



Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. This phrase first appeared in writing in March of 1862, and even then it was called an “old adage.”

Remember the old adage, 'Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me'. True courage consists in doing what is right, despite the jeers and sneers of our companions.

This was written 144 years before Twitter was founded. Now we have the president of the United States engaging in daily word battles thrown at others in the form of tweets. But he's far from the only one. Twitter seems to have become the place where politicians slice and dice one another. These are not just ideas that are bantered about. These are all out personal attacks. Twitter may be where the adults bully each other but a study from this summer showed that Instagram and Facebook are the place where teens are bullied. Just this past Monday a thirteen year old girl in Miami took her own life after being mercilessly bullied on social media.

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. We get the idea. It's like putting on a good front. You don't want your enemies to know that their words bother you, so you taunt them back with some of your own: Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. I remember kids saying this in first grade. It didn't make sense to me then and it certainly does not ring true now. We all know that words contain tremendous power to heal or to harm, to give life or to take it.

In Ephesians 4 we are warned to not let any corrupting words come out of our mouths. That's a great goal and we need to understand all of the reasons that is so important for believers.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.* ³¹ *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.* ³² *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

1. Corrupting words are literally a slow death.

The Greek word for “corrupting” words means to decay. Watch how quickly [these vegetable decay](#) under time lapsed photography. Should I show you how a rabbit decomposes? I won’t gross you out. You can look it up on Youtube. The verse is literally *Let no decaying talk come out of your mouths*. These are words that are literally rotten. They are decaying and smelly. If you could actually smell the words, they would turn your stomach. You would turn away in disgust and and say, “Man. Where did that smell come from!” Words will either cause decay and death or else they will bring life and encouragement to those who hear.

Corrupting words include swearing but they go well beyond just using so-called naughty words. I had a friend who was a new believer and for a while he would occasionally take the Lord’s name in vain. I’m not sure why but I never confronted him about it. I probably should have but I figured he was a new believer and eventually he would understand why it was wrong and make a change. Sure enough, he eventually did stop doing that.

In the next chapter Paul demonstrated just how bad decaying words can be. *Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving* (Ephesians 5:4). These are the kind of decaying words that Paul wants us to get rid of. Filthiness is obscene speech. These are not merely obscenities, swear words, though it certainly includes that. Filthiness is actually a good word. If you were to hear such words you feel like to need to take a bath and wash off. They are filthy and stinky and cause decay.

High contact sports require you to wear a mouth guard. I am looking forward to watching Aaron Rodgers return to lead the Packers. Like most quarterbacks, Rodgers always take out his mouth guard and sticks it in his helmet after each play so he can communicate clearly in the huddle. What we need is a mouth guard that lines up with Psalm 141:3.

Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth;
keep watch over the door of my lips!

Wouldn’t that be nice to have such a “mouth guard”? And of course, we can. That’s why King David prayed this prayer. The same man who prayed Psalm 139 prayed this prayer in Psalm 114. Notice how these two Psalms work together.

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!

So in Psalm 139 David asked the Lord to show him what the Lord already knows. The Lord knows him perfectly and completely. No sin—nothing is hidden from the eyes of the Lord, so

David asks the Lord to reveal to him what the Lord already knows, so he can deal with it. But in Psalm 141, David is taking a further step. He is asking the Lord not to show him how he has already sinned but to keep him from further sin. David knew that without divine intervention, his mouth would get him into trouble. He knew that corrupting words cause decay and death. He knew that he could Damage people and relationships if the Lord did not guard over his mouth.

2. We have the responsibility to guard our mouths but not the power. Jeff Cade is a good example. Let's say his boss comes to him and says that he needs to produce 25,000 cubic yards of rock in one week. Jeff looks around and all he has is a shovel and an axe. Jeff has the responsibility to fulfill his boss' assignment but not the power. Now if they provide a budget to allow for heavy machinery and a team of trained operators, then Jeff has both the responsibility and the power.

This verse says, "Let no corrupting words come out of your mouths." This tells us that we do have the responsibility to guard our mouths but our experience tells us that we lack the power to do so. I'll tell you where the power comes from later.

