

Building up and giving grace

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I mentioned when we read from Ephesians, our passage or our text this evening is one verse in particular, and it's verse 29 of Ephesians chapter 4.

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Now, why this verse? Why Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 29? I don't know if you've been listening to the moderator, the Free Church moderator, Donny G's pastoral messages on social media week by week.

And I think those who have been listening, I'm sure, will agree with me that he has been doing a great job. And the content of what he says and even the setting of his messages have been very encouraging and pleasing to listen to.

Now, on Friday, for those of you who have been following these weekly messages, you may have noticed that Donny G had a wee rest and he was replaced by Neil and Louise McMillan.

[1 : 1 5] Neil, of course, is the moderator designate. Now, Neil read from Ephesians chapter 4, indeed from this part of Ephesians chapter 4, that we're going to be focusing on verse 29, not only verse 29, but including verse 29.

But that's not my reason for focusing on the verse. That's just a happy coincidence. The reason that I'm focusing on this verse is that last week I was reading a book.

And in that book, this verse was referenced. And as I read the verse, not so much in the context in which it was being referenced, but simply as I read the verse.

And in that book, it was the ESV translation of the verse. It struck me as a verse that was very good sermon material.

Now, I guess that's true of all the Bible, but it struck me particularly as a verse that I would like to explore a little more and preach on.

[2 : 1 7] So that's what's happening this evening. Let's see how we get on. How are you surviving lockdown? I wonder, are you excited by the prospect of phase two?

I believe it's on Thursday that Nicola will be revealing if phase two begins. And perhaps you're already working out what you'll be able to do that you currently can't do.

And as lockdown eases. During lockdown, we've often focused on what we can't do.

Certainly that's often been my focus. I imagine it's true for you as well. And that includes aspects of our Christian service. We can't gather in the church building with others to worship God together in that way.

You know, we can't run Sunday school in the way that we normally do. Some activities we can't do at all. You think of Bon Accord. You can't do Little Lambs.

[3 : 2 6] You can't have the lunch club. It's not going to be possible to have summer camps this summer. There's so many things that we can't do.

And that is frustrating to not be able to do those things. But what can we do? How can we serve God?

What can we do to serve others? My proposition is this, that we can all exercise a ministry of speech or a ministry of words.

Now, I don't know how that sounds to you. To me, it kind of sounds like something out of George Orwell's 1984. But if that's the case for you, try and put that thought to one side, though I've already sewn it in your mind.

And focus on this proposition that we can all exercise a ministry of speech or a ministry of words. We can speak. We can use words.

[4 : 30] We can communicate. We can communicate. We may be trapped in our homes, but we can communicate across the street or even across the globe, as I am doing with you this evening.

We can phone. We can text. We can WhatsApp. We can Zoom. We can send emails. Emails are just so yesterday. But we can do all of these things. We are not unable to do these things.

To the contrary, there's a sense in which we have, some of us, perhaps more time to do these things than we would otherwise have had. The question is, how are we to speak?

How are we to write in a way that pleases God and is a blessing to others? I think Philippians chapter 4, verse 29, sets the standard.

You might call it the gold standard for all our communication in lockdown or indeed out of lockdown. And there's three verbs in the ESV translation of the verse that I want to focus on this evening.

[5 : 36] In the verse, you'll find the verb building up. We'll come back to each of these. I won't say more about it other than identify it. First of all, building up. There's also the verb fits, as fits the occasion.

And then there's a third verb, give, give grace. Those are the three words that I want us to think about this evening. But before we look at each of them, note that the positive instructions, and these three verbs all are part of the positive instructions, are placed in contrast to a prohibition.

And what is the prohibition? Well, it's how the verse begins. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth. The word translated corrupting there in that sentence is a word used by Jesus of rotten fruit.

In Matthew chapter 7, verse 18, where he speaks of good fruit, bedding good fruit, or good trees rather bedding good fruit, or bad trees bedding bad fruit. And the word there is the word rotten.

