

TAMING  
THE  
TONGUE

HOW THE GOSPEL  
TRANSFORMS  
OUR TALK



JEFF ROBINSON  
FOREWORD BY PAUL DAVID TRIPP

“Jeff Robinson points us to what it means to be like Jesus, and Christ-likeness is revealed by the way we talk. Robinson’s book is steeped in Scripture, full of illuminating examples, and both deeply convicting and also wonderfully encouraging. I am grateful for such a practical and pastoral work and hope that it is read widely.”

THOMAS R. SCHREINER, James Buchanan Harrison professor of New Testament interpretation and Biblical Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This book hit home with me, perhaps because some of my greatest regrets have come from ways I’ve misused words—confidences I didn’t keep, criticism I was too eager to offer, bragging to make myself seem important, dominating the conversation when I should have listened. I’ve also misused words by keeping silent when I should have come clean, when I should have offered praise, when I should have spoken up. These and many more insights on how we use our words are covered in this brief but wisdom-filled book—a great book to read prayerfully on your own, but even better to use to discuss with a small group.”

NANCY GUTHRIE, author and Bible teacher

“Whenever I pick up a book on words or taming the tongue, I brace myself for conviction. It’s a struggle I’ve long known exists for me, and one I fight daily. But it’s also one that I find comes back so readily, with new manifestations of its hold in my life. Jeff Robinson has written a book that not only brought the chisel of conviction, but also the hope for transformation. I was convicted of new ways I use my words for evil, but was also reminded of the power of Christ’s grace to keep working in me. If you need help taming the tongue (don’t we all to some degree?), then this book is for you. I highly recommend it.”

COURTNEY REISSIG, author, *Teach Me to Feel* and *Glory in the Ordinary*

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.’ This striking statement from the book of Proverbs is a potent reminder of how our words can be used to create beauty . . . or ugliness. Words do indeed have power. Jeff Robinson’s study of speech, in both its positive and negative, is an extremely helpful exploration of these realities. May its reading shape the speech of all its readers for the good of their communities and God’s glory.”

MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN, professor of church history and biblical spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Jeff Robinson offers a compelling treatment of the power of our words to destroy and to heal. If we claim to be his followers, people will judge Jesus by our words and how we speak them. This book contains memorable illustrations, but its greatest strength is its unapologetic appeal to the only words that will last forever: God’s.”

RANDY ALCORN, author of more than 50 books, and founder of Eternal Perspective Ministries

“With vulnerability and warmth Jeff Robinson shares his own story of taming his tongue. He spurs us on from the Scriptures to consider the power of our words, how we use them, and how the gospel might reshape them for the edification of others. I was convicted, in the best way, in every chapter and ultimately finished the book in awe of God’s grace. As one who wields words in my home and in public ministry I will regularly revisit this book.”

JEN OSHMAN, author of *Enough About Me: Find Lasting Joy in the Age of Self*

“Some books are about issues unique to our time. Others address matters that relate only to a segment of society, such as men, women, parents, singles, students, expectant moms, those in financial crisis, or another group. But Jeff Robinson’s book addresses both a timeless and also universal struggle: taming the tongue. It is full of biblical truth, personal transparency, and practical counsel. If you have a tongue—and an open heart—you’ll be both convicted and helped by these words.”

DONALD S. WHITNEY, author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* and professor of biblical spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Much needed. Highly readable. Constantly applicable. I’ll be rereading, passing out copies, and studying with our congregation this book. Why? He addresses the negative use of words without a club; highlights the positive with verve; reminds that good listening lays groundwork for healthy conversations. The book zings with biblical underpinnings, poignant illustrations, and encouraging applications. At times humorous, other times sobering, but always on target, Jeff shows us the effect of living as Christ-followers in our communication. Few subjects could be more strategic than learning how the gospel transforms our talk.”

