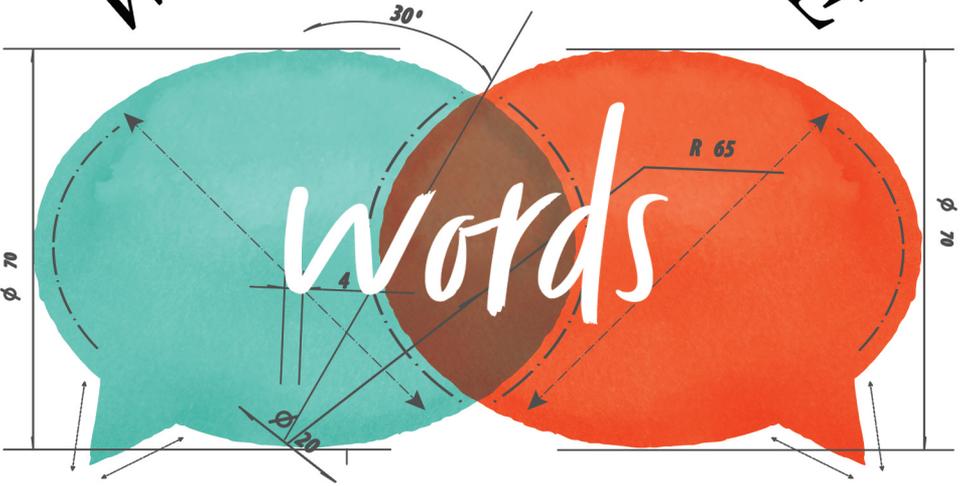


WITH THESE



FIVE COMMUNICATION TOOLS
FOR MARRIAGE AND LIFE

Rob Flood

“Of any marriage counseling topic, communication is easily in the top three. This is why Rob’s book is both timely and timeless. I was struck immediately by his honesty and vulnerability, starting in the introduction and continuing throughout the book. Rob helps couples navigate the difficult path of communication with warmth, compassion, and biblical honesty. I’ll be commending this resource to couples for years to come.”

Jonathan Holmes, Executive Director, Fieldstone Counseling; author of *Counsel for Couples*

“*With These Words* serves as a marriage toolbox, providing the tools people need to strengthen a healthy marriage and rekindle hope and inject fresh faith for couples in conflict. This is the marriage book pastors have been looking for to use with their couples’ ministry or married small group. *With These Words* is scripturally rich, theologically grounded, and filled with practical application to make this book a must read for every married couple.”

Marty Machowski, Family pastor; author of *The Ology*, *Parenting First Aid*, *Long Story Short*, and other resources

“Communication is challenging. Some, however, limit their understanding of communication—their view is too small. *With These Words* reminds us that communication is a much deeper issue than we realize. Since our words are an outflow of the heart, every aspect of our heart impacts our communication. That is why prayer is so important. It is why timing is so important. It is why your closeness with Jesus is so important. You will find help for both your heart and for your tongue in this book.”

Rob Green, Pastor of Counseling and Seminary Ministries at Faith Church, Lafayette, IN; author of *Tying the Knot* and coauthor of *Tying their Shoes*

“Whether your marriage is happy or hurting, every couple needs help communicating. Rob Flood is a skilled counselor with years of pastoral experience in strengthening marriages. The unique value of this book is its focus on practical application, and the insistence that God’s truth must function in everyday marital

communication. I can't wait to get *With These Words* into the hands of married couples in our church and beyond."

Jared Mellinger, Author of *Think Again* and *A Bright Tomorrow*

"My recommendation begins with the author. I know Rob Flood. He pastors with me in our church. He has helped me be a better husband and father and communicator. I often pass by his office and see married couples sitting with him—couples who can't resolve their problems because they don't even know how to talk about them. I'm glad they're in his office. Rob helps people change. I've seen it with my own eyes. This book is your opportunity to see it in your own life."

Andy Farmer, Pastor; author of *Real Peace* and *Trapped*; council member, the Biblical Counseling Coalition

"Sadly, the kinds of words that often come naturally to us as we navigate our relationship with the most important, most precious person in our lives can be careless, hurtful, and alienating. In this book, Rob Flood applies biblical insight to unhealthy patterns of communication, offering genuine hope to couples who long for a marriage in which words are used to affirm, connect, and bless."

