

# 7Sides Chapter 1



By Nikki Rutz

## CHAPTER ONE: SPEECH

Embarrassing moments. We all have them, but some definitely stick out in our minds more than others, right? Perhaps you share a similar experience to mine and can picture the following: I am starting my first day of junior high school. Junior high school is a new endeavor for me because previously I have attended a much smaller grade school. My grade school was one building – as were all the other district grade schools in my home town. But upon reaching the seventh grade, all students from the district grade schools are now required to attend a new school: a school that sits in the center of our town and consists of *three* separate buildings. It is a “campus” and it’s scary to be a new student here. To make matters worse, I feel awkward because I am tall for my age. It’s not so much that I am tall at 5’8”, but at 12 years old I am consciously aware that I am taller than most of the boys that will play on our school’s basketball team. As I get out of my mother’s car and begin my walk to the school’s front doors, I can sense the distinct difference between seventh and eighth graders. Students are standing everywhere as they wait for the school bell to ring signaling it’s time to enter the main campus building. Eighth graders are confident – they are comfortable at this school because they have already been there for a full year. They know what to expect. Seventh graders, on the other hand, look anything but at ease. I feel their pain as I am one of them: bewildered, awe struck, and quite nervous. My nervousness about starting my new school on this first day of class is compounded by the fact that I am sporting a new hairstyle that is a cross between a multi-layered look and the distinct possibility that I have touched an electrically charged pole. This, of course, is the direct result of having applied a “hair lightening” product on my hair during the summer months leading up to this moment and then choosing to get a perm the day before school started. The effect of bleaching my hair and applying perm solution, it turns out, essentially fries the hair shaft so that my hairstyle resembles something close to one of those little “troll” doll heads on the end of a pencil. You know, the pencil that you roll back and forth in your hands to make the doll’s hair stick out all over? Yep – that is my hairstyle – *after* the pencil has been rolled back and forth. Quite simply, I am a sight to see. I look like a troll.

Unfortunately, the eighth graders notice this. I’m trying to pull it off like it’s the latest trend, but one of the “cooler” eighth grade boys is too smart for this. He quickly calls out to me from his little gathering of friends as I walk up the sidewalk. “Hey Shag!” Those within ear shot start to giggle. I am mortified. There is no place to hide and I consider the option of quitting school all together, and then realize that to my parents this will not be an option. I continue on and try to act like I did not hear him. “Hey *Shag!* Your hair looks *shaggy!*” More laughter. I try to smile like “yeah, that is funny and this is exactly what I am going for – shaggy hair is in, or didn’t you know?” but I am crumbling with fear on the inside. I pray that this is a one time occurrence and that maybe they will not notice me again tomorrow. However, they *will* notice and the name *will* stick. “Shag” will be the preferred way for those eighth grade boys to refer to me on a regular basis around school. There is nothing that I can do about it and I feel helpless. But I am fortunate that hair grows out over time. I am also fortunate that eighth grade boys do, despite common thought, eventually grow up.

We communicate with other people on a daily basis. How we communicate and what we say does, indeed, impact other people. Nicknames can be cruel, but there are other words that can communicate to a more devastating degree. I could have let “Shag” effect me for life...but I let it go. And I’m glad that I did because some of those eighth grade boys became good friends of mine in high school – one even helping me to survive a high school physics class. How weird would it have been to still be holding a grudge all of those years later? I hate to think of where my life would be if I had chosen to let a simple nickname in junior high mark me for life. (We’ll talk more about grudges and forgiveness in a later chapter.) But the truth is this: *words do affect us*. Some words affect us more than others. Some words affect us in a positive way; others, in a negative way. And whether or not we have the ability to not be concerned with what is said to us, we must be concerned with what we say to others. How do we affect others by our communication to them? I believe if we could fully see the impact that our words have on those around us, we would be more careful about what we say. Not just the use of words like nicknames, but the issues of everyday conversations. Do we communicate with others in such a way as to encourage or destroy them? The Bible tells us that our words hold the power of life and death. I believe that means that we can either encourage others to live, or we can actually, through our words, make them want to die (emotionally and/or physically).

*The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit. Proverbs 18:21 (NIV)*

Not too long ago, I was sitting in a coffee shop while waiting to meet with a college student (something I do quite often in my ministry). As I took a few moments to answer some e-mail messages, I could not help but overhear a conversation happening two tables over from mine. A mother, with her three children, was impatiently trying to get her children to sit down while they waited for their food orders to be prepared. My best estimate was that the two

