


Make Your Mouth a Means of Grace

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[Ephesians 4:29-30](#)

Let no rotten word come out of your mouth, but if something is good for the upbuilding of a need, (let that come out of your mouth) in order that it might give grace to those who hear.

I remember one time as a child that my mother actually washed my mouth out with soap. She took me to the bathroom sink, rubbed the bar of soap around in my mouth, and then rinsed it out and made me go to my room. Do you know what I had said? I think I had said, "Shut up!" to my sister.

The Battle for Purity of Mouth Starts in the Heart

Now why should my mother wash my mouth out with soap for saying, "Shut up!" to my sister? She did it because she believed Jesus when he 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](#)).

I had made myself dirty by saying, "Shut up," to my sister, and my mother had a white-hot zeal for my purity. So she used an unforgettable object lesson. I think she did right and I have risen up to call her blessed even this past week on her birthday.

"But really!" someone will say, "What's the big deal with saying, 'Shut up,' to your sister? It's not swearing. It's not taking the name of the Lord in vain. It's not a dirty word. Why get so worked up? What's really so bad about it?"

The answer is that when I said, "Shut up!" to my sister, it was mean. There was no affection and no good will and no kindness in it. It was ugly. There was no moral beauty, no holiness, no love. To use Paul's phrase in [Ephesians 4:29](#), it was a "rotten word." It came from a garbage pile of pride and one-upmanship and anger and resentment—all very normal between siblings, and all very sinful. Beware lest you grow accustomed to sin because it is so normal!

But what I thank God for more than that my mother was intensely moral is that

she was intensely Christian. She knew that soap in the mouth couldn't touch the dirt in my heart. If she had thought it could, she wouldn't have cried.

So she taught me the truth of [Ephesians 4:22-24](#): "You must put off your old self-assertive, mean, uncaring self, son, because it is corrupt with deceitful desires. And put on the new meek and kind self created by God in his own likeness in righteousness and holiness. In other words, son, you need to be deeply renewed in the spirit of your mind."

In the end the battle for purity in the mouth is fought in the heart, because "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." If you don't like what comes out of your mouth, listen carefully this morning, because the apostle Paul is at pains in this text to clean up your mouth from the inside out.

Rotten, Evil, Unwholesome, Corrupt Words

Let's look at verse 29. I said a moment ago that Paul used the phrase "rotten word." The RSV translates it, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths." The NIV and NASB use the word "unwholesome." And the KJV says, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth." What is this idea behind the words, "evil," "unwholesome," and "corrupt"?

The Greek word (*sapros*) is used in only one other context in the New Testament, namely, the places in Matthew and Luke where Jesus says, "It is not the good tree that bears bad fruit" ([Luke 6:43](#); [Matthew 7:17f.](#); [Matthew 12:33](#)). The term for "bad" fruit here is the same word for evil or unwholesome or corrupt in [Ephesians 4:29](#)—"Let no evil talk come out of your mouth!" The image in Paul's mind is probably one of rottenness and decay, something that is spoiled.

This kind of rotten language must be taken off like the old garment. It is part of the old self of verse 22 that needs to be stripped away when a person becomes a Christian. The garment of a rotten mouth must be taken off and thrown into the fire, just like the Ephesians had burned their old books on magic in [Acts 19:19](#).

Four Kinds of Language That May Be in Mind

Now what sort of talk does Paul have in mind when he says, "Let no rotten talk come out of your mouth"? Let me suggest at least four kinds of language that I think Paul would include as "rotten" or "decayed" or "spoiled."

1. Taking the Name of the Lord in Vain

First would be language that takes the name of the Lord in vain. It is a great contradiction of who we are as Christians if we say, "God!" or "My God!" or "God Almighty!" or "Christ!" or "Jesus!" just because we are mad or surprised or amazed. No one with a good marriage would stomp on his wedding ring to

express anger. It stands for something precious and pure. And so does the name of God and Jesus Christ.

2. Trivializing Terrible Realities

The second kind of language that Paul would call rotten would be language that trivializes terrible realities—like hell and damnation and holiness. What's wrong with saying, "What the hell!" or "Hell, no!" or "Go to hell!" or "Damn it!" or "Damn right!" or "Holy cow!" or "Holy mackerel!"?