Nancy Guthrie, Author; Bible teacher

"Your words bring life or death to your most important relationships. Healthy communication in marriage is like blood to the body—it is the life giver to every marriage. Rob's authenticity and biblical approach to communication in marriage and life will be a fresh, life-giving transfusion for all your relationships."

Dennis Rainey, Cofounder, FamilyLife

"In a Twitter world, most of us have become way too casual about the words we speak every day. Words have so much power! They can build up a marriage or tear it down. This book will be a turning point for a lot of marriages. It gives us the help we need to know how to use our words wisely and carefully."

Bob Lepine, Cohost, *FamilyLife Today*

With These Words

With These Words

Five Communication Tools
for Marriage and Life

Rob Flood



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DEDICATION

*To Gina,
support ever behind me,
grace ever ahead of me,
and love ever beside me.*

*Wherever I go,
if I'm next to you,
I'm home.*

With grateful love.

Acknowledgements

BOOKS ARE FUNNY things. A person's name appears on the front (in this case, it's mine). Yet, the book is a product of community that occurs over a lifetime. As those in my church read this book, they likely see my fingerprints all over it. As I read this book, I see the fingerprints of men and women who have built into my life for decades. Their voices ring in my mind. Their sacrifices of time, talent, and treasure echo in my heart. They are the ones I acknowledge here.

First and foremost, I am grateful to God for providing me a wife like Gina. Her intelligence, humility, boldness, studiousness, curiosity, insightfulness, and silliness have made the journey of marital discipleship a joy and a privilege. She has borne the impact of my communication mistakes, my selfishness, and my immaturity as we've grown and matured together. If I could do it all over again, I'd still pick you, Gina. I'd just do it more quickly.

After Gina, my children have heard more of my words than anyone else. They, too, have needed to forebear as I've learned the similarities and differences between marital and parental communication. Nate, Sam, Hannah, James, Lizzy, and Jenny, thank you for supporting the process of this book,

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Nearly twenty men and women sat with my manuscript at its earliest stage—before edits, rewrites, and submission to the publisher. These reviewers included younger and older, men and women, pastors and laity. They sacrificed time and invested wisdom that can be traced throughout the book.

Thank you for your willingness to be the first readers that read this book and the first voices that spoke into it.

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May God in his grace grant these folks a double portion of the grace they've extended to me, for his glory and the good of his church.

Introduction

Our Story

To understand our story,* we have to go back to the beginning. It was in most respects a typical Italian-American engagement. (I know “Flood” doesn’t sound very Italian. My father was Irish, my mother was Italian, but our family culture was Italian indeed.) Our families were deeply involved. In fact, the night I proposed, I planned a surprise party with both sides of the family awaiting the arrival of the newly engaged couple. (That party would have been very awkward had her answer been “no”!) The one, ill-advised characteristic of our engagement was its length; we were engaged for twenty months... twenty long months.

But even at that, it was a sweet time of anticipation. As we approached the wedding date, some tensions began to brew, but it was easy to write them off as pre-wedding jitters combined with the stress of planning a once-in-a-lifetime celebration with 175 of our closest family and friends. We didn’t often

* Except for myself and my wife, all couples mentioned in this book are fictional and there is no intention to reflect anyone specific, either in name or situation.

talk about the tensions; we just overlooked them (or so we thought) and moved on blissfully to our wedding day.

Even in light of the story that follows, the wedding day is still a treasured memory of God's kindness and grace to us. We went from our happiest *day* on earth to the "happiest *place* on earth" as we honeymooned in Disney World. If you are able to do it in the "all-inclusive honeymoon-type" way we did it, I highly recommend it.

From the start, the treatment we received in Disney should have made it easy to have a delightful and peace-filled honeymoon. However, intimacy seemed relationally awkward. We had no trouble enjoying the venue and especially the food, but we were not connecting well with each other in intimacy. These were not the normal "we just need more practice" challenges. Trust seemed shaky. Walls were up. Something was genuinely amiss.

Then it happened...*day five*. It was technically day six of the marriage, but it was day five at the "happiest place on earth." In our hotel room, that beautiful, posh, Yacht Club room, we had the biggest fight of our marriage. I don't mean the biggest fight of our six-day-old marriage. I mean the biggest fight of our now two-decade-plus marriage. Things were said that you just don't come back from. We threw word grenades without consideration for any of the lasting damage that would come from the shrapnel of our bad intentions. We were Christians, but you never would have detected that had you been a fly on those beautiful, posh, Yacht Club walls.

