Lethal Language: Experiencing the Power of Life-Giving Words  
July 14, 2013
Series: Soul Detox: Clean Living in a Contaminated World

Back in the late 1980’s when I was working on my undergrad, I ran for a student government position at the Christian liberal arts university that I was attending in Rochester, New York. The competition was stiff. So I made campaign posters out of bristol board. I gave speeches. I handed out flyers to fellow students. I even did a skit dressed up as Pee Wee Herman. Would I win the election and become Campus Ministries Coordinator? As it turns out, I did, and the responsibility I had to organize student ministries on campus actually turned out to be an important step in my journey toward becoming a pastor.

But that wasn’t the first time my name was on a ballot. Before that, in high school, I was in the running for a title. Jeff Campbell was my competition. He also happened to be a state champion wrestler. To this day, I insist that the only reason he won that election was that he threatened to put people who didn’t vote for him into a half nelson. Now every time I flip through my old high school yearbook, I see Jeff’s picture in the class clown space, where my picture should be.

I definitely have a serious side, but those who know me are well aware that can be a bit of a class clown. I do like to joke around. Indeed, I believe that a mature, healthy Christian life should be generously marked by laughter—particularly the ability to laugh at ourselves, and at life’s little ironies. It’s when we take ourselves too seriously that we get into trouble.

Humor is a prelude to faith, and laughter is the beginning of prayer.” —Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr

Language can indeed be toxic to our souls. Scripture says so specifically. The Apostle James describes the uncontrolled tongue as “a restless evil full of deadly poison” (3:8). So what is the biblical antidote for toxic words? This morning, we’ll explore that question from three different angles: First, from the angle of the words we speak to others; second, from the angle of the words others speak to us; and third, from the angle of self-talk—how you speak to yourself.

First, the biblical antidote for toxic speech from the angle of the words we speak to others is to be a bucket-filler. Our son Ryan had his 8th birthday this past week, and a couple weeks before that he completed his grade 2 year at school. In his classroom, Ryan had a paper cut-out of a bucket hanging from his desk. So did each of his classmates. Those paper buckets served as a visible reminder that each student has an invisible bucket, so to speak, on the inside. To have a full bucket is to feel great inside. To have an empty bucket is to feel pretty awful inside. Ryan learned that everyone’s invisible bucket is constantly being emptied or filled, depending on what others say to them. To say kind or helpful words is like taking an invisible dipper and filling other people’s buckets up. To say mean or hurtful words is like using that same dipper to empty other people’s buckets out. Through this simple illustration, the kids in that classroom were reminded that the words they say to have the power to either fill or empty other people’s buckets.

What was neat was that the kids actually started to use this bucket language in their interactions with each other. One time when she was helping out at the school, my wife witnessed one little boy putting Ryan down. Ryan replied to the boy, “You stop saying that! You’re really emptying my bucket!” I heard another story about how one morning, Ryan was standing at his cubby in the hallway outside his classroom. He overheard one teacher lamenting to another about how she had spilled food on herself that morning, staining her blouse. “Not a great way to start my day,” she said.

Ryan then turned to her and said with his biggest grin, “Don’t worry Mrs. Chlan; you’re still beautiful!”

“Aw, thanks Ryan,” she responded. “You really filled my bucket!”

But that wasn’t the first time

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words I once said to someone else that you now regret? How many of you can think of words you said just this past week that you regret? Now, let’s look at the other side of the coin: How many of you can think of words that someone once said to you that continue to have a negative impact on your life to this day? How many of you can think of words that someone once said to you that continue to have a positive impact on your life to this day? Words. They are powerful beyond imagination. The old playground saying goes, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Really? Not so, according to the Bible. The Bible says, “The tongue has the power of life and death” (Prov. 18:21). What we say can give life to other people, or it can take it away. So be careful what you say.

This morning, we continue in our Soul Detox series. We’ve been talking about the fact that in this fallen world, we are exposed to various toxic influences, emotions and behaviors that threaten to stunt our spiritual growth. God’s Word, however, offers the antidote to such toxins, showing us how to overcome them in Christ. Today, we want to look specifically at how we can overcome the toxin of lethal language, so that instead, we can experience the life-giving power of words.

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Ryan seems to have a knack for filling other people’s buckets, and we’re proud of him for it. God wants you, me, and all of his people, to be bucket-fillers. As the Bible says in Proverbs:

*Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad.* (12:25)

*The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life.* (10:11)

*The lips of the righteous feed many.* (10:21)

*Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.* (16:24)

*Rash language [being too quick to speak] cuts and maims, but there is healing in the words of the wise.* (12:18, MSG).

