

I vividly recall my seminary class where our Episcopal priest/instructor was lecturing us ‘pastors-in-training’ about pre-marital counseling. He told us that most people believe they’re ready to marry when they find one person they ‘just can’t live without.’ This priest advised us to ask engaged couples 2 ‘reality check’ questions: 1) “Are you ready to get married knowing that you will say things to your spouse that will hurt them MORE than you’ve ever hurt anyone with your words?” 2) “Do you think you’re ready to marry this person knowing they will say things to you that would hurt you MORE than anyone ever has?”

Today we’re continuing our *Power of Words* series; looking at the potency of words we use in our families -- not just with spouses, but with our children, siblings, and parents. Doubtlessly, a family member has said something so deeply wounding to some of you that you still carry the hurt in your heart. (If not, count yourself blessed!) Most of us can also recall saying something to a spouse, sibling, child, or parent that we *still* regret. (Again, if not, count yourself blessed!)

As a pastor I can tell you, this is a universal reality. People carry deep scars – sometimes decades old and unhealed – from words spoken to them by family members.

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Before going further, let’s revisit Ephesians 4:29, our memory verse for the series: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” While these words are meant to apply well beyond our families, what a great aim in our homes! To speak in a way “that *gives grace*” to our spouses, to our children, to our parents... I encourage you to continue reading this card each day. As you read it, I hope it begins to make a difference in some of your conversation patterns and word choices. (If you didn’t get one of these cards last week, we have them available from the ushers as you leave the sanctuary.)

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Our Colossians reading this morning affirms the importance of words and behaviors in our families. It’s an interesting passage in that the final verses, vv. 18-21, include a category of writing – a genre -- known as a “Household Code.” That’s interesting because a careful exploration of the gospels reveals that Jesus was not what we’d consider a “family

values” guy; certainly not in the way the term is used in our culture. Let me illustrate.

Mark 3 is just one example of Jesus rejecting the prevailing idea that ‘family’ is limited by bloodline, clan, or tribe. In Mark 3:31 we read that when Jesus is told that his mother and siblings want to speak with him, Jesus asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” He then says in Mark 3:35, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (Now, I can just hear Mary saying, “You listen here young man, because I’m going to remind you what your father and I went through to bring you into this world!)

But this raises the question, “if Jesus is non-traditional about the meaning of family, why does Paul include instructions about family relations?”

The most likely reason is that Household Codes were common in the ancient world where proper household management was regarded as a ‘matter of crucial social and political concern.’ So, as Paul and the other apostles spread the gospel into Gentile regions, they were being asked how the Gospel – this new religious way of Jesus – how does this apply in our homes?

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So everything in the reading that precedes this Household Code is what we’d expect – teachings consistent with Jesus’ ethos of building a community not limited or defined by kinship, ethnicity, bloodlines, or cult. In v. 11, Paul asserts that Christ has not simply blurred typical distinctions but supersedes them; making these distinctions non-essential! Here’s how *The Message* translation renders v. 11: “Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean *nothing*. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ.”

Now this was (and is) pretty radical stuff; the idea that in Jesus, though we differ in externals, we’re one in Christ. And the Household Code that follows is equally radical.

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I’m not going to go into a great deal of detail, but even as vv. 19 and 21 of Colossians 3 may sound mundane to us, they were revolutionary in a world where moralist and philosophers lectured women and children on how to behave, with NO related expectations for males! It is Paul’s exhortations to men which were radical in a culture where there

were no expectations of husbands or fathers. (And if you struggle, like many do, with v. 18, I'd refer you to Ephesians 5:21 where Paul tells both husbands and wives that they need to 'submit to one another' which again, is radical in a culture where the notion of a male 'submitting' his wife would have been considered a shocking idea.)

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So what words might we speak into our families, so that our words give grace to those we are closest to? First, we need to recognize that much of the power of our words comes when we talk less and listen more. It's been said that God gave us two ears and one mouth in the direct proportion to how much we should use each. James 1:13 counsels: "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." (James 1:13)

I'm struck by how counter-cultural this wise advice is in our day and age, where it seems we're so quick to pounce, to react, to tweet; to ratchet up speech as we cut down others with our words. I've got to think that the healing of our culture can happen if, in our families, in our homes, we begin to listen more graciously *to* each other and talk less damagingly *about* each other.

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Second, we need practice forgiving as we've been forgiven. It's in our reading today, Colossians 3:13: "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you *must* also forgive." Notice the word 'must.' Forgiveness isn't optional in a Christ-centered household, nor for Christ-centered people. So hear the question, "How much have you been forgiven in Christ?" Totally, right? So how much do you need to forgive others?

Here are three, three-word phrases, which we need to use regularly if we are going to practice forgiveness and reconciliation. 1.) "I feel hurt". Too often we assume that a person who has hurt us knows and intended to hurt us, but isn't taking responsibility. And then we start building up resentment. But based on my own experience, I think it's safe to assume that at least 50 percent of the time, the other person doesn't know that they've said or done that caused our hurt. And so they need us to say, "I felt hurt when you said [or when you did] [or when you didn't do..."]

2.) Then we need to practice another three word phrase: "I am sorry." Parents, your kids need to

hear you say "I am sorry" or to hear you apologize to your spouse if you are going to teach them how to have good relationships!

3.) Finally, just as we must be willing to express remorse, we must practice saying these three words: "I forgive you." Paul says forgiveness isn't optional for those who've received the forgiveness of Christ. It's expected!

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One final thought. I also want to encourage you to utter words of thanksgiving and praise to replace the malicious and critical words we too often use. Over the course of my ministry I learned the phrase: "Hurt people, hurt people." And so when people say hurtful things to or about me – and it happens a lot to pastors -- I try to keep in mind how hurt these folks must have been by their own parents, or pastors, or others. But I think a corollary is also true: "Praised people, praise people." We know that people (especially our children and spouses) wilt when they are criticized and that they blossom when they are praised. I am not saying to offer phony praise, but I am saying that the more we look for things to praise and affirm, the more we find to praise and affirm. (In two weeks, I'm going to talk about how our praise of God can help us acquire a better vocabulary of praise for our daily lives!)

Friends, our words have so much power. And Christ calls us to use words that bless, that build up, that forgive, encourage, and affirm. When we do this in our families, it will spill out and will give grace to all who hear. Amen