older girls were ages 10 and 7, and the younger brother was 5. It seemed like every couple of minutes the mother was scolding one of her kids. First, it was how one was slumping in her chair and needed to sit up straight. Next, it was for giggling too loudly at one of the other sibling's antics. Then, it was for not getting enough napkins, as had been instructed, before they had sat down at the table. This went on and on and I found myself having a hard time concentrating on answering my e-mail messages. I was dumbfounded at the negativity in this woman's voice. It seemed that these three children irritated their mother by their very existence. That bothered me as I looked at their sad faces. But what bothered me the most was the condescending tone this woman used with every word coming from her mouth. It wasn't enough that these three youngsters weren't behaving to her standards; it was as if she wanted them to feel embarrassed and stupid for daring to behave outside of her demands. With each sarcastic remark, I could see a little bit of confidence chiseled away at the future adult within the child. My stomach grew nauseous at this thought. I pondered the option of getting up from my table, walking over to this woman, and letting her know of the child abuse (mental abuse) she was inflicting on her children. I wanted to hug these children and encourage them – I wanted to tell them positive things: "How beautiful you are!" "What a neat sense of humor you have!" "What great laughter you bring!" After all, shouldn't children be an example to us of how to laugh? But there was no laughter from these children and I imagined there was not much laughter from them ever.

Realizing that I would not get much work done while this little family was sitting so near to my table, I closed my laptop and concentrated on eavesdropping while I sipped my mocha frappacino. Just then, the youngest girl began pleading with her mother to go to the restroom. Her mother, consistent with her behavior up to this point, acted annoyed at the timing of this request. She sarcastically responded to the little girl that she was "stupid" and should have gone before they left their house as instructed. It was the remark of her being "stupid" that especially made me cringe. Given that this little family now had my full attention, I gazed over in their direction. The little girl's eyes were glued to the floor. It was clear that this was not the first time that she had been called "stupid." With a loud huff, the mother grabbed the girl's hand and dragged her off to the bathroom. All the way there, she yelled back at the two remaining children to make sure that they behaved "or else."

I had been shocked up to this point – it's true. I can't remember the last time that I'd observed such harsh tones and words coming from a person. But what I observed next left me speechless. With the mother now gone, the oldest sibling turned to her younger brother and started scolding him for constantly getting "them" into trouble. I was amazed. She *sounded just like her mother* – same tone, same sarcastic emphasis, same hurtful words.

And then it hit me. Everything that this woman will ever say to these young children will leave an everlasting mark on their lives – every tone, every word, every communication. Her speech alone will impact the very essence of the person they are and who they will become. They, in turn, will have the same impact on others through their words. The cycle is there. This woman probably had the same communication growing up (and maybe still does) affecting her life. We simply affect others with our words and how we say them. Do we realize how our speech echoes through time?

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As women, we hold the distinct honor of communicating verbally far more frequently than our male counterparts. Several years ago, Gary Smalley spoke at Baylor University and told of a study done with toddlers. Wiring toddlers with small microphones, researchers were able to show that female toddlers spoke words and attempted full sentences while their male counterparts primarily made noises and sounds associated with toy cars, trains, air craft, etc. The study showed that women generally develop their speech patterns before men do. Mr. Smalley went on to mention that, on average, women speak around 25,000 words a day while men speak around 12,500 words. Clearly, women are verbal communicators.

If we are speaking that many words on a daily basis, then the challenge for us is to acknowledge the power behind our words and exercise care in our choice of those words. Everything we say not only communicates some form of information, but has the potential to echo in the hearts of the receivers. It's much like the strumming of a guitar in a music hall. Chords from the guitar echo through the auditorium as they are strummed – providing either beautiful music or a sound that makes one cringe. My friends who play the guitar tell me that the way a person strums will determine the sound that is produced. Strum too hard and the strings will break. Strum when the chord is not properly formed and an unpleasant sound can result. Strum the right chord at the right time in the right way and you have beautiful music. I like the analogy of our words to that of strumming the strings of a guitar. The strings are like

our hearts. Words and tones can either strum beautiful chords that resonate pleasantly or bring about gut-wrenching sounds. Shouldn't we prefer to produce the echoing sounds of beautiful chords?

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. Ephesians 4:29 (NIV)*

Our words, tones, and information communicated to others must be done with one goal in mind: to produce positive, uplifting and helpful results. Put another way, **we should strive to speak with beneficial purpose and discretion.** Beneficial purpose means to benefit the person receiving your words, i.e., the listener. Discretion is merely choosing to say the right thing in the right way at the right time. (Just a little bit of a challenge!) When these two ideas are operating together, we are saying the right thing in the right way at the right time to benefit the listener. We can benefit the listener by encouraging them (positive speech) or by giving them information that, even though it may be of a critiquing nature, is still of benefit to the listener because the listener now has gained new insight or knowledge. For example, I love receiving e-mail messages from our Lily7 Editor. One of her jobs at Lily7 is to oversee the *Consider Lily Blog* and often she has to remind us to stay on the topic or to change how something is written. I am amazed at how she is able to critique each of us who write for this Blog so that we are encouraged to change for the better. She might say, "we need to stay on the topic here, so Nikki – would you care to save your observations on this other, unrelated issue for another discussion topic? This is great insight, so we should start a new topic with what you're saying here" or "would you care to re-word this last sentence here? I just want to make sure that our readers are clear about what you are saying because it is a great point." She gives the critique, but then she follows it up with a specific compliment. She communicates in such a way as to make us want to become writers – she "speaks" with beneficial purpose and discretion.