Somewhere during that conflict, we both realized what a massive mistake we had made. Not the kind of humble recognition that acknowledges our words were mistakes. No, we both became convinced that our marriage was a mistake. Gina left the room and I had no idea where she went. Did I go after her? Did I worry and pray for her? No, I went to sleep. That's

right. In the middle of that cataclysmic Thursday afternoon, I went to sleep.

After a couple of hours, it was time to go eat another unbelievable meal, so we put on our nicest clothes and sat across a table from one another. Our wait staff, knowing we were on our honeymoon (because people at Disney know *everything*), greeted us like the happy couple we were supposed to be. We managed to get through the remainder of the trip and make it back to our home. I wish I could end the story there and tell you that's as bad as it got. There is more.

The next nine months devolved past arguing into an icy, silent war. We didn't talk much, but everything we did say was an offense to the other. I would ask, "What's for dinner?" She would hear, "I can't believe you haven't prepared dinner again tonight!" She would say, "What time are you coming home?" I would hear, "You better get here and help me because you're never here."

We could not express anything without mistrusting and misconstruing what the other was saying. We did not build each other up. We tore each other down and caused devastating, emotional pain that settled into deep, relational scars. Quite honestly, we had inflicted so much pain on each other that we could not see any hope for ever communicating well. Our despair was overwhelming. We were both convinced that we were condemned to a loveless marriage since we had obviously married the wrong person.

Neither of us had any history of conflict like this. In fact, individually, we were both quite good at dealing with difficult situations and difficult people. We each were skilled at expressing both thoughts and feelings in words—just not with one another.

During this season of our marriage, we were meaningfully involved with our local church and in caring for others. Our

church family would innocently ask, “How are the happy newlyweds?” Neither of us could admit how poorly we were doing and how much we regretted where our lives were so we’d smile and say, “Great!” That’s the answer they were looking for so no one pressed further. (For the record, I no longer give newlyweds the benefit of the doubt. I just assume they feel in over their heads, and I’m generally right.)

After five months of marriage counseling (where we were assigned many tasks but never asked to open a Bible), I finally had enough. In a moment of spiteful exasperation, I relented on a major point of conflict. Notice I did not say “I repented.” There was nothing of God or grace perceptible in what I did—just exasperation, spite, and self. (When I think of the evil words that spewed forth out of my mouth, I am still brought to tears two decades later.) But my motivation didn’t matter to Gina—she didn’t like me anyway. I relented, and that was enough. It wasn’t reconciliation by any means. But it was then that God moved.

Inexplicably, following that wicked exchange of selfishness, God had mercy on us. The small crack created by my sinful relenting was the opening God used to pour his grace into our war-torn marriage. We spent the next several months discovering the mercy and grace of God through pastoral help, marital conversations, prayer and confession, and the FamilyLife Weekend to Remember. It was like discovering a military hospital in a war zone: so much self-inflicted destruction, so much devastation, so many gaping wounds to stitch up. We learned it is harder to face reality and take responsibility than it is to assign it. But God’s grace is greater than our sin.

In the process of this self-revelation and God-discovery, we both asked for and received forgiveness from each other and set our eyes on building a different future. We applied

the truths of the gospel. We never wanted to go back to that dark and destructive place, so we learned how to communicate: how to hear and not just assume, how to speak and not just accuse, how to love by listening, and how to be on the same team—even in disagreement. But more importantly, we learned that the Word of God has much to say for couples who want to grow in their communication.

Let me be clear: God saved our marriage; we did not. God grew our communication; the tools did not. We are very much still in process. We do not have it all figured out. That is not just some self-deprecating statement authors have to make to sound humble. We still have to return to the basics over and over again. We still have struggles with communication and find ourselves still stinging every now and then from past hurts. The difference is this: There is grace now. There is charity toward one another. There is the benefit of the doubt. There are follow-up questions before there are conclusions. There is not perfection, but there is health. This is all because of God's grace working through our devotion to the Lordship of Christ and the application of basic communication tools.

This book exists to equip as many people as possible with some helpful tools for communication. These tools can help each husband and wife grow more competent and effective in their use of the powerful gift of communication—not for their own glory, but for the glory of God.

