



It is reckoned that on average we speak about 15,000 words a day. There are plenty of pits we can fall into resulting in the 'careless' use of words, something which we may wish to avoid in light of Jesus's comment to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:36... James also has some strong words to say about this subject (see James 3:1-12): our tongues can have an influence out of all proportion to their size, and a few stray words have the potential to wreak havoc with relationships in the same way as a small cigarette-end can set off a massive forest fire. With our tongues we both praise our Lord and curse our neighbour – how illogical and wrong! Is controlling the tongue an impossible task, soluble only by sticking to a vow of silence?

Read Ephesians 4:25-5:4. There are six examples here in which Paul balances a negative prohibition with a corresponding positive command, and nearly all of them are relevant to our use of words. The message appears to be: it is not sufficient just to avoid using words badly, we should seek instead to use them 'positively well'. So, after verse 29 has instructed us to desist from "unwholesome talk" it invites us to use words that are "helpful for building others up" and which "benefit those who listen".

Speech is a gift, given by God uniquely to humans. We can therefore use it positively in all subject areas, including great British taboos like religion, sex and politics:

- In most cases, words are required for non-Christians to come to faith (Romans 10:14)
- It is always good to be ready to give a personal testimony (1 Peter 3:15)
- If we don't teach children about sex and relationships they will be 'educated' by porn, but we can talk about sex with "thanksgiving" (Ephesians 5:4)
- Opting out of political debate will cost us a voice in the building of good community
- To "make the most of every opportunity" our words are to be "seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:5-6)

It can all sound very difficult, but (v.30) Paul drops a key point into the middle of these practical instructions (although we would need to read Chapters 1 to 3 of the letter for a fuller discourse!). When we became Christians, God stamped his seal on us with his Holy Spirit. who now dwells within us, right up until the time we die and receive our full inheritance as redeemed people. So we are not tackling the task on our own...

Questions for discussion:

1. Are we aware of specific areas and situations in which we personally need to be very careful to watch what we say? What strategies can we share for exercising that care?
2. How do we react when other people around us are engaging in 'unwholesome' talk? Join in, change the subject, opt out, tell them off...?
3. Does reminding ourselves of the presence of the Holy Spirit in us help us to feel more equipped to use words positively? If so, how? If not, why not?
4. Consider the various points in the passage where Paul provides a 'positive' as an alternative to a 'negative'. Does this make things easier or harder?
5. Do we think we are over-reluctant to talk (wholesomely...) about some subjects, such as religion, politics and/or sex? If so, how can we overcome that reluctance?
6. Who (apart from ourselves and each other!) would we particularly like to pray for in their use of words?