

Chapter 5

The Power of Our Words

Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak and slow to be angry

An elderly aunt, who is now in her eighties, told me the following story from her school days. She was seven years old and wanted to join the school choir. The music teacher started to play the piano, a tune familiar to my aunt, and asked her to sing. With hope in her little heart she started to sing. After a short while he stopped playing and told her to stop singing. “You have a voice like a frog!” he told her. I am sure many of you smiled when you read those words. I expect the teacher had a smile on his face when he said it but to my aunt the words were devastating. They had a profound effect upon her life. She told me one day that from that day onwards she has never sung again. Can you imagine over seventy years without singing? The teacher thought he was being clever, but in effect his words acted as a curse on my aunt. I know she loves music. She listens to the carols on the radio at Christmas but will not go to church because, as she says, “You have to sing in church.” You can see how thoughtless words can become a curse.

It is a simple and sad story, but a lesson for us all. Our words have power. Every word that we speak has power. It has power to build up or it has power to knock down. How quick we are with our words. When people come together everyone has something to say and so often we do not think about our words. I am sure everyone has been in the situation of speaking something and as soon as their words leave your mouth you want to chase after and grab them to take them back before they are heard. Why? Because we know that those words may be misunderstood and perhaps hurt the listener. We may not have expressed it in this way but this is the power of words. Conversely, we have all been in the opposite situation where someone has spoken to us and suddenly the words pierce our hearts like a sword. Something said almost literally knocks us off our feet. We have felt the power of the words spoken to us.

On many occasions we do not even intend to hurt. Often those hurting words that we heard were not spoken to hurt us, but the power in the words did exactly that. No wonder when James was writing his letter he said this:

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath. (James 1:19)

If only it were that simple. We all have so much to say and so little time in which to say it, so little time to consider our words before we speak them. On the telephone we are conscious of the minutes ticking away and speak so quickly before the time runs out. Our bus is leaving and we are still talking. We do not have time to say all that we want to say – and we say the wrong thing. If we could only learn to be slow to speak, to think before we open our mouths.

I use a simple, almost childish, illustration when teaching seminars. I ask people to look at the face of the person sitting next to them before asking them two questions. The first question is simple, “As you looked at your neighbour's face how many ears

did you see?” The answer is obvious but there is usually a joker who answers three! Then I ask a similar question, “How many mouths do you see?” Not the most difficult questions, but I make the point that if God had wanted us to speak more and listen less He would have given us two mouths for speaking and only one ear for listening. It is not exactly science but it makes a point!

In the previous chapter I started to look at creation. God spoke out the whole of creation through the power of His word. Science is looking for explanations as to how the world was formed. One big question that they ask is about the origin of the universe. They want to know how life started. Is there life on other planets?

I love scientific discoveries. They tell me what a wonderful, powerful God we have. As science shows us new wonders it causes me to lift my heart in praise of our creator. The wonders of the universe and the beauty of the ocean deep all speak of the glory of our God. Hebrews 11:3 tells us that it is by faith *‘we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things that are seen were not made of things that were visible.’* If you have difficulty, as many do, in understanding how science and biblical creation are compatible, make this verse your foundation for understanding. You will be surprised how quickly and easily scientific knowledge falls into your understanding. Make faith the starting point of understanding. Take God at His word. Believe me it will surprise you!

By the power of His word all creation came into existence, but there is one exception. Man! He spoke everything but then said *“Let us **make** man in our image, according to our likeness.”* (Genesis 1:26) He **formed** man out of the dust of the ground. (Genesis 2:7). We were not spoken out as the animals were spoken out. We were **made**. We were **formed** by God. He made us in His image and likeness. It had to be that way. His ultimate plan was that a separated people would one day be fully transformed into His likeness and be joined to His son, as a bride, for all eternity. He can only join Himself to that which is like Him.

Adam could not be joined to any of the animals because none of them were like him. None of them carry the image of God as does man. We are not descended from the animals as godless men teach. God did not breathe His life giving spirit into a chimpanzee or gorilla or elephant or dog. On the day that God caused all the animals to pass before Adam there was not a helper found that was ‘comparable to him’ (Genesis 2:20). None of the animals are anywhere near to being equal to or comparable to man, because man is not like the animals. They do not compare with man although evolutionary theory tries to make that comparison.