The Road Map of the Book

We are going to explore the road that Gina and I discovered. In *Section 1: Truth for Communication*, we will find the rule book, the user's manual for communication. This section does not contain everything the Bible says about the topic, but it contains some key passages that we discovered were full of God's wisdom. We need that kind of biblical foundation before we

proceed to *Section 2: Tools for Communication*. This is the practical application of the user's manual. Some application comes directly from the Scriptures and some comes from personal experience. Then in *Section 3: Working It Out*, we will learn how to move forward safely, successfully, and soundly in the will of God.

This book is written to be helpful. I'm hopeful each section will improve your communication. Yet, for our communication to change, we must change. We must be willing to see our weaknesses, to see what is beyond our reach, and to embrace true power to change. That power comes to us from God through his Son. Without his power at work in our lives, these tools will be like a power drill that remains unplugged. Without his power, we will walk around our marital communication as we might a living room with the lights off. We'll stumble and fall without much success.

Jesus tells us that we are incapable of doing anything of value, of bearing any real fruit, apart from him (John 15). Allow the tools and tips and helps found in the pages that follow to reveal your need for God's power, for a surrendered life, for a life lived for his purposes and his glory. Then, with your weaknesses freshly revealed, turn to the one who makes his power perfect in them (2 Corinthians 12). When your life is connected to his, when you are living under his direction, you will see much fruit indeed.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to make one qualifying statement here. The principles and truths contained in this book are useful for most couples. However, they are not intended to be a substitute for pastoral care, for the fellowship of the saints, nor for civil authorities when that is appropriate. While the principles in this book are good and helpful, if you are in an abusive situation, you ought not to stay in that situation attempting to work on communication. Instead,

notify the authorities, a pastor, or a good friend as the situation demands. By God's grace, there will come a time, after your safety is secured and God's grace moves on your spouse that this book will be useful in your marriage, but your safety must come first.

Now, as we get started, let me ask you to pray. Pray that God would reveal your weaknesses and sins in communication rather than you focusing on the faults of your spouse. Pray that God would bring more than clarity, but also conviction, insight, and hope. Also, consider sharing with a friend or pastor that you are reading a book on honoring God with your words, and ask them to pray for your marriage and check in with you on how it's going.

In fact, let me be the first to pray with you now.

Heavenly Father, this brother or sister reading this book has a context in which they're reading. Perhaps their marriage is struggling and they're looking for hope. Perhaps their marriage is thriving and they're being proactive. I do not know their situation, but you know it fully. You know our thoughts, and before a word is on our tongues you know it. Father, draw near to them at this time, fulfilling your promises: to be a present help in their time of trouble (Psalm 46:1), to be near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18), and to shine a light on the hope and future you have for them and their marriage (Jeremiah 29:11). Spirit, fill them with understanding and provide help as you walk alongside them in their reading. Apply what is best, and help them to discard the rest. We pray in Jesus's holy and precious name, Amen.

Section 1:

Truth for Communication

WHETHER YOU HAVE a wonderful marriage or are experiencing troubles, we all can agree that healthy communication is a fundamental part of a strong relationship between a husband and wife. So we start this journey where all journeys must start: knowing where we're going. We start with knowledge.

To be a Christian is to believe the Bible is inspired by God and given to us for life and godliness (2 Timothy 3). It is to believe that the Bible has authority in our lives (Matthew 4:4), that we are changed by *it* and not the other way around (Hebrews 4:12–13). This is why I invite you to start this journey by understanding what the Bible says about words, their purpose, and effect.

The words that pass our lips don't start on our tongues. No, their origin goes a bit deeper into the body—into the heart (Matthew 12:34). Our words all start in our soul. Our mouths are morally neutral; all they do is *express* the morality or immorality, the faith or unbelief, the love of others or self, that is contained in our hearts.

Words contain the immense power to carry such messages as the gospel of Jesus Christ and the hope of eternity to come. When we are careless with our words, we cheapen the

currency of communication and weaken the bonds that hold relationships together. So let's begin the journey of learning about words and discover together what God intends for his children as they use them.

Discussion/Reflection Questions

Preparing for Section One

1. What was communication like in your childhood home? In what ways do you see those patterns of communication in your life today?
2. If you could rate your marital communication on a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate it? Why?
3. What one or two main things do you believe need to occur for the communication in your marriage to improve?

Chapter 1

Use Only as Directed

When God spoke, everything listened. Everything responded to God because he spoke – everything except humans.¹

- Gary Edward Schnittjer

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.

