

## Equipped to say the right thing

How good are you at controlling your tongue? You know what it's like - you blurt out something that you promised to keep confidential; you snap at your best friend because you're feeling out of sorts; you start to gossip about a work colleague; or your sarcastic tone wounds a family member. All these have one thing in common - they are irreversible. Once you've said these things, they cannot be unsaid. It reminds me of a can of squirty cream - once you've pressed the button on the top of the can and squirted out the cream, there's no way you can get it back in the can. It's out, and it's out for keeps. Words are powerful tools. They have the capacity to heal or to break<sup>1</sup>, to hurt or to build up<sup>2</sup>. If only we could always say the right thing! But sometimes it takes more than just saying the right thing. How we say things, why we say them, and when we say them can make all the difference in the world.

**We can say the right thing in the wrong way.** Perhaps you've spoken the truth to someone (right thing), but you've done it without love (wrong way). For some of us, it seems to be more important to get the right message across than to pay attention to how we do it, but the Bible points out the necessity of speaking the truth lovingly.<sup>3</sup> This applies in various situations: for example, when we share our faith with an unbelieving friend; confront a work colleague who blames us for her mistakes; or speak with a family member whose behaviour is out of line.

**We can say the right thing for the wrong reasons.** Ever done this? Although there is no problem with the actual words we are using, there might be times when the motives behind our words are less than honourable. A few years ago, a visitor to our house told me the truth about someone with the intention of showing up this person in a bad light. It wasn't necessary or helpful for her to pass on this information to me which was really gossip. We would do well to remember that "*a gossip separates close friends*".<sup>4</sup> Our motives are not always trustworthy and, as this verse says, can sometimes result in far-reaching consequences.

**We can say the right thing at the wrong time.** I recently heard about a woman who wrecked the family car by driving with no oil in the engine. Her husband was in hospital at the time and she knew, at some point, she had to tell him what had happened. Letting him know she had damaged the engine was the right thing to say, but telling him while he was lying ill in hospital would not have been the best timing. There is "... *a time to be silent and a time to speak*..."<sup>5</sup> Do you find it difficult to get the balance between knowing when to keep quiet and when to speak up?

How, then, do we say the right thing, in the right way, for the right reasons, and at the right time? Here are some suggestions.

- Admit your "speech problem" to God and ask for His help on an ongoing basis.
- Pray "*Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord*..."<sup>6</sup> before making an important phone call or at the start of a potentially difficult discussion.
- Take on board "*The godly think before speaking*..."<sup>7</sup>
- Limit how much you say - "*Don't talk too much, for it fosters sin. Be sensible and turn off the flow!*"<sup>8</sup>
- Use a Bible concordance to search for "speech" or "words" and apply the wisdom contained in these verses.
- Enlist the help of a trusted friend, becoming accountable to him/her for your use of words.

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 15:4

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:29

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 4:15

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 16:28

<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:7 (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 141:3

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 15:28 (NLT)

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 10:19 (NLT)