

1

FROM SPARKS TO RAGING FIRE

The Awful Power of the Tongue



Death and life are in the power of the tongue,
and those who love it will eat its fruits.

PROVERBS 18:21 ESV

I sat alone at a corner table in the sterile, gray, middle-school lunchroom fiddling with the peas and carrots on my mustard-colored plastic lunch tray. I wasn't sitting at the usual table near the front of the lunchroom. That privilege was reserved only for those in the popular group at my midwestern school in the late 1970s.

Oh, how different things had been just a week prior! I was privileged to hang out at the "cool table" then, occupying one of its sought-after metal and Formica spaces. But that was before "it" happened: my banishment from the popular group, which resulted in my need to sit at a normal table like the rest of my eighth-grade class.

I could feel the clique of teens staring at me even though I never looked up from my tray. I can only imagine the things they were saying about me. How could I have let this happen?

KEEP IT SHUT

How could I go from being one of the popular kids to now dreading school so much, especially lunchtime when the hierarchy of middle-school culture was on full display there in the lunchroom. Why?

Because of my words.

My words had brought me to this place. Just a week earlier I had been with a group of the “in” crowd of boys. I was the sports reporter for the school newspaper. We were laughing and discussing our basketball team’s latest triumph over our crosstown rival. But soon the conversation turned to what many middle schoolers talk about: what boys liked what girls, and vice versa. The wintertime dance was coming up, and so naturally the topic rose to the top of our talk.

One of the boys was considering taking a friend of mine whom I’ll call Janet. I knew Janet really liked this boy, but I also knew a secret about her, a secret that, although nothing serious or scandalous, was embarrassing nonetheless. You see, at the last dance in the fall she had snuck a kiss with another boy in our class under the bleachers when no chaperones were looking. That boy was one of my good friends, and he confided in me just what his opinion was of the stolen kiss: he thought that she kissed like a fish!

Now I should not have taken this juicy piece of information and wielded it against my friend, but I loved to get attention from the boys in my class (and I secretly had a crush on the boy who wanted to take Janet), and so I let the words tumble out. “Hmm . . . You might want to think that one through. You see, Bill Warner said he thinks Janet kisses like a fish.”

At that the entire group of boys burst into roaring laughter. I assumed that this meant Janet would get no invitation to the winter dance and the top secret info I leaked would never be divulged to her. But I was wrong. Instead of this information

FROM SPARKS TO RAGING FIRE

detering any boys from asking her to the dance, the one who had been considering taking her instead proceeded to tell her what I said. And to ask her to the dance anyway.

To say that she was upset would be an understatement. She was livid! She gathered all of the popular girls around, and together they shook their heads in disbelief, their Farrah Fawcett–style bangs swaying in the air, as they expressed their horror that a girlfriend could do such a thing to another sister. It didn't take long for the mob of middle schoolers to make a choice and then take action. They completely banned me from the popular group. No longer could I sit at their table, occupy a space next to them on the bleachers during a sporting event, or even sit near them in any of our classes. For the first time in my nine years of going to public school, I absolutely dreaded going. I had a stomachache every morning riding the bus to school. I was lonely walking through the halls between class periods. And once home, the phone never rang with one of the girls calling, wanting to chat.

Trying to find a new group of kids to hang out with halfway through the school year in eighth grade can be rather difficult. Cliques have formed. Friendships have been forged. And it just didn't seem there was any room for a “cool kids” reject like me. My only relief came from a group of three girls who took me in and allowed me to sit with them in the lunchroom. But the weekends were torturous and lonely.

No longer did I get invited home after school to hang out for a few hours with one of my former friends. There were no more invitations to roller-skating parties. Or Friday night sleepovers. Not even an invitation to hang out at the mall, grab a soda and an afternoon matinee, and just enjoy being thirteen.

The remainder of the year was hard, and I was so thankful to see summer vacation. Thankfully, the next year when I

KEEP IT SHUT

entered high school we would be joining with another middle school to form our freshman class. I hoped and prayed that this would mean I could find a new group of friends and begin to enjoy being a teenager again.

Sometimes I still think about that lonely eighth-grade year and how my choice to repeat something that was said brought about such a horrible time in my life. Now, what I said was not a lie. Bill Warner had said that she kissed like a fish. But my decision to repeat those words was a poor one. Especially when he later denied he ever said it! (And of course that was way before text messaging, so I couldn't save his words as a screenshot for proof later.)

My little middle-school drama taught me one important lesson:

Our words are powerful, and they have consequences.

Whether it is a string of words screamed out in anger during the height of a marital spat, or a politician who chooses to lie in order to win votes, or even just a middle schooler trying to impress a group of boys. Our words are powerful, and our words have consequences.

It Only Takes a Spark . . .

"It only takes a spark to get a fire going . . ." So started the popular campground song I sang growing up in my local youth group. Each night as we sat staring at the flickering flames of the campfire, someone would start to sing that popular chorus. One by one, each of us would join in, proclaiming the power of sparks to get a fire going, until all of the voices were singing in unity, making loud praise with our voices.

Our words are like sparks. They may start small, but they can ignite a wildfire of destruction and devastation. The author

FROM SPARKS TO RAGING FIRE

of the book of James was the first to make the analogy: “Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:5–6).

Yes, what starts as a little spark can soon gain momentum and become a booming blaze.

In the early summer of 2013, I flew to Colorado Springs for a radio show taping. I have been to the Springs several times in the past and always look forward to my visits there. Although the plane ride is a long one, the descent into Colorado is always breathtaking. My heart leaps as I view the mountains and the lush green grass and the natural rock formations.

This landing, however, was different. Just a few days prior, a horrible fire had broken out, and now the Black Forest Fire, as it was called, raged all around. Off in the distance I could see smoke. At other places I could see the blackened, charred remains of what had once been green foliage.

A friend had lost her home. Others on Facebook asked for prayers for relatives and friends of theirs who also were affected by the flames. When it was all over, 486 homes were destroyed, and two people died. The Black Forest Fire was considered the most devastating fire in the history of the state, and the images I saw and the social media about it were terrifying. All in all, over 14,000 acres were burned, and the damage was estimated at over \$85 million.

Just how did this disaster start? Record-setting heat had been in the region and a red flag warning from the National Weather Service had been issued. In the early afternoon hours of June 11, a man reported a tiny structure on fire, so small that he could capture the flames on his cell phone camera. However,

KEEP IT SHUT

the record heat coupled with the blowing winds soon fanned the flames, and the fire spread to over 100 acres. And then it spread to 1,000 — and on and on and on.

How fitting that James should use fire as an analogy for how our words can quickly spread, causing untold damage. No wonder the Bible cautions us to be very careful with our words. They are fiery indeed!

Corrupt and Untamable

The passage in James also talks about how the tongue can corrupt our whole body. I myself know very well from the times I have wished I could take back my words; often my whole body is affected. My mind races with regret. My heart pounds. My stomach churns and becomes tied up in knots as I fret and stress over what now might happen. My fingers fidget, and I can't seem to concentrate. Sometimes my feet pace as I ponder what I possibly can do now to get myself out of the royal mess I now find myself in.

If we read a little farther in James, we find that the tongue cannot be tamed (James 3:7–8). Every creature, reptile, bird, or animal can be tamed, but not the tongue. Imagine a colossal circus full of every kind of creature: dancing bears, prancing horses — even a ferocious looking feline or two performing tricks or jumping through hoops when their trainers give the signal. But way off in one corner stands a booth with a closed curtain and a sign that reads: “The Utterly Untamable.” Then, at a very strategic time during the spectacular show the ringmaster hushes the audience in order to display this beast that will not bend. When he throws open the concealing curtain, sitting behind it is a woman on a cell phone, chatting away!

With our tongues we curse men and women who are made in God's likeness and then, at other times, we praise God. Out

FROM SPARKS TO RAGING FIRE

of our mouths flow both praising and cursing. But, says the New Testament writer, this should not be! James tells us that a spring cannot suddenly shoot out both sweet and bitter water. Neither can a fig tree produce olives or a grapevine decide to grow a whole mess of figs instead of grapes. You can't get salt water from a freshwater spring (James 3:9–12). Lesson? We should not have both righteous and evil words coming from our tongues.

Misusing My Mouth

Often my mom used to say to us kids, whether we were leaving to go to school for the day or headed off to a weekend social gathering, “Be sure your sins will find you out.” There was no shortage of sins to choose from growing up as a midwestern teenager in the seventies and eighties. However, I chose to stay away from the cigarettes and booze and drugs. My problem was not with what went *into* my mouth. My problem was what came *out*.