Of course, how we communicate with others can be a complex issue. It may be easy for our Lily7 Editor to offer critique while at the same time encouraging the person being critiqued. Her personality naturally tends toward speaking in a positive and encouraging manner. It's pretty easy to see how our personalities influence our speech patterns as well as our choice of words. Knowing this, it is helpful to see what type of "personality communicator" that we are. All of us fall somewhere along the line between each of these personality types, but some of us find ourselves gravitating toward one category or another on a pretty regular basis. Which side of the following personality spectrums do you find yourself on?

Quiet -----Talkative  
Optimist -----Pessimist  
Narcissist -----Insecure

I confess that I often lean toward the talkative and pessimistic sides of the upper two spectrums here. Of course, I would not want to call it being a "pessimist" as much as being a "realist"...but I would be wrong. When you tend toward talking a lot and being pessimistic about life, you are not always the most cheerful person to be around. At times, I am sure that my words have not benefited those around me. I have been guilty on more than one occasion of not exercising proper discretion when speaking. In the first year of our marriage, in fact, my husband was a little surprised at my lack of discretion and lack of encouragement in the way I spoke to him. Falling prey to a common error women make when dating, I didn't exactly let Kevin see *every bad side* of my character until *after* we were married. I was "on guard" while we were dating. But shortly after we were married and living together at last, I felt more at ease and comfortable around him. So the "speaking filter" went away and I was quick to criticize his every move. He knew the minute I was displeased with finding his clothes on the floor instead of the hamper. There was no question as to how irritated I was when he forgot something I had asked him to do. I am a "verbal processor" so at that time in our marriage I believed that there was no time to filter my speech. It was just out there – words coming out without me realizing it. I expected Kevin to love me unconditionally and what that meant was that I could behave in any manner that I chose. It was almost as if I took the "unconditional" idea to a level of *how bad can I treat you and you still love me?* He was patient with me and it took me awhile to see the error of my ways, but I shudder to think of how harsh my speech must have been to him in those first few months. Much of our relationship conflict in those early days was the fact that my words and tones (my speech) were hurtful to him. It was not encouraging or beneficial and it was not spoken in discretion. It was careless. Because I was leaning toward the far right side of the spectrums of speech, Kevin was left to bear the weight of my negativity and insecurity.

Most of us, if honest, would prefer to have a healthy balance between the two ends of the spectrums. But how many of us have a healthy balance? How many people do we know that have a healthy balance? Is it possible to have a healthy balance? I think it is...it just takes a little work.

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In recent years I have had the opportunity to be around various types of people through different places that we have lived and ministry situations in which I've been involved. I'm always amazed at how different our *styles* of speech can be. A lot of this, of course, is in direct relation to our sub-cultures (i.e., where we live, who we hang out with, what type of communication we are having on a regular basis, etc.). I suspect that how we communicate with others is a function of our personality maturing in a particular sub-culture. This manifests itself in different "types" of speech. For example, look at the following different "types" of speech. Do you ever find yourself falling into a pattern of one of these types? Do you know people who fit one pattern or another?

- *Selfish Speech.* This type of communication is easily identifiable because the communicator speaks primarily about him/herself. (The personality behind this type of speech is one that leans toward the "narcissist" end of the personality spectrum.) Everything communicated is for the benefit of the person speaking and to further exalt oneself. It can be in the context of bragging about one's accomplishments or in the context of taking pity on oneself for one's hardships. Brian Regan, a comedian, makes reference to the person who is constantly bragging or out to impress others with him/herself as a person who is a "Me Monster." Everything is always about them and you know it because they are *always* talking about themselves.
- *Hurtful Speech.* Hurtful speech is used specifically to put another person down or cause them emotional pain. Speech that is slanderous (speaking falsehoods about another) and/or gossip are two examples of hurtful speech. Another example is words used to hurt others – a direct attack on another through the use of words – by criticizing something about the person, making an accusation against a person, or pointing out a person's flaw in an unkind manner, etc. In my personal experience, individuals who gravitate toward this type of communication usually have been hurt in the past themselves in a similar manner and have not fully recovered from the hurt.
- *Encouraging Speech.* As you can probably imagine, encouraging speech is the opposite of hurtful speech and selfish speech. It involves words spoken with the purpose of brightening one's day or uplifting another's spirit. It involves words used to bring hope and comfort. People who are encouraging speakers have the innate ability to see the positive attributes of a negative situation.
- *Truthful Speech.* The Bible tells us to speak with honesty.<sup>2</sup> I always tell students that we are to be "truth speakers." There is no point in lying and there is no godly purpose in embellishing or exaggerating. We do not honor God when we speak words that do not have truth behind them. You can usually tell when you are speaking with a "truth speaker" because they seek honesty instead of self edification and actual fact instead of exaggerated story lines in the way they talk about themselves and others. Though not always "long-winded" speakers, they will make sure that you know the actual truth of the story instead of letting potential misunderstandings occur.

