

This morning, we wrap up our series in Colossians, a letter from Paul to the church in Colosse where he is encouraging them to mature in their faith... To mature in their relationship with Jesus. He has reminded them of the supremacy of Jesus, He's encouraged them to stay centered on Jesus; he has reminded them that through Jesus there is total transformation with Jesus as a new foundation, He's reminded them that Jesus is enough – it's not "Jesus plus anything" when it comes to salvation, but there are very practical ways we live out our faith, and our faith impacts our every day relationships. So Colossians is both deeply theological and practical, and hopefully we've gotten a taste of that in this series. Next week we will begin a new series looking at the **book of Ecclesiastes**, that will take us up until the start of Advent and the Christmas season. Did I really just say that? Anyway, although Ecclesiastes was written nearly 3,000 years ago, there is wisdom for living in today's world, and that's the theme of the series that starts next week: Wisdom for Today. But first, we finish up with Colossians, and Paul's words encouraging his readers in their maturity in Christ.



There's an old children's saying that I bet everyone here is familiar with that talks about sticks and stones and the power of words. Join with me in saying this: **Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.** Have you found this to be true? (*No hands go up.*) Me neither. What a bunch of baloney. Why we teach our children junk like that, I have no idea. I don't think Gwen or I have ever uttered this little phrase around our kids, because it isn't true. Words can and do hurt – people experience this every day in face-to-face conversations, emails, texts, social media, and more.

We've all been hurt by the words of friends, family, co-workers, church members, and others. The thing of it is, it's usually someone who's close to us who hurts us with their words. In fact, the closer the relationship, the greater the possibility of being hurt. That's why marriage, for example, takes so

much work. Because: **The people in our lives who love us the most also have the most power to hurt us – and oftentimes it's with their words that that happens.** There is also the greater possibility of shared joy and encouragement and so forth in our closest relationships. But someone who I don't know, or who doesn't know very well: their words usually don't hurt. It's the people who are close to us, who we value and care for, and know that they care for us, whose words can hurt us.

But we also have to be very aware that this is a two-way street. We all have said things that hurt others. I know I've said things that hurt Gwen, or my sister, or other family members, or my friends. Fortunately, the Bible gives us some good advice on words and how we use our voice. If you want to be the kind of person who speaks well and uses words to encourage and build up others, as well as to build up the church, today's passage is a good place to begin – and there are others, too.

The first thing to note here is the role of prayer in using our words and our voices to positively impact others. **When it comes to how we pray, first and foremost, prayer is words that we speak.** Paul says to “devote yourselves to prayer.” How often have you prayed a prayer that cut someone down, or prayed for someone to be belittled or hurt? I'm guessing that that has happened very few times, if ever. Perhaps the closest we come is when we're watching a sporting event. Besides using a positive voice to encourage our own team, you might say that we “pray” for bad things to happen to the other team: that they would fumble the ball or throw an interception, or the outfielder would drop the ball, or the basketball player would miss the game-winning shot. But even then, we're not hoping and praying for anything negative to happen *to* the individual – I can't fathom ever hoping or praying that someone would get hurt, for instance. We never want to see that. And in our “real” praying, it is much the same: we don't pray for the demise of other people. We pray for their encouragement or their transformation or their healing, and so forth.

So: **Essentially 100% of our praying is lifting other people up (or ourselves).** We're praying that people would be strengthened, healed, encouraged, loved, cared for, and so forth. We pray because we want God's

best for someone and for them to live into God's will. That's a good way to use our voice – whether spoken out loud or in our heads. And so prayer is a great way to use our voices and our words and it has a positive transformative quality that we'll see in a moment.

Paul then makes a specific prayer request for himself. Note that he doesn't ask them to pray for his release from captivity (he's in prison), but...**He simply asks them to pray for his effectiveness in the spread of the gospel message.** He asks them to pray for his words, to pray for his voice: that he would proclaim clearly. The proclamation of the gospel message is so important to Paul, that that's all he asks for in his prayer request. It's not even really a prayer for himself, when it comes down to it. It's a prayer that the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ would be clearly made known. It's about Jesus. But it is a prayer request that Paul would proclaim clearly the message of Jesus.

Then after verse 5 where he encourages them to be wise in their actions toward people outside of the church, he returns to our words. He says, **“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6).** Conversation that's full of grace and seasoned with salt is conversation that presumes good intentions of the other person and is spoken with the intent of blessing and helping others; It let's the other person tell their story, with genuine interest in who they are and what their experience is. In Ephesians, Paul says to “speak the truth in love.” And we show love in our conversation when we presume good intentions by others and when we let other people share their story – or their “side” of the story if it's that kind of conversation we're in. This could be listening to someone's faith journey or their explanation of a breakdown at work or some misunderstanding in the home, or whatever it was. Presume good intentions and give others the opportunity to share their perspective.

When we do this, it takes the competition out of conversation. Sometimes we feel like we have to “win” a conversation. But in every competition where someone wins, someone else loses. That's not how Jesus calls us to engage others: **Jesus came that *all* people might have life to the full and life**

eternal. And so we want to do speak with others with grace and salt in our conversation. From the people we meet on the street or at the checkout counter to our co-workers and our family members...they are not our competition.

