

# SPEAKING WORDS OF LIFE

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*'The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.'* (Proverbs 10:11)

During World War II, the United States Office of War Information began a campaign with the slogan 'Loose lips sink ships.' Posters were displayed in public places to remind the American people to be careful about unguarded talk. The fear was that, in casual conversation, individuals might inadvertently reveal information about the locations of the US military and their ships to enemy spies.

Poorly chosen and ill-timed words ignite war and violence, destroy relationships, sow discord and dissension, and bring destruction and ruin. Conversely, the Bible teaches us that our words can bring healing (Proverbs 12:18), save lives (Proverbs 12:6), be sweet like honey (Proverbs 16:24), encourage many (Proverbs 10:21), and be 'more valuable than gold and many rubies' (Proverbs 20:15). Proverbs 10:11 reminds us that our words can be life-giving. The 'fountain of life' it describes is a spring, a well, a source of water—an apt reminder of the Word that 'gives life to everything' (John 1:4) and the need to be daily filled and transformed by His living water (John 4; Ephesians 5:18-19).

The Israelites were, however, quick to complain and murmur (Exodus 16, 17; Numbers 11, 14, 16). They easily drifted into focusing on their perceived lack rather than focusing on God's provision, providence and miracle working power so abundantly evident in their lives. They complained against Moses and Aaron. They complained about the food and water. They complained about the route God had taken them, overlooking God's tender mercies to them day-by-day. Every word revealed the true condition of their hearts. They didn't trust God or honour Him, rejecting not just God-appointed and anointed authority in their lives, but God himself (Numbers 11:20).

They might have thought no one was listening, but even when they were complaining in private in their tents, God heard every single word, every time (Deuteronomy 1:27). Ultimately, their 'whining' (Numbers 11:20) and murmuring affected the whole community, bringing death, disease and causing the complainers to miss the promised land (Number 11:1; Numbers 14:26-30). The consequences of their words were life-long and life limiting.

Those leading, serving and functioning within church are not immune from a critical spirit. God became very angry with Moses' own family—Miriam and Aaron—when they criticised Moses. Their ambition, pride and self-importance attracted God's immediate attention and action (Numbers 12). Even the disciples, those who were ministering with Jesus and in His physical presence, complained. Luke 6:61 states, 'Jesus was aware that his disciples were complaining, so he said to them, "Does this offend you?"'

As believers, and especially as leaders, we are to build the House (1 Cor. 3:10-15). Jude 1:18-23 reminds us that it is the ungodly, those who follow their natural instincts rather than God's Spirit, that scoff and create division. What tears down the House of the Lord not only attracts God's attention, but ultimately hurts us too. Instead, we are to:

- 'encourage one another and build each other up' (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- 'consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds' (Hebrews 10:24)
- 'encourage one another daily' (Hebrews 3:13)

*'Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.'* (Eph 4:29)

Note that the passage refers to what builds up according to the other person's needs and benefit. It's not an exercise in 'getting things off our chests' or—as contemporary worldly culture would encourage—'speaking your truth' regardless of the consequences. It is to build and to strengthen. The Greek here refers to an architecture and physical construction; symbolising something of the act of not just fortifying individual lives, but the House of the Lord itself.

How, then, do we ensure that we are speaking only life-giving words?

## 1. Ask God to help you

*'Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.'* (Psalm 141:3)

Pray that God will help you to guard your tongue (Proverbs 21:23). Sometimes the wisest thing to say is nothing at all (Proverbs 18:21; Ecclesiastes 5:2).

## 2. Choose love above all else

*'Love each other with genuine affection and take delight in honouring each other.'* (Romans 12:10)

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 reminds us that love is patient, kind, hopeful, never gives up and never loses faith. Love is not jealous, boastful, proud, rude, demanding, irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. Speech fuelled and flowing from love not only reveals a God who is love (1 John 4:8), but stands as a witness to a worldly generation and culture that has forgotten what pure love is. It speaks 'good news to the poor', 'comfort to the broken-hearted', and freedom to the captives (Isaiah 61:1).