My words, sometimes even my lack of words, have caused me much pain over the years. It hasn't always been that I have gossiped or lied. Sometimes I just talk too much. Or I repeated the words of others, which I should not have. Other times I have tried to say the right thing, but it came out the wrong way. Or I have said the right thing but in the presence of the wrong people or at the wrong time. There was just no shortage to the ways I could misuse my mouth.

A survey through the Bible reveals that God places great importance on the way we use our speech. In fact, the words *tongue*, *talk*, *speak*, *words*, *mouth*, and *silence* are used over 3,500 times in the Bible. The pages of Scripture are full of people just like you and me. Some of them serve as a great example of how we should use our words to build up, encourage, and speak for truth. However, there are others who seem to be the poster children

KEEP IT SHUT

for just how *not* to use our mouths. They gossiped, whined, lied, hurled sharp and angry words, or just said the wrong thing at the wrong time. They tempted and urged others to sin. They told half-truths that really were whole lies. Or maybe they said the right thing but at the wrong time or to the wrong person. This resulted in many outcomes: from hurt feelings to wounded relationships to even all-out wars between nations.

It really is the same today. Over the course of the last thirty years of my adult life, I have seen words bring about dire situations. I have also seen them bring about much good. Truly, death and life are in the power of the tongue. The key is knowing how to use our speech properly.

Psychiatrist Louann Brizendine states in *The Female Brain*, “Men use about seven thousand words per day. Women use about twenty thousand.”* (I do know of a few cases where I’m sure this is reversed, where the husband is a yacker while the wife is pretty quiet!) Although Brizendine’s figures are still much debated, just using the numbers on the lower range of both of these estimates means that in the course of a year, women speak about 7.3 million words and men utter about 2.5 million words. All of these words flying off of our lips give ample opportunity for mistakes, fumbles, and foibles. It also gives lots of room for intentionally harmful words. But we must also think of the flip side! How many words of love and care and encouragement can we speak over the course of a year? The choice really is up to us, since we are the ones who control our flapping jaws.

The Origin of Our Words

The Bible says that life and death are in the power of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21). Before the words can get onto our tongue and

* Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain* (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2006), 4.

FROM SPARKS TO RAGING FIRE

spill out of our mouths, don't they begin somewhere else first? Yes, our words may emit from our lips, but they originate in our minds and hearts before they find their way up to our mouths and then to the ears of others. If we really want to learn to control our tongues, knowing what to say, when to say it, and when to say nothing at all, we need to drill down deeper. We need to delve into our hearts and minds to discover the origin of our words, both the life-giving ones and the ones that deal the deathblows.

The apostle Luke says, "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" (Luke 6:45).

The mouth speaks what the heart has stored.

You see, my words don't just tumble out of my mouth randomly or by mistake. They are purposeful and intentional, having originated first in my heart. So if we have a mouth problem, in actuality what we really have is a mind and heart issue. Even in the case of my words gone wrong in middle school, it wasn't just that I spoke the wrong words. My mind entertained a wrong fact that turned into a wrong motive. My heart was intent on evil. I just couldn't bear the thought of my latest crush and Janet going to the dance together. So an idea first formed in my mind. Then it trickled its way down into my heart where a root took hold. Then, out of the abundance of my heart, the words bubbled up and spilled out of my lips, thereby causing pain, in this case not only for Janet, but mostly for me.

The truth is, words are never accidental. To be sure, there are times we utter careless words, but even then those words are first formed in our minds, filtered to our hearts, and then given permission to come out of our lips. So in our quest to use our words in ways that are good and honor God, we must first consider the heart and mind from which they come.

Care of the Heart and Mind

Every two or three years, my husband and I go to a center that does (for a very reasonable price) an entire battery of medical tests. His mother paid for us to go the first time about ten years ago just after his father suffered a stroke. His grandmother had also suffered a stroke, and so my mother-in-law was very concerned that if there were any early warning signals of Todd or me possibly being susceptible to stroke, then she wanted us to know.

Thankfully, each year these tests have shown that not only are our bones good and strong, but our hearts are in excellent condition too. If we had trouble brewing under the surface and were not having these tests administered, we might perhaps one day wake up with chest pain or a heart attack or maybe even a stroke. But because we are being careful to monitor things underneath, we can be alerted if something starts to go wrong before we notice it.

Long before our words go wrong, our hearts are the place in which they fester and brew. We must take very careful care of our hearts and their condition so that the words that come forth will be pleasant and sweet instead of hurtful and bitter. But just how do we do this?

Over thirty years of being a Christian, I have learned some very important things about the connection between my words and my heart. How I use my words, whether for good or for evil, can often, although not always, be traced back to the quality time I am (or am not) spending with the Lord each day, how intentional I am about investing in my relationship with him, and whether or not I am taking steps to become more like his Son, Jesus Christ.

This caring for the heart — the source of my words — isn't some kind of spiritual hocus-pocus where I simply open up my

FROM SPARKS TO RAGING FIRE

Bible and the latest bestselling devotional book and read a few words each morning. It requires being attentive to God's still, small voice throughout the day. Yes, I should be reading my Bible daily and spending time in prayer asking God to help me temper my words and my resulting actions. But the most important thing is responding to the Holy Spirit's tap on my heart when he whispers to me, urging me not to say something I'm about to blurt out or nudging me to speak up when I instead want to remain silent. Caring for my heart in those moments means asking the Holy Spirit to give me wisdom — to keep silent when that is best, or to give me the right words to say when I just can't seem to find them. Perhaps a friend has lost a loved one or is suffering because of some choices they or a close family member made. Or maybe I just need a little help creatively wording something for my children to really get a point across, so instead of just hearing Mom lecture again they really listen to the truth behind my words.

So yes, by all means grab a good devotional book. Crack open your Bible. Hit your knees in prayer. But do it all with an attitude of openness that continues throughout the day. Be attentive to the Holy Spirit's whispers to you — keep silent if that is the Spirit's leading. Or open your mouth and allow the words he is whispering and urging you to say to come out in your own sweet little voice. It isn't easy. It takes effort. It is always easier to ramble or hurl thoughtless words than it is to pause and then choose our words carefully.

Are you willing to try — really try? If you've struggled with words like I have, you may have some mixed feelings in response to this question. You really do want to try, but you also remember times you've "really tried" and failed. If that's the case, allow me to whisper a little encouragement to that word-weary heart of yours. Believe me when I say that if it is possible for someone

KEEP IT SHUT

like me to run her words through the grid of God's holiness, it is more than possible for you to do the same. One step at a time, prayer by prayer and word by word, we really can temper our talking so we have fewer words floating out there that we wish we could take back. It is possible — for me, and for you.

The Journey Begins . . .

Are you ready for the journey? A quest to learn to say what we should, when we should, and to know when to say nothing at all? Today, you can hit the Restart button on the way you use your speech. (Or perhaps click the Force-Quit command, shutting it down altogether?) Maybe words you utter to a family member. The language you use with your coworkers. How you talk to your neighbor. Even the words that tap out from your fingertips and onto the computer screen online.

Consider this your better-than-a-middle-school-sleepover invitation to hang out with me as we learn together to temper the untamable tongue, thus keeping the whole body in check. For starters, in the days ahead I invite you to begin each day with this simple prayer:

Father, I face another day in which I will be called upon to use my words wisely and well. May they encourage those who listen. May they speak truth but also be said in love. May I pause before I pounce. May I be bold enough to speak when I would rather run away. Lord, I give my mouth to you today. May what comes forth be sweet and not bitter. May the journey each word takes from my mind to my heart to my lips be guided by your hand. May what comes out be life-giving rather than causing death. May my words make you proud and bring you glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

2

SQUABBLES, SPATS, AND SUCH

How to Communicate with Family, Friends,
and Other Necessary People



Hatred stirs up conflict,
but love covers over all wrongs.
Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning.

PROVERBS 10:12 – 13

They are an odd, but pretty pair, the two candlesticks we have perched on the antique dresser in our master bedroom. While both are crafted from solid brass with similar round and sturdy bases, the shafts of each candlestick couldn't be less alike.

One is straight and streamlined, not at all fancy, just functional, with tall lines, direct and strong. The second is designed with a touch of flair; two equidistant strands of brass whirl and swirl side by side in a "look at me" manner as they ascend to the top of the shaft that holds the candle in place.