So God calls you and me to use the words we speak to fill other people’s buckets. To be a bucket-filler, it’s important to start by making sure you’re not being a bucket-emptyer. How do you avoid emptying other people’s buckets with the words you speak? To begin, do a heart-check. Jesus says, “A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart” (Luke 6:45, NLT). Last week Pastor Jeremy talked about the biblical command to keep our thoughts fixed on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable—anything excellent or praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8). Because what you dwell on in your mind determines the condition of your heart. If you’re dwelling on judgmental, angry, complaining or anxious thoughts, then your heart will become judgmental, angry, complaining, or anxious, and what you say will flow from what is in your heart. The Bible says we are to have the same mind as was in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5)—meaning our thoughts are to be filled with his truth, grace, and love. It may not be easy at first—especially if you’re used to focusing on the negative—but it’s your brain, and you do have a say in choosing what you fix your mind on. So do a heart check. If needs be, shift the focus of your thinking, and your words will follow.

Another piece of good biblical counsel for making sure you’re not an emptier of people’s buckets is to zip your lip. Let’s go to Proverbs again:

*Too much talk leads to sin. Be sensible and keep your mouth shut.* (10:19, NLT)

*Watch your words and hold your tongue; you’ll save yourself a lot of grief.* (21:23)

*A truly wise person uses few words; a person with understanding is even-tempered. Even fools are thought wise when they keep silent; with their mouths shut, they seem intelligent.* (17:27-28)

*A gossip goes around telling secrets, but those who are trustworthy can keep a confidence.* (11:13) [They know how to zip their lip.]

Throughout the history of the Christian church, a classical spiritual discipline has been the practice of silence. This involves setting aside a specific period of time—an hour, a half-day, a day—to intentionally refrain from speaking. Of course, if you’re going to try this when other people are around, you’ll want to let them know what you’re doing at time; otherwise, they’ll think you’re giving them the silent treatment— and that will empty their buckets. But the spiritual practice of silence has a proven track record for helping people learn control of the tongue. The spiritual practice of silence trains you to draw on God’s wisdom and power not only to refrain from bucket-emptying speech, but also to engage in bucket-filling speech.

Often, our problem is that we tend to speak the words that should not be spoken, and fail to speak the words that should be spoken. Too often, we withhold life-giving words—bucket-filling words—that we need to release for others to hear. This is why in the book *Soul Detox*, pastor and author Craig Groeschel says, “Every time you think something positive, give it life with your words… Each time you think something good, speak it. Never rob someone of the blessings of an unspoken treasure.” *Don’t leave any good unsaid.*

This especially applies to family life. The home is the place where the words we speak—or fail to speak—do more good or more harm than pretty much anywhere else. You all know this because you’ve experienced it; probably both the good and the bad of it.

Husbands and wives: You should be the primary bucket-filler for your spouse. How are you doing with that? I ask myself that question. It’s usually the simple, everyday statements that make the most difference:

*Thanks for the meal, honey. It was delicious.*

*You look really nice today, dear. Smokin’ hot, in fact.*

*I loved how you interacted with the kids today. You’re a great dad.*

*I want you to know that I’ve noticed all the hard work you’ve been doing around the house. Thank you.*

*I’ve always appreciated how you’re really good at _______.*
Of course, the following classics never go out of style:

I’m sorry.

Please forgive me. I was wrong.

I love you.

Parents: Are you filling your children’s buckets every day with words of loving affirmation? It’s your job, you know. Who else is going to make sure your child’s bucket is filled each day if not you? I’m so fortunate to have had parents who always spoke words of unconditional love and acceptance to me. To this day, my dad never misses an opportunity to tell me how proud he is of me. And I have to say, I never get tired of hearing it, because it fills my bucket. I bet your kids will never get tired of hearing the words of loving affirmation that you speak to them, either. Build them up with the words you speak; never tear down. Even when being a good parent requires you to discipline or rebuke your children, do it in a way that lets them know you love them unconditionally. Do it in a way that fills their bucket.

I remember when Nicole was a toddler. She had misbehaved, and I needed to discipline her. While she didn’t like her punishment, I remember looking into her eyes, and explaining to her, “Nicole, know that Mommy and Daddy always love you, even if you’ve been naughty. We’ll never stop loving you, no matter what.” I’ll always remember the look on her face when I said that. It was as if she was drinking those words deep into her very being.

Sadly, any number of you in this room know the pain of having had a parent or parents whose words have done far more to empty your bucket than to fill it. We’re going to consider the words that other people speak to us in a moment. But the question that’s before all of you parents now is this: Will you commit to being your child’s number-one bucket-filler with the words that you speak? With God’s help, you can do it.