PHIL A. NEWTON, author and senior pastor at South Woods Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee

“As Christians, our words are meant to be salt and light, yet we’ve all uttered words we wish we hadn’t—harsh, rash, bitter, unkind, and ungodly. In an age where platforms for quick and careless words abound, *Taming the Tongue* is a timely and much-needed book. With transparency, pastoral care, and biblical truth, Jeff Robinson offers hope for our untamed tongues by pointing us to the one who came to redeem all things—the very Word of God himself.”

COURTNEY DOCTOR, coordinator of women’s initiatives, The Gospel Coalition, and author of *Steadfast: A Devotional Bible Study on the Book of James* and *From Garden to Glory: A Bible Study on the Bible’s Story*

“It is difficult to overestimate the importance that the Word of God places upon our words. The same tongue can destroy and heal. In *Taming the Tongue: How the Gospel Transforms Our Talk*, my friend Jeff Robinson expounds some of the major biblical themes regarding the tongue and applies them with clarity and power. While the book is relatively brief, its brevity does not prevent it from being a clear, illustrative, convicting, but ultimately helpful resource for God’s people. The use of memory verses and questions make this book an ideal resource of Bible study or a Sunday school class.”

JIM SAVASTIO, senior pastor, Reformed Baptist Church of Louisville, Kentucky

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*To my loving, longsuffering wife, Lisa, who has patiently listened to at least 20,000 words per day from my mouth for the past 25 years. Thank you for being graciously frank that day I asked you if I talked too much. The Lord has used that and hundreds of other conversations between us to change me profoundly.*

# FOREWORD

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

It has been so much fun to watch; we have felt so privileged. We have two granddaughters, and we have been with them in those early formative years as they progressed from toddler gibberish to actually being able to communicate with us in real human language. The process is wonderful, mysterious, and holy. They have no idea of the significance of what they are struggling to master. They have no idea that this godlike ability separates them from all the rest of God's creatures. They have no idea how words will form into concepts and coalesce and become a life-shaping worldview. They have no idea how words will shape every relationship in their life. They don't know that they will use words to educate, but also to shame. To love, but also to hate. To serve, but also to demand. To encourage, but also to threaten. To motivate, but also to dominate. To express humility, but also to display pride. They have no idea of the power that has been given them simply because God has entrusted to them the ability to speak. They have no idea that their words will indicate again and again how much they need to be rescued by God's grace. They just want to be able to communicate what they want or what they think they need, but have little understanding of the unique humanity and holiness of words.

But there is something else my dear little granddaughters don't know. It's captured in 10 brief words at the end of Luke 6:45, but it may be one of the Bible's deepest, most profound and spiritually practical statements about



how human beings operate: “Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” It’s one of those statements by Jesus that you could quickly read and move on to the rest of your Bible reading for that day, without stopping to reflect on the importance of what those 10 words capture. Jesus is in the midst of explaining how human beings function—that is, why we choose what we choose and do what we do. He directs our understanding of human motivation back to one source, the heart, and his premier example of the inescapable influence of the heart on our functioning is our talk.

You see, the significance—the unique humanity and holiness of our talk—is not just that God gave us this ability, and in that way we are like him. More importantly, this ability is inextricably attached to the causal core of our personhood, the heart. Nothing more centrally defines who we are and why we do everything than the heart does. The heart controls all of our actions, reactions, and interactions, from the smallest, most inconsequential to the biggest, most dramatic, life-shaping decisions.

Words matter because they flow out of our hearts. Communication matters because what the heart is and what the heart does matters. My granddaughters are years from understanding the weighty value of words. They are far from understanding that their words are always heart-revealing. They have no understanding whatsoever that the struggle of words is not a struggle of the right vocabulary, but rather, a struggle of the right heart. They are using more and more words, but they simply have no clue of the life-shaping power of the gift the Creator has given them.

It’s important to understand what Jesus is saying: our words do what our hearts have already done. Our words have power and value because everything the heart does has holy value in the eyes of the One who entrusted us with this ability.

The heart *thinks*, and our words are the way those thoughts get communicated and transferred to God and others.

The heart *desires*, and our words are the way we communicate what, how, why, when, and where we want the things that our hearts have come to desire.

The heart *loves*, and every day the loves of our hearts get intentionally or unintentionally communicated to God and to those near us.

