

# 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

## Watch your words

Presented by Graham Agnew

Researchers tell us we spend up to 20 per cent of our entire lives talking! That's on top of the 1/3 of our time spent sleeping! So, from a Christian perspective it's reasonable to ask the question: what does the Bible teach about how we should talk?

What does it say about the tone of our conversation...the words we should use and so on?

Surprisingly, for something that takes so much of our time, the Bible doesn't offer that much direct teaching about speech and conversation, but what it does say is fairly direct and compelling.

The book of the Bible that contributes more than any other to the topic of words and speech is Proverbs: it's controversial and is seen by some as merely a series of quaint little sayings, many of which seem to lack the spiritual depth and insights of other parts of the scriptures.

Be that as it may in what it says about how we should talk, it's spot on.

Proverbs 11:9 says: "You can be ruined by the talk of godless people, but the wisdom of the righteous can save you". One of the strong messages of Proverbs is: words have power.

On the big canvas of history, the speeches of great leaders have shaped the destiny of millions of people. Some years ago, I visited Washington in the US and stood on the steps of the Lincoln memorial where Dr Martin Luther King gave his famous "I have a dream" speech in August 1963. As one who does a lot of speaking in my work, it was a moving experience to think that here was the setting where one of the most powerful speeches in modern history was delivered.

But we don't have to look at the great world leaders to know about the power of words. We only have to look in our own homes, our offices, our neighbourhoods, our families.

We can all say words that either encourage, affirm, congratulate or words that hurt, criticise and condemn. Sometimes we give words their power in that we let them get to us!

This is particularly so with criticism. Someone has said that no one can make you feel bad without your permission. Over the years as a Christian leader I've had my fair share of criticism and in the early days it used to really get to me.

However, I got to a stage of maturity where I was able to ask: Am I going to give these words of unfair criticism more power than the word of God which originally called me into the ministry?

Yes, words have power and our selection of words will cause people to either aspire or expire and give up in discouragement.

In Colossians 4:6 Paul says: “Your speech should always be pleasant and interesting – you should know how to give the right answers to everyone.” That’s a tall order – but it’s certainly an ideal worth striving for.

Of course, it comes down to discipline and choice. It’s easy to fly off the handle and say the first thing that comes into our mind, but the potential damage of such action can be permanent and very hurtful. Jesus calls us to a higher standard...

I’ve done a lot of counselling over the years and I’m amazed at the effect words have on individuals. I’ve talked to individuals who can remember way back when certain negative things were said about them. Like: “you’ll never amount to anything” or “you’ll always be hopeless, just like your father”. People remember these sort of put downs spoken by parents, teachers, sporting coaches and so on and the effects can be devastating.

In the twelfth chapter of Matthew’s gospel Jesus says: “You can be sure that on the day of judgement everyone will have to give an account of every useless word they’ve ever spoken. Your words will be used to judge you – to declare you either innocent or guilty”.

Now I can’t get my head around the thought of every person being asked to explain every useless and thoughtless word they’ve ever said. But I can grasp the point of the passage: the fact that words have eternal implications.

Let’s be responsible in what we say and how we say it. Some of the most thoughtless things you and I say are when we go off half cocked, making judgements and accusations before we assess the situation.

Like the young sales assistant who was overheard by the boss to say to a customer: “No we haven’t had any for a while and it doesn’t look like we’ll be getting any soon.”

Incensed, the manager awkwardly interrupted (in an effort to save the situation) and said to the customer: “of course we’ll have some soon, we placed an order last week”

The customer left with a rather quizzical look on her face, while the manager turned to the assistant and said rather tersely: “don’t you ever say we’re out of anything! Say we’ve got it on order and it’s coming soon. Now, what did she want?”

After a short pause, the assistant replied: “RAIN!”

Let’s get the facts...let’s be alert...let’s choose our words carefully, because ultimately we are responsible. Another powerful reference from Proverbs Chapter 10 Verse 11: “A good man’s words are a fountain of life” Are your words a fountain of life to those with whom you have contact? Are you one who builds up, encourages, supports, affirms?

Of course, we’re all going to lose it at some time, but if that’s our only response in situations of conflict, we’re going to cause untold damage to relationships. Again, Jesus calls us to a higher standard...

You know, ultimately, our words really do reflect who we are. James 3:11 says, “No spring of water pours out sweet water and bitter water from the same opening. A fig tree cannot bear olives. A grape vine cannot bear figs: nor can a salty spring produce sweet water.

In other words, our words and speech arise from our inner beliefs, convictions drives and urges. We can't easily fool people in this area because eventually, who we are comes through in what we say. In Luke 6:45 Jesus says: "A good person brings good out of the treasure of good things in their heart; a bad person brings bad out of the treasure of bad things. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

That's pretty confronting isn't it? Jesus is clearly making the point, our words are a direct indication of who we are.

Someone has put it this way:

- Watch your thoughts, they become words.
- Watch you words, they become actions.
- Watch your actions, they become habits.
- Watch your habits, they become character.
- Watch your character because it becomes your destiny.

Our words do reflect who we are – not that any of us don't get it very wrong at times, but to maintain consistency in this area of speech and conversation, we need a change on the inside; we need transformation! In a word, we need Jesus! With his example to follow and the power of the Holy Spirit leading, strengthening and guiding us, we can move increasingly to a place where, for the most part our speech is calm, gracious, encouraging and uplifting.

I love the way *The Message* version of the Bible renders Colossians 4:6: "Make the most of every opportunity, be gracious in your speech; the goal is to bring out the best in others in conversation – not put them down or cut them out".

As a Minister I know only too well about the fragility of life, so I make a point of ensuring I never leave the house without expressing my love for my wife Bev. That doesn't make me some kind of hero it simply means I'm making a deliberate choice to ensure that if something were to happen and that was the last time she saw me, the final words would be treasured forever.

I've met too many people over the years who are haunted by their final memory of a loved one, which involved a situation of conflict where heated words were exchanged. These people torture themselves mercilessly with thoughts of: "If only..." If only I hadn't said that...If only I hadn't lost my temper...If only I'd taken a moment to pause and think..."

Don't know about you but I want to avoid that kind of scenarios at all costs.

Some years ago I was at an airport and was fascinated by a reunion which took place between 4 people who'd clearly lost their ability of speech. They were into sign language big time!

It was obvious to me it had been sometime since they'd seen each other and they were extremely animated in the way they were communicating through the many gestures & signals associated with sign language.

It made me think, how would I cope if I suddenly lost my power of speech? If it was just for a season I'm sure once the ability returned I would be much more careful in my selection and use of words.

Father, guide us this day in our speech and conversation. May we always reflect your love, grace and peace.