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What Did I Say?

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misinterpreted,
I am likely to
ask myself...



“What did I say?”

By Dr. Robert A. Cook



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ALL OF US PROBABLY HAVE HAD THE EXPERIENCE of saying something, perhaps quite casually, that was perceived differently than we intended.

The result might have been funny ... or cutting ... or even tragic.

We are likely to ask ourselves at that point, "Now why did I say that?"

A family I know has a private joke that is bandied about when they are alone and one of them has offered a comment capable of double meaning. Someone in the group will say, "Time to 'keep them wherever they are.'" The reminder is always good for a laugh.

This is how those words came into being.

The occasion was a family vacation in a secluded mountain area. The father was not too much interested in spiritual matters at that time, but he invited a neighbor child to go with them as company for his daughter because the girls enjoyed playing together.

Knowing that it was the practice in the home of the little girl for someone to ask a blessing at mealtime, at their first meal together the father requested the guest to lead in prayer. The child responded without hesitation. She thanked God for the food and asked His blessing on it. She expressed gratitude for the beauties of the campsite. Then, perhaps because of temporary homesickness, she added, "And bless all our loved ones and keep them wherever they are." The father laughed roarily. "That's the idea, Katie," he boomed. "Keep everybody else away, so we can enjoy this great place by ourselves."

He had overlooked the implied comma, and thus had altered the real meaning completely. He put emphasis on aloofness, rather than blessing for everyone.

Of course, no harm was done by this incident, though it did point up the importance of careful speech. Throughout the Word of God we are warned to be watchful of what we say and of the meaning the words elicit.

Suppose I have said something, and I now question its value. I put the question to myself, "Why in the world did I say that?"

There are, of course, several possible answers to the question. They depend upon such variables as circumstances, the individual's comprehension, the speaker's intent.

But there are certain governing principles that pertain to all spoken language. One of these determining factors is this:

I Say What My Heart Dictates

*Out of the abundance of the HEART the mouth speaketh.”
(Matt. 12:34)*

If I am to use non-grievous, wholesome, healing, right-answer words, I must have a HEART - a motivating attitude - that generates that kind of expression.

Take a personal illustration. You know it is my practice to pray about everything that touches my life in the course of the day. That includes, of course, prayer about every radio broadcast in which I participate. I ask God’s guidance for the words to be spoken, the voice vehicle for the message, the over-riding control of the Spirit of God, the needs and responses of individual listeners.

If I am tempted in prayer to dwell chiefly on my own affairs, financial problems and all the rest, immediately the faithful Holy Spirit whispers to my innermost being, “Hey, Bob Cook, what about your HEART, your attitude? What about your short-comings, the errant selfishness and pride of the human race that is in you, just as it is in every other person alive? What about your desire for the glory of God, wholly apart from your human achievement? These things need prayer, too! They relate to your HEART.”

At that point my knees must bend low once more, figuratively, at the foot of the cross of Calvary. Again I must ask God to take charge of the whole of my inner being, to preside over what the Bible calls my “heart.”

Beloved, if we want to say “the right thing” today, under any and all kinds of circumstances, we must spend time with our blessed Lord for the sole purpose of bringing our heart into tune with His.

We all know that attitudes-evidences of one’s heart condition-find their expression in words. Solomon gave us this wise insight:

*“The preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, is from the Lord”
(Prov. 16:1).*

Note what is implied here: I cannot, of myself, change any attitude of mine. I must have divine "preparations" if I am to live and to speak in a God-glorifying manner.

In this connection there are at least four areas to consider: My attitude toward God, toward His Word, toward situations, and toward people.

What about my attitude toward God Himself? Is my worship of Him genuine? Do I trust Him completely with the everyday affairs of my life?

And the Word of God: Do I believe it to be absolutely true and authoritative as it bears upon my personal obedience to it?

My Attitude Toward Situations

To a large extent (not wholly, of course) each of us controls the situations we encounter. For example, suppose you meet John Doe. You know pretty well what he is likely to talk about. You say to yourself, "He has the wrong idea. It will never work. It will lead to a fiasco."

