speaking, instruct, or inspire us. When we lose a writer or a speaker who has meant a great deal to us, our lives are somehow diminished. When C. S. Lewis died on the day that JFK was assassinated many of us didn't notice but later we grieved. When

Theodor Geisel (better known as Dr. Seuss) died or Erma Bombeck, or even Louis Grizzard, many people felt like they had lost a member of the family.

Words matter! They matter to God and, consequently, they should matter to God's people. The ethics of speech, the use of words that are worthy of God and worthy of God's people has been a critical aspect of Judeo-Christian ethics from day one. As far back as the book of Leviticus we find the Holiness Code of the Hebrew people, which is chapters 17-26, specifies the rituals and practices and morals that often characterize a people who are holy, that is to say, set apart for the Lord. Chapter 19 in particular deals with holiness of behavior and alludes to many practices and rituals, but it is clear that one's speech, especially the words one uses about a neighbor, are to be holy and distinct from the way other people in society talk. "You shall not go around as a slanderer (some say tale-bearer) among your people." This verse comes only two verses before the one that is at the heart of all Hebrew and Christian holiness and which Jesus quotes as half of the summary of the Law: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In other words, if we are a people set apart for the Lord, then we are expected to speak about the neighbor as we wish to be spoken of. We are expected to speak to your neighbor as we wish to be spoken to.

Yes, my friends, words matter! The words we use as the people of God ought to reflect that somehow we are set apart from others and live by a higher standard which others may find strange.

Well, then, if words matter so much, if they possess inherent power and influence, if they can help or harm, if there is such a thing as the ethics of speech, if our language is to be worthy of our God and worthy of our character as God's people, then what is it that determines their worthiness? What must be true of words that are worthy?

To begin with, what I suspect it could go without saying is that worthy words are always true. There is no place for lies, falsehoods, unfounded and harmful rumors, malicious gossip in the believer's vocabulary on lifestyle. Indeed the telling of the truth, the valuing and protecting of the truth is deemed so important as to warrant one of the cardinal requirements of the decalogue--- "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Lives have been ruined, homes destroyed, careers crushed, and nations imperiled by those who refused to recognize and honor truth in speaking. President Andrew Jackson who, along with his wife was the victim of mean gossip, once stated: The murderer only takes the life of the parent and leaves his character as a goodly heritage to his children, while the slanderer takes away his goodly reputation and leaves him a living monument to his children's disgrace." Thus, to destroy another person's character, good name, or reputation has the same effect as taking that person's life.

So the first requirement, then, the first test for worthy words is whether or not they are true. Nothing does greater damage to the fragile trust and respect that binds people together in marriages, in families, in business associations, in social and political life than the discovery of lies and deception. When people can no longer be trusted to tell you the truth, then their integrity and their character

are forever suspect and their capacity for leadership destroyed. Surely this was what proved to be the undoing of presidents of the past, Richard Nixon in Watergate or Bill Clinton in the Monica Lewinsky affair. The crimes themselves were not so nearly as offensive to the American people as the discovery that their president had knowingly and intentionally lied about their involvement. In our political life, in our business life, in our family life as parents and as spouses, when we discover that someone has been untruthful or has deceived us, this greatly jeopardizes the possibility for future trust and respect. It is not impossible perhaps, but it is often very difficult to undo what has been done or to restore what has been lost. Words that are worthy are true.

In a second sense, if our words are worthy of God and God's people, they must also be candid. That is to say, they will be genuine, sincere, frank, and honest. Sometimes even the truth can be stated in such a way that it conceals or misleads or distorts. That is to say, some truth is disingenuous. It is lacking in complete candor and perhaps was intended to conceal some aspect of the truth that one wishes not to reveal. So partial truths, half-truths, vague truths are sometimes little better than lies.

We are acquainted with this in the political realm and in the news media where sometimes the truth can be stated in such a way that it actually confuses or misleads or misrepresents. I remember back during the Vietnam war our government was accused of invading the neutral country of Cambodia. They responded by saying that in truth this was an incursion into Cambodia. Now if you look up incursion in the dictionary, you will discover that there is a dime's worth of

difference between an invasion and an incursion but Americans know what an invasion is and many citizens would have tolerated that. An incursion sounds less offensive and perhaps could be excused, especially by those of us who wish to believe the best about our country. So some words which may, in a sense, be true are not really candid because they are intentionally used to obfuscate---oops, there I have gone and done it myself. To obfuscate means to obscure rather than to make plain. Have you seen the t-shirt that says “eschew obfuscation, “which literally means avoid being obscure?

