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Talk

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. Ephesians 4:29

Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless. Mother Teresa

I say stupid things sometimes. It's like the clutch between my brain and my mouth doesn't always engage. You've probably also had those experiences where you say something and instantly wish that you hadn't. If only life had a rewind button and you could take back that insensitive comment, that harsh criticism, or that sarcastic dig. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen. And while "sticks and stones may break our bones," words can hurt infinitely more. I talked with my classes about honesty a few semesters ago. I asked them if there were times when they lied without really thinking about it. Many answered yes. I suspect that we are the same way, not just about honesty, but also in terms of insensitivity, harshness, and sarcasm. Those things slip out before we have a chance to think.

James talked about the tongue as a world of evil (James 3:6), full of deadly poison (James 3:8). Perhaps that's why David asked God to "set a guard" over his mouth, to "keep watch over the door of my lips" (Psalm 141:3). How we talk is one thing that should separate Christians from others in workplaces, and this chapter focuses on that difference.

Fresh or Salty Water

Have you ever taken a drink, expecting one thing, only to taste something else? Perhaps you've tried to get Sprite out of a soda fountain only to get carbonated water? Or maybe you asked for Coke at a restaurant but they served Diet Coke instead? It's disappointing to say the least. But what if you got a glass of water on a hot day and began to drink, only to discover that salt water is coming out of the tap or water cooler? James explained why that's unlikely: "Can

both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water” (James 3:11-12). A fresh water spring is only going to produce fresh water, and a salt water spring is only going to produce salt water. James made the application that our speech should be just that predictable. He said that we should either praise or curse rather than allowing our mouths to praise God one day and then turn around and curse someone else the next day. Our talk is an outpouring of our faith—Jesus said “out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). As such, “pure” talk shouldn’t be isolated to Sunday but should carry over to Monday through Friday as well. We shouldn’t be honoring God on Sunday only to talk differently in our workplaces during the week.

Look at how Paul put this idea in Ephesians 4:29. Only say what is helpful and benefits others. Wow. I think about everything I’ve said in the last week, and I have to admit that I have said things at work that probably didn’t build others up. What about you? Any gossiping or grumbling under your breath? What about your humor? Sarcasm is something that’s not particularly helpful to others, but some humor might also fall under “coarse joking” that Paul discussed in Ephesians 5:4. The idea of limiting speech to only what is wholesome, helpful for building up, and beneficial may seem almost like a vow of silence to some, I would guess. The writer of Hebrews called Christians to encourage each other (3:13; 10:25), and that encouragement should be part of how Christians talk to everyone. That’s part of the “new self” to which Paul called the Ephesians (and us by extension). We are called to be different, and how we talk is certainly one way to show how unique God’s people are in workplaces where unwholesome talk may be the norm.

One way that we can stop ourselves from saying things that don't build other up is by slowing down as we talk to others. Don't be the first one to speak. You might be surprised, but the Bible says that listening is more important than talking.

Slow to Speak

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry” (James 1:19). It doesn't make sense. If we're going to get our way, we have to persuade people around us, we have to argue for our position. We have to make them see things our way. Our culture is all about talking. But James was saying something here that most of the best salespeople already know—the best communicators are the best listeners. First, listening values the other person, which is important in a biblical perspective (Philippians 2:3-4). But also, listening clues you in on the other person's needs and desires. You're better able to match your message to what they want to hear. Don't forget the last phrase—be slow to get angry. One way to read that in context might be “don't get defensive.” When we get defensive, the parts of our brains that enable empathy and rational thought get less blood flow—those things shut down¹. The result is that we're unable to listen. God knew it all along—listen first and don't get defensive. The tips in James 1:26 and 3:3-12 are also relevant here—watch what you say. Too often, we say things that wiser people would have left unsaid. James recognized that fact and reiterated that we need to be slow to speak. The two skills, listening and speaking, go hand-in-hand. You cannot be quick to listen if you're worried about what you need to say. And why bother being slow to speak if you're not willing to listen to the other person?

Angry words can be dangerous. 1 Samuel 25 describes the story of Nabal, who was “mean and surly in his dealings.” David had been protecting Nabal's sheep and asked for some food in return. In that society, such a request for provisions was completely acceptable. But

instead of granting that hospitality, Nabal insulted David and his men, so David prepared to attack him. Only the quick thinking tact and grace of his wife Abigail saved Nabal. In workplaces, tact goes a long way. As the pace of work speeds up, it gets harder and harder to treat people with tact and grace. But that only makes those who use tact stand apart even more. Treat people well. Things didn't go well for Nabal in the story (God struck him down), but Abigail became a queen.

