

The Key to Happiness

*“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits”
(Proverbs 18:21).*

This past summer there was a news story about “Colonel Casanova.” He was a veteran of the war in Afghanistan who had spent much time on the internet speaking with his girlfriends (some 50 of them) before returning to the States. His bride-to-be on the West Coast eagerly awaited his return. Somehow their e-mail traffic became public and other “fiancés” picked up on the fact that the good Colonel had proposed to other women as well (most of the fifty). Of course, the women, many of them accomplished and intelligent, felt humiliated, and the Colonel’s activities were investigated by the military. How did he get so many women whom he had never met personally to entertain a proposal of marriage? Many of them said, “His letters made me feel so special. No one has ever made me feel that way about myself.” The Colonel understood an important lesson about words – they can give life. Unfortunately if they are based on falsehood, they can also destroy, as these eventually did.

The fact is, there is no more potent member in our body for good or evil than the tongue. We can encourage and bless others, or shatter the minds and hearts of others including our spouses and children. The Bible indicates that the key to happiness is in our own hands -- or mouth. Speech is more than just our words, of course. Communication is going on around us all the time. The Psalms tell us that the heavens declare the glory of God and the creation reveals his divine attributes. Even animals communicate. The growling dog tells us to back off. His wagging tail invites a pat on the head. I had a dog when I was a kid who actually smiled when he saw someone he knew. Really!

Communication is both verbal and non-verbal. The Bible has much to say about both forms of communication. What lessons can we draw from the Bible to properly use this powerful tool which can bring such great happiness?

1. Our ability to speak makes us like God ... or the devil.

In the beginning God created the universe through His word. *“And God said, ‘Let there be light.’”* *“And God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water.’”* This formula is repeated eight times in the first chapter of Genesis. God spoke the creation into existence and he blessed the creation that it might multiply and prosper. The Greek word for blessing is *eulogia* from which we derive the word eulogy. It literally means good speech, or to speak well of. So we see that good speech is the way we bless others. On the contrary evil speech has the power to destroy.

One of the New Testament designations for the devil is *diabolos* from which we get our word diabolical. It is often translated as slanderer. A slanderer is one who uses speech to destroy another’s well-being, innocence, or reputation. Another term for destructive speech is gossip. *“The purpose of gossip is to excite and titillate, as well as to establish a seat of power. It usually produces paralysis, because sources cannot be revealed, and real information is always obfuscated. Gossip helps avoid real, direct, and effective*

communication. It relieves tension while providing a feeling of intimacy. In the end it is ephemeral” (Anne Wilson Schaef and Diane Fassel, *The Addictive Organization*, p. 140-1). It is the devil’s nature to use words to destroy, confuse, or bring disorder. So you see, our words make us not only like God, but like the devil, also.

2. Our words can determine our happiness and that of others.

“*Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body* (Prov. 16:24). “*Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad*” (Prov. 12:25). These Proverbs show the power our words have to bring encouragement and lift the spirits of others. If we would train ourselves to speak uplifting words, especially to those near us, how much healthier our homes would be. How many times have you said, “I wish I hadn’t said that”? Want to stay out of soul-draining trouble? Watch what you say. “*Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble*” (Prov. 21:23). “*There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing*” (Prov. 12:18).

3. Our speech can determine the happiness of our home.

Husbands are warned against being harsh, bitter, or provocative toward their wives and children. We are called to be an example of edifying speech, and patient encouragement to our family members. “*Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them...Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged*” (Col. 3:19,21). The Bible warns against a downward communication spiral between husband and wife. This can lead to disrupted fellowship in the marriage and even with God. Noted marriage researcher John Gottman has isolated four negative communication traits and calls them the four horseman of the apocalypse because of their power to destroy marriages. They are, criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. The good news is that the spiral can be broken by changing our patterns of speech. “*Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary bless* (good speech), *for to this you were called that you might inherit a blessing*” (I Peter 3:9). In fact, Gottman, after twenty years of research, found the one infallible measure of marital success is the number of positive to negative communications a couple generally experiences. The perfect number? Five to one. If your marriage has that ratio of positive to negative communications it is healthy. If less, it needs work.

4. Speech can destroy friendships, reputations, and destinies.

“*A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends*” (Prov. 16:16-18). We instinctively know that our words can be used as a weapon. It takes great discipline to avoid the natural tendency to use words to gain personal advantage. That is why the ninth commandment forbids us to bear false witness against our neighbor. “*A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will perish*” (Prov. 19:9). “*The getting of riches by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor, and a snare of death*” (Prov. 21:6).

5. Much speech (communication) is non-verbal.

An historic first occurred during the 1960 presidential election. John Kennedy and Richard Nixon had the first-ever televised presidential debate. Those who listened to the debate on radio felt that Nixon had won the day. Those who watched on television felt Kennedy had won hands down. Kennedy's appearance and body language exuded confidence. Nixon, recovering from the flu, appeared haggard and his body language was seen as negative, or even sinister, to some. These cues were picked up by the TV audience, but not on radio. Our demeanor and mannerisms speak – sometimes louder than we want them to. Slamming of doors, sighs, rolling of the eyes, and tone of voice often speak much louder than the accompanying words. Interestingly, Gottman says that body language is a great indicator of marital harmony. “Wives who make sour facial expressions when their husbands talk are likely to be separated within four years” (*Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, John Gottman). As Christians we don't have to accept this troubling observation as a done deal for us, but it should move us to work on our non-verbal communication and the attitudes it represents.

The Bible speaks of the power of non-verbal communication this way, “*Whoever winks the eye causes trouble*” (Prov. 10:10a), and “*Whoever winks his eye plans dishonest things; he who purses his lips brings evil to pass*” (Prov. 16:30). “*A scoundrel and a villain ... who winks with his eye, signals with his feet and motions with his fingers, who plots evil with deceit in his heart – he always stirs up dissension*” (Prov. 6:12-14). Non-verbal communication can express joy (the tail-wagging dog), delight, as in the smile of a friend, or something sinister, like a secret alliance or a sneer of contempt.

6. It's what's inside that counts.

There is a warning to remember here. We can learn and practice all the lessons we've discussed about communication, yet it can come up hollow -- like Colonel Casanova's con-game. Seemingly gracious speech can be insincere, hypocritical, and therefore destructive. It's not just a matter of “keeping it positive.” “*Like glaze covering an earthen vessel are fervent lips with an evil heart. Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips and harbors deceit in his heart; when he speaks graciously, believe him not, for there are seven abominations in his heart; though his hatred be covered with deception, his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly...A lying tongue hates its victims and a flattering mouth works ruin*” (Prov. 26:23-26, 28). Remember, Jesus was betrayed by a kiss. Sometimes straight-up hard speech is the most life-giving, “*Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy*” (Prov. 27:5-6).

While anyone could benefit from putting the lessons of encouraging speech into practice, it is only through a heart and mind renewed through a relationship with Jesus Christ that we can genuinely live out the implications of this teaching. Jesus taught, “*Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*” (Matt. 12:34). Our speech mirrors our heart condition. Even as believers, we must guard our hearts and watch our speech. Are we speaking life or death to those around us?