

Words matter—they matter a lot—and most of us need help to use them wisely and well. This book offers just such help. Focusing on the everyday kinds of interactions we all have with our friends, each chapter provides fuel for reflection, challenge, encouragement and hope. Rooted in Scripture and grounded in real life, this is an accessible, engaging resource, packed full of wisdom.

HELEN THORNE, Director of Training and Resources, Biblical Counselling UK

In this inspiring book, Carolyn Lacey helps us to appreciate just how important words are—helping us to see how our words can become channels of blessing into the lives of others. It is not just a matter of avoiding toxic words. Carolyn engages with a wide range of biblical passages in a way which is both pastorally sensitive and very challenging. Each chapter ends with a series of questions which enable the reader to apply what they have learned. Highly recommended.

PAUL MALLARD, Author; Speaker

As someone who regularly speaks before I think, I am accustomed to putting my foot in my mouth, as the saying goes! As I read these pages, I was both challenged and comforted. Carolyn Lacey doses out just the right amount of both truth and grace. She prioritizes the goodness we see in God's word and in God himself, and then she helps us to ponder how our own words might reflect that goodness in all kinds of situations. If you struggle with what to say or how to say it, this book will strengthen you!

JEN OSHMAN, Author, *Cultural Counterfeits*

Our God is a speaking God, and he always says the right thing at the right time and in the right way. As his people, we are to speak words that bring life and love to each other and to the world we live in. And this book wonderfully captures the essence of what that means for us in a world where words seem to do more damage than good. I finished *Say the Right Thing* being more aware of how I use my words, and realising not just that I need the help of the Lord in every conversation and interaction to speak in a way that glorifies him, but also that there is joy and blessing in being a person who says the right thing. This book shines bright in a world of words that are so often dark and destructive. A must-read for all who use words.

STEVE ROBINSON, Senior Pastor, Cornerstone Church Liverpool

Taming the tongue is a daunting task. James warns us of the damage our words can do, and we know we mustn't lie, slander or blaspheme—so how can we train our tongues (and our written words) and use them for good? In this little book, Carolyn Lacey looks at seven godly ways to use our words. With practical, honest examples, she helps us see how the things we say can bring beauty, hope, comfort and more to a world where words tear down more often than they build up. Insightful and encouraging.

JENNIE POLLOCK, Author, *If Only*

Given that the primary way we interact with other people is by speaking, it is unsurprising that the Bible has much to say about how we speak. However, speech is often a neglected aspect of our sanctification. This fresh and challenging book reminds us of the importance and beauty of godly speech. It expounds key biblical passages in a clear and compelling way, and applies them to everyday life with engaging illustrations, examples, personal testimony and searching questions for reflection at the end of each short chapter. It will help readers to guard their tongues, bless others and honour Jesus with their words.

JOHN STEVENS, National Director, FIEC



Say
the Right
Thing

CAROLYN LACEY

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*Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

Psalm 19 v 14 (ESV)



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INTRODUCTION

I don't always say the right thing.

Like you (I imagine), I know the shame of saying the wrong thing and only realising when it is too late. And the feeling of wanting to say the right thing, but not knowing what it is. None of us use our words well all of the time.

But I have also experienced the life-giving gift of a kind word spoken at just the right moment, the soul-nourishing goodness of a loving correction offered by someone wanting to help me grow in godliness. There are simple but significant reminders that God can use our speech—imperfect as it is—to encourage, equip and sustain his people as they seek to live for him.

Solomon says that “a word spoken at the right time is like gold apples in silver settings” (Proverbs 25 v 11, CSB) and “the tongue that heals is a tree of life” (Proverbs 15 v 4, CSB). I would like my words to have this kind of positive impact in the lives of those I speak to. And if you've picked up this book, I imagine that you would too. The good news is that they can!

When I was growing up, I heard a lot about the “do nots” of godly speech: do not lie, do not swear, do not blaspheme, do not gossip, do not exaggerate, do not praise yourself, do not slander other people, do not talk back to parents or teachers. (You can probably add to the list.) This was all good advice for staying out of trouble—and many of these instructions correspond to the Bible’s teaching about godly speech. But my problem was that, while I was fairly clear about what I should not say, I was left wondering what should replace these ungodly patterns of speech. What should I say, instead? Perhaps you have wondered the same thing.

The Bible offers a vision for our speech that goes beyond simply being well-mannered and not causing harm. It shows how our words can have a hugely positive impact on those around us—in a variety of ways and in different contexts. Our words have the power to bring healing to those who are hurting. To bring peace and reconciliation where there is conflict and fear. To offer hope to those living in despair. To give joy to those who are sorrowful. To combat lies with truth. To speak wisdom and beauty and grace into the lives of those around us. And to witness to God’s goodness and glory whenever we have the opportunity.

