

Chapter One

God Speaks

And God blessed them and said to them . . .

(Gen. 1:28)

NO matter where you live, no matter what you do every day, there is one thing that you do all day long. You talk. From the first “Is it time to get up already?” to the final “Good-night, I gotta get some sleep,” you talk. In the bedroom, bathroom, hallway, and kitchen, in the car, the store, the factory, and the boardroom, you talk. To your spouse, children, friends, family, neighbors, and fellow-workers, you talk. It is what human beings do, almost without interruption and often without a thought about how important it is to human life. The ability to communicate is one of the things that separates us from the rest of creation. We are people and we talk. We need to recognize how “wordy” our lives actually are.

The word itself doesn’t seem to carry the freight. “Talk” seems so normal, so ordinary, so unimportant, so harmless. Yet there are few things we do that are more important. And underneath the normality of it all is a great struggle, a war of words that we fight every day. Here are some familiar ways we talk about our struggle with words.

“I never thought when we were going together that he would talk to me the way he does now!”

"I can't believe what I'm hearing when my son talks to me!"

"She hung up on me right in the middle of a sentence."

"My parents never talk to me unless I am in trouble."

"He only talks to me nicely when he wants something."

"He talks so much it's hard to get a word in edgewise."

"I'm not comfortable with the way she talks to me about other people."

"It seems like we never have enough time to talk."

"He talked a long time, but I don't have a clue about what he was trying to say."

"Why do we always seem to end up in an argument?"

"What happened? We seemed to be so close and now we hardly ever talk."

"I feel like I spend all my time breaking up my kids' arguments!"

"Yes, he asked for my forgiveness, but I'm having a hard time letting go of the hurt. What he said was so cruel."

"I wish our family could go through an entire day without someone yelling."

"I don't know why I waste my time talking. It doesn't seem to make a bit of difference."

"We'll never get to the bottom of things if everyone keeps talking at once!"

"She always has to have the last word."

"He talks so sweetly to me when we're in public."

"Sometimes I think it would be better if we quit talking altogether."

These are all things that families have said to me in counseling. Taken together, they capture the struggle with words that all of us have. Who among us has not been hurt by the words of another? Who hasn't regretted something we ourselves have said? Who hasn't had to referee an argument? Who hasn't wanted to talk seriously with a loved one, yet there seems to be no time? Who among us can say, "My words are *always* appropriate to the situation and they are *always* kindly spoken"?

This world of talk—the world that exists behind the pub-

lic calm and kindness we are all able to muster—is what this book is about. If you are able to say, “I have no problem with my words,” then you don’t need to read any further. But if you recognize, like me, that there is still a war of words going on in your life, if there is still evidence of a struggle with fitting and loving communication, if there is still room for growth in your world of talk, then this book is for you.

The purpose of this book is not just to hold out the lofty standard God has set for us and then remind us how far we all fall short of it. Most of us are painfully aware of the distance between where we are and where God wants us to be. No, this book is meant to be a book of hope. It is a book about change, change that is possible because of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the *Word* who is the only hope for *our* words! In him alone do we find victory in our own war of words.

I have written this book because I am convinced that we do not understand how radically the gospel can change the way we understand and solve our communication problems. We do not have to be discouraged! We do not have to live “stuck,” and we do not have to give in to the cynicism that is such a temptation in this harsh and fallen world.

This book is a book of hope because it is rooted in four fundamental, life-altering principles:

- God has a wonderful plan for our words that is far better than any plan we could come up with on our own.
- Sin has radically altered our agenda for our words, resulting in much hurt, confusion, and chaos.
- In Christ Jesus we find the grace that provides all we need to speak as God intended us to speak.
- The Bible plainly and simply teaches us how to get from where we are to where God wants us to be.

In every chapter of this book we will consider God’s plan, our sin, his grace, and Scripture’s map. My prayer is that this

will lead you to a new awareness of God's design for his children, a new insight into your personal struggle with sin, a renewed reliance on God's abundant grace, and a practical biblical wisdom that results in a more God-honoring, people-benefiting life of talk.

Our Talk: The Real World

We drove through Philadelphia in silence. Finally, we had a night out with each other, yet we drove along with neither of us saying anything. It wasn't supposed to be this way. The silence was deafening and it seemed to last for hours, even though it was actually only a few minutes. In our heads we both were playing the videotape of what had happened earlier, nursing our hurt and reaffirming our innocence. Fortunately, it wasn't long before the silence was broken, forgiveness was sought and received, and we were once again enjoying rather than tolerating each other's company.

It all had started so innocently and so typically. Both of us were at the end of a long Friday at the end of a long week. Both of us had our own agenda for the evening and our own set of expectations for the other person. Both of us were more demanding than serving, and thus quickly hurt when the other rejected our ideas for the evening. Finally, both of us spoke out of that hurt. We accused rather than listened, criticized rather than looked at ourselves. Each of us gave up on the other and slid into the cocoon of our own hurt and anger.

You may be thinking, *Paul, what a depressing way to start a book that is supposed to be filled with hope!* But this mundane encounter on an unremarkable night in the Tripp family captures everything this book is about. This book is about God's wonderful plan for our words, which protects us from the pain and pressure of such moments. It is about our sin, which misdirects and distorts our words so that they are more about the desires of self than love of another. This book is about the

amazing grace of the Lord that calls us back to God's purpose; grace that rescues, restores, forgives, and delivers. And this book is about simple biblical steps of repentance and change. It is about a glorious Lord who is willing and able to take our troubled worlds of talk and transform them to places where love is the motivation and peace is the result. God is at work, taking people who instinctively speak for themselves and transforming them into people who effectively speak for him.

That night, my wife Luella and I did get out of his plan for a moment, but we have learned that his grace is sufficient, that his strength is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). We have seen that there is a way out. In the midst of utter personal failure, we can, by his strength, win the war of words. That is what this book is about.

Words Have Value

Words are powerful, important, significant. It was meant to be that way. When we speak, it must be with the realization that God has given our words significance. He has ordained for them to be important. Words were significant at Creation and at the Fall. They are significant to redemption. God has given words value.

He has a design for our communication, a specific plan and purpose for the talk of the body of Christ. I hope to lay a solid biblical foundation for understanding communication by starting where we first hear words spoken, then moving to the Fall to see the part words played in this world-altering event, and finally considering words from the vantage point of redemption. All the talk in the world is related to these events. Understanding this will orient us to the significance of our words, the reasons we struggle so much with them, and the design God has for the talk of his people.

Most communication books focus on techniques and skills without any recognition that our struggle with words goes much