The categories of speech that we may find ourselves using (either because of how we grew up or because of those we are constantly around) affect what kind of communicator that we become. If our goal is to speak with beneficial purpose and discretion, then how do we do that? More to the point, does speaking with beneficial purpose and discretion mean that we must change our personality or change our speech patterns? Maybe. The very essence of developing a character that is more surrendered to Christ and the example He gave us in the Bible may mean taking a serious look inside our hearts. It may mean that some old habits need to change and new habits need to come in their place. I cannot think of a more prominent side of our character in which to develop good habits than in our speech. To do this, then, we must understand what it means to speak with **beneficial purpose and discretion**. There may be many ways to develop these speech habits, but I believe that speaking with beneficial purpose and discretion means speaking with words that are appropriate in the moment and that benefit the listener not only with information, but with reason for hope.

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<sup>2</sup> *You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. Exodus 20:16 (NIV)*

## BENEFICIAL PURPOSE

Scripture makes two things very clear concerning our speech. First, we strongly affect others by our speech. Second, we often get ourselves into trouble with our speech. We have already recognized that our speech has the power of life and death. Look at the previously quoted verse from a different version of the Bible:

*Those who love to talk will experience the consequences, for the tongue can kill or nourish life. **Proverbs 18:21 (NLT)***

Ouch. Sounds to me like if I am talking aimlessly without purpose and discretion, I am going to reap some consequences (unpleasant consequences). I have heard it said that without realizing it, we can “poison” another person’s spirits by our comments. For example, if I express dissatisfaction and annoyance about one person to another person, the recipient of this information may now take on my views and be “poisoned” toward the person I was talking about. Further conversation about the matter may result in a “feeding frenzy” of more and more negative thoughts toward the person and more and more negative words spoken. How many people are being “poisoned” by my initial, negative words? Talking negatively to one person is the logical beginning of a chain reaction of negativity as the words are spread from one person to the next. We must consider the reality that what we say not only affects the initial listener, but also any other person that the listener might then go and repeat our words to.

If we strongly affect others by our speech, I think that it naturally follows that we should make more of an effort to speak encouraging words to one another. Isn’t this what Christ did? Didn’t He speak words that were “helpful for building up others according to their needs” (as seen in **Ephesians 4:29** quoted above)? And weren’t each of his listeners encouraged to behave in a manner more pleasing to God? They may not have wanted to hear it – but wasn’t there real encouragement in what He was saying? Christ handled communications in all of life’s situations with words that were spoken with beneficial purpose and discretion.

Clearly, there is something powerful in being able to speak in such a way that benefits and encourages others. When we can influence someone such that they want to replace old ways of living with better habits, we have encouraged change. It means that our words can strongly affect others in a *positive* manner. Ask anyone who has lived very long and they will admit that our speech can often get us into trouble. It appears all too common for people to be able to recall times that they wish they would not have said something (words they wish they could “take back”). My grandfather used to say that “the more you talk about something, the more you stir it up and make it stink so it is better to not talk about it and let it be.” On the flip side, my mother has pointed out times that she wishes that she *would* have spoken up in a situation where she remained quiet. That is the tension of knowing how to speak with beneficial purpose. When do we talk? When do we remain silent and just listen?

*He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from troubles. **Proverbs 21:23 (Amp)***

*It is not what goes into the mouth of a man that makes him unclean and defiled, but what comes out of the mouth; this makes a man unclean and defiles [him]. **Matthew 15:11 (Amp)***

*The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. **For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. Luke 6:45 (NIV)** [Emphasis added.]*

I believe that one of the hardest goals for women as it pertains to staying “out of trouble” in the area of our speech is to *not* gossip. Most of us can learn to tame our words and not speak harshly and negatively (although it may take years of practice to attain this if other habits have previously been developed). But gossip is an area that abounds around us. I know I face it everyday and consistently try to develop my character to be devoid of it. A gossip has been defined as “a person who habitually reveals personal or sensational facts about others.”<sup>3</sup> To gossip, then, is “to reveal personal or sensational facts about others.” I like this definition because it encompasses the reality that not all gossip is of a negative nature. Although most of the time gossip is probably sharing something of an unbecoming nature about the person being spoken of, it is also true that gossip can encompass positive information that should be held in

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<sup>3</sup> See Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary, [www.webster.com](http://www.webster.com).

confidence. For example, I recently had a friend share with me that she and her husband were expecting a child. She was thrilled to be pregnant, but did not want anyone else to know of the pregnancy until after she was past the first trimester. Over the next several weeks, I had numerous opportunities (“temptations”) to share this wonderful news. It was, quite honestly, a “sensational” fact that I was privileged to know. But I had agreed to keep this information confidential. I refrained from breaking my friend’s confidence. After she had made it successfully to her second trimester, she and her husband shared their exciting news with all of our friends. It meant the world to me that my friend knew she could trust me with her private information.