My aim in this book is not to tell you what you should or shouldn’t say. Instead, I want to explore this hopeful vision for our speech and to equip you to put it into practice—as well as to encourage you that this isn’t something we have to try to achieve by ourselves. Only God can shape our speech so that it produces good fruit, in us and in our hearers. But the Bible’s encouragement is that he is willing and able to do so.

Saying the right thing is not about being nice or polite: sometimes it means speaking the truth when people don't want to hear it, or calling out wrong thinking and behaviour. Saying the right thing is about using our words to do good to the people we encounter each day, whether that's in the home, workplace, church, local community, or on social media. It's about letting our speech be shaped by God's word rather than the world. And it's about looking to bring glory to him in every conversation or interaction. This is not something only super-saints can do. Each of us can learn to use our words—spoken or online—to make a difference to the people in our lives.

How do we cultivate wise speech? In a post-truth culture, what is the impact of speaking truth to one another? What does it really mean to be kind with our words? How can we use our words to bring beauty into view? These are some of the questions we will explore over the next seven chapters. As we do, I pray that you will be encouraged to consider the amazing things God can accomplish through your words, and be more equipped to glorify him with your speech.

By his power [may God] fulfil your every desire to do good, so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified. (2 Thessalonians 1 v 11-12)



HOW TO AVOID THAT SINKING FEELING

SPEAKING WISDOM

*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this:
everyone should be quick to listen, slow to
speak and slow to become angry.*

James 1 v 19

On 31st October 1938, actor and screenwriter Orson Welles found himself at the centre of a media storm. The previous evening, Welles and his theatre company had performed an adaptation of H.G. Wells' novel, *The War of the Worlds*, on his radio show. Welles had creatively converted the novel into a series of fake news bulletins describing a Martian invasion of New Jersey. But while a fictional news reporter choked on poison gas and imaginary Martians overpowered New York, confused listeners

mistook the play's bulletins for live news reports, and widespread panic followed.

While few people really believed Martians were attacking, many were convinced they were listening to reports of a German invasion, and their frightened phone calls to radio stations and newspaper offices convinced journalists that Orson Welles' show had caused nationwide hysteria. Welles woke the next morning to reports of chaos across the country and angry listeners threatening to shoot him for causing such distress. What started out as a bit of creative fun turned into a nightmare for Welles. "If I'd planned to wreck my career," he said, "I couldn't have gone about it better".

Welles had no idea beforehand what effect his words would have—and once he did, it was too late. Just imagine the sinking feeling as he became aware of the consequences of his mistake. His sense of guilt as he understood the hurt he had caused. The knot in the pit of his stomach as he anticipated the damage to his career prospects.

They're familiar feelings, aren't they? While you or I may not have the influence to cause nationwide hysteria with our words, we all know what it's like to feel embarrassment, shame or regret over speaking before thinking. How many times have you wished you had stayed silent in a meeting instead of saying something foolish or unhelpful? How many nights have you spent lying awake replaying an insensitive or hurtful response to a friend or family member's problems? It's easy to rush in with thoughtless or inappropriate words. It's much harder to undo the damage our hasty words may cause—to us as well as to our hearers.

It doesn't have to be this way, though. The apostle James writes:

The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. (James 3 v 17-18)

It is possible to learn to speak with wisdom from heaven that will impact our everyday conversations on Earth—so that we speak wise words, in a wise way, that will reap a harvest of righteousness in the people around us. This is what we are going to focus on in this chapter. But if that feels a little out of reach, don't worry—James helps us understand why.

LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE

Earlier in his letter, James paints a powerful portrait of the tongue. He compares it to a raging fire that consumes and corrupts; a reckless killer running wild and unrestrained. It may be small, but no other part of the body has such power.

The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell ... It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (James 3 v 5-6, 8)

I wonder how often you think about the power of your tongue in this way. I rarely do! But every day, you and I enter homes, colleges, workplaces, shops, hospitals, banks and churches carrying a weapon poised for mass destruction. And we rarely stop to think about the chaos we could inflict with it. An irritable tone can send a child running to their bedroom in tears. A harsh comment can hurt or embitter a loved one for years to come. “Harmless” banter can humiliate or deflate a brother or sister in Christ. A piece of gossip can shred a reputation or fracture a friendship.

You can probably think of ways in which you have been hurt by someone else’s words, even if it was only fleetingly. Perhaps you’ve felt undermined by a work colleague’s response to ideas you’ve shared in a meeting. Maybe discouraging remarks made by a teacher still linger in your memory. Perhaps you replay the constant criticism you received from a parent—or contrast it with the approval they showed to a favoured sibling. Maybe you feel you’re always the target of your friends’ jokes.