## 3. Fill our hearts with God's Word

*'A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.'* (Luke 6:45)

*'Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill you lives. Teach and counsel one other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.'* (Colossians 3:16)

The more we spend time in His Word, the more our hearts will overflow with His Word and truth. We are therefore encouraged to 'hide His Word in our hearts' (Psalm 119:11), not only that we may not sin against the Lord, but also so our conversation is 'seasoned with salt' and we may know how we 'ought to answer' (Colossians 4:6).

## 4. Be content in Christ

Division and rebellion in the Bible—including that of Miriam and Aaron—always has pride, ambition and discontent as its source. Yet, Paul teaches us not only to consider things such as power, status and position as 'worthless because of what Christ has done' (Philippians 3:7-8), but also to focus on the joy of knowing Christ, to eagerly await Christ's return, and be 'content in every situation' (Philippians 4:11). Paul left all striving behind (as we should). We, therefore, should work willingly and contentedly at whatever God gives us to do (Colossians 3:17), each doing our part (1 Corinthians 12). We rejoice in all circumstances and in every situation (Philippians 4:4), guarding against a dissatisfaction with our lot that plagued the Israelites.

## 5. Declare the praises of God and testify of God's goodness wherever you are

*'Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."'* (Psalm 126:2)

The Israelites would complain, whine and murmur in the tents. Yet, there should be continuity between our praise and worship in the House of the Lord and what we say in our homes. Our families should hear us build up the House of the Lord, testify of God's goodness, and speak well of God's people in our daily lives. We should recall and remember God's greatness and miracle working power. Moses told the Israelites:

*'But watch out! Be careful never to forget what you yourself have seen. Do not let these memories escape from your mind as long as you live. And be sure to pass them on to your children and grandchildren.'* (Deuteronomy 4:9)

*'And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.'* (Deuteronomy 6:6-8)

## 6. Speak with a prophetic edge

*'The Spirit of the Lord speaks through me; his words are upon my tongue.'* (2 Samuel 2:32)

Not everyone will operate with a prophetic gifting or mantle, yet leaders and believers should be sensitive to the prompting and unction of the Holy Spirit. It is said that the tribes of Issachar 'understood the times' and 'knew what Israel should do' (1 Chronicles 12:32). We too ought to be people who know how to 'rightly divide the word of truth' (2 Timothy 2:15) and can speak God's Word with discernment and wisdom, attentive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

## 7. Promote unity and peace

*'God blesses those who work for peace, for they shall be called the children of God.'* (Matthew 5:9)

In the global church, too many church splits, or losses of groups of people from a church family, have been caused by people giving time, ear and attention to the offence and rebellion of one individual or their family. Instead of giving short shrift to words of dissension and honouring the leadership of the House, they absorb offences that weren't theirs and sow their own ruin.

Yet, we know that it is when 'brothers dwell together in unity' that God commands blessing (Psalm 133). Our active choice should be to promote peace and unity: to see the best in people, to forgive quickly, to choose not to be offended, and to deal with conflict and offence according to the Biblical pattern (Matthew 18:15-20).



## 8. Pray for the church and individuals within it

We ought to pray fervently, frequently and passionately for our church family, for our pastors, for individual needs, and for souls to be added to the House:

*'Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayer for all believers everywhere.'* (Ephesians 6:18)

*'Pray for us too, that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. That is why I am in chains. Pray that I will proclaim this message as clearly as I should.'* (Colossians 4:3-4)

When we as leaders and believers choose life-giving words, we not only edify, build and strengthen the church, but we safeguard against the destructive potential of those who seek to tear down with their words. James 3:5-6 says that 'only a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire...the tongue is the flame of fire.' If we not only refrain from complaining, but also refuse to listen to those who do, we starve the fire of oxygen and fuel. We stop the tiny spark from igniting a great fire. We stop loose lips sinking ships. The church—just as Noah's ark symbolised—should be a place of safety, protection and respite, not one of conflict, backbiting and selfishness. Let those who join our church find a place where people genuinely love one another, work together with one mind and purpose, and look out only for the interest of others (Philippians 2:2-4)—a place where the glory of the Lord shines (Isaiah 60:1).