Now sometimes, doing this is hard. There will be challenges. We all love to tell *our* version of the story and share *our* experiences and voice *our* opinions. (Favorite book in the Bible is First Opinions¹, right?) But grace and salt in conversation means giving others a voice as well. There was an example of not doing that last weekend and into the week that got some attention about how some people use their words to bring people down, rather than build them up. And this comes from an unlikely source, but it reinforces this truth for us that how we use our voice – whether that’s literally a spoken word, or a written word, can really have an impact. Watch this video clip, and see if it doesn’t help us remember that seasoning our conversation with salt is important **(video)**. **(Reading online? You can watch the video here if you’d like:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISZtjol7mJA>)

So people used their “voice” (social media) in a negative way simply because two people who have differing views on some significant aspects of life – maybe religion, marriage, politics, and football allegiance – because they were sitting together and enjoying each other’s company. Is this what we’ve come to in America that we can’t laugh with people who are different than us? Where is the grace in that? Twice in the last several weeks I’ve come across this phrase **(Photo)**: You can’t treat people like garbage and worship God at the same time. Similarly: You can’t use your voice to authentically pray to God on behalf of someone and treat them like garbage at the same time. Remember, is encouraging them to be devoted to prayer. And when you spend time in prayer – in this time of speaking encouraging and uplifting words on behalf of someone else – when we do that, it becomes easier to do that in every day conversation as well. It's as if prayer is a training ground for speaking to others with grace and seasoned with salt.



So if we devote ourselves to prayer – including praying for our “enemies” as Jesus tells us to – we’ll be in the mode of having conversation that’s full of grace and salt in our interactions with others.

So, for us Christians, we have a calling on our life to be Jesus' hands and feet in the world...and also his mouth. In fact, using our voices rightly is one of the greatest signs of our maturation in Christ, because words flow out of us much more easily than our actions. Stuff comes out through our voices that is “innate” to us. You may be familiar with the statement: **Preach the gospel always, if necessary use words (St. Francis of Assisi)**. I hate to criticize a man who is revered in church history...but I have to beg to differ. Our words are critical to sharing the gospel always and are a deep reflection of our maturation in Christ. Jesus says that out of our mouths come the thoughts of the heart (Mt. 5:18). Let's speak in a way that reflects our own maturation in Christ – and maybe there’s some maturing that needs to happen – and so people are built up, that their spirits are lifted, that they feel blessed, and that Jesus is well-represented by us. (Which is not to say we have to avoid difficult topics or avoid expressing ourselves; but we can do so in a respectful way that brings people together in spite of our differences, rather than dividing us, which is a major problem in our world right now.)

And then Paul follows this admonition with his own words that are seasoned with salt. I'm going to read snippets of the rest of Colossians: **“Tychicus...is a dear brother, a faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you...that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother...Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas...welcome him. Jesus, called Justus, also sends greetings. ...They have proved a comfort to me. Epaphras is a servant of Christ Jesus...he is wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him....”** (Colossians 4:7-13). And he goes on even more about a couple other folks.

So if you struggle to be encouraging of others; if you need some inspiration in how to speak with grace and in a way that's seasoned with the salt of

encouragement, he gives it to us right here. **Paul models in his letter exactly what he's encouraging them - and us - to do.** If you struggle to speak positively to people, first pray for them and pray for yourself to be encouraging; and then you might even memorize some of these words or phrases and incorporate them in what you say to others.

Can you imagine if you went home to your spouse today, or called your parents, or your siblings, or your children, or your grandkids, or a close friend, or whoever, and said to them: “Thanks for being a dear parent, or brother, or sister...You have always been faithful and encouraged my heart, and I've seen you encourage others...You have brought me comfort...I know others who have been blessed by you...I've been wrestling in prayer for you, that you would stand firm in the will of God...I vouch that so and so is working hard for you...”

Can you imagine if we were better at speaking like that to the people around us? Can you imagine if our social media feeds or the conversation around the table was filled with those kinds of words? Even people you don't know well and just have a brief interaction: imagine how blessed the barista or the checkout clerk at the grocery store, or the bank teller or the postal worker...can you imagine how blessed they would be if you were to thank them for their hard work, for their courtesy, for the smile they gave you when you stepped into line? Even if they didn't do any of that...and they were terrible at doing their job and they made you feel like garbage...then I don't know: make something up that's positive. Just kidding. Look for some way...something positive...to give the people in your life a word of grace and encouragement. There are enough voices in the world that speak negatively and tear people down. They may not break our bones, but they do hurt. Let's be a voice that builds up and encourages, and points people to Jesus and helps them to mature in their faith, wherever they are on that journey. So be prayerful and watchful for how you can bless others – not just with your actions, but with your voices and your words as well. How we use our voice and speak to others is a sign of our maturing in Christ, as the very presence of Jesus is reflected into the world through His disciples. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Just to be clear: the book of First Opinions doesn't exist, except in our heads.