I found each candlestick at a different yard sale, both in the same month. While their styles aren't the same, somehow this eclectic pair is an interesting match. And more importantly, they

KEEP IT SHUT

are a constant visual reminder to my husband and me, providing a tangible picture of our marriage.

My husband is the first candlestick. No frills. Straight-forward. All about function.

I am the second one. Crazy. Winding. All over the map. Completely about fun.

While we both are “forged from brass” in that we are followers of Christ with the same spiritual foundation, pair our opposite-end-of-the-spectrum personalities together and disaster could ensue. In fact, we often joke that if in our courting college days we would have been able to send our profiles to an online matchmaking website, instead of pairing us up with each other, the computer screen would have blinked a bright warning. DO NOT DATE! TOTALLY NOT COMPATIBLE!

Pictures of Perfection?

So often in this day and age of online dating, larger-than-life romantic movies, and spectacular stories of love and romance making their way all over the Internet, it is easy for us to get a picture of marriage that blinks of perfection. And it isn't just with marriage. So many smiling, well-dressed, and seemingly well-behaved families also parade before our eyes on social media day after day. New moms post a parade of glowing baby and toddler photos on Instagram. Teens on Facebook tag their siblings in a post saying how “awesome” and “amazing” they are on the track team or in the school musical. Delighted parents praise their children (and rightly so) for their newly earned honor of “Student of the Month” or “Captain of the Soccer Team.” And every picture-perfect post makes our own family relationships seem to fall so short by comparison.

Yet, in all of these snapshots of flawlessness, there is a miss-

SQUABBLES, SPATS, AND SUCH

ing component. We do not see how these family members are interacting with one another. Sure, they may praise each other publicly, but they don't display their squabbles and spats for all the world to see. (At least not most of the time!)

Interacting day after day with our loved ones is not always easy. (Can I get an amen?) Parents and children have conflicts over many things both large and small. Even couples who are head over heels in love with each other are bound to clash at times. Squabbles, spats, and such are an inevitable hazard of life lived in close quarters.

Beyond the normal male/female differences between married couples, any two personalities in close proximity will inevitably cause friction, conflict, and sometimes (mostly from me) snapping and harsh words. In fact, no matter if it is in marriage, parenting, or in a work or friendship situation, we're bound to experience frustration, anger, and at times, wounded feelings. People who are not wired as we are, who don't think like we do, and who make decisions and carry out actions we would never dream of, are going to rub us the wrong way. That's a fact.

Usually, in dealing with a frustrating non-family member, we manage to keep our composure, tame the tongue, and not do or say anything that we might later regret. I've often wondered why I can usually (but not always) keep my cool with people who are not members of my own family. Let's say the cashier at the grocery store makes a mistake in counting out my change. It's an honest and innocent blunder. She didn't mean to do it. Now I don't go all ballistic on her, raising my voice or even speaking in a subtle but snarky tone to let her know that someone who has a job as a cashier should surely know how to correctly make change. Nope. I usually smile and chuckle and say that it's really no problem. I certainly don't make her feel stupid, nor do I use my words, eye rolling, or shoulder-shrugging sighs to imply such.

KEEP IT SHUT

With people outside my family, I may want to keep up a good image and not have them think ill of me, so I choose my words wisely, making sure to not err on the snarky side. Even if it is someone I will never see again, I am careful to make sure my words are pleasant and inviting and don't cause the person to think I am unkind or rude.

When it comes to my friends I am usually pretty careful with how I word things, making sure not to upset or offend them. Even when a friend says something I think is foolish or behaves in a way I think may be unwise, I usually manage to hold my tongue. Perhaps if this person is an extremely close friend and asks my opinion about something, I may speak the truth in a straightforward manner. But for the most part, I try to keep my mouth shut in order to keep the peace and avoid offenses or awkwardness.

But with members of my own family I can be so different! If someone in my inner circle makes a mistake, I've been known to subtly or even overtly make backhanded comments about it. Or if one of my children is assigned a household task and doesn't do it correctly, I don't really think about my words as I interact with them. I simply let them spill out. And what tumbles out isn't always pretty. Why is this so?

Perhaps because I am related to these people and share the same last name or bloodline, I sometimes feel I can cross the line of decency when it comes to my words. I don't have to fear that these people are going to decide not to hang out with me or to spread the word that I am an awful person. They are family, and my relationship with them will not end just because of a few cross words between us. Can you relate?

"Familiarity breeds contempt," so the old saying goes. And there certainly isn't any group of people we are more familiar with than those who live under the same roof. This familiarity

SQUABBLES, SPATS, AND SUCH

can tempt us to drop our standards when it comes to how we use our words. No longer are we careful not to offend. In fact, sometimes we offend on purpose!

With our children or spouse, sometimes we open the floodgates and spew out all sorts of cutting comments, nasty words, flying criticisms, and awful accusations. We can even use silence as a weapon. When we give someone the cold shoulder, we may hold in our words, but we're spewing out our feelings all the same. My husband and I call this misuse of words (or withholding of words) "throwing flesh balls." At that point, we are not "walk[ing] by the Spirit" but "gratify[ing] the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16).

My flesh just likes to be gratified sometimes, and nothing gratifies it more than a good ol', all-out verbal assault on my "thinks-and-acts-so-different-from-me" husband. He tends instead to use his cold-shoulder silence to make his feelings known and dig the knife in, twisting it for effect. But is this what God intends for people who call themselves his followers? Are our words weapons, and even our silence part of the arsenal?

For decades, TV shows have built whole seasons around household squabbles. Remember *Everybody Loves Raymond*? Ray and the Barone family had conflicts galore. And even back in the good ol' days, the wholesome Brady kids had spats, and the salt-of-the-earth Waltons got into a scuffle or two. Why, even on *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura and Mary Ingalls fought at times. And the *Bonanza* boys often found themselves in an all-out fistfight right there on the Ponderosa! (Little Joe, my personal favorite, often got the brunt of it.) Of course, these domestic disputes were usually solved within thirty to sixty minutes, ending with a smiling brood enjoying each other in the last scene of the show. Yes, it isn't just recently or just on TV that families have hit rough spots in their relationships. The pattern goes back even further.

An Ancient Reality Show

The story of Joseph and his family has always fascinated me. The saga of this family in Genesis 37–50 plays out almost like an ancient reality show. And I am simply in awe of the ways that Joseph uses both his words and his silence for good. He did it when he interacted with his family members, and he did it when he interacted with those he encountered in the workplace. Let's take a little peek at the story now.

Joseph's father Jacob had a couple of wives and a boatload of kids. Even though I'm sure the popular self-help books of his day told him not to, he had a favorite child. This child was Joseph, who had been born to his wife Rachel. Jacob even had a nifty coat of numerous colors specifically crafted for Joseph, who must have paraded this prized piece from his papa in front of his brothers enough that it made them very jealous.

To make matters worse, Joseph was starting to have big, self-important dreams. When he awoke, he shared what he'd dreamt with his older brothers, even when his dreams suggested all of his siblings would one day bow down to him. While that is indeed what eventually happens, you can imagine that sharing all the details of these dreams didn't win Joseph any "Brother of the Year" awards from his siblings. Instead, they hated him all the more. In fact, his brothers could not even stand the sight of him. Whenever he came upon them out in the fields, they uttered under their breath, "Here comes that dreamer."

One day when his brothers had gone out to pasture their father's flock at Shechem, their dad sent Joseph to see how they were doing and then bring word back to him. After searching for a while and asking a man out in the field where he might find them, Joseph stumbled upon his brothers at Dothan. Instead of being excited to see their brother and extending the family high

SQUABBLES, SPATS, AND SUCH

five and handshake, they decided to do away with him — murder their own flesh and blood. However, big brother Reuben spoke up and said, “Let’s not take his life. Let’s throw him into a pit instead.” (He intended later to come back and rescue him and return him to their father.) And so into the dry cistern Joseph was tossed. (Another “Little Joe” picked on by his big brothers.)

Later, the boys pulled him out of the pit and came up with a different plan. They decided to turn a little profit on the whole shady deal by selling him to a group of Ishmaelite traders who were headed down to Egypt. Then they returned home and told their father that Joseph had been killed by wild animals, providing his once colorful but now blood-soaked garment as proof of the tragedy. Jacob was distraught beyond belief.