Of course, there is a long history of using euphemisms to gloss over the real and perhaps painful truth. During warfare civilian casualties are sometimes referred to as “collateral damage.” For a while the U.S. Defense Department referred to persons who had survived bombing attacks as “Interdiction Nonsuccubmers.” Closer to everyday life we have a habit of saying that people pass away, instead of die. A person errs instead of sins. All of this may not be malicious in nature but it can be problematic and even dangerous when the plain truth is concealed or suppressed by carefully chosen words.

In his book, Strictly Speaking, Edwin R. Newman, former NBC news correspondent wrote:

“Watergate, in the course of revealing so much else about American life, also revealed the sad state of language; apparently form and substance are related...language used to obfuscate or conceal or dress with false dignity is not confined to politics and did not burst upon us for the first time with Watergate. In our time, however, it has achieved greater acceptance than ever before, so that stiffness and bloat are almost everywhere.”

I wonder if Jesus foresaw the problem with bloated language and insincere speech. In his teaching about oaths, he concludes by saying, “Just say yes or no---anything else you say comes from the Evil One.” (Matthew 5:37, TEB)

Words that are worthy of our God and of God’s people are true; they are also candid; and in a third and critically important sense---they are loving! Truth and candor together do not insure that our words are worthy. They must also be spoken in love. And by love, here I am referring to Agape, the love that always desires and seeks what is in the best interest of others. Our words may be true and candid enough, but if they are not also kind and helpful and constructive and intended to be a blessing, then truth and candor can be used as a weapon to injure others. Writing to the Ephesians, Paul says that, “Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” (Ephesians 4:15) So truth and candor have to be mattered with by constructive love. You and I could think of a number of things that could be said to others that would certainly be true and candid, but also unkind, unloving, unnecessary and harmful. “You know, since you have put on so much weight, you look like a pumpkin in that new orange dress!” I suspect that such a statement could be true, and it is certainly candid, but is it loving? A favorite professor of mine in seminary was fond of saying that while “We should always tell the truth; we should not tell the truth always.” What he meant was that unless the telling of the truth served some benevolent purpose, it was better left unspoken.

And what about gossip? Oh I know, some of you were hoping that I might avoid this popular pastime. What it is about us that causes us to love to glory in

gossip? What is it about the human condition? Why is it that we participate in gossip with such passion and addiction? For some people nothing is quite so delicious as knowing and sharing some choice bit of dirt about another person. In some kind of perverse way does this lessen our crimes or make us feel superior to others? No, in truth it cheapens us and has the potential of destroying others.

“O this isn’t gossip...it’s the truth! I know it to be a fact.” Have you ever heard people say those words when they are defending their use of gossip? And how uninformed these words are. Gossip has no relation to truth or fiction. Gossip is merely idle talk about other people and their affairs, which tends to be negative rather than positive. Whether the matter is true or false is beside the point. Gossip is usually malicious and dangerous and people who engage in it are inevitably victimized by it. I am sure you have heard the saying, “What goes around, comes around!” Or as a Turkish proverb puts it, “Who gossips to you will gossip of you.”

I read once an article by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, which explains that in Jewish tradition it is considered morally wrong to spread negative information about others, even if it is true. The Hebrew term, *la shon ha-rah*, literally means “bad tongue” or “bad language” and it has no precise equivalent in the English language. Unlike slander, which is universally condemned as immoral because it is false, *la shon ha-rah* means is true. It may be the dissemination of accurate information that because it will lower the status of the person to whom it refers, it is considered unacceptable. It is called a negative truth. Illustration: Political ads.



The Apostle James certainly recognized the power and peril of the tongue. Such a small part of the human body, the tongue is, like the rudder of the ship, capable of steering the course of the human vessel. Human beings have actually tamed the wildest of beasts, but they seem incapable of taming the tongue. How difficult it is for us to control our speech and use words that are worthy of our God and of God's people unless we have an understanding of what constitutes ethical speech, of what renders our words as worthy. In a day when language is polluted and politicized, in an age when people believe that they have the right to say whatever they think or please, regardless of the consequences of the offense given, in a time when prime time television contains language both violent and vulgar, we seem less capable than ever of taming our tongues and policing our speech. It seems that about the only thing that matters with respect to human speech today is that it be politically correct, so as not to offend some disenfranchised group. Now that it is a laudable goal for sure, but personally I am far more interested in not offending God and not harming others by the words we choose and use. And perhaps if we could ever discipline our tongues and insure that our words are worthy, that they honor God and reflect well upon God's people if we apply to them the test of truth, the test of candor and the test of love then we would certainly enhance our love of God and our love of neighbors.

Friends, our words do matter. They matter a great deal. They can bless or curse, they can help or harm. They can honor or dishonor God and His people. One day Jesus told the crowd: "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil

intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander; these are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

May God help us to watch our words and may God give us the grace to use words that are worthy. Let us endeavor as disciples of Christ always to be truthful and genuine and loving in our speech and in our relations. Amen.