- Ephesians 4:29

Yeah, Let's Talk...Oh Wait, Not about That

Tom and Marcy Butler are relatively new members at First Community Church after coming from another local church in the area. Each of them has experienced a pretty rough divorce and spent a number of years raising their children alone. After working through the initial shock and tragedy of the ending to their first marriages, they separately sought to grow as individuals and as disciples. When they met, they committed to starting their relationship as friends. They certainly were not going to rush things.

Once they became a couple, they sought help from their pastors and attended conferences to equip themselves for the potential of marriage. As they applied themselves, they seemed to excel at communication. More mature couples even began

asking for their help in their own marital challenges. Tom and Marcy feel like they've been through the fire and desire to be a blessing to others at First Community.

Their home is marked with carefulness and tenderness. Arguments are rare, as they seem to be able to walk through the most challenging topics with love and grace. By all counts, they are a healthy married couple honoring God as they honor one another.

However, there is a glitch not known to those around them. Their sexual intimacy is a challenging element in their marriage. Neither Marcy nor Tom is happy about it, but they don't know how to talk about it. Marcy's first husband had an affair so Marcy is understandably sensitive to this topic. Tom's first marriage ended after years of volatile conflicts with his first wife.

When they tried in the past, it didn't go well. The subject seems to short-circuit their carefulness in speech. Marcy gets emotional and uses words that are harsh and defensive. Tom withdraws, ultimately using quiet, but angry words to make it clear that he's not the problem. In the one area where their communication is in greatest need of carefulness, they can't seem to achieve it.

The mixture of Marcy's sensitivity to the topic and Tom's desire to avoid arguments at all cost has caused their sex life to go unaddressed. They don't want the conflict that ensues, so they avoid it. The problems are still there because they can't seem to use the right words in the right way at the most crucial time.

The Problem Illustrated

The way the Butlers communicate reminds me of Christmas, 2004. A family friend gave our sons a tool kit complete with a small hammer, a tape measure, and two precision screwdrivers.

You know, the tiny screwdrivers used for glasses. My five-year-old went right to work, hammering nails through boards straight into our deck.

Inspired by his older brother, my three-year-old attempted the same. His nail, however, was strangely larger than the one his older brother was using. Upon further examination, it became clear that he pulled the flat-head precision screwdriver from his kit and used it as a nail. The logic is impeccable: the head is larger and it was easier to hold. Forever damaged, the purpose of the screwdriver's brief existence was to become memorialized in this illustration. Even though his intentions were wonderful, he grossly misused the tool and significantly damaged it.

The Communication Connection

Among the other challenges the Butlers may be facing, they share something in common with my son. In the most sensitive times, they are using words differently from their intended design. They are harsh and uncaring when talking about their intimacy. They use their words to defend or attack. Their solution to this problem is to avoid words altogether when it comes to intimacy, which fixes one problem while creating others. And just like the screwdriver, significant damage can be done to their marriage either way, even if it's unintentional.

In light of how important words are, let's investigate together how to use words in our marriages. Let's educate ourselves and fill our minds with truth that can transform our hearts, our communication, and our marriages.

Husbands and wives don't need to settle for the challenges facing the Butlers. We don't have to settle for any of our weaknesses and sins in communication. With the power of God and the help of the Spirit under the guidance and authority of the Scriptures, couples claiming to follow Christ can do better

than this. As a means of communication, words are designed to leave an aroma of Christ, to dispense grace, to express love, and to give life. When we fail to direct the purpose of our words this way, we are not living as disciples. You may get what you want in the moment if you're sarcastic or mean or hurtful, but in the long run, those careless words will do more than damage your marriage. One day you will be called to give an account for every one of them (Matthew 12:36).

The Ultimate Purpose of Communication

At the end of the day, after we peel back all of the complicated layers, the ultimate purpose of all communication is to glorify God and reflect his image with our words. I know that might seem too lofty to be helpful. However, let's break it down, and we'll see just how useful it is.

As Christians, all we say and do is supposed to have the purpose of bringing glory to God. Consider the following familiar passages from Paul's letters:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.
And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.
(Ephesians 5:1-2)

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:17)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1)

When God redeems us, he makes a wholesale claim on our lives (Isaiah 43:1). Gloriously, we are free from the penalty of our sin and ransomed from death to life (1 Peter 1:18–19). That salvation is the beginning of a relationship with Jesus where he is in charge. We were once slaves to sin; we are now slaves to righteousness (Romans 6:18). We've been liberated *from* a master who only had destruction planned for us. We've been delivered *to* a master who only has good planned for us. We no longer have a devious dictator, but a benevolent Lord (Romans 6:22). These redemptive truths mean that each element of our lives is to be lived for Christ, including our words.