Joseph, once a favored son, was now a slave in the house of Potiphar. This man was a well-to-do official in the land of Egypt. He had a big house and nice things. He also had a very flirtatious wife who set her sights on the young and hunky Joe. I’ve always thought of her as the first desperate housewife. Although I’ve never watched that show, I think the housewives usually seduce the pool guy or some other unsuspecting (and inappropriate) male. And this is precisely how we see Mrs. Potiphar behaving.

When one day she finds Joseph all alone, Mrs. P. approaches him with a lusty request. “Come to bed with me!” Joseph, who fears God and wants to honor him even though he is now in a strange land, does not sin with his words. Instead, he plainly states the truth to his boss’s wayward wife: “With me in charge . . . my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” (Genesis 39:8–9).

KEEP IT SHUT

In using his words to answer this seductress, Joseph not only honors his boss but he also honors his God. He answers her in accordance with what is right, both as an employee and as someone who follows the one true God.

Joseph had a choice to make. He could have chosen to use his words for evil. He could have accepted her advances so as not to offend her and had an immoral relationship with her. Then he could have continued to use his words to cover up the deed, making sure his master never found out about it; and if confronted, he could have lied about the incident. But because Joseph chose to speak the truth from the beginning, he didn't have to continue to use deceitful words to cover up poor choices.

However, even good and true words have consequences. Mrs. Potiphar, who didn't consider her advances an immoral mess, engaged her lying tongue to spread the story that Joseph tried to rape her. Joseph was summarily thrown out — not into a dry cistern this time, but into the Pharaoh's prison.

Once behind bars, the plot only thickens. Joseph meets up with a couple of new characters. One is the chief cupbearer for Pharaoh and the second is his baker. When both men have dreams they can't understand, Joseph interprets for them. For one man it turns out grand — the cupbearer is released in three days and goes back to his old job. However, the baker doesn't get such a joyful interpretation. Instead, he is put to death after three days. Joseph asks the cupbearer to remember him when he goes back to serve Pharaoh. Unfortunately, the cupbearer is so excited to be bearing cups again, he plumb forgets about Joseph.

Later, however, when Pharaoh himself is tormented by dreams that include fat cows and skinny cows, the cupbearer suddenly remembers the clever guy in prison who could make sense of bizarre dreams. Joseph is summoned. The dreams are interpreted. Pharaoh discovers through Joseph's words that there

SQUABBLES, SPATS, AND SUCH

will be seven years of plenty and then seven years of famine. Joseph's advice? Pharaoh must find a discerning, wise man and set him over all of the affairs of Egypt, saving up food during the years of abundance to make sure they have plenty to go around in the years of famine. Well, who better to be in charge of such a plan than Joseph? He soon enters the service of the king with a whole administration under his command. He marries and has two sons just before the famine arrives. Circumstances finally seem to be going his way.

Meanwhile, back in his hometown, Joseph's family is quickly running out of bread and milk (and probably figs and dates too). Upon learning that there is grain in Egypt, Jacob turns to his sons and says, "Why do you just keep looking at each other? . . . I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die" (Genesis 42:1 – 2).

So all the brothers minus the youngest, Benjamin, trek off to Egypt in search of a little grub. When they come before Joseph, he immediately recognizes them. They, however, haven't a clue who he is. By this time years have passed, his looks have changed, and he dresses and speaks as an Egyptian, not as one of them.

Joseph decides to help his brothers but not without testing them first. Over the course of time, they travel back and forth between Egypt and their homeland and eventually fetch Benjamin. When Joseph discerns that they are being honest with him and dealing properly, he finally reveals who he is. He sends all of the servants out of the room and weeps loudly as he reveals his true identity to his brothers. The first question on his lips is, "Is my father still living?"

The brothers are so terrified they can't respond. They're sure Joseph will kill them for their treachery. But instead of retaliating, Joseph assures his brothers they have nothing to

KEEP IT SHUT

worry about. They shouldn't even be angry with themselves for selling him into slavery, because Joseph is certain God sent him to Egypt ahead of his family to preserve their lives.

The entire brood is then reunited, and Jacob gets to see the son he presumed was dead. It seems like a happy ending to a fierce family feud. Joseph provides his family with land to settle in, and they begin to make a living once again. However, years later when their father dies, the band of brothers is afraid that Joseph has only been biding his time — faking forgiveness for the sake of their father — and now he's going to let them have it. After Jacob's funeral and burial, the brothers go to Joseph and plead, "We are your slaves!" They send a messenger to ask Joseph to please forgive their transgressions and all the suffering they caused.

He could have had them executed or enslaved, but instead, Joseph responds with compassion. "Don't be afraid," he says. "Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children" (Genesis 50:19–21). And he continued to reassure them and speak kindly to them.

And then? Just like a classic episode of *Bonanza* ("Old, old East" rather than "Old West" style), well, they actually do live happily ever after.

Cues from Joseph

Just what can we learn from this tale of drama lifted right off the pages of the Old Testament? What cues can we take from Joseph about how we should — and should not — use our words when dealing with family, friends, and other necessary people in our lives?

First . . .

SQUABBLES, SPATS, AND SUCH

1. Beware of Bragging — and the Impact Your Good News Could Have on Others

Although for most of Joseph's life we see him using words wisely and well, many biblical scholars suggest that the young Joseph had a problem with pride. When he relayed his high and mighty dreams to his siblings, it set them on edge. We don't know what Joseph's motives were, and we don't know the condition of his heart, but neither do we read that God instructed him to tell his brothers about his dreams. Still, we can learn something from the consequences of his words to his family.

Sometimes we may have a piece of information that is indeed true. However, relaying that bit of information to someone else may not always be the wisest course of action. Before we open our mouths, we need to think about not only to whom we're speaking but also what they may be dealing with at the time and how the news might impact them. Did you just find out you are expecting your third child? Fabulous! But if your sister-in-law, who is childless, recently suffered her second miscarriage, then it might be best to hold off on your news for a while — and then consider carefully how you will let her know. The primary principle is to check your heart and motives before sharing a success or celebration. Also be mindful that — even if your heart is in the right place — how and when you share your news just might put a pinch in another person's heart, especially if they are sorrowful over the very thing about which you are rejoicing.

2. Say What Honors God, Not What Other People Want to Hear

When Potiphar's wife was chasing Joseph around the mansion, he knew what she wanted to hear. He also knew that giving her the answer she wanted was the furthest from what God desired. Joseph could have gone along with her little plan and

KEEP IT SHUT

then kept it a secret from his boss, but he knew God was watching. And listening. He chose to speak words that honored God rather than to please the ears of the person in front of him.

Most of us aren't usually faced with someone wanting us to break the law or do something immoral and against Scripture. However, there are times when answering according to what we know another person wants to hear conflicts with what we know to be true in Scripture. One of the authors of Proverbs writes, "The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil" (15:28). I certainly know there have been times in my life when my words just gushed out. I knew the answer I gave didn't please God. But I was so intent on pleasing the person standing in front of me (or on the other end of the phone) that I just started gushing. Unfortunately, what leaked out was wrong.

We must purpose to weigh our answers. Weighing fruit at the supermarket sometimes takes a few minutes of back-and-forth as we add and subtract to adjust the scales. But when we do the same with our words, mulling over our response before it tumbles off the tongue, we have a much greater probability that the fruit of our words will please God. And then? We can trust him with the consequences. If the other person doesn't like our answer, so be it. We must make it of greater importance to please the Lord.

3. Realize That Lies Are the Minuscule Snowflakes in a Monumental Snowball

Because Joseph was truthful, he had no need to lie to cover up for what he might have done. Nor did he have to tell even more lies to cover up the first one. Lies must be followed by other lies, and they soon become a giant, rolling snowball, wreaking havoc on everything in its path.

SQUABBLES, SPATS, AND SUCH

In middle school, I was a pitcher on the softball team. I simply loved to play and wanted to make sure my skills were at their best so I could don my colorful jersey and be chosen as the starting pitcher of the game. So, while my mom was busy at work one day, I went down into my basement to practice throwing pitches, using the middle cushion of the couch as home plate. (This wasn't fast-pitch softball, obviously.)

My little practice session went well, with most of the pitches landing squarely on the middle cushion of the big brown couch. However, one of them got away and sailed clear out our basement window, taking dozens of puzzle pieces of broken glass with it. Now I'd like to say that when my mom got home from work I told her what happened and offered my sincerest apologies. However, instead, I lied.

