

Building Up or Tearing Down?

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Life is full of choices. We are constantly making choices, whether we realize it or not. Some choices are made after much consideration, while others are spontaneous acts. When we think of life's choices we often think of those major, contemplated decisions such as choosing a career, a spouse, a car, a location to work, or a dwelling in which to live. Seldom would we think of including the way we talk to others as being one of these important life choices. But the *words* we use when we speak each day are choices, not chance utterances. Not only are they choices, they are powerful choices because they have the potential either to build individuals up, or to tear them down.



After finishing a round of student teacher observations, I was particularly intrigued by one particular student teacher who consistently demonstrated a strong emphasis on the quality of verbal feedback given to the students in her classroom. After one of the observation periods, I commented on her repertoire of responses and the affirming manner in which she spoke to the students. She shared that because of having to overcome several negative factors in her own life, she understood first hand the impact of appropriately chosen words and that positive words affect powerful results.

That comment started me to thinking. Since the word choices we select on a daily basis have such potential impact on the lives of others, perhaps we all should give more consideration to the selections that we make. David and Solomon both realized the importance of appropriately chosen words when they expressed “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.” Ps.19:14 (NIV). “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” Pr. 25:11 (NIV).

Pulitzer Prize winner Maya Angelou articulated the power of words when she stated:

“. . . words, once said, do not die.” “Words go into the body. So they cause us to be well and hopeful and happy and high-energy and wondrous and funny and cheerful. Or they can cause us to be depressed. They get into the body and cause us to be sullen and sour and depressed and, finally sick” (Urban, 45).

Selecting the appropriate words for a given situation is not as easy as it may seem. Several factors affect our choice of words, and sometimes what we ultimately say either may not be the most appropriate response or it does not achieve the desired effect. One of these factors is habit—we don't think before we speak and therefore a carelessly made remark finds a home and leaves a scar in the heart of the hearer. Thiruvalluvar, a great Tamil poet of the second century, writes:

“Wounds caused by fire heal; but scars caused by the tongue never heal.”

“Speaking bitter words is like choosing unripened fruit when sweet ones are on the tree.”

A second factor is that some people prefer to focus on the deficiencies in others rather than on their strengths. They mistakenly believe this approach will produce the desired results.

A third factor is that we may not have the right type of wisdom regarding our words. We never bothered to consider the impact our poorly chosen words have on others. Two kinds of wisdom are available to us, a good wisdom and a bad wisdom; an earthly wisdom and a heavenly wisdom. If our wisdom is from God, our words will be pure (James 3). The tongue, even though a small member of the body, can guide the body just as a small bit can guide movements of a large animal, or a small rudder can guide the movements of a large ship. James also recognized the influence and danger of the uncontrolled tongue and words, equating the uncontrolled tongue to a small spark that can set an entire forest ablaze.

How do we obtain this heavenly wisdom? James 1:5 promises that if anyone lacks wisdom he should ask of God, who desires to give it generously. God will give us the wisdom to become more effective communicators and to select those words that are appropriate and positive—words that build up rather than tear down. This wisdom is a free gift! We do not need to purchase the words. We do not need to go to school to find them. They are not a chance factor, they are a choice factor. It is a promise from God.

Resources:

- Urban, Hal. *Positive Words, Powerful Results*. Simon and Schuster, 2004.