

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Kind Speech

Ephesians 4:17-32

When it comes to the church in Ephesus, “word of mouth” is important. Early on in his letter, Paul indicates that he has “*heard* about [their] faith in the Lord Jesus and [their] love for all the saints” (1:15). Their reputation for mutual love isn’t primarily the result of slick brochures or a state-of-the art website. It’s generated by the way that they relate to one another and embody the love of God in their life together. That kind of behavior creates a name for the congregation. Word gets around. So between staying in touch with his own contacts in the fellowship, and reading the church’s Google reviews from first-time visitors, Paul can tell that the Ephesians are making progress. They’re growing into the holiness to which God has called them.

But all the news in circulation isn’t good. Word of mouth also indicates that there’s trouble with the words coming out of some mouths in Ephesus. In fact, Paul has been tracking the Tweets between some members of the congregation, confirming what others have already told him, namely, that some bitter verbal brawls have broken out in the fellowship.

By the time we reach today’s text at the end of chapter four, Paul is well into admonishing the Ephesians about their behavior. All that he has said so far about God’s saving grace, about unity in Christ, and about being filled with the Spirit, is just lofty theological talk if it doesn’t show up in their walk. Paul exhorts them to practice what he, and they, have preached. They’ve been raised from the dead by the power of God, but some of the stuff coming out of their mouths sounds like they’re still in the grave.

Paul says, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self; . . . and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (v. 22, 24). That includes their speech. The way they talk to one another is supposed to be holy speech, godly speech. When they got baptized, that included their tongues. “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (v. 29).

Writer Lauren Frey Daisley once committed herself to a month-long experiment to practice kindness in her speech. She wrote about her experience in an article titled, “My Month of No Snark.” “Snark” is a slang word that combines “snide” and “remark.” It refers to sarcastic comments. Daisley wrote:

It started when my husband, baby and I drove away from a visit with my aunt, who has Stage 4 breast cancer. I thought back on the 30-some years I’ve known her. I have never once in all that time heard her say anything unkind. Not even in the subtext of her words. That’s one hell—or, in this case, heaven—of a legacy. . . .

I began to wonder, how would holding my tongue—or at least changing what came off it—alter my relationships? Would I be forced into becoming a pushover or would I find more direct ways to deal with disagreement? Would I be less interesting? Would I still feel like myself, even? And in a bigger, moral way: Is it actually better?

Daisley discovered that it wasn't easy to live without snark. But she also came to see the benefits of avoiding it. She concluded, "Kindness doesn't have to imply repression. It doesn't rein in humor or impede the fight for justice. But it does require discipline and substantive engagement with others."¹

Note how Frey's experience led her to reflect more deeply on what constitutes kind speech. I think that's part of what Paul aims to create among the Ephesian Christians. He tells them what Christian speech is not. It's not anger, quarreling, bitterness, lying, deceit, or ruining the reputation of another. But Paul doesn't leave it at that. He also tells the Ephesians what Christian speech is. It's truthful, helpful, positive, and builds up. Christian speech is kind and compassionate. It has words of forgiveness for others.

Christian speech is a matter of both subtraction and addition. It involves removing the old and introducing the new. It involves getting rid of certain patterns of verbal engagement, and replacing them with ways of speaking that more faithfully reflect the character of God, most of all, his love and kindness. After all, where would any of us be without the kindness of God? As Paul summarizes it earlier in his letter, "We were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved" (2:3b-5). In and through Jesus Christ, God's kindness has been revealed and put to work in our lives and in the world. And this saving, life-giving kindness toward sinners is to be embodied in the way we relate to one another, including our speech.

When I say kind speech, I mean more than just nice speech. Now don't get me wrong, there's a place for niceness in the Christian life. But being a follower of Jesus goes way beyond simply being nice to others. We certainly need to be nice, within the congregation and beyond. But niceness often settles for simply pleasing others, or at least not offending them. Niceness operates more at the surface level of human interaction. Kindness actually goes further, and deeper. Kindness often requires a greater degree of self-giving and sacrifice. Kindness puts more on the line in order to seek the good of another. Kindness is more deeply intertwined with love and compassion.