This divine mouth guard goes well with the second half of the prohibition. Remember, with most of these we are putting off the unrighteous behavior and putting on the righteous behavior. There is positive behavior to replace the negative behavior.

but only such as is good for building up as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

This is obviously the opposite of decaying and corrupting words. It makes sense that building up others fits within the larger context of unity. Corrupting words are a unity killer and words that build up are a unity builder. Before you speak the words, we need to ask ourselves if our words will be for building up or for tearing down. Will they cause decay or will they help to bring about life?

But words that build up are not always what we would consider to be positive and happy words. For example, I really should have told my friend who was a new believer that it was wrong to take the Lord's name in vain. For some reason, I wimped out that time. Had I helped him to see that, my words would have helped to build him up. So words that build up are not just flowery, fluffy words. Sometimes words that ultimately build up are hard for the other person to hear. If you lovingly confront someone with the truth, it might sting at first. You might even be accused of trying to tear them down instead of building them up. If your attitude is not loving, that may actually be the case but don't get the idea that you can't speak hard truths. If I thought that was the case, I could never preach another sermon, right?

Paul said your words must build others up *as fits the occasion*. Sometimes, the occasion is that someone needs a shoulder to cry on and nothing but encouraging words. That would be building them up with your words. Other times the occasion requires is to speak boldly and give someone a mild kick in the pants. That would be building them up with your words. And when you build them up as fits the occasion, it will give grace to them. That's what this passage promises.

It's also important to remember that how someone receives your words is not always a good indication of the intent of your words. For example, if you need to discipline one of your children, they almost certainly will not like to hear it. They won't gladly receive what you have to say. But if it is done for the right reason and with the right tone, it will ultimately give grace to them. They will be built up and trained by your words.

3. Corrupting words grieve the Holy Spirit.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Why would this grieve the Holy Spirit? Let's go back to the foundation in 4:3—*eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*. The Holy Spirit is the divine agent of reconciliation in the body of Christ. This also reminds us that the Holy Spirit is a person, specifically the third person in the triune Godhead. The Holy Spirit is grieved by our callous words and only a person can be grieved. You can't grieve a wall or a chair. Inanimate things cannot be grieved but the person of the Holy Spirit is grieved when we speak decaying words.

Not only is the Spirit grieved but Paul reminds us that the Spirit sealed us for the day of redemption. When I was twenty-two years old I received signed and sealed orders to ship out with the Navy. I was looking for a way to finish my Medical Technology. I talked with a recruiter from the Army and in literally five minutes he told me that they were not able to match what I was looking for. On the other hand, the Navy gave me days of run around and countless lies with the end result being that I swore in to their delayed entry program and was going to be in the nuclear program. This was still in the days of heavy recruiting goals so they were under a lot of pressure to recruit people. But because they lied to me—and I wrote down the names of everyone who lied and what they said—they had to let me out of the Navy. It was an awful experience because I had signed, sealed orders in my hand and was due to ship in a matter of hours before they let me go.

The point is that I was sealed for service in the Navy but it was revoked due to their incompetence and lies. I had sealed orders that were changed but all believers have been sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption. You are not carrying the seal. The Holy Spirit is the seal. It's the seal that "guarantees our inheritance" as Paul wrote in chapter one of this letter. This seal cannot be revoked or changed in any way. It is a guarantee of and by the Spirit. But our decaying words grieve the very one who sealed us for redemption. The Holy Spirit is the great Reconciler and Unifier and anything we do to break that hard-earned unity will inevitably and always grieve the Spirit.

But remember we have four reasons that unity is important and they apply to all five prohibitions. So anger gives an opportunity to the devil but so do corrupting words. And of course anger and corrupting words usually go together, don't they? The two are best friends.

4. Corrupting words come from our hearts.

So far we have talked about the symptom and now we need to look at the cause. The symptom is decaying corrupting words. We know these are wrong but we do them anyway. But why? Why would anything other than words that build up, words that fit the occasion and words that give grace to those who hear. Why would anything other than flowery, kind words come out of our mouths? Just as I said last week, they come out of us because they are already within us. But

then we need to ask a deeper question still. Why is it within us? Why is it there lurking and wanting to bust out so we end up vomiting on people with our words? Or our anger? Or our actions, what we do?