The heart *worships*, and our words reveal what rules our hearts.

Words matter because the heart matters. This is why I am so appreciative of *Taming the Tongue*. I have spent the last two decades thinking about words, endeavoring to put my best words down on the page and seeking to

Speak words of grace wherever God gives me opportunity. But I still struggle to do with my words only what God intended. You are now about to read a book about words that is filled with words of humility, wisdom, warning, and grace. I wish I could say that I don't need this book, but I still do, and I'm sure you do too. What Jeff Robinson has written is not only deep in its understanding of this powerful human ability, but also personally insightful and convicting. Here is ancient wisdom coupled with contemporary application, both of which we all need.

I'll talk today. Sometimes my words will be words of wisdom, love, hope, and grace, but not always. And this is why I still need this book. You'll talk too, and until you're on the other side, your words will also be mixed in intention and vocabulary. So I commend this book to you. May the wisdom here be used of God to season your words with love for him and love for others, so that what you say will give grace to those who hear.

Paul David Tripp

## INTRODUCTION

# WHY I WROTE A BOOK ABOUT TALK

It was an unusual time for one of my elders to request a meeting with me, the senior pastor. It was Saturday, but I wasn't preaching the next day, so I didn't think much about why he wanted to meet. As it turns out, the conversation may have been the most earth-shaking hour I have spent listening to another man in my entire adult life.

My fellow elder was in a deeply serious frame of mind when we sat down. Instantly, the overwhelming thought—paranoia endemic among pastors—entered my mind: *I'm not going to like this.*

My intuition was correct.

He placed a yellow legal pad between us—the front page detailed his concern about me, written in black ink. “I've been watching you closely during your first few months of ministry here, and I've had a number of people in the church come to me about a pretty major issue with you, one I'm pretty sure you're not aware of—it's one I've seen myself.”

His tone grew increasingly gentle, telling me this brother wasn't angry with me, but was deeply concerned.

My mind went into overdrive. I frantically replayed parts of the tape of my life during the several months I had served as pastor in this church, searching for clips that would reveal unwitting immorality or moments of extremely poor judgment. Did he think I was involved in some secret sin? Were rumors circulating through the congregation of which I was unaware?

He continued.

"I want you to know that I love you as a dear brother in the Lord. I think you have great potential in the ministry, but you have this one blind spot, and if you don't get ahold of it, you won't be in ministry long."

My mouth was getting dry, and I began to feel my hands tremble slightly. "Okay, I'm listening," I said. "Please tell me what it is."

I wasn't going to like this. My inner attorney rose to his feet, preparing his defense.

"Please know I say this in love from a much older minister to a younger," the elder said.

"Okay, hit me," I said, wanting to get it over with.

"You talk too much," he said. "I mean, you really, really talk too much. You talk about yourself all the time—what you know, what you think, who you know, what you like, what you've done, what you want to do. But you don't listen, and you barely let other people talk. So many words come out of your mouth, it has intimidated some of our members, and they don't want to talk to you, because they know it's just going to be a monologue or a lecture. I realize you're an extrovert and you tend to process things by talking through them, so that makes this hard. Has anyone ever told you this?"

That I was both stunned and stung by his critique is a vast understatement.

"No, I don't think I've ever heard that from another person," I said sheepishly. "I've been teased by friends over being a big talker, but I've never been told it's a huge problem. I need to go away and give this some thought."

After a few assurances that he loved me and that his criticism was an effort to spare me significant relational and ministerial hardship, we parted ways. I wasn't talking anymore, I was assessing. My inner attorney sat back down.

I drove home in stunned silence, not turning on the radio even though it was college football season, and I would normally be dialing in some SEC game. *Could it be true? Wasn't he just being mean? I'm an extrovert, and he and our church members are introverts,* I thought.

As I came through the door, my wife read my shocked face, now probably a little pale. “Are you okay?” she asked. “What was that all about? You weren’t gone long.”