Not all things are necessarily gossip, however. Sometimes the information being shared is more of a factual nature and not expressed with the intent of sharing a “sensational” fact, per se. Recently, I got together with some friends that I attended high school with. We were laughing and catching up on how things had been going for each of us in the different places that we now lived. We then started talking about each of our classmates that had graduated with us – where they were now, what they were doing, etc. At one point, one of my friends started laughing and said “are we gossiping?” It was a great question. I had to think about it. I guess the real test would have been if the person that we were talking about would have wanted the information shared and then, of course, what we were doing with that information once we discussed it. In this instance, the information being shared was of a “factual” nature and not expressed to be a positive or negative reference about any one person. It was great to find out who had moved away. It was also beneficial to learn who had experienced tragedy or loss as several of us discussed the importance of contacting friends to let them know that we cared. Were we “gossiping”? Maybe. But I think the test is still what we have expressed here: speaking with beneficial purpose and discretion. If we had been bad-mouthing people and speaking without caution as to the whereabouts of our former classmates, then that would be a different story.

There is another type of “gossip” that is a sub-part of its mainstream definition. My husband refers to it as “Christian gossip.” This is where we attempt to use the noble purpose of seeking prayers for a person/situation by sharing “sensational” facts about that person/situation. We seek these prayer requests “just so we can all pray about this.” Although there are definitely times for prayer about person(s) and/or situations/circumstances, it is good to ask ourselves: *how much of the facts/circumstances must be told in order for a prayer request to be made? Can God not work within simple prayers with few facts known?* More importantly, what is the reason behind why we feel the need to share the information? Is it truly to seek prayers – or is it to engage others in our knowledge and seek their reaction to it?

Not sharing all of the details of a given situation can be a challenge because it is my experience that women love to talk about people (especially other women) and we love the feeling of being connected to others. We find that feeling of “connection” through our conversations with others and, if we are not careful, it can often involve sharing some “sensational” fact that we feel might be of importance to the listener. It is as if we are suddenly respected for our “insider knowledge” and that gives us an immediate common ground with anyone interested in listening to us. In essence, we often gossip to receive relationship. When I knew my friend was pregnant before other people knew, I thought of how cool it would be to share her news with different people that knew her. It would *connect* me to them because we would have a commonality to talk about: our friend and her exciting news. But that would have betrayed her trust in me. It would have broken a confidence and the Bible tells us that we are not to break our word:

*The LORD hates those who don't keep their word, but he delights in those who do. Proverbs 12:22 (NLT)*

Seeking to feel connected to others is one thing, but sometimes we are simply seeking to fill the “empty space” in conversation. We feel responsible for keeping a conversation moving forward and to do so means having no “dead air.” I still marvel at the first time I traveled to Chicago with my boss, the *Chief* Legal Counsel of the governmental agency where I was employed. We were lawyers handling matters of the Illinois State Government, so we spent our time often working between Illinois’ capitol city and Chicago. I was quite nervous to be traveling with him (I had only been in this position for a few weeks) and I worked fervently to keep the conversation going for the three hours it took us to drive from the Illinois Capitol to the Windy City. At one point near the end of our trip home my boss kindly pointed out that it was okay if we did not talk the entire time we were in the car. I was so embarrassed! I clearly had carried on like a blabbering fool! How could I have done that? But isn’t this scenario true for most of us? Maybe not for every woman, but for most women it seems that we feel this urge to fill the “dead air.” We generally do not like sitting in silence with others.

If we decide that we are going to pursue speech patterns that do not involve gossip, then we must deal with those times of silence that will inevitably occur. We must be okay with not having something to say when the one thing we

could talk about would be considered gossip. This is a much harder task than at first would seem. Gossip is always a ready provider of conversation and often feels like our only way to communicate and connect with the world. A possible suggestion to combat this urge to “fill the silence” is to focus on talking about other topics – your past experiences, current events going on, your preferences in music, your favorite TV shows, your love of a particular sport, etc. Focusing on these areas of our likes/dislikes can help steer us away from the need to talk about other people or share private information that we may know about another person.

The desire to find relationship with others through our communications and feeling a constant need to engage in gossip, however, misses a crucial reality: *receiving relationship through the destruction of others destroys our relationship with God*. Where our culture may view such speech as merely everyday communication, for the woman who seeks to develop character more like Christ, it is a problem. Our speech is how we *choose* to interact with others. We can either choose to interact in a manner similar to that of Christ’s example, or in a manner similar to that of modern day culture. Often, the two are not the same standards.

Think of it this way – is gossip a sin? If it is *not* a sin, then it doesn’t matter. If it *is* a sin, then it creates a barrier between us and God. We are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves (**Matthew 22:39**) and instructed to exercise grace (**Colossians 4:6**) toward those around us. When we gossip, are we exercising love? Are we exercising grace? What kind of character are we displaying by engaging in such speech? Better yet, do those listening to our words begin to wonder about the character of the person we are talking about, or do they begin to question our character for what we are saying in the first place?

