

5 Ways That Words Can Ruin a Life

“Sorry I’m late for the meeting. Traffic!” Half-truths such as this one were becoming easier and easier for me to tell.

Of course, there had been *some* traffic on the freeway, but nothing that would have delayed my arrival if I had left on time. The real truth was that I had overslept because I had stayed up to watch the late-night edition of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

Notice I didn’t actually say that traffic was extremely heavy or that it was the traffic that had delayed me. I just *implied* it so that my team members would conclude my tardiness was outside my control.

For some time prior to this incident my husband had been trying to convince me that *any* intent to deceive is a lie. My conscience had also been faithful to remind me of Proverbs 12:22: “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who deal truthfully are His delight” (NKJV).

I had to acknowledge that whether the misrepresentation takes the form of a half-truth, flattery, an exaggeration or blatant deceitfulness, it is still a lie—plain and simple.

I’ve been challenged with sins of the mouth for as long as I’ve been able to talk. However, a few years ago, I reached the height of frustration with my tongue after some unguarded words I spoke wreaked havoc in a valued relationship. The moment I uttered the words, I regretted them. I knew that trying to get them back was as impossible as recapturing a pillowcase of feathers released in the wind.

I decided then that it was time to bring my tongue, that unruly member the apostle James talks about, under control. I

began my journey by researching every negative use of the tongue I could find in the Bible. I ultimately identified 30. I'm sure there are more but I knew that if I could conquer even half of them, I would have gained a major victory.

I made a commitment to go on a 30-day "tongue fast," a period of verbal abstinence from all ungodly speaking. With my arsenal of Scriptures, I embarked upon my quest for a wholesome tongue that would be a wellspring of life in every situation.

I knew the task would be impossible without God's help. I was well aware of James' warning: "But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:8).

Nevertheless, I took courage from the words of our Savior, " 'The things which are impossible with men are possible with God' " (Luke 18:27). Each time I caught a negative talker in the act, I drafted her to join my mission.

My strategy when faced with the temptation to dishonor God in any way with negative speech was to catch myself, stop midsentence and exclaim, "Tongue fast!" It seemed that I had to restart the fast a zillion times during the first few days.

I would succumb to some of the tongue temptations even though the Holy Spirit was flashing a yellow caution light, warning me to stop. Sometimes I deliberately ran the red light and said the wrong thing; other times I stopped and won the battle.

It was eye-opening as well as disappointing to find out I wasn't the only one suffering from tongue trouble. During my fast I realized that this is a big problem throughout the body of Christ.

Many people seem to be oblivious to the power of their words to build up or tear down, motivate or discourage, heal or hurt, spread or squash rumors, and delight or deceive. Perhaps

you can identify with my struggles and triumphs in the following instances.

Complaining. “Why don’t they just get more tellers?” whined the woman standing in line behind me at the bank. In my desire to relate to her misery, I chimed in and agreed. What else was I supposed to do? Isn’t commiserating how you instantly bond with people?

Was I going to risk alienating myself from her by disagreeing? Heaven’s no!

This incident seems like eons ago. I now have a new strategy. When faced with a long wait, I pull out some reading material, intercede for the salvation of each person around me or try to get the complainer to see the bright side of the situation.

I have not forgotten that it was murmuring and complaining that caused most of the Israelites to die in the wilderness and miss the Promised Land.

I frequently challenge myself to note the number of times I am tempted to complain within a 24-hour period. My goal is to resist the temptation to express displeasure with any person or situation.

I once expanded the no-complaints challenge to seven days when I took an exciting trip to the Hawaiian island of Maui. Before I boarded the plane, I had to resist murmuring about the traffic at the airport, security procedures, the lack of meals on the plane, the length of the flight and a host of other unimportant issues—all before we arrived in Maui.

I am making every effort these days to “pour out my complaint before Him” alone (Ps. 142:2). Sure, it’s OK to solicit a friend’s input on a problem, but constant complaining is a contagious and God-dishonoring pastime. I’m trying to make gratitude a lifelong attitude.

Judging. Benjamin Franklin, one of America's Founding Fathers, once said, "I will speak ill of no man, not even in the matter of truth, but rather excuse the faults I hear, and, upon proper occasions, speak all the good I know of everybody."

His philosophy paralleled my grandmother's age-old advice: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

Easier said than done.

During my tongue fast, I went on a mission to stamp out my tendency to judge people who speak too loudly, overexpose their bodies—particularly when they are going to church—smack their lips while eating, and engage in a host of other behaviors that caused me to silently reject them.