In capturing the impact our redemption is to have in our lives, the apostle Peter says this:

Whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:11)

God's claim on us is all-encompassing. In all things, God is supposed to be glorified in the lives of those who call upon his name for salvation. This is the result of the indwelling of the Spirit in our lives. He moves and directs our hearts, which overflow with his purposes and not ours. This is the only way that fallen and finite creatures like us could speak as those who are speaking the utterances of God.

When we see this truth, moved by the Spirit, our hearts want to walk in the goodness of it. Knowing that Christ laid everything down for us, we in turn want to lay everything down in order to walk with him and keep in step with his Spirit

(Galatians 5:25). To do this, there are four key principles that function as user instructions for our communication. These, more than any personal objectives, need to shape our words. The first flows right out of 1 Peter 4:11.

Principle 1: We should speak so people encounter God.

As ambassadors for Christ, we represent him and his purposes everywhere we go. Our words are not our own, and when we speak it ought not represent *our* will, but *his* will. When your husband fails to show gratitude for your hard work, you remain an ambassador for Christ. The words you speak in response to that injustice will reflect either your will or God's will. When your wife says something you find to be careless and hurtful, you are still an ambassador for Christ, and your words are still supposed to sound like God himself might say them.

When we speak, people should encounter God, not us. If they are blessed by what you say, it is because God provides the blessing. If they are offended by what you say, it ought to be because they are offended at what God had to say and not offended because of you.

The Scriptures are full of examples of men and women receiving injustice, who had a legitimate case for responding harshly. Yet many of them manifested the reality and wisdom of 1 Peter 4:11.

Paul Attacked in Ephesus (Acts 19): An amazing work of the Spirit was happening through Paul. It turned Ephesus on its head and left many residents and merchants unhappy with him. Were they incensed at Paul's personality or tone or were they offended by the truth that he spoke? Paul was speaking as one who speaks oracles of God, and those truths offended them. They didn't primarily encounter Paul; they encountered God.

Nathan before David (2 Samuel 12): Following David's plot to cover his adultery with Bathsheba by murdering Uriah, Nathan the prophet was led by God to address David. Who was truly confronting David in the king's chamber? Was it Nathan the prophet or the Lord? David accepted Nathan's words as God's words, and he repented. David didn't primarily encounter Nathan; he encountered God.

Christ and the Pharisees (John 8): From the moment of his birth through the moment of his ascension, factions formed around their common hatred of Jesus. But why? Was he brash and arrogant? Did he lack compassion or wisdom? No, he was gentle and quiet in spirit, kind and compassionate. Jesus's words were God's words. And those who were opposed to God were incensed, but not because of anything Jesus did. In fact, at his trial they found no fault with him, no laws that he had broken. When they encountered Jesus, they encountered God...and they did not like it.

You may never face rioting mobs, or sinful kings, or homicidal Pharisees. You will, however, face friends, pastors, a spouse, or your children. The Lord will direct you to speak to them. The question is whose desires will you speak?

The pattern that plagued my marriage in those first couple of years was a pattern of speech that was nothing like the oracles of God. I wanted peace and comfort and a big fence built around my preferences. God wanted me to lay down my life for my wife and wash her in the water of the Word (Ephesians 5:25–26). Instead, I unleashed a firehose of my own words, robbing her of the nurturing care God calls me to express as a husband (Ephesians 5:29).

As you read, perhaps you are remembering some recent marital conversations. Perhaps your attention has been on how your spouse was not speaking the very oracles of God. Hopefully, you're also aware of how you struggle in the same area.

Remember, in the Christian life, conviction is a welcomed friend. Because God is always for us, we can be sure that conviction of sin is intended for our good (1 John 1:9). Don't push it away; invite it closer. We are called to speak in this way by the God who loves us. As his children, he empowers us to use words as he has directed since the beginning.

Principle 2: We should build up with our words and not tear down.

Principles two, three, and four capture the direction God provides in just one amazing verse: Ephesians 4:29. Paul's entire paragraph (verses 25–32) is rich with instruction that, if followed, will inevitably lead to marital blessing. The verse placed in the center of that paragraph is worthy of closer study. "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" (Ephesians 4:29).

