**COMMUNICATION – Words that hurt and words that heal**

Welcome to another edition of *Hope4HeavyHearts*. My name is Harry Metzger. I am one of the pastors of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North Hills.

*Hope4HeavyHearts* is a ministry dedicated to serving people by helping them to overcome the issues that weigh our hearts down and to foster the virtues that allow us to live in freedom, peace, and joy.

Our topic today is communication. We will explore how we can use our communications with others in ways that are God-honoring and helpful.

Words. Communication. It seems so natural. It seems so easy. We have all been using words since before we were toddlers. We've been communicating even earlier than our toddler years. Besides breathing, there are few things that we do that come more naturally, or more easily, than using words. Yet, probably few things are as important, or get us into as much trouble, or discourage us, more than words.

In the Bible, the Book of Proverbs is known as the “Book of Wisdom” because of the many sayings in the book that help us to gain God's perspective on life. It has many things to say about your speech, your communication, the words you use. In Proverbs 18:21, we are told “*Death and life are in the power of the tongue*.” In his book *Encouragement*, well-known author and Christian counselor Larry Crabb tells an experience that he had as a young man. As a youth he developed the annoying problem of stuttering. On an annual basis, the church he attended as a high school student would encourage the youth of the church to participate in the worship service by standing and praying aloud. As he came forward to pray, the nervousness overcame him and his prayer was laced with considerable stuttering. After the service, as he was darting to the door to escape, an elder in the church approached him. Larry was preparing himself for a severe rebuke. The elder put his arm around his shoulder and said to him, “Larry, there's one thing I want you to know. Whatever you do for the Lord, I'm behind you 1000%.” The elder then simply walked away. Even as Larry Crabb was giving his seminars on counseling across the nation, he acknowledged that he still has to fight back tears whenever he tells that story.

Your words can bring life and hope to people. Or, they can bring anger and discouragement. Which will you choose?

Words have power. Probably like all of you, I learned a little ditty as a child, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” It probably wasn't until my later teenage years that I realized how horribly wrong that statement was. We all have been deeply hurt by words. Most of us carry emotional scars from things that were said to us years ago. We have all probably said things we wish we had never said. We have all been uplifted and encouraged by things that have been said to us. Words have power. Words can either heal or hurt. In short, your words can either sting people, or cause them to sing.

What I want to address today is how we can use the power of the spoken word to encourage, uplift, and strengthen the souls of other people. Many people are hurting today, perhaps even more than they are willing to admit. “When Sigmund Freud discovered that symptoms of emotional distress could sometimes be relieved simply by talking in certain ways to his patients, he was puzzled and intrigued. Years of medical training had conditioned him to think of people as merely biological and chemical entities. He had concluded that problems like anxiety, depression, or phobias must reflect some physical disorder treatable only by medical intervention." (Quoted in *Encouragement,* p. 19).

In contrast to Freud’s puzzlement at the impact his words had on his patients, the Book of Proverbs tells us how powerful and healing (or, destroying) your words can be. Here are some other verses dealing with the words you use:

*Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad* (Proverbs 12:25).

*Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones* (Proverbs 16:24).

*There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing* (Proverbs 12:18).

*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger* (Proverbs 15:1).

*A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit* (Proverbs 15:4).

Notice the emphasis the Bible places on the importance of the tongue in Ephesians 4, verse 29: *Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for building others up]according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.*

The Biblical book of James also warns about the use of words. “*For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.**Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. …* *With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;**from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.* *Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?* *Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.* (James 3:2-5, 9-12).

We all need to improve our communication so that we can bring life and strength to others by the words we use. As a freshman in college, James Robison did not seem to fit in as the other students who made jokes about him and mocked him. All except one student, an upperclassman. Billy Foote knocked on James’ door one night. Upon entering, he put his hand on James’ shoulder and said, “James, I want to tell you something. I see something in you that I do not see in these other boys who are making fun of you. And I just wanted to come and tell you that.” James Robison went on to found ministries that have fed hundreds of thousands of children throughout Africa and opened orphanages in Rwanda and China that provide schooling, medical care, and farming skills. But, he never forgot the words of Billy Foote. In the acknowledgment section of his book, *My Father's Face*, Robison has this note: “Thanks to Billy Foote, the best man at my wedding, who in college saw me as a freshman and said, ‘I see something you I don't see in the others.’ He gave me a chance to help launch a ministry that has reached to the ends of the earth. It was because of the confidence Billy expressed in me that I gained a much-needed confidence in the Lord." (Cited in *The Words That Inspired the Dreams*, by Caron Loveless, p. 207-213.)

Words can give life and inspire passion and instill hope.

Here are several tips to help you be a better communicator – one who encourages, one who brings life to others through your communication and the words you use.