What happens? Your time together will more than likely be exactly as you envisioned it. Why is this true? It is because your subconscious (or unconscious) mind is programmed to believe what you tell it. If you expect the worst, you will get it - you will not be disappointed! How much better to go forward saying, "God is with me. I am His child. I know He will help me now, for He has said He will never leave me nor forsake me."

In that frame of mind you have confidence, not in your own fallible wisdom, and not in your short-fused endurance, but in the power, willingness and perfect provision of your blessed Lord who has never lost a battle.

My Attitude Toward People

There is a strange means of communication called body language. It requires no words to be spoken. Let us say you come into a room filled with people, most of whom are not in harmony with your views. They treat you courteously. They say nothing but the most innocuous generalities. Can you feel their hostility? Oh, yes, you can!

Or perhaps you meet someone in the street for whom you have resentment. He may not even be aware of your attitude. You do not say a word to him about your feelings. You have a pleasant smile on your face. But your criticism is going to be felt by the other party.

How are you and I going to face up to the problems of situations and of people, to the glory of God? The answer is in a verse we quoted earlier: "The preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue [come] from the Lord." Notice that the first noun is plural, "preparations." God has to make us ready, in many ways, to do His will.

You say, "Brother Cook, I can't help how I feel (especially about people)." You know something? You're absolutely right. But if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells within you, and HE - the Spirit of God - can make a difference in how you feel.

How do I know this?

The answer is in Galatians 5:22,23. The fruit of the Spirit is love, not hatred. It is joy, not gloom. It is peace, not turbulence. It is longsuffering, not a blow up.

No amount of urging, no great number of sermons, not even any determination on your part will make you feel much different.

But oh, if you will just let go of those corroding feelings, if you will surrender them to the control of the blessed Spirit of God who dwells within you because you are a believer, you will find that both strength and calmness will bathe your whole personality.

Let us assume that you have been with the Lord in a quiet time of communion with Him. He has spoken to your heart. He has forgiven your sins and your shortcomings and given you a sense of His love and care for you.

But you have a specific problem that you are facing. What do you do about that? I recall that on one occasion when I held a managerial position in a Christian organization, I was about to dismiss a man who was not getting his job done. He was a dear, dedicated person, but completely inept at the work assigned to him. So I decided to fire him.

Instead, on the day I had planned to take that action, I found myself in a prayer meeting that, strangely, involved this brother and several other people, praying about a matter totally unrelated to what I had in mind.

Well, obviously, under circumstances like that you don't break in and say, "Just a minute, here. I'm firing you."

So I knelt and prayed with the others. I must confess, in my heart I was thinking of my

personal situation: "Lord, You know what I'm facing. Please guide me. Please tell me what to do." Before we ever got off our knees, I had a glimmer of an idea that, if put into action, would turn the whole situation around. Relationships were established, involving that particular brother, that made him happy, and brought harmony and blessing to the work as a whole.

My dear friend, would you take hold of this truth today? Your problem may have no easy human answer, or no answer at all so far as you can see. It may have to do with family, or friends, or job procurement or maintenance, or a classroom situation, or something related to your professional duties.

GOD has the answer.

When He has dealt with your own heart, you can confidently wait on Him and without question, in His own time and way, He will give you the answer you need.

THEN the words that you speak will be right words. They will be wholesome, loving, non wounding, wise. They will be God's own answer to the problem.

I Must Pay Attention to the Spill-over

"The heart of the righteous studieth how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things" (Prov. 15:28).

The spill-over of one's life is generally a pretty good index of that person's relationship with God. For example, you fill a glass with pure, clean water and carry it into another room. Suddenly someone brushes against you and the water spills.

I ask you: What spills out? Why, pure water, of course.

If, however, you have just changed the oil in your car and you have in your hand a flat, round container - actually a drainage pan that some thoughtful garage man has made for you to enable you to change your oil yourself - the situation is quite different.

Now if someone jostles you as you are on your way to getting rid of that drainage oil, what will happen? That black oil will spill over and hit the floor. Why? Because it was inside, that's why!

“Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” is just another way of saying that whatever is inside is going to overflow when you are pressured, or harassed, or maltreated or ignored.