Among other things these expressions trivialize things of terrible seriousness. It's simply a contradiction to believe in the horrible reality of hell and use the word like a punctuation mark for emphasis when talking about sports or politics. The same is true of damnation. And if the divine command, "Be holy as I am holy," carries for you the same weight it carried for Moses and Jesus and the apostles, you will simply find that "Holy cow" or holy anything will stick in your throat because it treats something infinitely precious as a trifle.

3. Referencing Sex and the Body in Vulgar Ways

The third kind of language I think Paul would include in his command not to let any rotten talk come out of your mouth is vulgar references to sex and the human body. With this kind of language people take good things that God has made, and use them like mud to smear on whatever they get upset about. The whole assumption behind the use of vulgar four-letter words is that they communicate scorn or disdain or hate. How does this happen?

How, for example, does the act of sexual relations, created by God as good to be fulfilled in marriage—how does it get translated into a four letter word and carry the meaning of hate and scorn? The answer is easy: first you get God out of your mind. That's fundamental to all vulgarity. Then you get the sanctity of his creation out of your mind. And then, in your mind, you replace the tenderness of married love with the force of rape, and you've got yourself a four letter word which does verbally the same thing that rape does physically: it expresses selfish, uncaring abusiveness. (Which, incidentally, is why I would say to Christian women, don't spend two minutes with a man who uses this kind of language: rape and rotten language come from exactly the same root.)

4. Speaking in Mean-Spirited Ways

The final kind of language I think Paul would call rotten is mean-spirited language—like, "Shut up!" The words themselves are untarnished. But the usage is vicious and loveless.

Four Implications of Such Language

Those are the four kinds of language I think Paul would include in "rotten talk." Now let's step back and ask what Paul might mean by calling language evil or corrupt or unwholesome or rotten. If we think of spoiled or rotten fruit, like Jesus did, four implications come to mind.

1. It Does Not Nourish

First, rotten fruit does not nourish. Neither does rotten language. It does not strengthen or improve or help. It is not useful for food. It is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.

2. It Will Probably Make You Sick

Second, rotten fruit will probably make you sick if you do try to eat it. And rotten language can make people sick, too. In other words, it not only fails to give positive nourishment; it can cause negative harm. Words can wound a person very deeply. Words can be like the virus that transmits the disease of meanness or vulgarity from parent to child or roommate to roommate or colleague to colleague. Rotten language makes people sick if they are forced to eat it.

3. It Smells Bad and Makes the Atmosphere Unpleasant

Third, rotten fruit smells bad and makes the atmosphere unpleasant. I recall a couple of men in graduate school in Germany who seemed to carry the aroma of vulgarity about them. All they ever seemed to laugh at was sexual innuendo. The pitiful thing about it was that the nearer they got to the gutter, the more they laughed. With their mouths they created an atmosphere like a stinking locker room. It was unpleasant for everybody but themselves. And it made noble and high and worthy thoughts all but impossible. It's hard to savor beauty from a garbage dump. Can you stand in an "adult" bookstore and look through the window (if there were a window) and be moved by the beauty of a setting sun?

4. It Probably Comes from a Diseased Tree

The fourth implication that comes to mind when we think of rotten fruit and rotten language is that it probably comes from a diseased tree. If the fruit is rotten as soon as it appears on the branch (as soon as the words come out of the mouth), then the tree is bad.

Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned" ([Matthew 12:34-37](#)).

So if a person takes the name of God in vain, or trivializes the realities of hell and holiness, or turns sexuality into vulgarity, or makes words into weapons of one-upmanship and meanness, then we can say for sure, "There is a rottenness inside the tree as well as outside." If the fruit is bad, the root is bad.

A Whole New Way of Thinking About Language

If we see this, we won't be as surprised with what comes next in the text. It is not what you might expect. We might expect Paul to admonish us to clean up our language. We might expect him to talk about words that are not vulgar or rotten or corrupt, but are pure and wholesome and creative and clear. But Paul doesn't do what we expect.

Instead of proposing clean language, he proposes a whole new way of thinking about language. Instead of saying, "You don't need dirty language to communicate your intention," he says, "The root issue is whether your intention is love." In other words the issue for Paul is not really language at all; the issue is love. The issue is not whether our mouth can avoid gross language; the issue is whether our mouth is a means of grace. You see he shifts from the external fruit to the internal root. He shifts from what we say to why we say it. That's the issue.

Let's read verse 29.

