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The Words We Use

WHAT do the following all have in common?

- On the day of the 2016 United States presidential election, the swell of online traffic bulged on Twitter amongst its 321 million registered users. Throughout the day until 10 p.m. ET, there were forty million election-related tweets posted on the social media site.¹
- On the morning that I began writing this chapter, the Inclusive Language Guide of Colorado State University listed ‘America’, ‘American’, ‘male’, and ‘female’ as words to be avoided in usage. The university also listed ‘war’, ‘cake walk’, ‘hold down the fort’, and ‘starving’ as other expressions deemed as non-inclusive.²
- Social and political commentator Dave Rubin repeatedly receives heavy praise for his *Rubin Report* show, which features extended sit-down conversations with a variety of personalities such as television host Larry King, neuro-

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/technology/for-election-day-chatter-twitter-ruled-social-media.html>

2. <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=13460>

scientist and atheist Sam Harris, political commentators Ben Shapiro and Thomas Sowell, and university professor Jordan Peterson. Of special note are Rubin's generous listening skills, his open-mindedness, and lack of agendas or 'gotcha' questions.³

- Citizens of Hong Kong, in response to criminal and anti-extradition bills which they believe could leave them at the mercy of the Chinese government, turn out in throngs of anywhere from half a million to two million people in June 2019 to register their anger with the proposition.⁴

The answer is 'They all use words.'

The way we communicate ideas is a foundational part of human nature. One of the most noted milestones for children is their first word. How we utilize language, arrange thoughts, and express our inmost being taps into our great passions of life. In addition, the freedom to express oneself—whether individually or in more socially extensive ways like freedom of the media or the liberty to hold protests—is viewed by many as the primary freedom of all people (though I would argue the right to life outranks it, but that comes later in this volume). A significant number of people will base the quality of their nation, and their government, on the metric of free speech.

The Economist published its 'Democracy Index' a couple of years back, in which it mentioned that the 'quality of democracy in any country may in large part be gauged by the degree to which freedom of speech prevails. Societies that do not tolerate

3. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/free-speech-true-believer-dave-rubin-the-top-talker-of-the-intellectual-dark-web-doesnt-want-to-talk-about-his-own-ideas>

4. <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2019/07/05/hong-kong-extradition-bill-battle-continues-protests-planned-weekend/>

dissent, heresy, and the questioning of conventional wisdom cannot be “full democracies”.⁵ I think it is true that there’s a solid link between free speech and the quality of government, and that should be a concern for all citizens. But that is not what brings us to this chapter.

We are asking, what are the components of the *good life* that Jesus calls us to live? And while free speech is a wonderful right (and I definitely don’t want to lose mine!), the issue is not how do we use Jesus’ teaching to defend our rights of expression. We have to ask how we should use our words.

With that in mind, let’s start.

‘What?’: Speech, Free and Otherwise

The drama of human history is only a few sentences old before we discover that someone is *talking*. Genesis 1 exhibits the importance of the expressed word, showing us that the world is constructed *by the speech of God*. The New Testament underscores this when one writer shares that ‘the universe was created by the word of God’ (Heb. 11:3), or more literally, *the ages were formed by the speech of God*. Verbal communication is the reason why things exist. God spoke, and the elements of the world began whizzing into formation. He used imperatives, or commands, which shows that everything good in the world—including your existence—is an expression of His intention and purpose.

Obviously, God is not the only being equipped for speech. He invests His human creation with that gift, and people manifest this ability in stunning ways. They might celebrate God’s goodness, as Adam shows his elation when God creates Eve for him as a wife (Gen. 2:23). People can declare God’s worth, as Solomon did at the dedication of the Jerusalem Temple, praying

5. http://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy_Index_2017.pdf

aloud that ‘there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath’ (1 Kings 8:23). Prophets such as Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others spoke God’s messages of mercy and judgment to His people. And Jesus Himself—known for tangible actions like miracles and healings—spent much of His ministry on earth teaching people about God’s kingdom and using parables as stories to exemplify what that journey was like.

Also, verbal proclamation is the primary vehicle by which people have been moved to action over the years. Biblical preaching is God’s non-negotiable activity by which people hear the truth of salvation in Christ and growth in divine grace. The Apostle Paul makes this clear to his protégé Timothy when he commands him to ‘preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching’ (2 Tim. 4:2). Working from Scripture, which is ‘living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword’ (Heb. 4:12), followers of Jesus can have confidence that they will receive truth that is essential for godly living.

