

Sandra Stogsdill Brown  
*Watch Your Mouth: The Power of Words*  
Proverbs 12:14-19, 25; 13:2-3; Matthew 12:33-37  
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Being a pastor is a wonderful job. We get paid to do things like study the Bible, pray, listen to people's stories, and walk with them through some of the most precious moments of life. I'm grateful every day that I get to do what I do.

It's also a role that also comes with its share of awkward moments. Like the time I met a young woman, and we were having a very pleasant conversation, and then she asked me what I did for a living. This is a question clergy often dread, because of the way this young woman responded when I told her. She got very quiet for a minute, and I could almost see her attitude towards me begin to shift. And then, bless her heart, she said to me, "I'm trying to remember if I've said any bad words in front of you."

When a pastor meets somebody new, there's "before" and "after." Before they find out what we do for a living, we're just a normal person. We could be anybody. I love that little window of time.

Then there's "after." After we've confessed what we do, we instantly and automatically become the person that our new friend can't swear in front of. Or we become the person that you apologize to after you swear.

Part of me wants to say, "Really? You think that's what pastors care about? You think I went to seminary all those years, and went through Field Education and Clinical Pastoral Education and learned Greek and Hebrew, and took ordination exams because I care about people swearing in front of me? Do you think I carry a little pad of paper around and make little tally marks by people's names every time one of them drops a f-bomb in front of me? You don't

think I have better things to do with my time? You think my delicate little clergy ears are going to bleed? With all of the human suffering in the world, or even just here in Topeka, you think I'm going to be offended by CUSSING?"

The more patient, mature part of me says, "OK. If being around me makes you more mindful of what you say, if being in the presence of a clergyperson somehow activates your conscience in a way that being around others does not, so be it. I can handle that." Because even though a four letter word may not seem like a big deal in the grand scheme of things, words do matter. And deep down inside, we know this, no matter what our faith or beliefs.

Last week we concluded a 9-week series on the Fruit of the Spirit, spending one week each on love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and ending with self-control. Self-control is an ideal jumping-off point into the series we begin today, on the power of words. If we can control our words, and use them well, we have some serious power.

Scripture stresses the power of words. Genesis 1: In the beginning when God created the heavens and earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep . . . then God SAID, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:1-3). God speaks, and the world comes into being.

Every Christmas Eve, as the lights are dimmed, and the congregation is hushed, waiting to begin our candlelighting ritual, we hear these words read from the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Scripture teaches us that words are not neutral. You can put your car in neutral, but you can't do that with your mouth! Your words are either helping or hurting. No middle ground. Even our silence is either helping or hurting. Jesus points to this with his own words when he says, ". . . By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." I

like the analogy that author Gary Chapman uses in his book, Love As a Way of Life. He says we can use words either as bullets or as seeds.

Pause for a moment and remember a bullet you've taken. Maybe a harsh criticism. Or a name. Maybe somebody squashed a dream you had. Could have been when you were a kid, could have been last week. Maybe the wound has healed, or maybe not, but you can still remember the feeling of being shot by those words.

Think now of the last bullet you fired at someone. What was it, and how did it feel to use your words in that way? What was the impact on your target? Did you intend to fire that shot, or was it fired in a moment of thoughtlessness or loss of self-control?

Now, think of a seed someone planted for you. A compliment, a wise insight, a word of encouragement, or a simple, "I love you." How has that seed taken root within you? What would your life be today without that seed?

And now, think about a seed you have offered someone. Regardless of whether or not that seed has taken root and sprouted, what did it feel like for you to say what you said?

Because the other thing about the words we speak is that they don't just impact the people who hear them. Remember the musical, *My Fair Lady*? Remember how Professor Henry Higgins takes the uneducated Eliza Doolittle, and teaches her to how to speak beautiful English? For the first time in her life, the girl who has spent her life selling flowers on the street gets a bath, a room of her own in a gracious house, lots of chocolates, and beautiful clean clothes, but it is only in learning to SPEAK like a refined lady that she becomes one. (The rain in Spain . . . that is the turning point for her). Speech shapes the speaker even more than the one who only hears. That's why I love the proverb that says, "From the fruit of their words good persons eat

good things” (Proverbs 13:2a). We shape our speech, and our speech shapes us. . . yet another reason that it is so important to take seriously that there are no neutral words!

Jesus’ teaching that we are held accountable for everything we ever say, that our words are either working for good or for harm, as extreme as that might sound, is actually a blessing, because it compels us to really stop and think about what is coming out of our mouths, or flying out of our fingers as we type on our computers or text on our phones. Even small talk is worth examining. Small talk can be a wonderful tool to break the ice and get to know someone. It’s a great little seed that has led to lifelong friendships and productive diplomatic relationships. But sometimes small talk can be used to avoid more important things that need discussion. Like a bullet, it kills the possibility of going deeper.

So our challenge this next week is to become more mindful of our words. What is your ratio of bullets to seeds? If all of the words you spoke or wrote in the last week were strung out on a line for all the world to see, do they acquit you or condemn you? If your words had an odor, what would they smell like? Fresh flowers, home-baked bread, or a dead mouse festering under the kitchen sink? How do they taste? Are they sweet, or are they sour? I heard myself saying some words this week and thought, “Vinegar. Definitely vinegar.”

What about the volume of your words? How often do we find ourselves saying something that really might be better left unsaid? Are there times we stay silent when we should speak up? As a pastor, I try to be scrupulous about the words I use in the pulpit. I neither want to advocate for or criticize a political party, especially when we have members of both major parties here in our congregation. Sometimes I wonder if I’ve avoided politics so much that I have failed to speak up when I should, as in the current situation of the suffering migrants have experienced at our southern border. Silence, too, can justify or condemn.

Language is a wonderful gift. We'll be talking more about language and the power of words in the weeks to come. We'll talk about magic words, poisonous words, how to protect ourselves from the words of others, the kind of words we use in worship and why, even the words we use for God and why expanding our language is so important. We'll hear from Pat next week as he explores the impact of social media and our responsibility to use it wisely as ambassadors of Christ, remembering that we are now in an age where nothing we put out there ever really goes away.

Since that is so, may our words become ever more fragrant, and ever more full of blessing. Let's be intentional with them. Let's learn to claim the full power and the full responsibility of WORDS.