I have a friend who struggled for a decade with an eating disorder which she traces back to a grandparent’s constant criticism of her figure during her teens. I recently read about a doctor whose reputation was ruined by an unhappy patient who spread false rumours about his unprofessional conduct. And we all know of family relationships that have been torn apart by unkind words spoken in anger.

We do not need to look far to find evidence of the tongue’s destructive power. That’s why if we want to learn to speak wisely, there’s an unexpected first step: before we

think about what to say, we need to consider whether to say anything at all. Wise speech is slow and thoughtful.

We must take note of James' warning to be "quick to listen, slow to speak" (James 1 v 19).

During the Second World War, the US Office of War Information coined the phrase, "Loose lips might sink ships". (It's easy to remember but hard to say quickly!) The phrase was part of a campaign to limit the possibility of people unintentionally giving useful information to enemy spies. Various other slogans emerged around the world, all under the campaign's basic message: "Careless talk costs lives". We'd do well to apply that kind of message to our own use of words.

THE WISDOM OF GOD

So what's the solution? Is it actually possible to do good and not harm with our words, or are we fighting a losing battle with our tongues? Maybe silence really is golden, and the best thing is to say nothing at all!

Except I'm sure you can think of people who do always seem to know the right thing to say. Their speech is full of wisdom, insight and peace—just as James describes. My friend Jamie is like that. She is calm and measured in her speech. She doesn't interrupt, and she doesn't trivialise serious problems with quick solutions. I'm always struck by her gentleness and grace. What's her secret?

Firstly, she listens. She doesn't offer advice until she's really understood the problem. She doesn't pass a judgment on the situation until she's sure of the facts. This takes time! In our hit-send-think-later culture it doesn't come naturally for us to stop speaking and

assess a situation with a clear head—and then to pray for wisdom before we respond. But taking time to listen well increases the likelihood of answering well.

Secondly, Jamie speaks with wisdom because she is learning from Jesus, the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1 v 24). Perhaps you sometimes think, *If only Jesus lived on earth today. Then he could just tell me what the right words or actions are.* But Jesus speaks to us by his Spirit every time we open his word. He doesn't answer every question about every dilemma we face. But as we read his word, he helps us grow in wisdom so we can respond in the way he would want.

Perhaps this is most obvious when speaking wisely isn't so much about what we say as how we say it. A few years ago, I spent some weeks memorising and meditating on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Not long after, I found myself in a frustrating situation with someone who was being particularly unkind in the way they spoke to me. My natural impulse was to bite back with a harsh rebuke, but before I could, words that had become familiar came to mind:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. (Ephesians 4 v 2)

The Spirit brought to mind the truth I needed to help me respond wisely, and the tension was quickly diffused. Time spent in God's word was renewing my mind and transforming my heart—and that impacted my speech.

This shouldn't surprise us. Israel's wisest king, Solomon, writes in Proverbs 9 v 10:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

So if we want to grow in wisdom—both in the tone and in the content of what we say—we need to know God more through his word. We need to immerse ourselves in the word and submit to the Spirit’s transforming work in us as we humbly obey it.

WISE HEARTS, WISE SPEECH

The reason we need to focus on knowing and being transformed by God is that speaking wisely isn’t simply about managing our tongues moment-by-moment, nor just about giving prudent and insightful advice. It goes deeper than that—to our hearts. After his vivid description of the tongue, James lays down a challenge: if you think you’re wise, show it by your life (James 3 v 13). It’s not such an abrupt change of topic as we may think. In the previous verses, James has shown that our words simply reflect what’s in our hearts. Just as the fruit that falls from a tree shows what type of tree it is, so the words that fall from our lips show what kind of heart we have (v 12). He is echoing Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 12:

For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. (Matthew 12 v 34-35)

Rash, foolish and damaging speech is the fruit of a heart that is proud, full of bitter envy and selfish ambition (James 3 v 14). But the wisdom that God gives results

in pure hearts and fruitful speech. Wise speech can't be separated from wise hearts. Rather, it's through our speech that it becomes clear whether or not our hearts are wise.

We sometimes think that wisdom just means good advice—a wise person is someone with enough life experience to advise the right course of action. But look again at James 3 v 17-18:

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

This is the kind of speech that will be native to us as we grow in wisdom. It's the opposite of an out-of-control tongue, and it's much better than just giving sensible advice! My words can be pure. My speech can be peaceable, considerate, humble, merciful, fair and sincere. It can reflect the good fruit Jesus is growing in me as I abide in him. And it can result not just in someone making a prudent decision but in something much greater: a harvest of righteousness. Isn't that a hopeful picture?

Speaking in this way will mean, firstly, that our speech will honour God. We will want to talk about him more than we talk about ourselves. We will want to draw attention to the things that are beautiful, good and true. We will be quick to offer words of thanks and appreciation, forgiveness and reconciliation. We will use our words to speak on behalf of those who suffer injustice.