The same word here translated corrupting. We live in a world where every day there is a massive and stinking harvest of rotten words.

[6 : 55] I think we can all be agreed on that. It would be difficult not to acknowledge that that is so. And these rotten words that are harvested day by day reveal what is inside the one who speaks those words or writes those words.

A bad tree bears bad fruit, and a rotten heart spews out rotten words. Don't do that. Let no corrupting, let no rotten talk come out of your mouths.

And the contrast is striking because what Paul says isn't that instead of rotten words, speak nice words, wholesome words.

Rather, the contrast focuses on the purpose of our words, but only such as is good for building up. We're going to come back to the building up just in a moment.

But at the moment, my only concern is this word form. So no rotten words, no corrupting words, but rather speak in a way, communicate in a way, write in a way that has as its purpose to build up and all the rest of what is said in the verse.

[8 : 15] So back to the three verbs. Building up, fits, and give. And let me encourage you to use these three verbs as we explore them as a kind of checklist for your communication, for your use of words.

Maybe we can frame that checklist in the form of three questions. Do my words build up? That would be the first item on the checklist.

Are my words fitting? And then thirdly, do my words give grace? So we've got a checklist that can be of practical use to us as we evaluate and examine how we speak, how we write the words that we use.

First of all, then, building up. What does the verse say? Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up. Now, we've noted already just a moment ago the language of purpose.

Good for building up. Our purpose in speaking and writing must be to build up the other. But what needs to underpin that purpose?

[9 : 35] The purpose, the goal of building up the one we speak to or write to. What needs to underpin that? What needs to underpin that is love for the other.

It's because we love that we want to build up the other. Or in any case, it's in the measure that we love that we will want to build up the other. We want to smash down, belittle, humiliate those we hate.

Now, I hope that's not true of us, but it's certainly true as a statement. Those we hate, we use words to bring down and to humiliate and to hurt and to harm.

But we want to build up those we love. Now, how can our words, how can your words build up? Well, there's so much that could be said, but let me just suggest one or two ways in which our words can build up.

Words of truth can build up. The one we are addressing them to, words of challenge. Words that might not be nice and pleasant, but words of challenge given with that intention can build up.

[10 : 49] Words of kindness and encouragement can build up. There is a tremendous power in kind words. You don't, I think, associate kindness with power.

They seem to be in different categories. But if we think of our own experience, I'm sure we would all testify to the reality that kind words can be extremely effective and powerful in building us up.

You know, times that we have received from others, kind words. Maybe the person expressing those kind words is oblivious to the impact of those words.

And yet they have been powerful in encouraging us, in building us up, in lifting us up. So kindness and encouragement are words that build up.

And that is what we are being exhorted to do. Let no corrupting talk come out of your words or out of your minds, but only such as is good for building up.

[11 : 57] Now, in all of these ways, we can build up. There's no guarantee that these words will build up because it is a two-way street. We might use words that have as their purpose, genuinely, to build up, but the words might be ignored or rejected.

And of course, that can be true of us. People can direct words to us that ought to serve to build us up, but they don't because of our foolishness and not receiving them. But nonetheless, these words can build up.

That's our responsibility. And notice another element here that's really a very challenging one in what Paul says. He says, let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up.

You know, Paul isn't saying, look, in all of your speech, in all of your writing, in all of your Facebook posts, in all of your WhatsApp messages, in all of your Zoom meetings, you know, it really would be quite nice if every so often you throw in something that builds up.

He's not saying that. He's saying that the only thing that should come out of your mouths are the words that are good for building up. So the first item on our checklist, do my words build up?

[13 : 17] Do your words build up? If you were to have an audit of the words that you have used in this past week, be it in telephone conversations or text messages or Facebook posts or whatever it is, if you were to look at them one by one, would you be able to say, yes, my intention in using those words was to build up the one I was directing them to?