In the first phrase of that verse, you may wonder what Paul means when he says "corrupting." The Bible often does what Paul does here. A thought starts with stating the negative, then expounds upon it by stating the opposite, positive truth. We learn just what he means by "corrupting" when we see the kind of speech he wants us to use: not "corrupting" talk, but only "building up" talk. If we are commanded to use words that build up, then corrupting talk must be the opposite and include any words that tear down. Now we're getting someplace.

Words were designed to give life. We see this from the first moment of creation, when God spoke, and the universe came to be (Genesis 1). We are made in the image of Christ and, therefore, are designed to give life with our words. And yet, either our fallen ignorance or our willful rebellion causes us to use words to "tear down."

Have you ever said words you knew were awful the moment they left your mouth? Have you ever wanted to take back something you said the moment after it was said? What is actually happening in that experience? You hear words that land like nuclear bombs on someone you love and care for, and you know they will have radioactive impact for days, weeks, or months to come. Or maybe it is the accumulation of small, bitter words that wear away at a marriage like a moth eating fabric. You know you can never “unsay” them. They will remain in the annals of communication history forever. You and your spouse may recover, but it won’t be because of those words; it will be in spite of those words.

We can recover from words that tear down. But how much better would it be to avoid the damage in the first place? What would a marriage be like if each spouse purposed to use words that are good for building up? Even if just one spouse committed to speech that builds up, an entire marriage and an entire trajectory of the legacy of a home could be altered.

Principle 3: We should speak in a way that fits the occasion.

Ephesians 4:29 continues with four small but potent words: “as fits the occasion.” Every moment has a need. Some moments have a need for silence and others have a need for many words. As speakers, we are responsible to identify the need of the moment.

You don’t want a doctor to administer medication or perform a procedure without first assessing your condition. Until this happens, any action on his or her part is likely to do more harm than good. Rather, you’d expect any good doctor to take his or her time, be careful, and know that the prescribed medicine will fit the occasion of how you’re feeling.

In the same way, we must be careful to assess a situation before unloading our words. If we fail to do so, even our

good intentions can't prevent our careless words from doing damage. But if we are careful to understand the occasion properly, God can use our words for good.

Though every moment has a particular need, there are pockets of time that routinely call for discernment. One of those times is the last few moments before parting ways for the day. They leave a lingering flavor on the lips and, if encountered poorly, a lasting sourness to the belly. Usually the need of that moment is to protect and promote grace. We are wise to guard those times.

Then there are the first few moments when you come back together at the end of the day. Each of you has lived at least eight hours apart. During that time a lot of life has happened. In a very real sense, your spouse has changed since you last saw him or her and you don't actually have any idea what the need of that moment is. So those first few moments of reuniting are for learning and connecting. They must be approached carefully if your words are going to build up.

The last pocket of time I want to address is any time intimacy is being discussed. This is true whether we are talking about words used during sexual intimacy or in the moments leading up to and coming out of sexual intimacy. Even if you're at your dining room table talking about it, your words must be carefully chosen. Because of the unique vulnerability of sexual intimacy, your conversations about it delve more deeply into the heart and have a much longer shelf life.

Our calling before God is to speak in such a way as fits that occasion. But what if we don't know the need of the moment? What if we can't tell what would be fitting to that occasion? This is where we typically underuse an important communication tool: silence. James instructed us to be "quick to hear, slow to speak" (James 1:19). Is it possible the

delay in speech is designed for us to ponder what words will be most helpful?

If words are this significant, then they should be carefully chosen, particularly in sensitive moments. As followers of Jesus and as spouses called to build a godly marriage, our words must fit the occasion.

Principle 4: We should give grace to others through our words.

If our words are going to build up, they will do more than encourage; they will help others grow more like Jesus. Ephesians 4:29 concludes with the following stipulation for our speech: “that it may give grace to those who hear.”

Grace comes in many flavors and colors. Sometimes grace is sweet and complimentary. You go to a dance recital for your niece and she asks if you liked it. Your response focuses upon your joy in seeing her enjoy herself rather than your critique of the choreography or song selection, or the fact that you don’t care much for dance at all. By focusing on the truth of your joy in seeing her perform, you’ve extended grace in a sweet and complimentary way.