Whatever happened to love covering a multitude of faults? For sure, I needed more love, and I knew the source of it. I also knew that to the extent and in the way I judged others, God would also judge me (see Matt. 7:1-2).

Gossiping. "Deborah, we have to pray. I hear that John, the music director, might be having an affair with the sexy soprano who just joined the choir."

We all know that such statements are an invitation to gossip—cloaked in a prayer request. And rare is the person who has not been a bearer or eager hearer of information about someone else's personal affairs.

Because I have been the subject of a few "newsy" conversations myself, I have an aversion to such nonproductive exchanges. I found that the best way for me to resist gossip is to catch myself before I start.

I engage in a little self-interrogation: Why am I willing to use the temple of God as a "trash receptacle" by being a receiver of gossip? Is this my way of establishing a rapport with someone?

Do I need to be the center of attention? Does it make me feel superior to know something negative about someone that the hearer doesn't know?

Am I envious of the subject's good fortune? What do I plan to do with the information a gossip shares with me? Am I bored with my life and in need of more meaningful pursuits?

Of course, my best anti-gossip strategy is to heed Solomon's admonition in Proverbs 20:19 (NIV): "A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much." Wherever I am, I declare it to be a gossip-free zone.

Retaliating. I have little respect for wimpy people because they remind me of a few significant people in my life who have allowed others to treat them as doormats. It stands to reason that I am adamant about setting a better example in my own life.

However, I found that I often failed to make the distinction between being assertive and setting healthy boundaries, and responding in kind to negative behavior directed my way. My motto was, "Whatever you say to me is what you're going to get back."

And then I stumbled upon 1 Peter 3:9, which states: "Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you.

"Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will bless you for it" (NLT).

This is still the area that I have to commit the most to prayer. I know that I make God sad when I take His job in avenging the verbal wrongs; however, I feel 10 feet tall in my spirit when I "pay them back with a blessing." Often the best way to do that is to remain pleasantly silent.

Cursing. Cursing? Do you mean as in "profanity"? Christians?

Yes, many of God's children use profanity.

"Oh, that just slipped out," some say. The truth is that it slipped out of the heart, for "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34, NKJV).

Though I was not given to a profane tongue, when I would stub my toe, break something, upset a stack of papers, spill a drink, have an encounter with an extremely difficult person or find myself in any other frustrating situation, I would silently use profanity. When I saw that this behavior was becoming the norm, I ran to God.

I prayed: "Lord, I understand according to Luke 6:45 that 'a good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good'; and I also understand that 'an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.'

"Would you please take the four-letter words out of my heart and replace them with Your expressions? I thank You in advance for purging me of profanity and for allowing the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart to be acceptable in Your sight."

Every day presents us with an opportunity to respond or to speak in a manner that would dishonor or glorify our heavenly Father. Is it spiritual naiveté to think that we can *always* say the right thing, at the right time and in the right way?

How was the woman described in Proverbs 31 able to set a communication standard that raised the bar so high?"She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness" (Prov. 31:26). Looks as if she was able to tame *her* tongue.

One of my spiritual mentors, Marlene Talley, held the secret. More than 25 years ago when she observed my tendency to speak

without much forethought, she cautioned, “Stop, think and pray before you speak.”

When we stop, think and pray before we speak, we find ourselves blessing rather than blasting others, exhibiting patience rather than pushiness, sharing good rather than gossip and choosing caring rather than cutting words.

Otherwise, we find our tongue in drive while our brain is in neutral. It is then that our words become verbal shrapnel that lodges in another person’s emotions with disastrous results.

Here’s what I have concluded. Words are verbalized thoughts that emanate from our hearts. If we turn to Scripture and use Philippians 4:8 as our thought sifter, our communication will always go from negative to positive:

“Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.”

I find that memorizing “tongue” Scriptures such as this is essential to transforming my speech.

I store them in my spiritual war chest for use whenever a situation arises.

King David declared, “ ‘I will guard my ways, lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle’ ” (Ps. 39:1). Do you share his desire to honor God in your speech?

Then why not try a day-to-day tongue fast to get started? And don’t forget that the Holy Spirit, your Helper, is standing at attention ready to give you all the grace you need to succeed.

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author of *30 Days to Taming Your Tongue*. A certified behavioral consultant and certified public accountant, she has also written *Financial Survival in Uncertain Times and Emergency Prayers*. For more information, go to .

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Find Scriptures to help you tame your tongue here.