When we engage in gossip, we operate under purely selfish motives (another area that we will examine in later chapters). We “poison” our relationships with others and we “poison” our relationship with God by loving ourselves and our own interests more than we love God. Likewise, we show love and grace when we hear things and we do not share them or (when the situation necessitates) we double-check the accuracy of what we have heard with the person the information is about. By checking for accuracy, we accomplish two goals: 1) we go to the source of the issue and 2) we take a step toward stopping the cycle of falsehoods continuing to spread.

A few years ago, a friend of ours was getting married. She and her future husband suddenly decided to move up their wedding date and that, unfortunately, started rumors that they “had to get married” (i.e., they were pregnant). I was frustrated with the “discussions” I heard others share about our friends. It was obvious that no one had actually *talked* to our friends about their reasons for changing their wedding date. So, in a bold move and after much prayer, I approached our friends and asked them for the reason of the sudden move of the wedding date. In a gentle manner, I informed them of the confusion that had been created among others and my desire to see that cleared up. They were shocked to learn of the confusion, but also appreciative of the opportunity to address it head-on. Their reason for moving up the date of their wedding, as it turned out, was due to their desire to have as many of their family members present as possible and an earlier date provided for this. I won’t lie – it was a hard move for me to talk with them and approach the sensitive nature of what was being said about their underlying reason for the date change. But I was relieved (as were they) to get the rumors quashed. If we hear something and proceed to share it without checking its accuracy or finding the truth about its source, then we essentially reveal that we do not value that person enough to care about what is being said in the first place. If we really cared, we would want to clear up the matter. At the very least, we would not want the information shared further. We would want the truth to be known. We would want to stop the rumors.

So how does one handle a “gossip” situation – i.e., when you find yourself on the listening end of the information being shared? How do we reveal that we do not want to engage in that type of conversation without coming across as a “Christian snob” or as “holier than thou” or “Miss Goodie Two-Shoes”? Over the years, I’ve had many opportunities to observe how women that I admire have handled such situations. One of my friends does it with the most amazing grace. Instead of pointing out the flaws of the “gossiper” or drawing attention to the gossip being shared, she always takes a moment to listen and then adds a comment of some positive quality about the person just spoken of. She makes you feel as though she has thought over the information just shared and *still* believes highly of the person being talked about. She uses kind words to draw out these differences and the effect is always that of making those present realize the negativity of what was just said. C.S. Lewis has also suggested the principle of simply saying nothing to bring about conviction. But I confess that I like my friend’s approach. She seems to have mastered a way to speak with beneficial purpose when those around her are not seeking the same goal.

## DISCRETION

The Bible has a lot to say about the use of and/or lack of use of discretion. The most striking image for us as women is the analogy that scripture draws to the woman who does not use discretion:

*Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion. **Proverbs 11:22 (NIV)***

I love this verse. I have often thought of the humor behind this analogy – and how it so beautifully plays into the truth of a woman who lacks discretion in her speech. Have you ever met someone who was physically beautiful – only to learn that her personality left much to be desired? I have a friend who is absolutely beautiful to look at – stunning features with gorgeous skin and hair. But she tells everyone she knows that she is not able to keep a secret if her life depended on it. Unfortunately, she has a reputation for this and it affects her ability to maintain close friendships. Her beauty is masked by the lack of discretion in her character. In high school, she was the girl all the guys wanted to date. Now, she is the girl that no one wants to date. As we all come to learn eventually, physical beauty is not *real* beauty. Real beauty is what is underneath the skin.

Discretion is simply knowing when and what to say, and knowing when and what not to say. As mentioned earlier, discretion is simply saying and doing the right thing in the right way at the right time. It requires the development of a beautiful spirit – *inner beauty*. Exercising discretion, as you can imagine, can be very difficult. On a practical level, it requires that we seek to develop the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our everyday lives.

*But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, He will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Here there is no conflict with the law. **Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)***

These “fruits,” when exercised as a conscious part of our day, will naturally result in discretionary speech because our words will be filtered through such standards as patience, kindness, and gentleness. How can one speak inappropriate words and/or speak at inappropriate times within these filters? Patience, kindness, and gentleness seem to cover all aspects of speaking in a manner that would honor God. My husband calls it “*the PKG Principle*” and he has engaged an exercise of filtering his speech through these standards for years. When he is communicating with others, he asks himself, “*Am I exercising patience, kindness, and gentleness as I am talking?*” The development of the *PKG Principle* requires that we examine our hearts. We must acknowledge that our speech is merely an outward expression of what is going on in our hearts (i.e., our thought life).

*The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. **Luke 6:45 (ESV)***

*And then he [Jesus] added, “It is the thought-life that defiles you. For from within, out of a person’s heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, eagerness for lustful pleasure, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you and make you unacceptable to God.” **Mark 7:20-23 (NLT)***

(The idea of “slander” that Jesus’ refers to here is speaking untruths about another.) The Bible also tells us that lacking discretion in our speech is simply foolish.