Paul says to put off bitterness, wrath, anger clamor, slander and all malice. And you might say, “Well that doesn’t describe me. Those are strong words. Wrath and malice? Nah, that’s not me.” Here’s the thing. We are not psychopaths waiting to go off on someone but most of us do have small amounts of these things. How do I know? Two reasons. One, I know because Paul wrote this letter to believers. These are things that believers struggle with which means potentially everyone in this room. And I also know because these things have come out of me at times.

Let’s take malice as an example. If you are malicious you want to harm someone else. That sounds so harsh when you put it like that, but again, think about our words. How many times have we spoken words with an intent to harm, even in the smallest way? And malice is a bit like bitterness. These emotions simmer under the surface all of the time. I may not do or say anything malicious against you but I feel it. Wrath and anger are actions that flow out of the emotions of bitterness and malice.

Or take slander and its close cousin, gossip. Look how gossip can be flow out of so many idols of the heart.

- The idol of approval (I want the approval of the people I’m talking to)
- The idol of control (Using gossip as a way to manipulate/ control others)
- The idol of reputation (I want to feel important, so I cut someone else down verbally)
- The idol of success (Someone is succeeding— and I’m not— so I gossip about him)
- The idol of security (Talking about others masks my own insecurity)
- The idol of pleasure (Someone else is enjoying life— and I’m not— so I attack her)
- The idol of knowledge (Talking about people is a way of showing I know more)
- The idol of recognition (Talking about others gets people to notice me)
- The idol of respect (That person disrespected me, so I’m going to disrespect him)¹

The ways that we manipulate people and treat people without love are nearly endless. And so much of the time we do and say these things without realizing it. We are aware of our words but we are not aware of why they are inside of us—what is causing them.

OK, so we are instructed—we are commanded to put off these emotions and actions. We don’t want to speak in these ways. We don’t want to feel these ways. So what do we do about it? How do we move forward? The true power is found in verse 32. *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

Be kind and tender hearted. Forgive one another. In other words, don’t hold grudges. That’s just another way of saying to put away your malice, bitterness, wrath, slander and anger. Stop doing those things and instead, do the opposite. Go ahead, stop it. Just stop it.

It’s not so easy, is it? If it were that simple we would not have needed verses 25-32. We can’t do it. We can’t stop doing these things and saying these things because we are too concerned about

our approval, control, reputation, success, security, pleasure, knowledge, recognition and respect. As we are driven to protect all of these things we hold so dear we throw out verbal weapons at one another. We hold bitterness in our hearts. We nurture malicious thoughts about one another. It slowly eats away and we'll do whatever it takes to protect ourselves and not let people see us for who we really are.

There is a well-known pastor who was fired from his megachurch for extreme anger and alcoholism. He claims that he was molested as a boy and turned to alcohol to numb the pain. That will get you into big trouble eventually but most of the things we do to protect ourselves or hide our pain are much more subtle. Biting remarks. Harsh words. The silent treatment. We can't stop.

We just can't do it and until we see that, we won't be ready to receive the true solution: forgive one another *as God in Christ forgave you*. Forgive as he forgave. How did God forgive? The Innocent One died in our place. The Creator gave up his life for His creation. The Lover of souls laid down his life for those who hated his guts. Every Christian was Christ's enemy. I know, some of you may have been six or seven years old when you placed your faith in Christ, but the Bible still says you were his enemy. Don't try to wiggle out of that or else you'll miss everything.

Jesus used the parable of the unmerciful servant to show us our problem. The king forgave his servant a debt of 10,000 talents and then he immediately went out and strangled the man who owed him 100 denarii. He scoffed at his 50 million dollar debt and turned his wrath on the one who owed him some pocket change. Why? It wasn't a lack of gratitude. It happened because he did not believe that he could be forgiven such a debt. He did not really believe the king's promise. He was absolutely convinced that he would still have to work to pay back that debt so he started earning it back.

This is the only reason we treat others the way that we do. We do not forgive as God in Christ forgave us. If we do let go, it doesn't mean that the relationship will be instantly restored. It doesn't mean that you are reconciled with them. That may never happen because it takes two people to reconcile.

In Paul's own words, here is what we were before Christ.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

And here is how we were forgiven in Christ.

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly

places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Rich Maurer
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¹ Robert H. Thune and Will Walker. The Gospel-Centered Life (Kindle Locations 757-758).