When you are thus jostled, you can be irritated and spill over some hurtful or even evil things. Or, if you are full of the presence and blessing of God, the spill-over will be, amazingly, God Himself!

Years ago I witnessed what was, to me, a remarkable display of instinctive Christian love and courtesy. I was in Tokyo, the guest of General and Mrs. Harrison. With business concluded, the General was eager to show me some of the sights of the city.

We started toward an elevator that was already well filled with passengers. Suddenly a young enlisted man burst in, pushed his way past the General who was near the door, and past me, all the time shouting, “I’ve got to get in here!”

When the intruder saw that he actually had attempted to push a general out of the way, his face turned ashen and he was speechless.

Instantly that great good man looked at the soldier and smiled. “It’s O.K., son,” he said, “God bless you.”

In that little drama in an elevator in Tokyo I saw a man - albeit a highly placed general in the United States Army-responding to a potentially explosive situation with profound courtesy, grace and Christian love. The spillover was magnificent!

We have seen that our speech is largely the product of our innermost being, without premeditation or contriving. At the same time there is a sense in which study enters in.

I Must Study What to Say

[Solomon said] *“Have not I written ... that I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth, that thou mightest answer the words of truth to those who send unto thee”* (Prov. 22:20, 21).

Two points are made in these verses. The first is “the certainty of the words of truth” (the Bible). And the second is the effectiveness of those “words of truth” when used in dealing with other people.

How sure are you that God’s Word is absolutely true? As you read your Bible,

never be satisfied until God has spoken a blessed message from it to your own heart. Then, I promise you, what you say to other people will be not only acceptable but also helpful and God-glorifying (though it may not be received in that light).

If I know for certain that God's Word is true, that His promises are valid, that the verities taught in the Scriptures are applicable to my own life and will work for me if I apply them, then when I'm faced with hard questions in everyday life I can take those same truths and pass them on to others with the confidence that there, too, they will find fulfillment.

Would you give some thought to developing good answers to life's questions? True, not every puzzling situation that you may encounter is referred to in the Word of God, complete with an accompanying solution. But answers are there, and it is your business and mine to arm ourselves with them.

By the way, please don't go around giving advice. No one is more pestiferous than the chronic advice-giver. Even if your wise responses are couched in Scripture, don't pose as a paragon of wisdom. The human mind automatically turns off gratuitous advice.

There are many situations in everyday life, however, where you may be requested to give an opinion. When that happens, do you have a good answer, a Scriptural reply?

For example, here is a wife with three children and another on the way. The husband has a good job. He brings home enough money to care for the family's needs. Occasionally, he displays terrible fits of temper-toward his wife, toward his children. He is not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ; his wife is. She comes to you and asks, "What should I do? Should I leave him?"

Do you have a Scriptural answer to give her?

You may have to dig a little bit, but you can find that the Word of God clearly gives an approach to that very set of circumstances.

A friend tells you confidentially, "I'm really in love with So-and-so. Yes, he's married, but he's not happy. He says he and I belong together and I think so too. What should I do?" Do you have a good answer for that question?

There IS one in the Word of God.

Another person complains to you, "I was passed over when merit ratings were considered

last time. I've been a good employee in that firm for twenty years. The boss's favoritism hurt me. I didn't get a promotion, not even a raise. Why didn't I? What should I do now?"

Does the Bible talk about promotions? Oh, yes, it does.

I've given you a few examples of questions that may arise in the course of everyday living. Admittedly, they are tough ones, and capable of endless variations. But the Word of God does have answers.

What the writer in the Book of Proverbs is saying (we quoted him earlier) is that you had better arm yourself with those answers to life's hard questions that Scriptures clearly provide, so that by means of them you will be able to respond authoritatively to anyone who turns to you for counsel.

The answer will be GOD'S answer, not yours. You don't need, and never will have, the wisdom of Solomon. But if you are a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, you have the Holy Spirit within you. It is His business to bring to your remembrance the Word of God that is applicable to your present situation.