*He who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame. **Proverbs 18:13 (NIV)***

*Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him. **Proverbs 29:20 (NAS)***

*He who restrains his words has knowledge, And he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; When he closes his lips, he is considered prudent. **Proverbs 17:27-28 (NAS)***

Having wisdom should be enough of a goal for us in our speech...the idea of knowing when to *bite the tongue* and/or when to speak an encouraging word is truly exercising discretion and wisdom. But in addition to gaining wise behavior, scripture gives us a major key to living *all* aspects of a Christian life:

*We all make mistakes, but those who control their tongues can also control themselves in every other way. James 3:2 (NLT)*

Did you catch it? Read it again:

*We all make mistakes, but **those who control their tongues** can also **control themselves in every other way.** James 3:2 (NLT) [Emphasis added]*

Amazing! According to this verse, if we can get our speech under control – exercising discretion – then we can exercise self-control in every other area of our lives! We can keep those things under control that feel out of control. We can stop doing the things we don't want to do. We can start doing the things we do want to do. We can exercise *self-control*...we can exercise *discretion*. The key to this, however, is being able to control our words. Want to stop overeating? Get your speech under control. Want to stop impulse buying? Start watching your conversation. Makes sense, doesn't it? Unless we live alone in a remote area and never interact with another person, we are constantly bombarded with temptations regarding our speech. If we can get this area of our lives under God's authority and surrendered to the goal of speaking with beneficial purpose and discretion, then surely we can surrender other areas of our lives as well. We can not only keep from saying things that we will regret later on, but we can be more disciplined in our academic endeavors. We can not only speak up to encourage a friend, but we can take care of our bodies in a beneficial way by eating healthy foods and exercising properly. We can not only speak with beneficial purpose and discretion, but we can strive to serve God fully by listening and obeying Him in our daily lives. There is a connection here – and I believe it is one that is powerful. Our words simply do more damage (and more benefit) than we realize.

So you are probably saying at this point, "all of this talk about speaking with beneficial purpose and discretion is great – *but how do I do that? Where do I begin?*" It's simple. The **first step** is realizing where our speech patterns need to be changed. Which end of the personality spectrum do you fall on? What categories of speech do you find yourself speaking most often in? Do these two together make up speech patterns that communicate with beneficial purpose and discretion? The **second step** is to apply six filters to our words that are consistent with the *PKG Principle*. You know when you are reaching the goal of speaking with beneficial purpose and discretion because you can look back over a conversation and see that it was consistent with these filters. If we monitor our speech through these six values, then I believe that we will be able to communicate in ways that glorify God.

To speak with beneficial purpose and discretion, we must speak with . . .

... **kindness**

*Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of malicious behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:31-32 (NLT)*

... **gentleness**

*Gentle words bring life and health; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit. Proverbs 15:4 (NLT)*

... **encouragement**

*So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing. I Thessalonians 5:11 (NLT)*

... **love**

*Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. I Peter 4:8 (NLT)*

... **patience**

*Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are lazy. Encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone. I Thessalonians 5:14 (NLT)*

... **words that please the Lord**

Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. **Ephesians 5:10 (NLT)**

Please note that the last value is important – *words that please the Lord* – because sometimes we will need to communicate difficult information to others. Even in correcting others or offering beneficial critique and insight, our words should be spoken with kindness, gentleness, encouragement, love, and patience. In doing so, we can have those “hard” conversations and still use speech that honors God.

Think about it. When you look at women who are older and wiser – who are really living their lives to exemplify Christ – do you see women who are “Chatty Cathy’s”? Or do you see women who exercise kindness, gentleness, encouragement, love, and patience with their words? The women I have observed in my life tend toward conversation that is grace-giving and uplifting, even when the words were for critiquing a flaw in another.

Let your conversation be gracious and effective so that you will have the right answer for everyone. **Colossians 4:6 (NLT)**

Speaking with words that have beneficial purpose and that are chosen with discretion may mean that we are holding our tongues much of the time. But what about those instances in which we need to talk through a matter with someone? What about those times when we feel the urge to “verbally process” a situation because it is through discussion that we often learn God’s leadership and gain knowledge of how to proceed?

There are two instances in which I think that discussing a matter (that in other circumstances might be considered “gossip” or “non-beneficial” speech) are appropriate. However, even in these two instances, it is necessary to exercise discretion in how much information must be shared to “talk it over.” Remember the part earlier about “Christian gossip”? The same applies here – how much must be shared to get the proper advice/direction on the matter? Only you, through much prayer, can know the answer to this question but it would seem that a good goal would be to reveal as few facts as possible. The two times that it can be appropriate to talk through a situation about someone else with another person are 1) when seeking godly advice and 2) when seeking accountability about the matter.