We do not know how Adam felt after seeing all the wonderful animals pass by. He may have been excited as he saw these wonderful creatures for the first time that day. I have taken many friends to the National Parks when they visit with me in Africa and not one has been disappointed by the wonders of creation. Perhaps Adam was disappointed not to have found a help mate. It had been a long day and he was probably tired. That night, as Adam slept, God took a bone from his side. He did not take the bone from his head, because the woman was not to be over the man. Neither did he take it from his foot so that the man would be over the woman. He took a bone from his side to signify that man and woman should stand side by side in partnership

and equality before God. He took the bone nearest to his heart as a sign that the husband should love his wife and with that bone he created woman, Eve.

Having failed to find a helper, a mate, a wife out of all the animals, Adam woke up the next morning and opened his eyes and cried out “Yes!” “Wow!” There she was! Eve, made in his own likeness and image. He was so excited when he saw her “She is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone.” I can picture them running and jumping and dancing together in their naked innocence. Now Adam had his helper. Now he had his wife. Now there was one like him. Not an animal but one with the same image of God that was in him.

If we are like the animals we are not in His image. How can we expect to be joined to the Lord and become one with Him, like as a bride, if we do not have His image and likeness? It is that very image and likeness that makes us unique in the whole of creation. To put any lesser value on man is an insult to man and more seriously is an insult to God. It is also an insult to my ancestors to suggest that they were nothing more than intelligent apes.

How is this relevant to the power of words? Because of our likeness to God. Just as He speaks and His every word has power, so too when we speak, every word that we speak has power. That is tremendous. Or is it? Not if we are speaking negatively. Not if what we say will bring pain. Not if our words divide or destroy. God gave us speech so that we could communicate. So that we could learn from one another, encourage one another, build up one another, lift one another, help one another, and love one another. But what do we do so often? We despise one another, gossip, speak lies, backbite and speak evil. We express bitterness, anger and wrath. We quarrel and argue. What a contrast to the exhortation of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians:

‘Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification (building up), that it may impart grace to the hearers.’ (Chapter 4:29)

Here lies the problem. Let no corrupt word come out of your mouth but only what will build others up. If only the school teacher of my old aunt had spoken different words to her. “Well done! Thank you for singing. You are nearly good enough for the choir. Come along to the rehearsals and learn the songs and sing along with us. Maybe soon we will be able to add you to our choir.” She would have been built up. She would have continued singing and improved. She would know the joy of singing today.

How many parents say to their children something like this? “Why can’t you be like your brother? You will never make anything from your life!” Be careful. Firstly you are not building them up. Secondly, if you are not careful you may be cursing them. You may mean nothing by it, but the words you speak have power. Many a life has been ruined because a parent, in trying to spur his child on actually discouraged them. One brother may have different gifts from another. The one that does well in his studies should be encouraged in those studies. Others do less well in academic subjects and have practical skills. These should be discovered and encouraged. What would have happened if David Beckham, the England football captain, had been sent

to Manchester University instead of Manchester United? Everyone would have lost out!

'You, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:3)

Parents are responsible for the upbringing of their children. It is not the responsibility of grand-parents, schools or churches, not the government or friends. A home atmosphere of criticism, condemnation, sarcasm, intimidation or fear will provoke a child to wrath. It will crush them rather than build them up.

“Uwivu! Come here!” “Bring the water here, Uwivu!” “You will be late for school Uwivu!”

I was staying with a family in rural Africa and I noticed that they kept calling their youngest child, David (name changed!), by the name ‘Uwivu’. I assumed at first it was some sort of tribal name. Eventually I asked the father, “Why do you call him Uwivu? His name is David!” He smiled and said that is our word meaning ‘lazy’. David is a lazy boy and we call him by that name. I was shocked. That was many years ago. David is now twenty years old. He is still at home and does not work. As far as I know he has not looked for work and I have noticed that he never seems to be doing anything constructive. He is possibly one of the laziest boys I know. Why? What caused him to be so lazy? It was the curse of his nickname. He heard himself called ‘lazy’ by his parents and others in authority over him and he believed what he heard. He was not born lazy. His parents caused him to become lazy by the power of their words.