* **Practice the Golden Rule.** Jesus gave “the Golden Rule” in Luke 6:31. "*Treat others the same way you want them to treat you.*" It is a good practice to apply this rule to our communication with people. You should try to talk to them in the same way you would want them to talk to you. You desire to be understood, to be talked to with respect, compassion, and tenderness. Seek to do the same to other people.
* **Be a good listener.** In the Bible, we are told that “*Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger”* **(James 1:19)***.* Francis of Assisi’s famous prayer includes these words: “*Lord, grant that I may****seek rather to****comfort****than to be****comforted;****to understand, than to be understood.”*** And, in recent times, in the book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen Covey has as Habit #5 - Seek first to understand, then be understood. Throughout the ages this principle of being a good listener is paramount. You should try to understand the perspective, the passions, the frustrations, the goals, the desires, and the hurts, of the person to whom you are speaking.
* **Be gracious and forgiving when listening to others.** In the Bible, the suffering Job asks a penetrating question. "Do you intend to reprove my words, when the words of a man in despair belong to the wind?" (See Job 6:26.) Many times when people are frustrated or discouraged or are angry, or they may say things that they really do not mean, or things which they have really not thought through carefully. In these situations, when someone simply blurts words out because of frustration or anger, you need to be patient and forgiving, displaying graciousness and understanding, realizing that the painful words may not really express their heart nor their real desires.
* **Ask good questions.** It is true that the person who asks the questions is the one who controls the conversations. If you are seeking to bring life and encouragement to others, it is important for you to ask the questions to know what other person is thinking so that you can be of help and bring encouragement to them.
* **Purpose to be a person who brings blessings.** In Psalm 109 the person who loves blessing is contrasted with the person who loves to curse. As cursing seems to enter into a person's life and becomes part of who he is, so also you can be known as a person who gives blessing, encouragement, and life.
* **Think before you speak.** It is true that before you say a word, you have to think about it. Make sure before you simply blurt out something that you ask yourself questions about what you are about to say. "Will this be helpful?" "Will what I'm about to say demonstrate love and compassion and understanding?" "Is what I'm about to say truly going to express what I believe in my heart?" In my life, when I've planned to say something that is not appropriate, there is often a little tinge in my conscience trying to warn me not to say what I'm about to say. Sadly, many times I've not listened to this "inner voice."
* **Give sincere compliments.** In his book, *The Mentor’s Wisdom*, Larry Moyer relates the lessons that he learned from Haddon Robinson, who was a seminary professor and was recognized in a Baylor University poll as one of the "12 Most Influential Preachers in the English Speaking World.” The eighth lesson that Moyer mentions is "Make it a point to speak a word of praise to someone each day." Giving sincere compliments can work wonders in your relationships.
* **Choose your words carefully.** One of the kings of Israel was given wise counsel to "speak kind words" to those who were seeking to challenge his authority. (See 1 Kings 12:7.) As stated in Ephesians 4:29 (quoted above), we should seek to speak words that are good for the building up of others. In your communication, think of how you can build up other people with your words. If you are having a conflict with someone, think not how you can win the argument, but think of words that you can say that will allow the relationship to win.

Sometimes we will have to approach people with a difficult issue, or even challenge or correct them. In these times, is especially important to think through beforehand what you need to say. Make sure that you are truly seeking the other person's best interests. Then say it carefully, lovingly, and truthfully, seeking to help and bless the other person.

* **Monitor your heart.** In Luke 6:45 Jesus said, "*The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart."* It is an interesting statement that Jesus says that our mouth speaks from that which fills the heart. You can have many things that fill your heart. If you allow anger, bitterness, jealousy, pride, and other such things to fill your heart, the words that you say will reflect those things that are filling your heart. You can remove these attitudes by focusing on gratitude, peace, joy, and other such noble virtues. One of the best practices that has helped me to fill my heart with good things is to be able to read and meditate on the Bible.

I will encourage you to try some of these ideas. As these have been proven over time to help people in their communications with others, I believe they can be of help to you as well. Remember: Your words have power. They can build up or they can tear down. They can help and they can heal, or they hurt. As Proverbs 18:21 says, “*Death and Life are in the power of the tongue.”*

If you would like additional help in learning how to use your words to bring hope and encouragement, we have other resources that we can give you. Please contact us through our e-mail address (H4HH@rpcnh.org).

As I mentioned earlier, reading and meditation on the Bible is one of the best practices that has helped me to fill my heart with good things. We would be very happy to give you a Bible in an easy-to-read translation and share with you some good places where you can begin reading if you are not familiar with this precious Book. Again, please contact us.

I would also like to say it is because of my personal relationship with the living and loving God, through trusting Jesus Christ as my Savior, that my life was changed from an angry, disappointed, and lonely young man into a person that strives to bring joy and encouragement to others. I would be happy to tell you my story and to explore with you how a personal relationship with God, through Jesus, might make a difference in your life as well. In addition, one of the messages that we love to share with people is the central message of the Bible and how that truth can be helpful to people. If either of these would interest you, please contact us through our e-mail address (H4HH@rpcnh.org), or simply call the church (412-486-1167). We would be most happy to serve you in any way we can.

One of my favorite sayings about Jesus is given by the prophet Isaiah. *“The Lord God has given to Me (Jesus) the tongue of disciples that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.”* (See Isaiah 50:4) I believe that the closer we draw near to Jesus, the more consistently we are enabled to sustain the weary ones with our words.

Thank you for listening! May the Lord bless you and encourage you. And, may the Lord allow you to be a blessing and encouragement to others through the words you use!