

TONGUE IN CHECK

How to speak from a heart of love

As my friend rehearsed for me what she planned to say to her husband, I could hear the communication techniques I often used reflected in her speech. She presented her view, built her case, and left no clever phrase unsaid. She raised her voice to emphasize her point, lowered it to appear agreeable, and paused dramatically when nothing else would work. Speaking as much to myself as to her, I asked, "How about you 'say it short,' smile, and let him think about it?"

Like my friend, I have for years presented my ideas with a song and dance. But lately I've been convicted that such an approach reveals a lack of trust in God and a failure to love others. As I've let the Lord reshape how I converse, He has led me to develop a less-is-more way of speaking.

by Jan Johnson

ILLUSTRATION BY GREG CLARKE

Simply Put

I often use words to get my way and shape my image. Without realizing it, I dominate conversations by interrupting, exaggerating, or choosing the most dramatic words possible. I think I'm right, and I want others to share my beliefs or accept my advice. Other times, I'm excessively concerned about my reputation. I rattle on to avoid giving the wrong impression or because I feel I need to defend myself. Perhaps you can relate. The people in Jesus' day certainly could.

In that culture, "evasive swearing" was common. Good Jews would swear by something other than God—heaven, the earth, Jerusalem, even their own heads—but have no intention of keeping their word (Mt. 5:33-36). As long as they avoided swearing by God's name, they assumed they could say whatever they wanted. They could speak with a lot of pizzazz and manipulate others' opinions of them without having a heart of integrity.

In contrast to their showy speech—and ours—Jesus' instructions sound radical: "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Mt. 5:37).

Taking Our Words to Heart

Jesus' teaching hints at our need to examine the motives behind our words. As I've searched my own heart, I've realized that I'm often concerned about what others think, and I use words to try to make a good impression. Knowing this helps me recognize when it might be best to remain silent.

A while ago, some people I was ministering with asked if I planned to attend a concert they were giving the next evening. I smiled and said no. I knew that by withholding the reason for my decision (I'd been traveling a lot and had reserved the next day for a Sabbath), I might convey that I didn't care about them. But I also knew that if I tried to explain myself, I would probably sound as if I were lecturing them about practicing a Sabbath. I would speak too emphatically in an attempt to defend myself. So I smiled again and asked them to tell me about their plans. It was better to be brief yet warm and pray that my actions would speak for themselves.

The answer to overblown speech, however, is not merely to try to talk less. Neither is it to withdraw from others to avoid over-talking. True simplicity of speech flows from a heart filled with the compassion, truth, and love of Jesus. Our words are byproducts of what is in our hearts:

Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. —Mt. 12:34-35

If we are placing our confidence in ourselves instead of in God, we will try to persuade or impress others by the force and quantity of our words. But if our hearts mirror the heart of Christ—caring for people, trusting God with our reputations, abandoning our desires to have our ways—our speech will be a tool for loving others. We'll be able to state an idea briefly and peacefully and allow our listeners the freedom to respond.

So the central task is to develop the heart of Christ. Otherwise, our mouths feel as if they can't help themselves, and our attempts to stop interrupting or not raise our voices when no one is listening to us will prove fruitless.

**SIMPLE
SPEECH
HAS ITS OWN
POWER.**





Speech Therapy

Certain practices help us shift our conversations away from ourselves and allow the Holy Spirit to retrain our hearts, minds, mouths, and gesturing hands in simple speech. They grow our confidence that God will work in our conversations—to uphold our reputations, to not let us be walked on or ignored, to convince others of the truth—without our over-the-top additions. Here are a few practices to consider.

Silence. Extended times of silence allow us to retrain our mouths and will quiet any compulsions to impress others through our words. We can notice how we respond to the silence. We can consider ways of speaking that reveal attempts to adjust others' opinions of us.

Situational silences, such as not having the last word in a conversation, are also effective, especially if we parent a teenager! If we usually express our ideas without considering others' responses, these silences can help retrain us to listen. We may be surprised at how God enriches our interactions with others when we're quiet.

Following the example of a friend, I've attempted to practice the situational silence of withholding my opinion in a conversation unless someone asks for it. (This is particularly difficult because I talk for a living.) As I was teaching several nights at a church, I discovered that the pastor's daughter was a painter. I'm an art history hobbyist, so I couldn't resist asking if she had a favorite painter. Even before she opened her lips to reply, I realized I was not listening for her answer. I was only waiting for her to return the question so I could talk about my favorite painter and tell a story about the piece of art I'd most recently fallen in love with. Recalling my intention not to offer my thoughts until asked, I disciplined myself to listen fully to her.