First I denied even knowing about it. Then I said it must have been my brother and his friends playing outside. However, when my smart — and sometimes smart-aleck — brother cleverly pointed out the fact that the glass was on the outside of the house rather than the inside, I knew I was sunk. The ball had to have been thrown from inside the basement out into the yard, not the other way around. And I was the only one inside the house that day. My string of untruths soon began to unravel. If only I had told the truth from the beginning, there would've been no need to continue twisting words in order to deceive. And my punishment would have been much less than the punishment I got for not only breaking the window, but also initiating a cover-up.

4. Give God Credit Where Credit Is Due

How easy it is to take credit for ourselves. But Joseph's example shows just how much he learned from the failures of his early, bragging days. Whenever others marveled at his ability to interpret dreams, he rapidly pointed out that it was God who

KEEP IT SHUT

did the interpreting. I wonder how many of us, when receiving compliments from a high government official, would be quick to give all the credit to God. How easy it would be to smile and say, “Oh, it’s nothing really,” rather than declare, “Oh no — it’s all God. Not me. And he is really something!” Joseph knew where credit was due. God gave the talent. God gave the ability. God arranged the circumstances so he could use his talent and ability. And so it was God, and God alone, who should get any credit for the good things that resulted.

5. Watch Your Words in the Workplace

Beyond our immediate family members, perhaps the people we spend the most time with are our coworkers or collaborators in church, community, or school committees. We spend so much time with these people they are almost like family, so it’s easy to let down our guard with what comes out of our mouth. But Joseph didn’t shut the filter off when he was around his working buddies. Whether in service at his master’s house or in the cold dark prison, he watched his words. He knew that how he behaved and what he said reflected on the God he served. This is something we must also keep in mind as we work alongside others who are watching, absorbing, and then determining just what our God is like.

6. Just Because You Have a Reason to Retaliate Does Not Mean You’re Justified in Doing So

Oh boy, if there were ever anyone who had the right to retaliate, it was Joseph! Sure, we might have family squabbles or old wounds that just don’t seem to heal. Perhaps a family member has offended us in the past and now there is a great chasm of silence between us. Maybe someone’s words rubbed us the wrong way and now there is tension whenever we get together as

SQUABBLES, SPATS, AND SUCH

a family. Got that coworker who said something bad about you in an email, and somehow it made its way to your desk? Or that other parent down at the PTA who you are just sure does not like you? Scenarios such as this sometimes tempt us to retaliate.

Maybe that retaliation isn't an all-out assault on the person. It could be something subtle. You might use facial expressions or silence to convey your disapproval when that person's name is brought up in a group setting. Maybe you are on a committee selecting a student for an award, and the child of the person who offended you just happens to be one of the kids up for it. Even though you think this child is probably most deserving of the award, you vote for someone else instead. And who knows what devious ways of retaliation our minds can concoct when it comes to our family members? I'll just let you fill in the blank there. And even if it's not from your own life, I suspect you certainly have seen this happen a time or two.

It challenges my heart in the greatest ways to think that Joseph did not retaliate. He had not just been talked about publicly in a negative way or given the cold shoulder by an extended family member — he was thrown away and left for dead! If he can forgive those who did such evil to him, then why, oh, why can't I step back from the urge to retaliate?

7. Don't Be God

Joseph went beyond just giving credit to God for the good things and talents in his life. Most importantly, he knew his position — and God's. When his brothers approached him after their father's death, begging for him not to retaliate, his answer was quick and clear: "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?" (Genesis 50:19). Then he proceeded to turn a horrid family feud into a timeless tale of forgiveness. "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being

KEEP IT SHUT

done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children" (Genesis 50:20–21). Even though Joseph surely could have used his position of power to deliver a punishing blow to his brothers, he chose not to. He realized that in God's divine plan, the evil they intended had instead been transformed into fuel for the fire of good. Joseph didn't question God or complain. He didn't take it out on his brothers. He let God be God while he was content to simply be himself: a servant.

8. Do Be Nice

After Joseph announced to his brothers that he was not God, he "reassured them and spoke kindly to them" (Genesis 50:21). Talk about turning the other cheek! He not only reassured them of their safety, he spoke kind words, even going so far as to say he would provide for them and their children, which is exactly what he proceeded to do.

What a simple yet significant lesson — one we should all have learned way back in kindergarten.

Simply. Be. Nice.

Did a family member slight you and you are still stewing about it? The next time you're around them try this: Be nice.

Did the other soccer mom jockey for position on the snack committee, leaving you in the dust? The next time you encounter her on the sidelines, try this: Be nice.

Got a coworker you know who talks behind your back? Don't lower yourself to their level, adding to the workplace drama. Try this instead: Be nice.

Be nice.

Be nice.

BE. NICE.

Maybe this is what my mama meant when the eighth-grade

SQUABBLES, SPATS, AND SUCH

girls were all being mean to me and she told me to “Kill them with kindness.” (Or “Knock them over with niceness” perhaps?)

Joseph’s behavior not only inspires me, it reminds me of Jesus. My former pastor once showcased in a sermon sixty similarities between Joseph and Jesus. (I respectfully pointed out that he’d missed one. They both start with “J”!) So, when we try to emulate Joseph’s godly behavior, we are also — in a sense — being like Christ.

For example, when we choose to speak words that honor God — rather than massaging our words into what we think someone wants to hear — we follow Joseph’s example, but ultimately we mirror Christ. His words always pleased the Father even when some people didn’t agree or understand.

When Jesus tells his disciples he will soon be going away, it wasn’t what they wanted to hear (John 16:16–18). His companions did not understand (and I’m sure they didn’t agree with the timing), but he knew his death on the cross was the Father’s perfect plan, and so speaking these words pleased God. (And his death on that cross for the sins of the world opened the way to heaven for those of us who believe in him!)

What does it look like to speak words that honor God, rather than speaking what someone else wants to hear? It may mean speaking truthfully about our views on an issue even if we know the other person’s views are polar opposite and they’d much prefer we agreed with them. (Insert “awkward tension in the air” here!) And our words — though not what the other person wants to hear — must always be delivered with gentleness, respect, and grace.

Most of us understand what it means to be gentle. And respect? We get that too. But what does it mean to speak with grace?

I’m so glad you asked.

Laced with Grace

The words *grace* and *gracious* are used 169 times in the Bible. Often the word *grace* is used to describe how God deals with us. How he lavishes us with this gift. But just what *is* grace?

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word used for grace is *chen*. Its meaning is tightly tethered to God granting a person favor, and it is often worded that so-and-so “found favor” in God’s eyes. A central part of its meaning is that the person being spoken about pleased God immensely.

The New Testament uses the Greek word *charis* when talking about the concept of grace. The essence of this word is that we receive the unmerited favor of God. Over and over, Scripture affirms that grace is something freely given. There is no cost on our part. But there was a cost to Christ. We can only receive this saving grace by trusting in Jesus Christ as our Savior and staking our lives on the promise that his sacrifice on the cross paved a way for us to spend eternity in heaven with God.

When my husband first began his life with God, he was part of a Bible study called — appropriately — *Life with God*. The minister who taught the class gave the students a clever way to remember just what grace is: G.R.A.C.E. is **G**od’s **R**iches **A**t **C**hrist’s **E**xpense. The apostle Paul’s words to the church at Ephesus affirm this description of grace: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

When Scripture describes God as gracious, several times the words “compassionate” and “slow to anger” are also used. The psalmist sums up God’s character with this amazing description: “But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Psalm 86:15).

SQUABBLES, SPATS, AND SUCH

God is patient. He doesn't fly off the handle in anger. His love never runs out. His faithfulness never takes a vacation day. And God's Son knew how to impart grace when he spoke while here on earth: "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips" (Luke 4:22).

Many verses in Scripture affirm that our speech should be gracious. When we choose to grant favor with our words or to lavish love on someone through our speech, we mirror Christ and his free gift of grace. "Let your conversation be always full of grace," writes the apostle Paul (Colossians 4:6). One wise author of Proverbs says, "Gracious words are pure in [God's] sight" (15:26), and "Gracious words promote instruction" (16:21).

What is the result of intentionally speaking graciously to our family, friends, and other necessary people? Of loving them without stopping? Of containing our anger when we speak and dealing with them in a patient and faithful way? When we choose to lace our words with grace, healing happens: "Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones" (Proverbs 16:24).