We need love to underpin that. In the absence of love, then we won't even have the desire to build up the other. May God grant us greater love that will in turn find expression in language, in words that build up the other.

The second verb that I want us to notice is this verb to fit. The expression in the verse is as fits the occasion. Now, the Greek word that is translated in the ESV in this manner, as fits the occasion, is a word that means need.

And so another way in which this could be translated would be, but only such as is good for building up, as is needed. Similar to as fits the occasion, but perhaps a slightly different flavor to that way of translating.

Now, if we need love to speak words that build up, which is what we've just contended, then we need wisdom to speak words that are needed or fitting.

[14 : 55] We need love so that we're motivated to build up, but we also need wisdom so that the words that we use are, as Paul states, fitting or the words that are needed.

We need wisdom to know who we are speaking to, because who we are speaking to, what their circumstances are, what their needs are, what they're going through, all of those things will impact on what would be fitting words.

So we need to know people better. If we don't know people, then it will be very difficult sometimes for us to know what is needed or what words are appropriate or fitting.

One of the problems of communicating on social media is that you're addressing whatever it is you're saying to multiple audiences, to people in very different circumstances. And so what you're saying may be very suitable or appropriate for one of your hearers or readers, but quite inappropriate for another.

That's just the nature of the beast, as it were. But I guess there, too, the need for wisdom is so urgent that we would be wise in what we say and how we say it on those platforms.

[16 : 11] We need wisdom. We need wisdom to know when to speak. That kind of ties in with this idea of as fits the occasion. As fits the occasion, we need to know when to speak.

Indeed, sometimes we need to know if we ought not to speak at all. You know, we've all used the expression, you know, there's a time and a place, and that's true. We need wisdom to know what that time is and what that place is.

Not enough that what we say is true. It's not enough for us to defend ourselves and say, but what I said was true. It was the right thing to say. Sometimes we can say the right thing in the wrong way or at the wrong time.

And I think this is what Paul is getting at when he speaks of words that fit the occasion. So we need our words to build up. We need words that fit the occasion.

That's the second item on our checklist. Posed as a question. Are my words fitting? Do my words build up?

[17 : 16] That's the first check. And the second one, are my words fitting? And for that, we need wisdom. The third verb that we have here is the verb to give.

But only, I'll read the whole verse, let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

And notice that what Paul is saying is that it may give grace. The words in question are the same words that are to build up and that are fitting.

So it's not as if Paul is saying, well, on the one hand, you should address or speak words that build up. Oh, and as well, think about words that give grace.

It's the same words. We could put it this way. Fitting words, appropriate words that build up, give grace. So the same words are described in these different ways.

[18 : 27] But what does that even mean? That our words would give grace. That it, our communication, the words we use, may give grace.

To those who hear. It sounds great, you know, the word grace. What's not to like in the word? But what does that actually mean? That our words give grace.

What does that look like? I think it is significant that in the passage, in this chapter four of Ephesians, Paul has already spoken about grace given.

Notice in verse seven, we didn't read verse seven, but let me just read verse seven. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

So early in the chapter, Paul speaks of how we have received gifts from God, from Jesus. Grace has been given to each of us.

[19 : 25] Jesus Christ has given you grace or gifts. Indeed, the context of that verse seven is really the idea of gifts to help or equip us to serve.

Christ distributes grace or distributes gifts to his people, to each one of us, that we might serve others more effectively. So the idea is this, it seems to me, as we see this same verb being used now with regard to our responsibilities.

Jesus has given you wonderful, gracious, generous gifts. And as you have received from him, so you are to give to others.

We receive grace from Jesus. And we give of the grace received to others. And one way that we do that is with our words.

One of the principal ways in which we do that is with the words that we employ. Our words, your words, fitting words, appropriate words, building up words, give grace.

[20 : 45] That's. Now, if we just reflect on that a little bit more. How our words give grace.