We sat alone on our front porch, away from the kids, where I recounted our dialogue. Finally, I summoned the courage to ask the person who knows me best: “Is his assessment of my talking correct? Please tell me and don’t hold back. If I’m in sin, then I don’t need any mollicoddling.”

My wife loves me too much to tell me anything but the truth. She took a few seconds to gather her thoughts and she began to speak—slowly and carefully. My first thought was, *I probably don’t do what she just did when I’m asked a question. I probably plow ahead.*

“Yes, there is a lot of truth in what he’s told you. I’ve not heard church members say anything about it, but I can see why they might feel that way. I think you need to take his words seriously. Maybe it’s not that you talk too much, but it’s what you say when you’re talking. Sometimes that’s what gets you in trouble.”

Hundreds of hours in prayer and reflection on Scripture led me to agree with my dear brother and my loving wife. It led to deep self-examination, which exposed layers of sin, self-centeredness, anger, arrogance, pride, and many other unsanctified things in my words.

There was trouble in my talk, and God loved me enough to expose it.

## DELUGE OF WORDS

God’s Word is full of, well, words. The Bible’s storyline begins with its protagonist uttering the first recorded words in history: “Let there be light.”

Those words brought light into being. Over those first six days, God spoke words, and all of creation came into being. The lesson for us: words—particularly God’s words—possess incredible power. But human speech possesses a profound power as well—power for life, power for death. No, I don’t mean power in words as teachers of the false “name it, claim it” gospel often assert.

The timeline of history is dotted with seismic words. Adam and Eve, our first parents, spoke in the garden. The serpent spoke. God spoke. Our Lord’s opponents spoke (“Crucify him!”). Think of history outside the Bible. Think of Augustine and the words of children singing near his garden in Milan (“Take up and read”), Luther (“Here I stand . . .”), Lincoln (“Four score and seven years ago . . .”), MLK (“I have a dream . . .”), Reagan (“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall”). Encouraging words. Inspiring words. Revolutionary

words. And, thanks to the words “Did God really say?” there are also terrible, destructive words.

We are a communicating people. Talking heads on CNN, Fox News, and ESPN prattle ceaselessly, analyzing the day’s events and issues, many of them trivial—from batting averages to Hollywood hairstyles. Enough books are published each month to sink Noah’s ark. And *we talk*. We talk to our spouses, our children, our co-workers; sometimes we talk to ourselves. Using our keyboards and smartphones, we talk on Twitter and Facebook and Instagram. We send text messages and email. All of them contain words.

The conversation is endless. It’s been estimated that the average human being utters between 10,000 and 20,000 words per day. Consider that fact in light of Solomon’s words in Proverbs 10:19: “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” If the average person speaks between 10,000 and 20,000 words each day, then we are looking at 10,000 to 20,000 opportunities to sin. We all have different temperaments—some of us talk all the time, others not so much—but we all talk, so the Bible and all its talk about talk confronts us.

### NOT THE WAY WE’RE SUPPOSED TO TALK

In the world after Genesis 3, there is trouble in our talk, so how should we use words? Is it okay to vent? To rage? To “tell it like it is”? To use profanity? Words wield incredible power, and the proper and improper deployment of them gets a lot of ink in Scripture. Words begin life-changing relationships: “Will you marry me?” Words start wars: “This day will live in infamy.” Words change the world: “He is not here, but is risen from the dead.”

Our God is a speaking God who inspired a book to tell us about himself and our relationship to him. Thus, it is important that we develop a biblical theology of words and a practical theology for how we use these deeply powerful tools for the sake of our sanctification, for the sake of the church, for the sake of God’s glory.

That’s the right place to begin this conversation.

### THREE PURPOSES

This book has three main goals. First, I want to convince readers that words are one of the most important aspects of a life lived before God, one of the best indicators as to our maturation and growth in Christ-likeness.

Second, I want to show how the fall has turned words into potential nuclear warheads, so we must handle them as such.

Third, I want to show how the gospel beats those swords into plowshares and transforms them into conduits of God's grace.