Our forever family, of course, is the church—the family of God. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, and we are responsible to speak words of life and encouragement to each other. The Apostle Paul is addressing the people of the church in Ephesians when he says, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is useful for building others up according to their needs” (4:29). Do the words you speak to your brothers and sisters in this body build them up and fill their buckets? One of the best bucket-fillers in this church family is Joyce Page. I don’t think there’s ever a time when I speak to Joyce that she doesn’t have a word of encouragement for me. So Joyce, let me fill your bucket right now, and thank you for the way you keep my bucket full, as well as the buckets of many in this church, with your words of loving affirmation.

Friends, my challenge to you is not to leave this place today without saying at least one thing to fill the bucket of someone else in this church. And don’t stop at that. Don’t leave any good unspoken. When someone in this church family says or does something that you appreciate, tell them so, either in person, or by email; you can even drop a card in the mail. Let’s encourage one another in the Lord!

Sometimes in the family of God, the most loving and bucket-filling thing you can do is to have that difficult conversation with someone, speaking the hard truth in love (Eph. 4:15). It may not seem bucket-filling at first, but Proverbs 28:23 reminds us that, “In the end, people appreciate honest criticism far more than flattery.” Again, it’s about speaking the truth, in love.

In the words of Don Clifton in his book How Full is Your Bucket, it comes down to this: “We face a choice every moment of every day: We can fill one another's buckets, or we can [empty] them.” Friend, will you choose this day and every day to be a bucket-filler?

We’re talking about the Bible’s antidote for toxic speech. So far, we’ve looked at it from the angle of the words we speak to others. Now let’s look at it from the angle of the words others speak to us.

Of course, we can’t control the words that others speak to us. We can, however, decide whether or not to accept and believe what we hear. As Craig Groeschel says, “Since toxic words can destroy our souls, we’ve got to passionately guard our hearts against them.” Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” We must guard against others dumping the waste of their toxic words into the water supply of our hearts.

Now it’s no secret that we live in a consumer-oriented society. There are differing estimates as to the number of advertisements the average North American is exposed to in a day. Suffice it to say, it’s a lot—in the hundreds at least. Of course, that’s more commercial messages that our minds can truly absorb. In fact, our minds learn to pay attention only to the ads that interest or appeal to us, and to very quickly dismiss everything else. And most of us have been taught the spirit if not the actual meaning of the Latin phrase caveat emptor, which means, “Let the buyer beware.” As trained consumers, most of us develop a pretty keen sense of what to accept and what to reject when it comes to the marketplace messages we are exposed to.

In a similar way, we need to develop a keen sense of when to accept or reject the words that other people speak to us. When someone says something to you or about you, train yourself to categorize the words: Do the “truth-or-trash” test. Groeschel writes, “Analyze the message and source before swallowing and digesting what someone else says... Are their words true? Based in scripture? Supported by data over time? If so, embrace them. Allow those life-giving words to minister to your soul and conform you to the image of Christ. If their words are untrue, mean-spirited, and critical without being constructive, then call them what they are—toxic waste. Reject those words. Don’t let them into your soul. Take out the trash and leave it by the curb. Delete toxic words and insert the truth.”

So often, the words that other people speak to us become the thoughts that fill our minds. And remember how earlier I reminded you of what Jeremy taught us
last week? We are to fix our thoughts on whatever is… true (see again Phil. 4:8). Or as the Apostle Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians, “… we take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ” (10:5). It’s the truth or trash test, essentially. When someone says something to you or about you, take it captive, and make it obedient to Christ. A little later, I’ll tell you about a take-home exercise sheet that will be available to help you to do just that.

But do note carefully that the words other people speak to us often become the very words that we speak back to ourselves. I’m referring to self-talk here. How do you talk to yourself about… yourself? Does it agree with what God says about you? Does it line up with the truth of His word, or does it line up with false and soul-damaging words that somebody else spoke to you in your past?

- “Can’t you do anything right?”
- “You’ll never change.”
- “Why aren’t you married yet?”
- “You’ll never amount to anything.”
- “You’re such a loser.”
- “You’re a real piece of work; you know that?”
- “I wish we never had you.”
- “You’re nothing like your brother.”
- “Why didn’t you become a doctor or lawyer?”
- “You’re a real disappointment.”

As a pastor, I’ve counselled far too many people who’ve heard toxic words like those, and have taken them deep into their souls, believing them to be true. Once somebody spoke this way to you, and somewhere along the line, you began to speak this way to yourself:

- “I can’t do anything right.”
- “I’ll never change.”
- “I’ll never amount to anything.”
- “I’m a real disappointment.”

Some of you have even believed that God feels the same way about you, even though nothing could be further from the truth. Such statements have their source in our enemy the devil, who Jesus refers to as a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).