Let no rotten talk come out of your mouth, but only what is good for edifying, as fits the occasion [literally: good for edifying of need—meeting a particular need is in view] that it may impart grace to those who hear.

Do you see the shift? He doesn't say, "Let no rotten talk come out of your mouth, but instead let fresh clean talk come out of your mouth." He says, "Let no rotten talk come out of your mouth, but ask this: Is my mouth a means of grace? Am I meeting a need with the words that are coming out of my mouth? Am I building up faith into the people who hear?"

The Far-Reaching, All-Encompassing Christian Faith

This is a revolutionary way to think about your mouth, just like verse 28 ([last week](#)) was a revolutionary way of thinking about your secular work. Do you see the parallel?

In verse 28 Paul said, "Let the thief no longer steal, but let him labor doing good with his hands," and then he shifts from the what to the why, "so that he may be able to give to those in need." In other words, it is not Christian just to stop stealing. It is not Christian just to work honestly in order to have things. It is

Christian to work to have in order to give—to meet needs. All our work is to be a display of grace.

This is exactly what Paul does here in verse 29. He says, "Let no rotten talk come out of your mouth, but only what is good," and then he shifts from the what to the why, "for edification to meet a need that it may impart grace to those who hear." It is not Christian just to stop swearing. It is not Christian just to put good language in the mouth instead. It is Christian to ask the deeper, internal question: am I speaking now to edify? Is your mouth a means of grace?

All our secular work is to be a display of grace; and all our speech is to be a display of grace. Do you see how all-encompassing and how far reaching our Christian faith must be? These are amazing verses about the grace of God in our lives.

If my mother had only washed out my mouth with soap, and never prayed and labored to wash out my unloving heart with the gospel of the grace of God, I might today have an antiseptic mouth, but I probably wouldn't be a Christian.

A Christian is a person whose rotten root within has been made new by grace through faith in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The grace of God has taken the hate and anger and resentment that spill over in mean and vulgar and irreverent language, and has covered them with the blood of Christ and killed them along with the old unbelieving self.

Sealed for the Day of Redemption

And do you know what the grace of God has left behind in the place of the old hate and anger and resentment? It has left hope. This is the meaning of verse 30. It says, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."

What does this mean? It means that a Christian is a person in whom the Holy Spirit of God dwells, and that this Spirit of God seals the believer for the day of redemption. In other words, the Spirit God puts the stamp of his own image (4:24) on the life of the believer and guarantees that he will persevere to the day of redemption. The seal of the Spirit is the assurance of a secured hope.

The hope of all believers, guaranteed by the seal of the Spirit, is that at the end of history we will come to a day of redemption instead of a day of damnation. What, then, is this day of redemption?

It is the day when the long battle with sin will be over. It is the day when the deepest longings of our heart will be satisfied with the sight of the glory of the grace of God in the face of Jesus. No more groaning with imperfection; no more

waiting; no more frustrated longings. Our redemption will be complete.

The Relationship of 4:30 to Our Language

So what is the point of [Ephesians 4:30](#) in relation to rotten language and gracious language?

The point is this: Paul says that the Spirit has been given to seal us and secure us for an infinitely wonderful future. In other words, the Spirit's sealing work aims to give you hope! So how do you grieve this Spirit? By not hoping in the day of redemption! By not hoping in the power of the Spirit to secure you and help keep you. If the Holy Spirit has been sent to give you hope in God, and instead of hoping in God you fret over your problems and become angry and bitter and resentful, then you grieve the Holy Spirit of God. You strive against the very purpose for which he was sent.

And the language that comes out of a heart that doesn't hope in God will not impart grace to those who hear. How can you make your mouth a means of grace for others when you don't hope in the grace of God for yourself? It is out of hopeless hearts of discouragement and frustration and anger and bitterness and resentment that all rotten and hurtful language comes.

But if you as a believer stop and think for a moment that Christ has died for your sin, that God has promised to work all things together for your good, that he has given you his own Holy Spirit for the specific purpose of sealing you for the day of redemption, then surely a deep and confident hope will be the root of your life. And up through that root will flow the sap of grace, and out onto the branches of your life will come the fruit of a whole new way of talking.

The question for your mouth will not merely be the moral question: Am I avoiding dirty words? But the Christian question: Am I building the faith of others by what I say? Is my mouth a means of grace? Am I frightened and anxious and angry about my life, or am I filled and overflowing with hope that the Spirit of God will keep me safe for the day of redemption?

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