

Equipped to guard what we say

Is it a challenge for you to know when to keep your mouth shut? It certainly is for me! In fact, there's a history to this...

When I was in my very first year of school, I was told to stand outside the classroom door as a punishment for talking when I should have been quiet. I was puzzled by this and said to my teacher, "But I talk all the time at home!" I hadn't yet learned an important biblical truth - "*There is a time for everything... a time to be silent and a time to speak*".¹ I also wasn't aware of this verse: "*If you keep your mouth shut, you will stay out of trouble*".²

Exercising speech control is not always easy. Sometimes the best thing truly is to say nothing at all. This can be so difficult because we can be uncomfortable with silence and feel we need to say something - anything - in order to feel at ease. This is when we need to remind ourselves of the truth of that verse from Proverbs: "*If you keep your mouth shut, you will stay out of trouble*." It's very easy to say something in the heat of the moment and then to regret it at a later date. It's like squeezing toothpaste out of a tube - once it's out, it's out, and cannot be put back into the tube again. Unfortunately, a few ill-chosen words can have the same effect. No matter how hard we try, we can't unsay them.

But keeping quiet isn't the only way, and not always the most appropriate way, to guard what we say. This gets right to the point: "*Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them*".³ I wonder how much thought we give to the effect our words can have on other people. Although we might not always be aware of it, there are probably people in our sphere of influence who desperately need words of encouragement. Will we be the ones to meet that need?

Unfortunately, our speech isn't always positive and one of the most dangerous forms of speech is gossip. I don't think we take this issue half as seriously as we ought. To begin with, gossip isn't always true. Perhaps there's a kernel of truth in it somewhere, but it's often coated with exaggeration and a few bits of imaginary information thrown in for good measure. The more a story is repeated, the more embellishments get added to it. We might think we have a news item on good authority, but do we ever bother to check out the facts?

Gossip can also blacken someone's character. We hear a snippet about someone and, before we know it, we're saying negative things about that person that we wouldn't dare repeat to their face. Let's guard our speech against gossip.

Another negative way of speaking is to grumble and complain. Perhaps we start off by thinking we have a legitimate gripe against someone or something and, before we know it, we're off on a slippery slope of negativity. Know what I'm talking about? Here's plain talking: "*In everything you do, stay away from complaining and arguing... so that no one can speak a word of blame against you*" (NLT).⁴

Guarding what we say requires us to be *intentional* about our choice of words, tone of voice, how much we say, and where, or to whom, we say it. I reckon the psalmist must have been aware of the danger of speaking without adequate thought and consideration as he asked God to set a guard over his mouth.⁵ I find it helpful to pray this verse any time I'm about to enter a particularly sensitive situation or when I know I'll be engaged in a lot of speaking.

Words are extremely powerful and can have a significantly positive or negative effect on those who hear them. Let's get into the habit of consciously guarding what we say and use our words to build others up and not bring them down. Are you up for the challenge?

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7 (NIV)

² Proverbs 21:23 (NLT)

³ Ephesians 4:29 (NLT)

⁴ Philippians 2:14, 15 (NLT)

⁵ Psalm 141:3