The more there is of Jesus in our words, the more they will serve to give grace. We can think about words about Jesus as we share the good news concerning Jesus, who he is and what he has done, and how he invites all who are weedy and heavy laden to find rest in him.

Words about Jesus, the good news concerning Jesus, are words that give grace to others. But also words that display Jesus, or the character of Jesus.

And so we who are to reflect Jesus in the measure that our words display our master, in the measure that the manner in which we speak reveals something of the character of the one we serve, so our words in a very special way, give grace.

Words spoken like Jesus spoke are words that give grace. So the question that I can pose to you is this.

[22 : 07] Do your words give grace? That they may give grace to those who hear. Do you even think of your words as gifts?

Have you ever thought about words as gifts? Words as presents? Maybe just think about that for a moment. Think about words that you've directed to somebody in this past week.

Imagine if you had taken those words, you'd written them on a bit of paper, you'd put them in a little box, you'd wrapped it in a gift paper, put a little bow on it, and you'd gone to the person and you'd given them a gift.

And what is the gift? It's the words that are inside the box. And they open it and they read the words. Would they look at you quizzically and say, well, what kind of gift is this?

But our words are here described as gifts. Or they have the potential to be gifts. They ought to be gifts.

[23 : 12] Our words are to give grace to the other. That's the third item on our checklist. Do my words give grace?

In order that they might give grace more and more. We need more and more of Jesus. Well, let's just remind ourselves of the three items on our checklist.

And I do that in the hope that as we remind ourselves, so they will remain with you. And not just that you could maybe look back and evaluate, but perhaps more significantly as you look ahead and in the rest of today, and certainly in the week that has begun, as you use words in all kinds of contexts, you might be able to just pause for a moment.

It's maybe not practical. Every single time you're about to say something to pause, but at different points in the day, just pause for a moment and think about this checklist, this gold standard of communication that Paul gives us.

God gives us in the Bible. And so what are the three questions that you can ask yourself concerning your words? Do these words build up?

[24 : 36] Are these words fitting? Are they appropriate? And do these words give grace? A final thought, and with this we conclude.

Such words, fitting words, words that build up, words that give grace, are words that delight God. Now, why do I say that?

You might say, well, yeah, I agree with that. If that's what God wants us to do, then presumably they will please God. But it's not just that that seems like an obvious thing to say.

We know that such words delight God by implication from what follows in the passage. You see, the verse that immediately follows, the sentence that immediately follows in the passage contains these words, and do not grieve the Holy Spirit.

Now, sometimes when we read Paul and he's got a whole host of instructions, they all seem to be or can appear to be independent instructions that can be seen almost on a standalone basis.

[25 : 51] But inevitably there are connections between them. And I think in this case there is clearly a connection. The call to not grieve the Holy Spirit is not only referencing our text that we've been thinking about and the exhortation to speak in the manner that we're being told.

But I do think that it is particularly referencing our text. Rotten words grieve God. They don't just harm others, though they do.

They also grieve God. Gracious words delight God. Gracious words build up others, encourage others, give grace to others, but they also delight God.

So how will you exercise your ministry of speech, your ministry of words in this week that has begun?

Will your words build up and give grace to others? Will your words delight God?

[27 : 05] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the Bible. We thank you for your word. We thank you that it gives us practical instructions as to how we should live.

We acknowledge that we find it very difficult to control the words that we use. speaking and writing and communicating is such a minefield, so easy to do the wrong thing or say the wrong thing.

So we pray that you would be the one working in us by your Spirit. Grant us greater love for one another, that it would be our desire to build up others. Grant us the wisdom that we need to speak appropriately, to be able to discern what is needed and what is fitting, and help us to have that generosity of Spirit, that as those who have received grace generously from you, it would be our desire to give grace to others, that we would speak of Jesus, and that we would speak like Jesus, and that our words would point to Jesus, and that as we do speak in such a way, so we would delight at you.

Forgive us for the times when we have fallen short, and help us so to speak, and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.