Yes, choosing grace will sometimes cost us. Spats and squabbles are oh-so-easy to fall into. We will have to resist the urge to lash out in anger. We might even have to bite down on our tongues. But better a bleeding tongue than a family member's wounded heart. We might have to choose to let go of the need to prove our point, choosing instead to do the right thing: to impart grace and deal with the other person in love and with utmost patience.

When we choose to do this — even though it can be extremely difficult — we model to those closest to us a picture of Christ loving his church. Fights are abandoned. Tempers cool off. Stress simmers down. Our gracious words wash over the other person with love and compassion. We find ourselves faithful to God.

When we lace our words with grace, healing happens.

KEEP IT SHUT

Every day, we can choose to apply the truth and promise of these wise words: “Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs. Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning” (Proverbs 10:12–13). This snippet of Scripture provides direction for how to handle with grace the inevitable conflicts that arise when we react to those in our inner circles of life.

So, when a colleague or fellow committee member is bossy and condescending, we can refuse to add to the negative tone of the meeting. How? By resisting the temptation to bark back or respond with additional condescension. Instead, we can choose to speak honestly — with words that are direct — but that are also strategically tucked inside an envelope of grace.

When a family member’s behavior threatens to knock the nice right out of us, we can pause. Recalculate. Punch in a different destination for the words now downloading from our brains onto our tongues. We can program them to first stop at gentleness, swing by to pick up respect, and finally — arrive with grace. Then our mouths can utter pleasant words rather than those that are caustic, cutting, and unkind.

Take the advice I sometimes have to give to myself: Don’t say something permanently painful just because you are temporarily ticked off.

Will you join me today in choosing to stop stirring up strife when it comes to someone in your life who is oil while you are so water? Yes, even if that person is your spouse? Or your child? Or your in-law? Or the coworker in the cubicle next to you? Or the grumpy neighbor across the street?

God intentionally orchestrated the relationships in our lives. He knew who would share your last name — or your four walls. Who would occupy a seat in your car pool or dwell in the house right next door. It didn’t surprise him who would wind up as your in-law or be the one to teach your kids.

SQUABBLES, SPATS, AND SUCH

All the humans you encounter throughout the course of the day are “on purpose” people. God plopped them into your life for a reason.

These souls — whether they are of the easy-to-love variety or the scratchy sandpaper kind — can be used by God to mold, reshape, and sometimes stretch our souls as he perpetually crafts us into creations who are becoming more and more like his Son.

Will we be perfect?

Nope. Never. (Not until heaven!)

Just like Joseph?

Maybe close.

But of this I'm certain: others can catch a quick glimpse of Jesus when they see us speak and act in ways that honor him and line up with God's Word.

Others are watching, sizing up how we behave. What will they see? Stirred-up strife — or lovingly covered offenses? Speech that incites spats and squabbles? Or speech that soothes and heals?

You choose. (Pssst... The correct answer is “g.” Grace.)

3

STOP FILLING THE GAP

Learning to Listen



Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

PSALM 34:11

My family calls me the gap filler. I'm not sure I'm too keen on that nickname, but I guess I earned it fair and square.

For as long as I can remember, I have loved to talk. My gift for gab was what my relatives commented on when I was little. My constant chatter entertained not only my neighborhood friends, but also their moms, who reported all the highlights to my mother. There's nothing cuter than a precocious little girl who has a winning way with words. However, once the little girl begins to grow up, her gift of gab can become a detriment rather than a delight. And I got my first taste of the detriment side of the equation in elementary school.

As a young girl, I simply loved going to school. Even the awful scratchy tights under my dresses didn't keep me from feeling intense excitement each day as I walked a quarter mile down

STOP FILLING THE GAP

the country road to catch the school bus. I loved to read. And to write. I even liked figuring out those mind-bending math story problems. Excelling in school soon became my pastime, and I was rather competitive about it.

As my classmates and I sat working on a test, I tried my best to not only answer all of the questions correctly but also to hurry. Somehow being the first one to rise from my blond wooden desk and walk my paper up to the front of the class to flip it upside down on the teacher's desk made me feel important.

My instructor's opinion meant a great deal to me. I wanted her to think I was smart. To think I was cooperative. And kind. And so I tried my best to be all of these things. (Can you say overachiever? I knew you could.) And then I waited with anxious anticipation every time parent-teacher conferences rolled around. The only other woman I cared more about impressing besides my teacher was my sweet mother.

Now this was the seventies. Our parents would return home from the school building that night clutching a canary yellow piece of paper. On the paper was a little chart that graphed out all of the various subjects I was taking as well as the behavioral areas I was being evaluated on. Of course, reading, writing, and arithmetic were a big part of this evaluation, but there were also other items on the list. In addition to academics like science and social studies, there were electives such as music and art and gym.

Beyond all the course work, there were categories for classroom behavior, including things like politeness and cooperativeness with classmates. When there are thirty students in a room all trying to make a papier-mâché replica of the ancient Mayan ruins, learning to get along is crucial. Another character quality was respect. Did the student show respect not only to the teachers but also to other students? Line after line detailed

the character qualities for rating the stunning student I wanted to be.

For each of the academic subjects as well as the behavioral characteristics, a teacher could check one of five boxes: *Very Good. Good. Average. Needs Improvement. Poor.* Oh, how I loved seeing all of the “Very Good” and “Good” boxes checked on the progress report my mom brought home. My identity was completely tied up in being the smart and model student. However, year after year there was one section in which I did not earn a “Very Good” or even a “Good” score. In the pesky little box called “Listening Skills,” the highest rating I ever got was probably “Average” — and more often than not, I saw a big fat check mark in the “Needs Improvement” box.

“Karen is a delightful student,” my teacher exclaimed as she visited with my mother during those parent-teacher powwows. “But she does seem to have a tad bit of trouble listening. Especially when I am talking.” When my mother inquired whether I had trouble following instructions, the teacher assured her I had no trouble with that. (Apparently I could still take note of the instructions while my lips were moving.) The issue was my willingness to listen when the teacher was talking or another student had the floor for a minute or two. Still, I couldn’t seem to keep my little jaws from flapping. I just had to add my two cents’ worth. Whenever there was a gap of silence in the teacher’s speech or another student’s comment, you could count on me to fill in the gap. (And I’m sure, in my defense, I felt that what I had to say was way more interesting than whoever else was talking at the time, including my instructor!)

It always bummed me out when my teacher reported that I didn’t listen so well and I talked too much. But it didn’t bother me enough to motivate a change in my behavior. I *liked* filling those gaps. And, to tell the truth, I still do. When a group of

STOP FILLING THE GAP

people are chatting and there is even a small lull in the conversation, if I am not intentional about reining in my tongue, I will rush right in to fill that gap and fill it good.

Fill That Gap and Fill It Good

My husband says my ability to talk is what first attracted him to me. He loved how I could work a room, making the shy ones feel included. I could converse with the college president and yuck it up with the grocery store bag boy all in the same afternoon. Yep. My college sweetheart loved how I could talk. So this rather shy guy bought a ring, slipped it on my finger, grabbed my hand, and off we proceeded down the church aisle and into marital bliss. My proficiency at all things linguistic hadn't bothered him before. In fact, he had felt it was an asset. I talked and talked. He smiled and listened. And it really didn't seem to bother him.

Then, about three days into our honeymoon, he had this thought: "When is she *ever* gonna shut up?" In fact, if I make it to heaven before he does, he's decided just what should go on my tombstone:

A period.

Ask him why, and he'll declare, "Well, she'll finally be done yacking!" (He insists my language has no periods — just commas, colons, and semicolons — because there's always more to come!)

In a group Bible study or a visit with friends over coffee, I can easily monopolize the conversation. And, in the early days, I didn't even know it was happening. I just assumed everyone was as dazzled by my words as I was.

I'm not sure how I was first enlightened, but I soon came to discover that often when I was talking, other people in the room were mentally checking out. Or I noticed there were other

KEEP IT SHUT

women in the Bible study or the playgroup who never seemed to give their two cents' worth. I just couldn't figure this out. Didn't they have anything to say? Didn't they have something to add to the discussion?

Eventually, I came to realize that perhaps the problem wasn't with the other people in the group. *Gulp*. Maybe I was too ready to jump in the minute there was a gap in the conversation. Maybe the other folks needed a pause or two for their thoughts to gel before they could speak them. And maybe, just maybe, if some of us who talk too much would actually zip our lips a minute, then these people could have an opportunity to speak up more often.