Speech also moves people by the power of words and compels others to remembrance and action. This can be demonstrated by memorable speeches and addresses down through time. Historic examples include Winston Churchill’s ‘We Shall Fight on the Beaches’ speech to Parliament in 1940 (‘we shall never surrender’); the inaugural address of John F. Kennedy; Martin Luther King’s electrifying ‘I Have a Dream’ speech during the March on Washington; Ronald Reagan’s urging in Berlin to ‘tear down this wall’; Abraham Lincoln’s ‘Gettysburg Address’; and Sojourner Truth’s passionate ‘Aren’t I a Woman?’ speech in 1851. Even fictional speeches like King Henry’s stirring address to the English troops on St Crispin’s Day in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* coin enduring phrases (‘band of brothers’) and inspire future generations.

The point is that verbal communication is a gift from God. The ability and hunger to express oneself, to utter thoughts and opinions, to tell stories and publish poems (because some of us, like me, do better at writing things out than speaking them) is a profound facet of being made in God's image.

'So What?': Speech Spoiled

Aside from the potential to edify and uplift others, our words also carry with them great power to divide and destroy. Note what the Apostle James says in the third chapter of his epistle:

Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so (James 3:4-10).⁶

Our ability to speak can create more impact that goes well beyond the (relatively) small size of our tongue (and vocal cords). In seven verses, James compares our power of speech to (a) an uncontrollable rudder on a ship, (b) a fire, (c) a poisonous stain, (d) an instrument of hell, and (e) untamable. In short,

6. While this is just taken from James 3:4-10, the whole chapter, and indeed the entire epistle, is worth reading.

our words—which can bless and encourage—also have the ability to (a) get us and others off course from where we should go, (b) savage and tear down people, (c) smear, tarnish and toxify reputations, (d) do Satan’s bidding, and (e) refuse to get under control. James ends this with an exhortation that the contradictory, hypocritical action of blessing and cursing should not come from people transformed by the good news of Jesus.

Aside from the difficulty of bringing one’s own speech under control, we live in a worldwide environment marked by a sharp decrease in civility, tact, and kindness. In spite of the best efforts of many to make decency and empathy more apparent, social media and online blogs open up too many opportunities for people to load up their untamable selves to spew controversial and harmful opinions.

There also exists much confusion about where different sorts of communication might be welcome. In a number of American universities and colleges, for example, the designation of ‘free speech zones’ and ‘safe spaces’ has literally carved out places where discussion of controversial and disturbing issues might be either welcome or barred.⁷ For places that ideally should be citadels of discussion and generous debate, it is difficult to see how this artificial sectioning can nurture the growth of emerging adults rather than imprison them in deepening immaturity.

Recently, this anxiety has erupted in specific protests. Bret Weinstein, an evolutionary biology professor at Evergreen State College in Washington, found himself at the center of a verbal storm in 2017. Evergreen State had for years observed a tradition known as a Day of Absence, in which students and faculty of minority races would stay away from campus for the day. This was not to bar them or discriminate against them,

7. <https://thebestschools.org/magazine/speech-codes-and-safe-spaces/>

but to highlight (by their absence) how critical the minorities' contributions had been throughout history. In 2017, a collection of students and professors challenged this and wanted to flip the tradition, barring white students and faculty from campus for the day. Weinstein firmly spoke out against the 'flip',⁸ earning him an astounding level of anger from many students, who sought to bar him from campus and also took over the college library and shouted down anyone who disagreed with their conclusions.⁹ This hardly seems to be a generous arrangement for the exchange of ideas with deliberation and thoughtfulness.

Of course, this is not limited to those of more 'progressive' views. Traditionalists and conservatives can exhibit like traits, unloading vile statements and personal attacks on others, even those within their tribes.¹⁰ Such actions have much to do with blurting out whatever is on one's tongue and less than they might think about exhibiting the spirit of Jesus Christ.

'Now What?': Speech Redeemed

As I referenced before, I think the idea of free speech is a good one, and it's a cornerstone of a freer society. I live in the United States, where I am more than happy that the First Amendment of our Constitution specifically declares that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; **or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or of the right of the people peacefully to assemble,**

8. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/16/us/evergreen-state-protests.html>

9. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/may/25/evergreen-state-students-demand-professor-resign-f/>

10. Witness leaders such as university presidents (<https://www.christianpost.com/news/evangelical-divide-explodes-over-migrant-children-after-jerry-falwell-jr-slams-russell-moore.html>) and pastors (<https://friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2019/06/29/robert-jeffress-democrats-claiming-to-be-christian-dont-worship-the-true-god/>).

and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.¹¹ This makes for an existence where we (in principle) can have a great deal of latitude of expression, in a spirit of tolerance where we do not have to agree with someone else, yet that other person would have the right to say what they wish. A couple of truths need to be stated as we practically work this out.