## CHAPTER 1

# GOD'S WORD AND OUR WORDS

*And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Gen. 1:3)*

*You talk too much, you worry me to death, you talk too much, you even worry my pet; you just talk, talk too much. — R&B singer Joe Jones in his 1960 hit "You Talk Too Much"*

In the beginning, there were words. Three verses into the Bible, we read the first spoken words in history: "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). God spoke, and there was light. God continued to speak, creating everything on earth and in the heavens, speaking them into existence out of nothing in six days. God's words at creation reflected his power as Creator and sovereign Lord over all things.

On the sixth day, God formed man out of the dust of the ground, breathed life into his nostrils, took a rib from him, and created a woman. God made humans in his image, and endowed them with the ability to communicate through words. The first human speech recorded came from the



lips of Adam in Genesis 2:23 where he meets his helpmate for the first time: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

It’s easy to read the early chapters of Genesis and miss the fact that God came down and spoke to the humans whom he created. He established a relationship with them. He gave them commands and told them how life works best. The infinite and almighty One makes himself knowable and understandable through human language. Isn’t that incredible? God is not distant and aloof from his people as he is so often depicted in popular movies and music.

God comes near and uses words to reveal himself and explain everything else to us. Who is God? He tells us. What’s wrong with us and our world? God tells us. Where did we come from, and where are we going? God tells us. How can we know him and live in right relationship with God? He tells us. As John Calvin put it, God uses “baby talk” to make himself known to us; that is, he capitulates to our weakness by making himself known through a form of communication we can understand:

... as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to “lisp” in speaking to us... Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.<sup>1</sup>

God did this for our first parents, and he does it for us through his Word. He revealed each phase of his work with words. There’s a lot bound up in God’s lisping. Think about how much God packs into single words in Scripture when he talks about himself. Various words help interpret the character and attributes of God—including sovereignty, holiness, goodness, omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. God is a rock, the sun, a fortress, a shield, a light in dark places, a shepherd, a protector, a prophet, a priest, a king, a father, a judge, a door, a lamb, a master, water, bread, and much more.

And you communicate almost constantly. You talk, presumably to others, but also sometimes to yourself. You send email. You tweet. You post on Facebook or Instagram. You think words, sing words, write words, read words. Words are at the heart of who you are as a person created in the im-

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.13.1.

age of a communicating God. And communication is at the heart of God's nature, as John Frame writes: "[God] in his very nature is communicative . . . He is, among all his other attributes, a speaking God."<sup>2</sup>

Without God's words, we know neither God nor ourselves accurately. In his prologue to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin famously wrote, "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists in two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."<sup>3</sup> How do we know God? Because he has spoken to us. My church's confession of faith has this to say about God's Word:

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of saving knowledge, faith, and obedience. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God and his will which is necessary until salvation . . . Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

Not many of us stop to consider the fundamental importance of words when we're talking or reading or listening. We just do those things. Adam and Eve's ability to communicate made them unique. Animals don't talk (unless they are Satan-possessed serpents or divinely inspired donkeys). Trees don't talk. Rivers don't talk. But God did, and people made in his image do. God set the trajectory for our lives by giving us this ability. Communication is fundamental to who we are as created beings, and God has wisely designed it that way. Paul Tripp points out:

There is nothing we depend on more than our ability to give and receive communication. In quiet conversation over coffee, in anxious conversation in a busy airport, in defending why we are late for curfew or didn't complete the task at work, we talk. In teaching our children or intervening in an argument, in a lengthy congressional debate or an intense discussion with a friend, people talk. In a good quiet night, in words of

2. John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 42.
3. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1.
4. *The Baptist Confession of Faith & Baptist Catechism* (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Books, 2010), 1.

athletic challenge, in romantic words of love, in words of correction and rebuke, anger and irritation, people talk. In the confusing patter on a railway platform in India, with the voices of children walking home from school in Soweto, people talk. Words direct our existence and relationships. They shape our observations and define our experiences. We really come to know other people through conversation. We want to be alone when we have heard too many words and we feel alone when it has been a while since anyone has spoken to us.<sup>5</sup>