I knew that things were going to have to change for me if I wanted to use my words well and shed my habit of gap filling. In fact, over the years I have developed a practice or two to help in this endeavor. The first is a little rule of thumb (or rule of tongue, perhaps). I only chime in or respond to the question thrown out by the study leader about every third time I think I have something to say. And you know what? It comes out just about right, and no one seems to suffer from not hearing the nuggets I withhold.

Here's another practice — I pause before I pipe up. It works in a group. It also works one-on-one. When the person with whom I'm chatting pauses, it doesn't always mean they have finished what they want to say. They may still be mentally composing the next sentence. When I take their pause as a green light that it's my turn to talk, I may actually be interrupting instead. No, not in a rude way — interjecting midsentence — but by butting in before they've finished their thoughts. Pausing for a moment before I pipe up helps me to be both courteous and understanding.

A person who seeks not only to listen but to understand as

STOP FILLING THE GAP

well is rare — a treasure. And rare treasures are priceless. When we make listening and understanding our aim, we become valuable treasures in the lives of those around us.

Talking and Listening

The apostle James has more good advice about the tongue. “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (James 1:19–20).

Even if you don’t consider yourself a major gap filler, perhaps you know what it’s like to be someone who is “quick to speak.” That’s an easy trap to fall into, especially when dealing with family members. Or maybe you can relate to being “slow to listen,” thinking more about what you’re planning to say rather than really listening to what a friend is sharing. However, according the passage from James, listening is something we should do quickly; and when it comes to speaking, we should take our time. And I love how, for extra emphasis, James begins by saying, “My dear brothers and sisters, *take note of this* . . .” He knew we’d need to plaster this verse on a neon-colored sticky note posted right on our bathroom mirror where we are sure to see it!

When we flip-flop these two commands — being slow to listen and quick to speak — it often leads to the third part of that verse: we are quick to become angry. (Quicker sometimes than Mr. Usain Bolt. Not heard his name before? Search for him on YouTube to get the full picture. Just don’t blink!)

Speaking too soon combined with not listening leads to conflict — and conflict often leads to anger. But when we choose to live out the words of this verse, the promise of Scripture is

KEEP IT SHUT

that we can defuse angry encounters before they even spark. So let's go back and see what boxes we can check on some of our elementary practices of the faith. Namely, talking and listening.

The Bible has much to say about both talking and listening. And many of these verses can be found in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. I have always loved this book, especially the pithy statements about how to live right. They're like Old Testament tweets! Here are just a few about how to use both our words and our ears:

- “When there are many words, sin is unavoidable, but the one who controls his lips is wise.” (10:19 HCSB)
- “Do you see a man who speaks too soon? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” (29:20 HCSB)
- “The one who gives an answer before he listens — this is foolishness and disgrace for him.” (18:13 HCSB)
- “Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues.” (17:28)

When I break down these verses into foundational principles, I come up with three warnings about words and then one piece of advice. The warnings?

1. Don't speak too much.
2. Don't speak too soon.
3. Don't speak without first listening.

And then the advice? Don't speak at all.

Don't Speak Too Much

When there are many words, sin is unavoidable,
but the one who controls his lips is wise. (Proverbs
10:19 HCSB)

STOP FILLING THE GAP

When we rattle off words in rapid succession, we will almost certainly end up saying something that is sinful. But a person who learns to control what she says (and perhaps how many words she uses) is smart indeed.

Has your mouth ever gotten you into trouble — yes, even made you sin — all because you talked too much? In your conversation you started to ramble. The more you spoke, the more your speech dug a deep hole, tripping you up and trapping you inside. Soon you were in a mighty tangled mess. It's certainly happened to me.

I recall once visiting with a friend at a high school basketball game. Her son and my daughter, both sixteen at the time, had a bit of a crush on one another. It was nothing official, but we both thought it was sweet. As we discussed this whole new relationship and the current dating culture, I began to rattle off my opinion about things. We had tried very hard to instill in our kids not to choose someone to date, or even marry, just based on their looks. In fact, we often joke with them that looks should not matter since we are all headed toward ugly. (Of course my daughter was quick to chime in that while it is true that we are all headed toward ugly, some get there faster than others. Therefore, she wants to pick someone with a great starting point!)

In my conversation with my friend, I was just rambling on and on and really didn't give her much time to talk. In trying to express that we were happy our daughter not only chose someone who was good-looking, as this teenager was (hey, I might be getting old, but I'm not blind!), but also someone of good character who had a wonderful personality and godly habits and traits, somehow just the opposite came out. Although I didn't know it at the time, she thought I was saying we were glad our daughter was choosing on character and cared less about looks because,

KEEP IT SHUT

boy — was her son homely! This was in fact just the *opposite* of what I was actually trying to say.

It wasn't until a few days after this basketball game that I realized I had conveyed the complete opposite of what I was trying to say. I received a letter from my friend stating how hurt she was that I would give a backhanded compliment about her son's character while at the same time basically saying he was unattractive. I was floored. And devastated. And misunderstood. And now I had a fractured friendship with someone I'd really hoped I could hang out with. All because my words were too many.

I called her up immediately to apologize and to state what I'd meant to say before my rambling and roaming thoughts came out as misspoken words that led to misunderstanding, conflict, and offense.

If we want to avoid offending our friends — or committing any number of verbal sins — we need to learn to control our lips. And taking a first step can be simpler than you might imagine. When we sense the Holy Spirit telling us that things are starting to go downhill, we can simply say, "I'm sorry. I'm talking too much." And then? We can "shut our tater trap," as my dad used to say when I was little. (And yes, for those of you old enough to recognize it, he learned that phrase from Festus on *Gunsmoke*!) However, before we can listen to the nudge of the Holy Spirit tapping on our hearts and telling us to zip our lips, we must have an attitude of prayer throughout the day that enables him to do just that. As a Facebook image I saw recently declared, we must ask God to "Put your arm around my shoulders and your hand over my mouth!"

Don't Speak Too Soon

Do you see a man who speaks too soon?

There is more hope for a fool than for him.

(Proverbs 29:20 HCSB)

STOP FILLING THE GAP

Speaking too soon. Before all the facts are out. Before we really understand those facts. Before we've listened fully to the other side. And most importantly, before we've had time to pray and process what we've heard with the Lord. When we do any one or even a combination of those things, we are foolish.

Scripture has many things to say about fools. They are senseless, lacking in understanding, rebellious, and can suffer affliction because of their choices. They hate knowledge. They are wayward. Simpletons. Complacent and shameful. They do not listen to instruction, and as a result they come to ruin. Their way seems right to them, but it leads to disaster. They show their annoyance at once and refuse to overlook an insult. Don't know about you, but that's not a list of descriptions I want tacked on to my public profile!

In order not to speak too soon, we need to cultivate two habits: perfecting the art of the pause and pondering.

Perfect the art of the pause. Pausing creates white space in a conversation that enables us to sort out our thoughts before we let out our words. Perhaps you've heard the old "count to ten" advice. Although it may sound silly, I know from experience it can help. Counting to ten before responding provides just enough wiggle room to really think through what we are about to say, sometimes realizing in that short pause the ridiculousness of the words we were about to let out of the trapdoor of our soul.

Ponder what the other person said and perhaps go on a fact-finding mission. How easy it is to jump to conclusions when we don't have all of the facts. Holding our tongues, and our opinions, for a while often gives us time to assess the situation clearly before pronouncing judgment. In fact, if you are in the middle of a heated discussion with someone and they ask, "Well, what do you think?" it is perfectly reasonable to tell them you don't yet know what you think. Yes, this may frustrate

KEEP IT SHUT

some people. They may think you're copping out. They may even accuse you of not knowing your own mind. But I have found that many times what I was going to say (but thankfully didn't!) was not in the end what I wanted to express. Giving our thoughts time to settle and soak in Scripture is a wonderful habit that will keep us from answering too soon and looking foolish.

So pause. Gather facts. Think before you answer. Do not speak too soon.

Don't Speak without First Listening

The one who gives an answer before he listens —
this is foolishness and disgrace for him. (Proverbs
18:13 HCSB)

My youngest son loves to tell a good story. He reenacts every detail with his body and facial expressions as well as the inflections in his voice. He typically tells me these stories just after he's come through the back kitchen door and tossed his backpack on our wooden bench. I'm usually doing dishes, mixing up the meat loaf, or sorting through the day's mail.

