

## EPHESIANS #69 4:29 5-12-13

### WORD CONTROL

(Ephesians 4) You know, you can't preach what you aren't living. Ever heard that? Sounds good, but is it true? I hope not. My calling is not to preach my own life. I'm not setting myself up as your standard. I have, you have, we have a standard, an ideal that is much better than any of us. I frequently find myself teaching you lessons from the word that I have come nowhere close to mastering. Today is certainly one of those days. In fact, there are few verses in all of God's word that Dan Hendley has more desperately needed to have stamped on his eyeballs. I speak to you today out of my personal struggle to live what we are going to study. Our text for today is Ephesians 4:29 and I sure don't need to look at my Bible for this one. **29** *Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.* It's a short verse so we can read it twice as we begin **29** *Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.* I am probably not alone in my need to meditate long and hard in this passage. Join me as we examine from this verse the goal, the guide and the guard of our speech.

First, we see here what ought to be the goal of our speech, the purpose behind everything that we say. And what is it? The goal is stated in two ways. Paul says first that the goal is to edify, to build up and strengthen. Then he puts it this way, that our goal is to give grace, specifically grace to those who hear us. This is so simple but so profound. It's easy to understand, but to apply it is a revolutionary thing. When I was in college I took a Speech course and we discussed the purpose of human speech and guess what we were told it was? Speech is for the purpose of expressing ourselves. Hah! Speech does serve that purpose, but that purpose is not God's purpose is it? This is where we have to undergo a revolution. We thought God gave us our vocal apparatus so we could express ourselves and clearly he did. Without this ability baby wouldn't get fed or wouldn't get his diaper changed promptly, but as we grow older we have to grow better and learn how to use this ability in a Christian way. And that way is the way of love, the building up of one another not the way of mere self-expression. I have had to re-learn the purpose of speech. My natural mode of thought as I grew up was the worldly mode. I thought God gave me a tongue for self-expression, basically, that it was for me. Now, I understood that there were certain God-ordained parameters. There were things you could not say because the Bible said you couldn't. I have never used the

name of the Lord as a curse word. Never, which is pretty amazing considering the other foul language that poured out of my mouth as a teenager. I was a fine Christian young man in most respects. I didn't drink, smoke or chew or go with girls who do, but I did learn to cuss quite freely among my peers. If you had confronted me about it I would ask you what was wrong with those particular words I used. The Bible didn't have a list of banned words. I was a letter-of-the-law kind of dude. But I missed this principle. If you had asked me to quit cussing because it bothered you I may have said that was your problem, get over it. I was expressing myself with unwholesome speech. My attitude was worldly, immature and selfish and didn't really change until I got a hold of this verse and its implications. The lesson here is that our capacity to speak is to be directed toward the blessing of others. And if it doesn't serve that purpose, then it is out of bounds and, at best, an idle word.

Do you see what this passage teaches us about the power of words? It says that by our words we can give grace to someone. By our words we can build them up and strengthen them, and of course, the converse is equally true. We may speak condemnation and weakness into a person's soul. Words are incredible things. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can destroy me. Words can also set me free. Think for just a moment, and see if you can remember a time in your life when somebody said something to you that shaped who you are either for good or for ill. In the momentous, fateful days when Nazism was in its early stages, Adolph Hitler spoke to a group of people in a beer cellar in Munich. His inflammatory words, which bristled with hate were mirrored in the hardened faces of his audience and soon they engulfed the world in war. An artist captured the scene in that beer cellar, putting on canvas the facial reactions of the group as Hitler spoke those fiery words. He gave this title to the painting: "In the beginning was the word." Those, of course, are the initial words of the gospel of John which speak of the Christ. They are torn out of context by the painter to make another statement, I think a powerful statement, about the power of words. In the beginning was the spoken word and what followed was years of international conflict and millions of deaths and the redirecting of history, but it all did start with human speech, with what came out of the mouth of one man. Don't underrate the ability of words to accomplish great evil or great good. Proverbs 11:**9a** *With his mouth, the godless man destroys his neighbors.* The mouth is mighty. Proverbs 11:**11** *By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted. But by the mouth of the wicked it is torn down.* It can tear down a city, or it can lift it up. Proverbs 10:**11a** *The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life.* It just pours forth with good things and blessing. Here are some

Proverbs that mention both possibilities Proverbs 12:**18a** *There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword.* Man, that hits home to me. I have said things suddenly and without thought that have wounded those I love. Then look at the latter half of that. **18b** *But the tongue of the wise brings healing.* Much like that is Proverbs 15:**4** *A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit.* The same tool can serve both functions. Proverbs 18:**21a** *Death and life are in the power of the tongue.* ® This is very serious stuff. This is a sober issue. This is a matter of life and death.