One matter is for everyone, whether Christian or not. If you subscribe to the political principle of free speech, it is not a gift given to you with limitations to others. Uncomfortable and disturbing words (providing they do not demonstrably incite violence) would be given a place in the world along with your own beliefs. For instance, members of the Westboro Baptist Church (which is more like a cult than a Christian community) in Topeka, Kansas, travel around the nation to protest both at events celebrating the achievements of homosexuals and at the funerals of American soldiers killed in action, claiming such deaths are God's judgment on America for tolerating homosexuality. Now I don't affirm homosexuality (as you can discover in a later chapter) and neither do I think military deaths display God's judgment in a discernible way. But we have to ask if we can just eliminate some verbiage from our surroundings simply because it is offensive. If you are a Christian, do you want an atheist to be silenced if he or she mocks the idea that Jesus is the Son of God? It's important to play fairly. Free speech protects unpopular speech.

There is another item to consider if you are a follower of Jesus. Whether or not you live in a nation that has free speech, the Bible never guarantees you have that right. God is more interested in your speech and your communication being *faithful* than *free*. For one reason: Not every Christian lives in a free society. A number of believers inhabit oppressive nations

11. *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* (Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education, 2009), p. 207.

like North Korea, China, Turkey, Vietnam and others, where they do not have the benefits of free expression but always are under the biblical directive to obey Christ with what they say. Another reason is that God gives us different parameters for judging the quality of our words:

(1) Is what I say true? That is, does it match with reality? The Apostle Paul urges Christians to emphasize ‘whatever is true ... honorable ... just ... pure ... lovely commendable’ (Phil. 4:8). As a follower of Jesus, you do not get to pop words out of your mouth indiscriminately without measuring them well. God is a God of truth. Everything Jesus spoke was truth, and everything the Holy Spirit reveals to Jesus’ followers is true. So, if we are to imitate Jesus and grow in His nature, then our speech and communication should follow the same truthful trajectory.

(2) Is what I say helpful? As the Christians in ancient Thessalonica looked with anxiety toward the future, Paul reminded them of our mutual life in Christ, and then he says, ‘Therefore, *encourage one another and build one another up*, just as you are doing’ (1 Thess. 5:11, *my emphasis*). Rather than sucking the life out of someone, we should seek to strengthen them with what we say. This doesn’t mean we can’t ever criticize someone when it’s called for. However, the goal of our communication should be pouring hope and healing into others by what we share. Are people lifted up when you are around them? Do people view you as an encourager?

One of my former college room-mates has spent a great deal of time as a public school principal in Alabama. One of Danny’s greatest gifts is his strategic desire to mingle with students and seek out kids who might need encouragement. Whether it is a positive statement or a question of how they are doing that day or giving them a high-five hand slap with a smile, Danny knows how to take a student and empower them to lift up their

head a little more. That is an intentional attitude which takes dedication and practice, and the more we seek to turn that spirit into habitual action, the more clearly we will communicate helpful, encouraging, strengthening hope.

(3) Is it necessary? Jesus counsels His disciples in Matthew 5:33-37 about taking oaths, such as in a court of law. Technically, He is speaking to this specific matter when He tells them ‘Let what you say be simply “Yes” or “No”; anything more than this comes from evil.’ But surely there is no problem with broadening this to a more general application here. Yes, we should tell nothing but the truth, but does that mean we should go into a mind-boggling amount of detail every time? This is especially important when people have told us information we should hold in confidence. If your friend Tyler is facing the divorce of his parents, he might let you know about his struggles but ask you to keep this matter private for now. Perhaps your other friend Maggie asks, ‘What’s going on with Tyler?’ In that case, you don’t need to give the details. You can say, ‘Who can say?’ or something innocuous like that. Or just shrug and say nothing. Or perhaps a ferocious argument breaks out near you, and it’s clear no one is wanting constructive dialogue, so any engagement in the verbal struggle is fruitless. Have you thought that you can just walk away or disengage? You don’t have to attend every fight that invites you in.

There are other questions to consider, but these should get you started on a road toward more thoughtful speech. If you live in a society where you can speak freely, be thankful. But remember also that your freedom of speech does not free you from the consequences of opening your mouth. People are free to disagree with you. They can push back against your ideas. That’s good and healthy. It forces you to be more thoughtful about how true, helpful, and necessary your ideas might be. There’s no reason to fear this, especially as a follower of

Jesus. We have His promise that if we are earnestly wanting to communicate truthfully to others, even if we are under the scrutiny and skepticism of others. His words to His disciples then must penetrate our hearts today when He exhorts us to ‘not be anxious about how [we] should defend [ourselves] or what [we] should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.’ (Luke 12:11b-12)

For Your Consideration

- Why is it so important to communicate our ideas clearly and graciously?
- Note the implications of what James 3 reveals about our speech. In what areas of your speech do you struggle with exhibiting biblical faithfulness?
- If people’s free speech should be protected as a right, what is our responsibility when we encounter hateful words, unpopular ideas, or statements that clearly could lead to physical violence?