If you find that you can really relate to what I’m talking about right now, my heart is especially burdened for you this morning. Know that Jesus wants to set you free with his truth. “And you will know the truth,” he says in John 8:32, “and the truth will set you free.”

Friend, you’ve come to believe these false things about yourself—words others have spoken, whatever they happen to be—because you have rehearsed them in your mind over and over again. They’ve become part of your self-talk. You may not have known the difference between the truth and a lie when you first heard those toxic words, but by now you’ve played those words over in your mind so many times that on a deep level they feel true, even though intellectually you may have come to know otherwise.

To begin to experience new freedom from this, you need to rehearse the truth of who you are in Christ, over and over again. Reprogram your mind with truth, and your heart will catch up. Because whatever anyone else has said about you, there is Another who has spoken about you, and His word alone carries ultimate authority. God’s word about you is true, and it’s final, so rehearse it over and over in your mind. As the Bible says, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

On the table by this exit (where the Bibles are), and on the welcome desk in the lobby, I have placed a stack of these sheets, entitled “Who Am I?” (if you’re reading the text version of this sermon, just scroll down to find it). This is a list of scripture verses about who God says you are in Christ (assuming you are indeed a Christian). If God has been speaking to you today about this, what you need to do is pick up one of these sheets, take it home, and read through at least a couple times a day—more if you need to. Read it out loud if you can. Look up the verses in your Bible. And do it day after day after day for weeks; months even. These are God’s words to you—rehearse them over and over again in your mind, and the old lies will begin to be uprooted, and God’s truth will set you freer and freer. I won’t go through the whole sheet, but it gives a bunch of verses about how in Christ, you’re accepted, secure, and significant.

Now in a moment, I’d like to wrap up this message with a time of prayer. Before I do, I’d like to share a video that really brings home what we’ve just been talking about. Check it out…


Closing Prayer

- To be bucket-fillers who are checking our hearts (because what’s in our hearts flows out of our mouths), zipping our lips when we need to, and making sure we don’t leave any good unspoken.
- Thanks for bucket-filling words, and healing for toxic words in our lives.
- Thanks for the truth of who God says we are in Christ—is there anyone here who is not yet “in Christ”—anyone who has not yet entered into a personal relationship with God through Jesus? As you heard in the video, you can’t be forgiven of sin without Jesus; and you can’t be freed from condemnation outside of him. I wonder if there’s anyone here this morning who wants to
say, “Yes, I want to become a new creation in Christ now. I want all those things I just heard in that video to be true of me.” If that’s you, I’d like to invite you to just slip your hand up for a second—no one’s looking around—and then you can take it back down: “I want to begin a relationship with Jesus—I want to invite him into my life to be my Saviour and Lord.” If you’re reading this online, here’s a link to a simple prayer you can pray to begin a relationship with Jesus:

Who am I?

I am accepted because…
John 1:12 I am God’s child.
John 15:15 I am Christ’s friend.
Romans 5:1 I have been justified.
1 Cor. 6:17 I am united with the Lord, and one spirit with Him.
1 Cor. 6:19-20 I have been bought with a price. I belong to God.
1 Cor. 12:27 I am a member of Christ’s body.
Eph. 1:1 I am a saint.
Eph 1:5 I have been adopted as God’s child.
Eph. 2:18 I have direct access to God through the Holy Spirit.
Col. 1:14 I have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sins.
Col. 2:10 I am complete in Christ.

I am secure because…
Rom. 8:1-2 I am free forever from condemnation.
Rom 8:28 I am assured that all things work together for good.
Rom 8:35-39 I cannot be separated from the love of God.
2 Cor. 1:21-22 I have been established, anointed, and sealed by God.
Col. 3:3 I am hidden with Christ in God.
Phil. 1:6 I am confident that the good work God has begun in me will be perfected.
Phil. 3:20 I am a citizen of heaven.
2 Tim. 1:7 I have not been given a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and a sound mind.
Heb. 4:16 I can find grace and mercy in time of need.
1 John 5:18 I am born of God, and the evil one cannot touch me.

I am significant because…
Matt. 5:13-14 I am the salt and light of the earth.
John 15:1, 5 I am a branch of the true vine, flowing with life.
John 15:16 I have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit.
Acts 1:8 I am a personal witness of Christ’s
1 Cor. 3:16 I am God’s temple.
2 Cor. 5:17-21 I am a minister of reconciliation for God.
2 Cor. 6:1 I am God’s co-worker (1 Cor. 3:9).
Eph. 2:6 I am seated with Christ in the heavenly realms.

Eph. 2:10 I am God’s workmanship.
Eph. 3:12 I may approach God with freedom and confidence.
Phil. 4:13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.
(From “Living Free in Christ” by Dr. Neil Anderson)