In the unity seminars, one of the earliest questions I ask of the leaders gathered is “Do you have unity?” Almost invariably they will reply yes, of course. As the sessions progress they begin to see that they may not have the unity that they think they have. They begin to see that while they may be together there is not the unity is not there. As the Holy Spirit begins His work, He shows them how they speak about one another, gossiping and backbiting about other ministries. They begin to see, for example, how they have had feelings of superiority over that small church where the pastor has never been to Bible College or struggles because his congregation are in a small rural area with few natural resources.

Unity is not an outward togetherness. It begins in the heart. The men of Babel had the same speech. They said the same things and had the same purpose. In their hearts they had the intention of building a name for themselves. If it had been ‘just words’ they would not have got far. Our heart will determine our words and our actions. Jesus gave some profound teaching and a solemn warning about the source and reward of our words.

For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.

But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give an account for it on the day of judgement. For by your words you will be

justified, and by your words you will be condemned. (Matthew 12:34-37)

It is so easy to speak. It comes naturally to us. Speech is a gift from God. We may say we have unity with our brothers but if we speak a word against them we demonstrate that our words are idle words. They may divide us from the very person with whom we profess to be unified. We may say 'I love you brother' but our thoughts are harbouring jealousy because we feel we are able to lead worship much better than they.

Even laughing at the mistakes of others could cause pain. Reacting negatively to a situation that is culturally strange could hamper an opportunity for the Gospel. As a missionary evangelist I come across many culturally strange situations. I remember sitting in a mud house in the middle of rural Africa when our host came in with four women. He introduced the first one as his wife and I made the correct polite greetings. Then he introduced his second wife, then his third and finally his fourth. I had never come across polygamy, but managed to maintain a polite smile on my face while my brain caught up with the situation! A wrong word or reaction could have alienated me from them. As it turned out they have all received Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. The husband became an active evangelist. I pray he will be as fruitful as an evangelist as he is a family man. He has over forty children!

I recently attended the funeral of my great aunt. Her son had joined the Royal Marines many years ago and he is now married with grown sons – one of whom had joined the Merchant Navy. In conversation after the service I was talking with him and he mentioned that he heard that, like him, I had travelled a lot. He has no church background and therefore interpreted what he had heard through his own experience. I replied to his comment, "Yes, I am working as a missionary." His reply amused me but I was able to keep a straight face when he replied "Oh!" he said, I thought you was a mercenary!" I could have upset him so easily and carelessly if I had laughed. We need to be slow to speak. Whatever our situation!

I abhor political correctness. I am sorry if I offend you, but I believe that it comes from the pit of hell. If we speak the truth in love there is no need for us to tread on eggshells every time we open our mouths. However, there are occasions when I am shocked by the words of others. I was invited to spend about ten days in the town of Belcy (or Beltsy) in Moldova. Before you react to this story, remember that this man had lived all his life under the lies and control of the Soviet Communists.

It was lunch time, and while we were waiting for food to be prepared, the choir master, an excellent musician and singer, played and sung a most beautiful song. He played with such feeling. Very moving! When he had finished, Neil, by travelling companion, asked him the meaning of the words of this Russian song. We were shocked by his answer and most certainly did not agree with the sentiment of the song. Forgive me as I report his answer – the words are his and not mine. He said, "It is a song about a nigger who is longing to go to heaven so he will no longer be black!" His words would have been devastating if I had been travelling with one of my African friends, and yet, in all sincerity, the choir master meant no offence.

Idle words: those words that we speak without thinking. I know I speak far too much. I know that far too many times I have spoken words that do not build up. Too many words pass my lips that have not been considered. I know all too well from experience how easy it is to be quick to speak. I pray for you that on the day when I give an account for my idle words you are not in the queue behind me. You will be there a long, long time!

If we are to give an account for every idle word we speak then let us pray that the Lord will give us the grace to learn to be slow to speak.

How can we profess unity when we are guilty of so much negative talk about each other? Is there any one who has not at some time criticised the preacher over Sunday lunch because of some point that he made that we disagree with? Who has never been angry and never lost control of his tongue? Do we sometimes give advice even when we have none because we feel that we should say something? After all, shouldn't we Christians always have an answer? When we are at work or school and hear people gossiping about someone do we not also enjoy sharing that tasty gossip? When our children do not reach our expectations do we punish them, or try to find a way to encourage them?

The best advice I can give is that if you have nothing positive to say, nothing that will build up a brother or sister, then say nothing!

Thank God for His forgiveness and His grace.