God's communication to us is lovingly designed to address the need of the moment in simple words that can be understood. We know what a judge is. God tells us he's a judge. We know what a shepherd is, and God tells us he's a shepherd. And before he worked, God told us what he was going to do. He talks about what he's doing and what he's done. Then, he interprets it all for us. Really, that's what much of the Old Testament is and what much in the epistles are—God explaining what he's done for his people. Scripture presents God as the great standard for all communication.<sup>6</sup>

### WHERE IT ALL WENT WRONG

In the beginning, words were good. And the ability to communicate with words is a good gift from the hand of God. There was no slander, no deceit, no abusive talk. But, like all the gifts he's given us, many of them began to be grossly misused after the fall. All our trouble began in Genesis 3. There commenced what Tripp rightly calls a war of words.<sup>7</sup> Now we use words in conflict to insult one another, to lie about one another, to curse God, to spread slander and gossip—basically, to destroy one another. Think of World War II and the infamous memo Nazi general Herman Goering wrote to Hitler saying, "We have reached the final solution for the Jewish problem." That 10-word sentence led to the murder of 6 million Jews and perhaps a million more whom the Nazis declared unfit for human society. Ten little words, incalculable in their tragic effect. Sinful words have led to world wars, civil wars, church wars, familial wars, and murder.

5. Paul David Tripp, *War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 13.
6. *Ibid.*, 9.
7. *Ibid.*, 13.

Satan originated the use of words for evil purposes. God had already warned Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Everything is still pristine at this point. Genesis 2 ends on what seems like an odd phrase: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). Why did God need to point out they were naked and not ashamed? Because shame would soon invade human relationships.

That odd sentence sounds foreboding and sets the stage for the next chapter. The curtain rises on Genesis 3, and the serpent slithers into the garden. He speaks to Eve about God’s prohibition that forbids them from eating from the one tree. Satan asks Eve, “Did God really say?” This question sets off a chain reaction of ill-begotten words between the serpent and our first parents that ends with them eating the forbidden fruit.

God speaks to Adam, Eve, the serpent, and the entire created order: “Cursed are you.” Ten thousand nuclear warheads exploding every day could never rival the cosmic impact of those words. It’s why there’s trouble in our talk. It’s why Jesus came. Those few words declared in Eden triggered the fall of man from innocence. They opened the door wide for two intruders: sin and death. A few chapters later in Genesis 11—following Noah and the flood—sinful men at Babel use language to reshape reality, “believing and declaring that we are able to bring God down and so de-god God, who is ultimate reality. It is then a short stop from this idolatrous construal to reimagining everything else.”<sup>8</sup> In judgment of their self-idolatry, God stopped their work by making their words unintelligible to one another, and he scattered the people across the earth. Filled with secular hubris, human wickedness had grown to such a degree that the people began to mimic the words of God; in Genesis 11 they repeatedly said, “Let us,” brazenly seeking to commandeer God’s creative power of words and language.

Words, once creating life in a world God called good, now bring death. Human hearts are now idle word factories. In Matthew 12, Jesus says, “You brood of vipers! How can you speak good when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). Our heart, now enslaved to sin and death, shows its diabolical way by what comes out of our mouths.

8. Melvin Tinker, *That Hideous Strength: How the West Was Lost* (Welwyn Garden City, UK: Evangelical Press, 2018), 42.

## HOW IT WAS ALL SET RIGHT

The misuse of language at Babel brought God's wrath, but the storyline of Scripture does not stop there. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit un-confused the languages such that men began to hear the gospel in their native language. The Messiah foreshadowed in Genesis 3:15 crushed the head of the serpent as promised, defeating him at Calvary, dying on the cross and coming out of the ground on the third day. Seismic words tell the story, first at Golgotha, where Jesus bore the wrath for his people's sins: "It is finished" (John 19:30). Three days later, the angel reported to the women at the tomb seven words that changed history: "He is not here. He is risen" (Mark 16:6b).