Have you ever thought that you, just as you are—with all your limitations and deficiencies - can be full of the Spirit of God and that He can and will operate through you for the good of others? Oh, yes, you will say "the right thing" when it is not your word but His, made available to another person through your commitment to Him.

God has put springs of living water in your life to make you a resource person. Be the kind of individual to whom others will turn because they know you will search the Bible for answers they need. They know they will be encouraged and guided along the lines of the will of God. They know that by spending time with you, they will become more confident persons. Be that kind of Christian today, will you, dear friend?

Yes, you can trust God for "the right answer."

It's found in His Word and it's implemented in your life, through your mind and your mouth, by the Holy Spirit who dwells within you.

I Must Confront Unbelievers with Calmness

How will you know what to say when powerful anti-God factions press in upon you? The classic illustration is in the Book of Daniel. You know the story.

In his pride and love of power, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the erection of a huge image to which everyone in his kingdom was to bow down in worship. The penalty for disobedience was death by burning in the fiery furnace.

Though the threat was repeated and the furnace heated seven times its usual limit, three brave Hebrew men staunchly defied the edict.

They said:

"We are not careful [worried] to answer thee in this matter Our God whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and HE WILL deliver us out of thine hand, O king. BUT IF NOT, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up" (Dan. 3:16-18).

Here was an unworried answer to a powerful unbeliever's threat. You will face situations, probably, that are just as frightening as this one albeit without kings and edicts and furnaces.

What will you do?

Begin with GOD: "our God is able."

Add your own commitment to Him: "whom we SERVE."

Settle in your mind whether God really is able to handle this situation.

Be ready to accept, as God's will, even a contrary outcome:

"if not, we [still] will not serve thy gods."

Always, Beloved, your answer to unbelief and unbelievers is GOD: His mighty working, His faithfulness, His perfect plan. It also involves your commitment to Him: complete and unwavering. When these conditions obtain, you will have "the right words," bathed in calmness, fraught with power.

I Must Find Gracious Words

"Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how to answer every man" (Col. 4:6).

"Grace" found its highest expression at Calvary. There God's favor, unmerited by us, was displayed in the death of His beloved Son. In this matter of speaking "the right word," under any circumstance, how shall we put "grace" into our daily speech? We do it by remembering Calvary,

by being saturated with the Word of God, by using common sense and by being ready to share our faith with others.

Be Thoughtful

When I realize how much God has had to forgive in me, I am apt to be slow in criticizing others.

This process actually has taken place many times in my own experience. Let us say I enter a time of prayer with a measure of resentment or blame in my heart, or even fear of what somebody might do to me. As I pray-honestly, barring nothing - confessing my own sins at the foot of the Cross, I become a great deal more tolerant of other people and much less afraid of what they might do to me.

Why is this true? It is because God's grace has power not only to save ("By GRACE are ye saved, through faith - Eph. 2:8, 9) but also to transform human tendencies.

When our Lord ministered to His own people in the synagogue, it is said that: *"All bore him witness and wondered at the GRACIOUS words that proceeded out of his mouth"* (Lk. 4:22).

Later, when the Holy Spirit was bestowed upon the infant church, it is said that:

"With great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great GRACE was upon them all" (Acts 4:33).

The grace of God in the life will show up in daily speech. How do you bring about this transformation? You do it by bowing at the Cross-not just once, but day after day after day. The physical posture that you assume in praying is relatively unimportant. The posture of your soul is vital.

Another rule: If you and I would employ gracious words, we must be full of THE Word, the Bible. The Word of God is called "the word of his GRACE." If you want your speech to reflect the grace of God, put more Scripture into the computer of your mind and memory. I can't tell you how this works; I can only assure you that it does work.

Be Full Of The Word

I am thinking of an industrialist I have known over a long period of years, a man who made his millions and was highly respected in the business community.

When I first met him he was undoubtedly a dedicated Christian, who knew and loved the Lord and tried to serve Him well. But he was also one of the most brusque, sharp-tongued individuals I have ever known. In a few words, he could cut an individual down to size.

There he was: immensely successful in business, impeccable in reputation, committed in his Christian position of trust in the Lord Jesus-and with all that having such abrasiveness and terseness as to make listeners wince even when he said "good morning"!