As he launches into his reenactment full force, I nod and give the occasional "Uh-huh," and "Oh, really?" but my man-cub is wise to my distraction — he can tell whether or not I am really listening. Sometimes he calls me out by asking me to repeat back to him what he just said. (Drat! Why did I do the same thing to my kids when they were younger? Now they know my trick.) He picks up on my cues that tell whether I am really engaged with my ears and my eyes and my brain or whether I am simply faking it.

The authors of Proverbs urge us to really listen to the other person before responding, thereby saving ourselves from looking foolish (again!). Do you see how closely our words are linked to our looking like a fool or bringing disgrace?

STOP FILLING THE GAP

Listening is more than just being quiet for a moment. It's not just the pause we were talking about earlier. Listening includes paying attention to the whole person, and especially their emotions. When we really listen, we give careful attention not just to the words a person says but also to the feelings he or she is trying to communicate. Listening requires attending to the other person's heart. So how do we do that?

The skill of repeating or mirroring what someone has just said can be quite helpful here. Every once in a while, stop and repeat back to the person what you think you are hearing them say. For example, "So I think what I am hearing you say is that although you are invited to the party, you're not sure if Annie really wants you to come, and this is making you hesitant to go. Is that what you mean?" The value of mirroring is that it not only demonstrates to the other person that you're listening, it also helps to clarify that you are accurately understanding what's been said.

In fact, clarifying questions are essential to good listening. Michael, our life group leader, does this regularly in our group conversations. For example, he might ask someone to elaborate on a word or phrase. If they said they felt sad about something, he might ask them to elaborate on what they mean by the word *sad*. What kind of sad? Why do they think it made them feel sad? What could've happened differently that would have made them feel happy instead?

In addition to asking clarifying questions, Michael has also taught our group how to listen for what he calls "heart drops." This is when a person drops a hint about something deeper going on in her heart without really coming out and saying it directly. Maybe from her conversation you sense that she's feeling rejection. Or loneliness. Or that she feels inadequate.

If you sense a heart drop, acknowledge it by asking for more

KEEP IT SHUT

information: “Go back to when you were talking about your father never going to your games when you were young. How did that make you feel? How do you think it might be affecting you today?” Then shut your mouth, and let her do the talking. Picking up on someone’s heart drop is a great way to help her express herself more directly. One caution: resist the temptation to put words in someone’s mouth. If you sense a heart drop, don’t say to the person, “So ... What I hear you saying is that you feel lonely and rejected and like you are a loser in life? Is that right?” Trust me. That will not help that person or your relationship with her at all! Instead, focus on the emotion by asking open-ended questions — questions to which you do not know the answer.

Yes, learn to really listen before you speak. It will not only save you heartache, but it will help others to express their hearts as well.

Don’t Speak at All

Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent,
and discerning if they hold their tongues. (Proverbs
17:28)

Boy oh boy, is this hard for all of us who are gap fillers! Sometimes we just can’t stand a moment of silence in a conversation. We fidget. And fuss. And soon we blurt out *something* just because we can’t stand the awkwardness of silence. However, silence is more than golden. It can also be God-sent. He might use it to give us some breathing space, a brief interlude that allows us to process the conversation or pay attention to the emotions behind the words. I find it interesting that not all cultures view silence as awkward. Some pass long stretches of time just being together. No words. No worry. Just complete quiet. To them what feels strange is when someone tries to fill up all the silence with speech!

STOP FILLING THE GAP

Publilius Syrus, a Roman writer in the first century BC, is quoted as saying, “I have often regretted my speech, never my silence.” I love the way the Amplified Version of the Bible expresses this truth: “Even a fool when he holds his peace is considered wise; when he closes his lips he is esteemed a man of understanding” (Proverbs 17:28).

Yes, sometimes the best thing to say is nothing at all.

We have been close friends with a couple for nearly thirty years. The husband, Richard, is a very quiet man. I can’t ever remember him saying something offensive. In fact, I don’t remember him saying much at all because he is usually pretty quiet. (Unless of course you bring up a subject near and dear to both of our hearts, which is the Detroit Tigers. Then we could chat for hours.) I’ve always thought how great it is that Richard doesn’t have a lot of words to regret. At least not ones I know about. But there is another asset to Richard being the strong, silent type; when he does speak, people almost always listen. When he had something to say in a Bible study we both once attended, it was usually a great point. And honestly? Even though others in the group (ahem . . . me!) talked more frequently and used more flowery and theological terms, often it was Richard’s words that stood out. Because he doesn’t just drone on and on all of the time sounding like the teacher in a Charlie Brown cartoon, when he does have something to say, people tend to listen.

Some of us just need to accept the fact that it is often perfectly fine to say nothing at all. Yes, we don’t have to use fancy words and big terms or convincing arguments to be thought of as smart. We just need to learn to keep it shut. *Who knew?*

These “Old Testament tweets” offer punchy, practical bits of advice that — if followed — allow us not only to temper our tongues, but also to strengthen relationships. Do you feel one of them might help in your life right now? Have you been talking

KEEP IT SHUT

too much or speaking too soon? Did you answer before really listening or fail to remain silent when now you wish you had zipped it? What impact did it have on a friendship or your relationship with a family member or coworker?

I've struggled with all of these situations at various times — most recently with the whole “speaking too soon” routine.

My sixteen-year-old son had a baseball game last week. Upon returning home that night he walked by me in the kitchen, and I noticed that the back pocket on his uniform had something round in it — round like a tin of chewing tobacco! I opened my mouth and promptly let loose, accusing and lecturing in classic mama form: “What in the world? Chewing tobacco? Not only is that stuff cancer causing, it is illegal for people your age! You are in big trouble, buddy. Give that to me now!”

He looked at me a bit cockeyed as he slowly smiled and reached into his back pocket — which I found odd for a sixteen-year-old boy about to have one bumner of a summer due to being placed on house arrest.

He concealed his hand behind his back for a few seconds and then when he finally forked it over, I saw the reason for his grin. It was a tin all right — a tin of “cool watermelon mints”!

My little jump-to-conclusion lecture taught me something: I need to get better at asking questions before I hurl accusations. Or better yet, ask questions, listen patiently to the answers, and then don't accuse at all!

Investigate? Uh-huh.

Process and pray? Oh yes.

Pronounce a loss of privilege to a child? Perhaps.

But *not* speak words I'll regret before I have all the facts.

Less talk, more listening. Yep. That's what we need. We may also need a little listening lesson in another crucial area — our relationship with God.

Listening to God

Not only is it a bad habit to talk too much (and to talk before we really listen), but I have also discovered something else about my “Just-gotta-have-the-next-(and of course the last)-word” behavior. It often means this: not only am I not listening to the person I am with. I am also not listening to God.

When I yack too much, I can’t hear him whisper to me what I should — and should not — be saying. I can’t ask God about the answer he might want me to give to questions I’m being asked. Instead, I’m focused only on expressing my opinions and exerting my will. Which reminds me of another truth about talking too much: “A [self-confident] fool has no delight in understanding but only in revealing his personal opinions *and* himself” (Proverbs 18:2 AMP).

Ouch!

How about you? How do you rate in the listening, talking, and expressing-your-own-opinion departments? Think back on your last few conversations. Did you seek to really understand the other person? Or were you more concerned with getting your words out first? Did you make an intentional effort to listen to God as you were conversing with others, taking your cues from him about what you should and shouldn’t say? Or were you focused on asserting your own opinions?

Question: If those closest to you were asked, which would they say more accurately describes you: a great listener or a constant chatterbox? Has not really listening to the other person (or failing to listen to God as you were talking with someone) ever caused you trouble? What happened? If you could have do-overs, how would you go back and handle the interaction differently?

Wanna take a double-dog dare? For the next twenty-four to

KEEP IT SHUT

forty-eight hours, make an effort to really listen to the people in your life. Purpose to not give your opinion unless you are directly asked. Instead, seek to ask clarifying questions that will help you better understand what the other person is expressing. Beyond that, keep your thoughts to yourself. See if anyone comments on the difference they see in you. (My family always asks if I have laryngitis!)

Let's pinky promise today that we will seek to be quick to listen and slow to speak — not the other way around. Our family and friends will thank us for it. And they might just get a word in edgewise!

I know you can do it. With a little effort, energized with the power of the Holy Spirit, we can all better learn to Keep. It. Shut.