At other times, grace is challenging. Perhaps you have to bring a hard word to a friend who is on the verge of making an awful decision. You know your words will sting as they go in (Proverbs 27:6), but you truly believe they will result in grace when applied. This flavor of grace is not sweet on the front end but, when spoken for the benefit of the hearer, can result in sweet fruit on the other side.

We should never assume that the flavor of grace the Lord led us to use last time is the same flavor of grace we’re supposed to use this time. But there is one theme that should mark all flavors of grace: looking out for the welfare of others (Philippians 2:4).

Again, Jesus models this for us perfectly. Sometimes his words are sweet and encouraging. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Sometimes his words go in like swallowing a giant square pill. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). And most potently, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matthew 16:23). But in all cases, his words reveal that he is looking out for the welfare of others.

We should do the same. We should speak in a way that gives grace. This reveals a common Achilles heel in many marriages: selfishness. You see, too often, our words are used in self-serving ways when the plain command from Scripture is to use our words for serving others. The following verse from Galatians clarifies this: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20).

We are to live the calling of laying down our lives for others. This is why the New Testament is filled with an assortment of “one another” passages: serve one another (Galatians 5:13), exhort one another (Hebrews 3:13), encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11), etc. Philippians 2 calls us to consider others as more important than ourselves (see verse 3). Is there any more important “other” than the one with whom you’ve been made one flesh?

For example, there is no room in Christianity, let alone in marriage, for venting. Venting is for the benefit of the speaker. It spews without concern for how the words land or what impact the words have. This flies directly in the face of Ephesians 4:29. But what are we to do with all of these intense feelings and all of these offenses? We are to cast our cares upon

Christ (1 Peter 5:7). This is the pattern Christ himself laid out for us. Though he was sinned against daily during his earthly ministry, he went to his heavenly Father to be sustained while going to others to be an encouragement.

We should do likewise. When we speak, it ought to be for the benefit of the hearer, that we would give grace.

Power for Growth and Change

Just one chapter before Ephesians 4:29, the apostle Paul prays for those who read his words. His prayer reveals the required component to overcome our weaknesses in speech and in all other areas as well. Contained in that prayer, he says, “according to the riches of [God’s] glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being” (Ephesians 3:16).

Notice he doesn’t pray that God would strengthen you according to how hard you try. He doesn’t pray it would be according to the words your spouse deserves. This is how we act apart from Christ. But when we live our lives walking with Jesus, seeking to allow his word and his power to influence each moment of our lives, God strengthens us with power through the Holy Spirit “according to the riches of his glory.” He gives wisdom and discernment to us that we do not possess when we are doing things on our own. He gives us words we would not naturally speak and causes those words to have greater effect than any we would conjure up.

God grants us his power because he delights when words are used according to his design. He does this because he loves you, and he loves your spouse. The result of this power from God is that “Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” and that we would be “rooted and grounded in love” (Ephesians 3:17). The change we experience and the growth our spouse experiences in us come from the power of Christ at

work in our lives. Hope remains since the power for change is based on Christ and not on us.

Hope for the Butlers

This takes us back to the Butlers. When we look at the communication Tom and Marcy share in light of the four principles we just learned, it isn't hard to see the root of some of their problem. When they talk about intimacy, it seems God is far from their perspective, so naturally their words are far from God's design for them. They are not purposefully walking with Jesus in their speech, and they are experiencing the consequences of that.

What might happen in their marriage if Tom spoke so that Marcy encountered God in his speech? What would happen if Marcy built Tom up with her words instead of tearing him down? What would happen if they both spoke in a way fitting to the very sensitive occasion and committed to give grace with each word that passed through their lips?

The wonderful gift of speech comes with instructions and, in bold caps across the top, it reads "USE ONLY AS DIRECTED." Our willingness to adhere to those directions will reveal either wisdom or foolishness in our speech. Chapter 2 will help you evaluate how you're doing in this area.

Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. When you read 1 Peter 4:11, what areas of your communication do you feel need the most attention?
2. Which of the four principles seems to highlight your greatest area of need? What would need to occur for growth in that principle?

3. Think of a recent conflict in your marriage. How might that situation have been helped if principles 2, 3, and 4 had been applied? The more specific you are, the more helpful it will be.
4. Three specific pockets of time were mentioned: just before parting, just after coming back together, and around intimacy. If you could address just one, which would it be and what would be your first step?
5. It is important to track your own hope for change as you read and process this book. What three or four words would you use to describe your level of hope at this point?