About twenty years went by. We lost track of each other. Then it became my privilege again to meet this man, this time in a situation involving Christian fellowship. He greeted me warmly, and we engaged in some small talk, each of us catching up on news about the other. As he spoke with me I noticed a mellowness, a gentleness, a reservoir of empathy and patience I hadn't seen before.

Calling him by name I said, "You're different.

What has changed you?" .

He laughed heartily. "Oh, you noticed?" "I surely did!" I told him.

"Well," he replied, 'I've been memorizing Scripture.

I've learned verses and sections and whole books of the New Testament. I'm now memorizing the Book of Isaiah. I know most of the Psalms by heart."

He told me the plan he followed.

"In the mornings," he said, "I go over the portion I'm memorizing, on my way to work. I review it on my way home. When I have a spare moment or two in the course of the day, I continue the reviewing. That's what has made the difference you see in me. Praise God!"

I saw this change take place over a period of two decades. Unlike his former style, the words that now came out of this man's mouth were words of grace, a direct result of hiding God's Word in his memory and his heart.

There is an additional practical suggestion given to enable us to find gracious words to use. The verse quoted earlier contained the phrase, "seasoned with salt." What does that mean?

Be Sharp

I take “salt,” as used here, to mean just plain good sense. Our speech is to proceed from a heart that has been to Calvary and has partaken there of God’s wonderful grace. At the same time those Calvary-motivated words are to be “seasoned”, suitable, appealing, honest.

Salt enhances flavor. It also possesses highly valuable powers of preservation. But too much salt in a dish can be a catastrophe.

In my growing-up years money was extremely scarce. Somewhere my father found a bargain in marble-size potatoes, of which he bought a bushel, and in over-salted summer sausage that could not be sold in stores. The potatoes had to be cooked before they could be peeled, they were that small. And the sausage had to be soaked to remove at least some of the salt before it could be converted into the tiresome creamed product that was our main source of protein that year. My sister, who was keeping house for the three of us, remembers the agony of those years more than I do-salt, too much salt.

Oh, yes, we need seasoning, but it is not everything. We want flavor and taste appeal and suitability, but all in proper proportion. The proper combination of grace and good sense is unbeatable.

We have been looking for a formula which would lead to the production of gracious words for you and me to use. We have seen that we will be helped along this line by being thoughtful, remembering what God has done for us; by being full of the Word of God, and by being sharp in the sense of practical alertness. There is another thought to be added to the ones we have considered.

BE READY TO SHARE

“Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15).

Why “be ready”? The Bible assumes that dynamic, vital Christianity will produce a reaction on the part of people who observe it. This is normal, New-Testament Christianity we are talking about. The cause of this inevitable reaction is that Christianity in its essence is a continuing miracle. It is not a point of view. It is not an allegiance, as one would hold toward a political party. The Bible says the secret of the Christian life is a Person: CHRIST IN YOU.

Paul gives us a concise definition of the gospel:

“Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. He was buried and rose again according to the scriptures. He was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve ... and above five hundred brethren at once. And last of all, he was seen OF ME ALSO” (1 Cor. 15:3-7).

“Seen of me,” Paul says. He is joined by every person who, throughout the centuries, has put faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior: “Seen of me.” The experience has to be personal and real, not a mere profession.

Unbelievers are often cynical about the gospel. Why is that? May it not be that too often what they see in so-called Christians is a front, a facade, a man-made way of life? Where there is no divine miracle element, on-lookers naturally are dubious.

You want to say “the right thing” in your contacts with others. I have to tell you that the beginning, the genius, the raw material if you will, out of which effective communication is made, is the miracle of your relationship as a sinner with Jesus Christ the Savior. That you can share, and more times than not, people will pay attention. They will find you not offensively “different” - odd, fanatical- but shinningly unique with a glow that only God can give.

“Sanctify the Lord AS GOD in your hearts, and be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you.” The simple declaration, by life and by daily speech, that Jesus Christ is LORD in your life, will produce the “shine” that cannot be ignored and will give the “right words” for any occasion.