You young people here, need to pay close attention today. If you call yourself a disciple of Christ you cannot afford to follow the crowd on this issue. You are to love your parents, love your brothers and sisters, love your classmates and the primary way you do that or fail to do that is in how you speak to them! Are you blessing or cursing? Wounding or healing? I am still so bad at this now, I can only imagine what I must have been like in high-school back when I thought I was given lips for self-expression. For me, life was an ongoing canvas on which I was to demonstrate just how clever I was. And I was clever. I was class clown and basked in the laughs and God only knows whose feelings were stepped on in the process. I remember in high-school telling a story on a dear friend of mine named Lisa. In second grade Lisa was standing before her class reciting something when her nervousness got to her and she lost control of her bladder. For some reason this memory recurred to me when we were high-school juniors. I shared it with my buddies and Lisa had to endure her senior year in high-school with a new nickname. Due to my funny story she became *Puddles Drake*. It seems funny now but that's the kind of thing that can devastate a young person. Another friend of mine got nicknamed *Moose*. We thought it was cute at the time but years later I learned that he hated it.

Humor is an interesting thing. Like speech itself it can be of tremendous value when used properly. But it can also destroy. That is why it is good to think twice before making a wisecrack. Many of you have expressed appreciation for my humor in the pulpit. That is part of who I am, but, it can hurt people. One time a lady got on Charles Spurgeon for being too much of a cut up, and I could relate to Spurgeon's reply. He said, "Oh, if you only knew the many jokes I don't use." Letterman and Leno don't have these restrictions, but Christians are bound by Ephesians 4:29. We may not use humor that is unwholesome or hurtful. Ephesians 5:**4** *there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.* Coarse jesting. Boy that comes easy for some of us. Marriage is great for helping us see ourselves and understand

ourselves. At least it has been for me. My loose lips have been an enormous trial for my wife. There came a point in our relationship when I really did some self-analysis to figure out why I was so frequently hurting Beth's feelings and I discovered something about myself and my past. You see, growing up in the herd of young men that I grew up with, the way we butted heads, the way we fought and tested ourselves was verbal. It was a continual contest to one-up each other. You ever hear these Winston Churchill quotes in which he responds to Lady Astor? Lady Astor says to Churchill, "If you were my husband I would poison your tea." Churchill says, "If you were my wife, I'd drink it." That's the kind of thing we did constantly in my peer group. It was how we discovered ourselves I guess, but I eventually figured out that this type of thing didn't play well in a marriage. Marriage is no time to prove your cleverness. Neither is any other mature relationship. The goal for us is to edify. That means you ask, "What would bless them to hear?" Not, "what do I want to say?" How about this - what you say should be shaped by your hearer's interests, not by your personality. By nature, sinful nature, we speak to build up self. God totally changes that for us and says, "speak what is good for edification, to give grace to those who hear." That's the goal. And that's why Ecclesiastes 10:**12a** *Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious.*

Wow, there are a number of verses on this sheet that we could stand to memorize. Let's move on now to our second major point which is the guide for our speech. ® We've seen the goal, but to get there we need a guide. And our text tells us what that will be. **29** *Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.* That tells us that what should shape our speech, to ensure that we hit the goal, is the need of the moment. You got that? That's our guide. To know how to bless others with our speech we need to analyze the situation. Saying, "Praise the Lord!" May be great in one situation and may be a very poor choice in another. Some apparently think that one phrase fits all circumstances but it does not. Nothing does. You can quote the Bible in a very unedifying way if you fail to see what is the need of the moment. And sad to say, love is not enough to guarantee edification. That is, you can be motivated purely and still do more harm than good by what you say. Ever done that? In order to edify we need to speak the truth in love plus wisdom. I remember a situation in my last year in high-school when a dear friend came into a class crying because she just discovered she had made a B in Trigonometry. This was the first non-A my friend had made in four years of high school. That grade meant she would not be valedictorian. She was upset and I felt sorry for her. In my foolish love I offered her a sermon on not caring too much

about outward expressions of success. I was truthful and loving but not at all helpful. It was not wise. Of course, timing is critical. I read recently of a woman who was pulled over by a policeman for speeding. The officer gave her a warning and then said to her, "Have a good day and drive careful." As he walked away the woman leaned her head out the window and said, "You mean, *drive carefully*." She got an \$80 fine. Bad timing. You know what the secret to good humor is don't you? (Ask me what the secret of good humor is) Timing. Comedian Stephen Wright tells of getting pulled over for speeding and the officer says to him, "*Why were you going so fast?*" The comedian says, "*See this thing my foot is on? It's called an accelerator. When you push down on it, it sends more gas to the engine. The whole car just takes right off.*" I think that's funny, but the timing was horrible. Sometimes humor can heal and help. Other times it can hurt terribly. I remember trying to help cheer up a friend whose girl friend had broken off their relationship. I tried the light-hearted approach, underestimating the extent of his pain. Our relationship was never the same. Oh may God help us speak words of wisdom in the timing of grace. Proverbs 25:**11** *Like apples of gold in a setting of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances.* Colossians 4:**6** *Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person.*