After she responded, she didn't request my opinion. So I asked her more questions. As she spilled out her heart, I wondered with joy at the person God had put in my life. In

my hurry to project my opinions, I nearly missed that moment of connection.

Inviting insight. I recently discussed my speech habits with my husband, and—you guessed it—he informed me the next day of a time I spoke when I could have been silent. I wanted to protest that I was innocent, but

I was, after all, learning to be quiet! As I prayed about what my husband had said, I thought of even more instances in which I could have been quiet. I found myself thanking my husband for helping me with his insights.

Confession. We can ask the Holy Spirit

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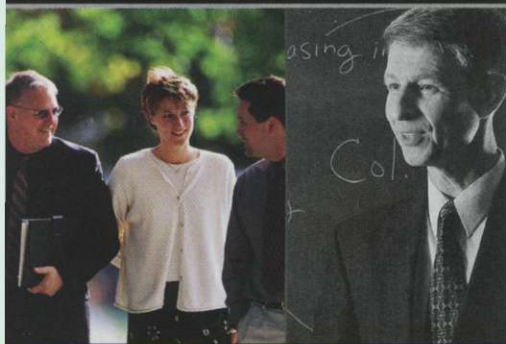


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to reveal to us those instances when we use showy speech. When He does, we can ask ourselves what's behind our words. Is it self-importance? Pushiness? Disregard for the other person? Once we've identified what lies behind our words, we can confess it and ask God to help us plan the next step. That might be putting my hand over my mouth when I want to interrupt. Or perhaps I can lean closer and look more tenderly at the person speaking to me.

Prayer. Each morning, we can think about the people we'll speak to during the day. Who are we likely to "run over" verbally because we want to convince them of something, because they routinely run over us, or because they let us run over them? We can ask God to help us love and respect these people through our words.

Prayer can also help *during* a conversation. When I want to respond harshly to others, I find it best to pray silently rather than to speak up. If I sense I should say something, I wait until I am calm. Then I speak softly because "a soft answer turns away wrath" (Prov. 15:1, NRSV)—including my own.

Attentiveness. There are many ways to develop this. We can wait for an answer when we ask others, "How are you?" Then we can use their responses to inquire further about them. Or we might answer questions with a simple yes or no. We won't seem uncommunicative if we smile to show that we're eager to be attentive.

When speaking with others, we might ask ourselves, *How can I draw these people into the conversation? How can I learn more about them?* Then we can try to state our ideas briefly and give others time to respond. Instead of thinking about what we're going to say next, we can look at the people we're talking with and truly notice what they're saying.

In a world that routinely speaks in exclamation points, we often feel that we must advertise our messages. But simple speech has its own power. Consider William Penn's description of Quaker leader George Fox: "The fewness and fullness of his words have

often struck even strangers with admiration." Fewness. Fullness. George Fox spoke little, but his carefully chosen words were clear and compelling.

As we allow the practices of simple speech to retrain our hearts and mouths, we too will become the kind of people whose talk demonstrates the Spirit's power instead of our clever eloquence (1 Cor. 2:2-5). We'll be less self-absorbed, we'll see the hearts of others more easily, and we'll hear the prompting of the Holy Spirit more clearly. This is the rich way of life that we are invited to enjoy in the kingdom of God. ☺



about the author

JAN JOHNSON is a writer and speaker. Her books include the *Spiritual Disciplines Bible Studies series* (IVP) and *Savoring God's Word* (NavPress). *Heron and egret fly high* on her list of favorite things. So does the book *Long Walk to Freedom*, which is Nelson Mandela's biography. Jan is recommending it to her reading friends because "his Christlike love for his apartheid enemies transformed a nation."

On Your Own
Words of Love

1. Scripture describes many ways we can love others through our words. In the following verses, what positive speech practices are mentioned?

1 Sam. 23:16-18 _____

Prov. 16:21,24 _____

Prov. 25:11 _____

Eccl. 10:12 _____

Is. 50:4 _____

Is. 52:7 _____

Col. 3:16 _____

Col. 4:6 _____

2. Ask God to give you a heart that's attentive to opportunities to use words lovingly.