

Our Speech in an Electronic Age

James writes, “But if any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body” (3:2). In this chapter James also describes the small rudder that can turn a big ship, or the little metal bit that steers a horse. In this, he reminds us to consider our speech. Explaining the Eighth Commandment, Martin Luther writes that we should, “apologize [for our neighbor], think and speak well of him and put the best construction on all he does.” God’s Word is timely and is our guide. It is our source of strength, encouragement, and instruction. As James reminded, we, too, need to consider and temper our speech in today’s electronic age and in the many ways we communicate.

Advancements in technology have changed our abilities and possibilities to communicate. Not many years ago, phone calls were less common and less affordable. For those separated by distance, writing a letter was typical. Now we have instantaneous communication with nearly anyone, and distance is no longer a barrier. Communication tools are numerous: phones, text messaging, video messaging, e-mail, and so on. Our speech takes on new and varied forms.

Coupled with the ease of communication is a society that demands information. News organizations constantly vie for the next breaking story to the point that we sometimes question its newsworthiness. Entertainment, sports and celebrity gossip all blur under the broad spectrum of news. This also affects our own communication. It is amazing how quickly news travels, and it is a disappointing reflection of our sin-corrupt nature that negative and hurtful news travels fastest. When we share something, it’s good to consider: “Is it my place to share this information?” and, “If I share it, am I contributing to the rumor mill?” Paul instructs: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Phil. 4:8). In the short and quick format of modern messaging, our communication can be misinterpreted. A quick response sent in humor might be received differently. If we were visiting across the table or by phone would we say the same thing? If not, it’s probably best not to write it either. There are times when written communication cannot and should not replace a conversation.

It is easy to post comments and messages without identifying oneself. Many outlets are devoted to anonymous communication. Those who write anonymously do not wish to take ownership of their comments, which are often negative and incendiary. When comments are written under the cloak of anonymity, there is no way to openly discuss issues that are raised. When honest discussion cannot happen, how can we care for offenses or correct misconceptions?

Social networking sites allow us to post information and photos about our interests and express our concern or condolences to people in our lives, and we can easily share pictures and news with family and friends who live far away. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus instructed: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). This is timely instruction for us in participating on these types of sites. Are our postings, pictures, songs, video clips, and writings fitting for a believer? We also want to respect the privacy of others on our own pages. When others have decided not to communicate this way, we should honor their decision.

Viewing of social networking sites is often limited to those people we allow—those we designate as “friends” or “followers.” This is akin to visiting in a room filled with many people: some are our closest friends and others are less familiar acquaintances. Other pages are public, where anyone who knows the name of the created site—often the name of the focus person or group—is granted access. It is good to remember that our messages and comments can be viewed by all who can access these sites. A personal, loving

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message, even one calling to God's kingdom, reaches beyond the intended recipient. The love for the undying soul expressed in such messages is understood by believers, but may seem insensitive or harsh to others. A personal card, letter, e-mail, conversation, or thoughts relayed through a close family member may be more appropriate.

In all forms of communication, we do well to recall what James writes: "Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:5,8). Jesus also reminded that offenses will come. We understand that the danger James writes about can apply to more than just spoken communication. Alone, we are weak. When our words, or other communications offend, the gospel restores unity and love.

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