Daniel had a similar experience where he spoke wisely to others. Nebuchadnezzar had a dream and wanted someone to interpret it. But he knew that if he told the dream to his advisors, they would make up an interpretation that they thought he wanted to hear (those people still exist today). So he told his advisors to tell him what he dreamed as well as the interpretation. Naturally, they thought this request was unfair. They couldn't do it, and Nebuchadnezzar was ready to kill everyone in the court, including Daniel. When the executioner came to Daniel, "Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact" (Daniel 2:14). The executioner explained the problem, Daniel asked for a little time, and he eventually explained the dream.

You know, if an executioner came to your office door, I can think of a lot of potential reactions, but very few of them have anything to do with "wisdom and tact." Yet that's sometimes exactly what's required. When your boss is being irrational, don't get defensive—respond with wisdom and tact. When an undeserving coworker gets a promotion, don't be hostile—respond with wisdom and tact. Wisdom is knowing what to say, when to say it, and especially what not to say. It's avoiding defensiveness and personal attacks. It's not being hasty. Tact is all about how you say something, your tone of voice and body language. Can you be respectful even when others aren't? Notice that Daniel responded before he had received any assurance of a stay in the execution. That is, he used wisdom and tact, regardless of the outcome.

In today's workplaces, there are lots of "king's executioners," and they come in many different forms. The next time you see one, try to resist the urge to scream and fight back. Instead, try to respond with wisdom and tact.

Solomon also emphasized the idea of wisdom and tact. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Whether you are correcting someone, giving advice, or just venting about how you think things should be, a gentle tone and a little bit of tact go a long way. When someone says something offensive to you, instead of responding in kind, consider a gentle answer. When a subordinate (or coworker or supervisor) screws up, consider responding with a gentle answer. In any situation where you are heating up, try to take a second to cool down and respond to the people in that situation with a gentle answer. That can go a long way toward soothing relationships rather than reacting defensively, which tends to "stir up anger."

What Not to Say

Some passages talk about how we should talk, but other scriptures focus on how we shouldn't talk. In addition to avoiding unwholesome talk and quick tempered talk, there are at least two other types of speech to avoid. One of those is gossip. The context of James 4:11 and 5:9 refers specifically to gossiping about other Christians, but the idea about not gossiping at all is consistent with other passages. Paul talked about gossip as stirring up trouble (1 Timothy 1:4-5). He also condemned "godless chatter" (2 Timothy 2:16) and specifically stated that slaves shouldn't slander their master (Titus 2:9-10), which relates to not gossiping about your supervisor. Let's be completely honest—it's tough not to join in when others are talking about someone. You may fear being left out. You may want the approval and acceptance that comes from sharing your stories about the subject of the gossip. It's easy to justify spreading rumors with things like "it's not gossip if it's true" and "it's not gossip, they really need to know what

this person is like.” Most of us have used those or similar justifications. But the Bible doesn’t make those distinctions.

Proverbs 26:20 and 26:22 describe how gossip makes conflict worse. Whereas two coworkers might otherwise let a conflict between them die out, when the rest of the office is talking about it, the conflict grows bigger and bigger. People take sides and tell each person that he or she is justified in being upset. Misinformation is rampant as rumors get back to each side. Pretty soon, the positions are locked and the chances of managing the conflict while preserving relationships dwindle. The metaphor of this proverb is apt: the fire of office conflict might die out, but gossip rekindles hurt, indignation, and anger to keep it going.

Think about what happens when you gossip or slander. Yes, it’s true that you may experience the solidarity that comes from a common experience. In the moment, gossip does bring gossipers together. But then it also creates one of two mentalities. First, gossip creates an “us versus them” mentality when you are gossiping about someone that you don’t like. Second, gossip can create an “at least we’re better than that” attitude when you are gossiping about someone else’s unfortunate circumstances. So you reinforce an attitude of malice or superiority toward someone else, someone who is created in God’s image and who is loved by God. And you are doing it based only on partial information, when you don’t know the whole story (because very rarely do we confirm our gossip with the person involved). No wonder James and Paul were so tough on gossipers.