Forty days after he arose, Jesus ascended into heaven and soon thereafter, the promised Spirit came to indwell God's people. The curse of Babel was reversed. Now, because of Christ's death and resurrection, by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, God's people could again use words to build up and not tear down, to give life, rather than bring death. John's Gospel tells us that the Word of God has changed everything:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

How does the Word affect our words? One of the most powerful reminders in all of Scripture of the grace we've received and how it should shape our posture—even our talk—toward others is found in Matthew 18:21-35, the parable of the unforgiving servant. The disciples thought they were being charitable when they asked Jesus if we should be willing to forgive those who've wronged us seven times. But Jesus told them we must forgive "seventy times seven" times, which means we must be willing to forgive an infinite number of offenses—seven representing the number of completeness in Scripture. Then, like a great preacher, Jesus illustrated the truth by setting forth two servant debtors—one who owed the king the equivalent of millions of dollars, and one who owed that servant a relatively small amount. The king demanded full payment of the unconscionable debt the servant owed him, but the poor servant begged for more time. Then, inexplicably, the king forgave the debt—entirely. This story powerfully illustrates what

Christ has done for each of us who've come to faith in him: he has paid an infinite debt we owed but could never repay.

But the story doesn't end there.

The servant who'd been forgiven what was virtually an infinite debt then encountered a fellow servant who owed him a small debt. He demands immediate payment, and when the other servant begs for more time, he begins to choke the second servant, demanding, "Pay what you owe." Then the forgiven servant has the other servant cast into prison until he can pay the debt. The king, upon hearing of the forgiven servant's ungracious behavior, has him arrested and jailed until he is able to pay the debt that had been previously canceled.

Jesus delivers the lesson in verse 35: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

The lesson as it applies to our communication struggles is this: as the redeemed of God, we have been forgiven an infinite debt. In dealing with others, even in the way we talk to them, we have no right to mistreat them. Jesus demands that we give them grace in the way we treat them and in the way we speak to them. To mistreat another person verbally is to forget that we did not get what our sins deserved, that Jesus paid our debt with his life. This sacrifice should liberate us to speak to others with kindness, humility, and grace. God's indwelling Spirit empowers us to talk graciously to others in ways we never could in our unregenerate state.

### TROUBLED NO MORE

Still, even though we are redeemed, we misuse words. The tongue must still be tamed. We live between the times—the already and the not yet—and our communication is still getting straightened out. We sin with angry words. We sin with lying words. We sin with threatening words. We sin with boastful words. We sin with profane words. We sin with gossip. We sin in conversations, in email, and on social media. Though we are filled with God's Spirit, though we are being transformed day by day into the image of Christ, our communication struggles remain. But, because the gospel is true, we can gradually see our words conformed to Christ.

One day our troublesome talk will be no more. One day Christ will fully consummate his kingdom, death will be dead, sin will be cast into hell, and God's people will live in a kingdom with citizens who communicate with perfection. We rejoice in these words:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Rev. 21:1–4)

But first, we need to see clearly why words are so dangerous and why they must be handled with great care.

### MEMORY VERSE

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
(John 1:1)*

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Genesis 2 tells us that God made men and women in his own image. The creation account also shows that he is a talking God. How does his talking and communication relate to ours? How is our talk similar and different from his?
2. How many words does the average person use in one day? Does that number surprise you? What might this mean for those among us who tend to talk more than others?
3. What did you spend most of your day talking about today? What topic(s) did you give the most attention to? What do you spend most days talking about?
4. How has the fall in Genesis 3 affected our talk? How does this shape what you talk most about, and how would you like to see that change?
5. In what ways does God describe himself in Scripture, and what does that say about the richness and importance of words?
6. What are three main purposes for this book? What are the areas that cause you the most trouble in your communication with your spouse or

children? Other family members? At work? In church? How do you hope to grow in those areas from this study?

#### FOR FURTHER READING AND STUDY

- *War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles* (P&R, 2001) by Paul David Tripp
- *The Power of Words and the Wonder of God* (Crossway, 2009) edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor





## THE GOSPEL COALITION

The Gospel Coalition (TGC) supports the church in making disciples of all nations, by providing gospel-centered resources that are trusted and timely, winsome and wise.

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