When the Bible speaks of how God comes to us and relates to us, it doesn't describe God's character and action in terms of niceness. One of the key biblical terms is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which can be translated in various ways. Sometimes it's rendered as "steadfast love" or "faithfulness." I also especially like the King James rendering, "lovingkindness." The central characteristic of God, in his dealings with his creation, with humankind, and with each of us, is his lovingkindness. His love is kind, and his kindness is loving.

God's lovingkindness has been manifested to us fully and decisively in Jesus Christ. That's why Paul grounds his admonition in what God has accomplished for us in Christ. Paul doesn't say use kind words primarily because they're more likely to gain a positive response from the other person, though that may very well be true. Paul doesn't say use kind words primarily because you have a better chance of changing someone's else's heart or mind, though that too may very well be true. Paul doesn't say use kind words primarily because you'll help make the world a better place, though again, that may very well be true.

Paul doesn't say, "Kill 'em with kindness." That's not just the title of a Selena Gomez song. It's also a widely used piece of advice and wisdom. It means combating someone's hostility or aggression with kind words and/or deeds. About a year ago, there was a man in Pensacola, Florida named Bryan Stewart who wrongly took the phrase literally. When he was approached by neighbors about yelling and banging coming from his house, Stewart responded by exiting his house wielding a machete with the word "kindness" written on it. One of the neighbors stepped in to block the incoming blow and suffered a cut on his hand.

Police eventually responded and Stewart was arrested and booked on charges of aggravated battery and assault with a deadly weapon without the intent to kill.²

Clearly this is not what Paul has in mind when he talks about combating division with kindness, though later in Ephesians he does tell them to “put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (6:11). He doesn’t speak of the machete of kindness, but does underscore the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (6:17). In other words, as believers, our primary weapon is the gospel, the message of God’s lovingkindness toward us in Christ. Our relationship with God and with one another in the life of the church is based on that. So Paul concludes, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (v. 32).

Our kind speech has to be grounded in God’s kind speech. And God’s kind speech comes in the form of the cross. The cross does what no human being ever could. It reconciles us to God. It breaks down the wall that separates us sinful human beings from God and from one another. The cross establishes peace between you and God, and between you and others. When you believe this good news and confess Jesus Christ as Lord, you’re united with the community of God’s people who live out this peace. And one of the critical ways we preserve, promote, and perpetuate this peace is through our words to one another.

Kind speech doesn’t mean that we should avoid confronting one another or refrain from holding one another accountable when wrong has been done. It doesn’t mean that we should just speak to one another in superficial niceties and tiptoe around the deep and difficult matters of being fellow members of God’s household. No, kind speech recognizes the hard realities of life in Christian community, and engages these realities with the kind of tone and language that promotes healing and unity.

Preacher John Claypool once said, “Of all the creative potencies that we humans have, nothing is any greater than a person’s saying, ‘What happens to you makes a difference to me,’ and then extending that person the gift of kindness.”³ Sometimes we extend the gift of kindness through specific deeds or actions. Sometimes we extend the gift of kindness through our words, which are themselves a form of action. Through the way that we engage with one another verbally, we act out our faith. We demonstrate and embody the kindness of God. We practice kind speech, both inside and outside the community of believers.

This means using your words to speak the truth, not falsehood. It means using your words to build others up, not to tear them down. It means using your words to serve others’ needs, not to secure your own interests. It means using your words to encourage someone’s potential, not to destroy their reputation. It means using your words to communicate the facts, not to spread gossip. It means using your words to calm things down, not to stir things up. It means using your words to cultivate cooperation, not to create chaos. It means using your words to promote unity, not to perpetuate division. In short, it means using your words to take the kindness of God extended to you in Christ, and extend it to others.

¹ Lauren Frey Daisley, “My Month of No Snark.” Salon.com. March 29, 2011. Accessed January 5, 2020 <https://www.salon.com/2011/03/29/my_month_of_no_snark/>.

² David Moye, “Florida Man Threatens to Kill Neighbor with ‘Kindness’—The Name of His Machete. Huffington Post. January 14, 2019. Accessed February 6, 2020 <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/florida-man-machete-kindness_n_5c3cd96de4b01c93e00c6d21>.

³ John Claypool, in his sermon, “The Creative Power of Kindness.” 30 Good Minutes. November 28, 2004. December 6, 2007 <http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Claypool_4809.htm>.