Another way we may be tempted in our talk at work is to flatter someone, hoping that person will think well of us in the future. David was pretty harsh when it comes to people who flatter others. “Help, Lord, for the godly are no more...Everyone lies to their neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception. May the Lord cut off all flattering lips and every boastful

tongue that says, ‘we will triumph with our tongues’” (Psalm 12:1-4). Ouch. The passage considers the flatterer to be ungodly, and David asked God to cut off the tongues of flatterers. David wasn’t condemning those who compliment others. In fact, genuinely complimenting your boss can go a long way. David also wasn’t talking about using tact when it comes to your conversations with others. The reference here is to the person who “bends” the truth to win favor with another. Perhaps your boss completes a project that you could have done better but you tell your boss that it’s the greatest thing you’ve ever seen. Or maybe you’re competing for a promotion but you tell your coworker that he or she deserves it more, even when you don’t think that’s true. Compliments are an important part of interaction, whether in the workplace or in other parts of life. But if you’re going to compliment someone, be sure that your compliment is genuine.

David was also talking specifically about those people who pridefully think they can talk their way out of trouble and into gain. So one issue is making sure your compliments are honest, but the second issue is that you are not relying on what you say for career success. As a communication professor, I understand the importance of talk at work. In many ways, it’s the way to succeed. But relying too heavily on your communication ability, thinking you can communicate so well that you can achieve success for yourself, means that you are not relying on God and giving him credit for your accomplishments.

When the Bible uses the word “flattery,” it’s not referring to giving genuine compliments. Flattery in the Bible is telling people what they want to hear, usually when you don’t believe what you say. “Yes, boss, that’s a great idea.” “I don’t know what management was thinking, you really deserved that promotion.” “Will do, whatever you say.” Those thoughts could be sincere acknowledgements of a boss or coworker. But on the other hand, they could

also be insincere attempts to win attention or influence others. Look at Proverbs 26:24-25: “A malicious man disguises himself with his lips, but in his heart he harbors deceit. Though his speech is charming, do not believe him, for seven abominations fill his heart.” Another way to read “disguises himself with his lips” might be “thinks he (or she) can talk his way out of anything.” That’s the deceit factor. These are not genuine compliments. Proverbs 26:28 says that a flattering mouth works ruin. If you think you can work your way up the ladder and avoid disappointments by telling people what you think they want to hear, watch out! Verse 27 says that it’s probably going to come back to haunt you, and verse 26 states that your (mis)deeds will be publicly exposed. People will eventually catch on, and all the talking in the world may not make things right. Perhaps worst of all, people will begin to not trust you, and that trust may be very hard to win back.

Proverbs 28:23 has a fitting final word on all of this. False flattery may help you advance or help you to influence others. But at the end of the day, “he who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue.” That is to say, people want others around them that they can trust. In the workplace, good managers don’t surround themselves with yes-people, subordinates who tell them what they want to hear. Good managers surround themselves with people who look at things objectively and speak the truth (with tact), even when it means disagreeing.

Mastering Your Talk

More than almost any aspect of our behavior at work, how we talk shows others what we believe. Our talk will be either fresh water or salt water. Either we believe that faith is something that happens on Sundays while work is something that happens Monday through

Friday, or we believe that faith is part of every day. And part of our testimony to people around us isn't how we talk about our faith—it's how our faith talks.

James knew the difficulty in controlling our talk. He said that “those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect, able to keep their whole body in check” (James 3:2). Of course, that's not possible because “no one can tame the tongue” (verse 8). Look back at David's prayer in Psalm 141:3. He knew that only God could really master his tongue. That's the answer to reconciling our faith and our talk. It starts with lots and lots of prayer. Prayer that God will help your speech be holy. And then it takes a lot of work. You have decades of speech habits to break. But as God helps you break those habits, you can be enabled to build others up rather than tearing them down.

Up to this point, this book has focused on attitudes and behaviors that are applicable to almost every work situation. The next several chapters focus specifically on the relationships between supervisors and subordinates and the relationships between coworkers. Chapter seven examines how supervisors can use their positions to honor God.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does James describe the tongue as a world of evil? That's seems harsh for something that God created in us?
2. Why is it so hard to control our talk?
3. How does sarcasm or gossiping hurt others?
4. Look at Psalm 12:1-4, Proverbs 26:24-28, and Proverbs 28:23. Why is flattering such a big deal?
5. How can your talk be an encouragement to others rather than something negative?

Application Exercise

Keep a journal of what you say at work for one week. Each day, try to say more positive things and fewer negative things than the previous day. If you need encouragement or accountability, talk to a friend or significant other about your goal and your progress.