That is what we're after. Words that bless, appropriate to the person and the occasion. How do we develop this ability? Some come by it more naturally than others. Some were better trained as a child at doing this. And some of us have to make a study of it now, as adults, even though we're already expected to be capable of it. You may not be. Here is how you grow in this ability. First, you get in to God's word. There you will see the example of godly men and of our Lord Himself. There you will come to understand human nature. Secondly, seek after counsel from others. That means read books on people skills like Dale Carnegie's *How To Win Friends and Influence People*. Ask for help from those you deem superior to yourself. When you are developing a strategy for handling a touchy situation, run it by someone else to get another perspective. Thirdly, don't waste trial and error. ® Learn from it. And on that point I need to remind us all that offenses are going to occur. Your Christian friends will say things that are not edifying, that hurt you, and your challenge then is to respond with grace. That means you don't assume evil on their part. Almost all of us are adept at hurting each other unintentionally. Forbear, forgive and go on. Who is this sermon for today anyway? Huh? What's the answer? It's for me. Watch out lest you find yourself saying, "Yeah, I know somebody who really needs to hear this one!" This word is for you. And for the

same reason you don't use Ephesians 4:29 as a whip of condemnation and say, "Hey, you need to build me up. You need to give grace to me" and get all upset over the failures of someone else. We can grow together in this ability, but it's a lot easier to grow in an atmosphere of grace instead of condemnation. Understood? Good, let's move on.

Main point #3 is the guard of your speech. And the guard of your speech is you. You are told to control what comes out of your mouth. You see, as long as we are partly-saved sinners, we will have trouble here. Unfortunately, unwholesome things do proceed from our hearts. With God's help we must stop and fix them before they escape our mouths. That is the point of our text and so I assume this means you have the capacity to do this, at least as God helps you. But oh, is this ever difficult! James 3 tells us just how difficult it is. **3:2** *we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.* He implies that this is the hardest aspect of life to control. **7-8** *every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. <sup>8</sup> But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.* I assume that means "no man can tame the tongue." If you're a Christian that doesn't discourage you. You have Holy Spirit power on your side. You are not what you used to be. You are a new man and can live a new way. But don't expect the change to be easy. Let me give you six suggestions, taken partly from the word, partly from my experience about how you may gain mastery over your speech and grow to be an edifier. Suggestion #1 is to practice slowness of speech. (speaking slowly) I don't mean talking like this. I mean pausing to think before you speak. We looked at the importance of this a couple of weeks ago when we spoke on handling anger. It is a must, and it makes possible suggestion #2 which is to remember God's word when you need it. We can be resolved to obey as we sit here, but wait till you're sitting at lunch today and you get to talking. Will Ephesians 4:29 come to mind when you need it, when you are tempted to blurt out something unwholesome or unwise? What I find is this-- If I commit a verse of Scripture or a principle to memory with intention of following it a process sets in. I won't quit sinning right away but next time I do it I will recognize my wrong and apologize more quickly. Then one day I'll catch myself halfway through the offense and stop. Then I'll catch myself just before I say something foolish and that's the time to rejoice. The second thing to do is to work on remembering what is right.

Thirdly, watch what you hear. ® Do you know why babies in America grow up speaking English instead of Russian? It's because that is what they hear all the time. And listen, if you are around

coarse jesters, and unwholesome speech too often you will find it more difficult to speak rightly yourself. My fourth suggestion here is to work on the source of your words. That is, constantly be seeking a heart that is more pure, and a mind that is being renewed into the image of Christ. As you do that, you will find your thoughts needing much less filtering. Your speech will be more wholesome because your heart is more pure. Fifthly, I suggest making this a matter of consistent prayer. For some of us, this is a major front of spiritual warfare and must be fought with spiritual weapons. Listen to David's prayer and make it your own Psalm 141:3 *Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth. Keep watch over the door of my lips.* Some of us could stand to utter that word two or three times a day. And my last suggestion – another line from Churchill - is to never give up. I have felt the temptation to do that before. I have come close to throwing in the old towel on this one. That is exactly what Satan wants you to do. Paul says he did this, “forgetting what lies behind, and reaching forward to what lies ahead I press on toward the goal.” That's what we must do, and we do it in hope that we are indeed children of God, destined for glory, and called to become like Jesus in thought, word and deed. So you go right on fighting the good fight, finishing the course and keeping the faith. For those who do there is guaranteed victory ahead. Amen? Amen. Let's respond to God in prayer....In My Life Lord In My Words. Benediction II Th.2:16,17