Seeking advice must be with a heart of seeking wise counsel and, of course, must be sought from someone who would be considered wise. Advice on a medical condition from someone not trained in medicine, for instance, would not equate to “wise” advice. Although experience is not always an indicator of wisdom, there is some truth to the fact that those who are older than us and have lived through experiences before us will have some wisdom to impart.

A wise man will hear and increase in learning, And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel, ... **Proverbs 1:5 (NAS)**

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, But a wise man is he who listens to counsel. **Proverbs 12:15 (NAS)**

Accountability partners are, quite simply, an amazing asset to living a life modeled after Christ. (See the **Appendix** for “A Quick Guide to Accountability Partners.”) When we meet with someone for accountability purposes, we trust the person to listen to us and then help us to seek behavior in our lives that glorifies God. Accountability partners help us do this by asking us questions about areas in which we struggle. They have our permission to examine and critique our lives because we know that they are doing so for our benefit and growth as a Christian. Accountability partners can help us work through situations that we may need to discuss and make sure that we are not revealing more information than is necessary.

*If we can talk out the problem with someone who has the power to change it or us, then by all means we ought to do so. But just carrying idle tales about a negative situation is not going to make it better, only worse. I am not saying that we should never talk about our problems. I am saying that we need to speak with purpose.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Joyce Meyer, *Me and My Big Mouth!*, p. 202 (1997).

Even though receiving counsel and accountability can have beneficial results in our lives, there is also the reality that the more we discuss something, the more “present” the matter will be in our minds. The more “present” something is in our minds, the more opportunities there are for it to be a nagging problem. Nagging problems weigh in our thoughts and, naturally, our hearts. They keep us from moving forward and out of situations we need to let go of. Sometimes, the solution to the issue at hand is not to seek counsel or accountability, but to simply stop talking about the issue all together. Sometimes we need to simply grow up, put the issue in God’s hands, and then drop it.

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John Maxwell has said that for every one negative comment made to a person, it takes four other positive comments to counteract the damage of the original statement.<sup>5</sup> If we seek to speak with beneficial purpose and discretion, I believe that we could unleash a new generation of women who will counteract the damage done in the lives of those who have been the recipients of negative words. I believe that God will use us to encourage and uplift others and bring about life, instead of death, with our speech. And, truly, wouldn’t that be something? I can’t help but think of how pleased God would be with such a generation of women.

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<sup>5</sup> Maxwell, John C. *Your Roadmap For Success* (2002), p. 172.

## SPEECH: APPLICATION

*"Our lives are on loan from God, a sacred trust of opportunities and **discussions**. And every one of our choices is made on a battlefield with heavenly ramifications."* Louie Giglio [emphasis added]

**\*GOAL: To speak with beneficial purpose and discretion.**

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."* **Ephesians 4:29 (NIV)**

### I. STEPS FOR CHANGING OUR HABITS AS IT PERTAINS TO OUR SPEECH:

- a. Memorize a verse.
  - i. Choose a verse from the scriptures listed below
  - ii. Put the verse up on a mirror, or other location, to aid in memorization
- b. Spend 5 minutes each night journaling:
  - i. What you said throughout the day
  - ii. What you heard throughout the day
  - iii. How you responded to what you heard
  - iv. How you felt after you spoke
- c. Use the six filters for exercising the "PKG Principle" when speaking:
  - i. Are my words said in **kindness**?
  - ii. Are my words said with **gentleness**?
  - iii. Do my words provide **encouragement**?
  - iv. Are my words said in **love**?
  - v. Am I speaking with **patience**?
  - vi. Am I using **words that please the Lord**?
- d. Exercise the "**15 Second Secret**" – idea behind taking 15 seconds before you speak to pray/discern/contemplate...letting the Holy Spirit guide you in the next proper step.<sup>6</sup>
- e. Use the "**youth group**" standard:
  - i. How would you speak in front of a youth group?
  - ii. Would you say/have said the same words?

### II. ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS (Commit to doing these suggestions – alone or with a partner – on a daily basis for the next two weeks.)

- a. Have I said anything *about* a person to someone else?
  - i. Was it uplifting?
  - ii. Was it hurtful?
  - iii. Was it encouraging to the person hearing it?
  - iv. Did it leave an impression of the person talked about in a favorable or unfavorable light?
- b. Have I said anything *to* a person that was...
  - i. Hurtful?
  - ii. Encouraging?
  - iii. Purposeful?
- c. Did I think before I spoke?
- d. Have I said anything to myself that was...
  - i. Degrading or hurtful?
  - ii. Encouraging?
- e. In general, have I spoken with beneficial purpose?
- f. Have I used discretion in my speech?
- g. Have I heard anything that was degrading about another person?
  - i. How did I respond?
  - ii. How would Christ have responded?
- h. What steps can I take to exercise discretion/purpose in my speech?

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<sup>6</sup> Larry Jones, *The 15-Second Secret* (1991).

SCRIPTURES TO LOOK UP ON YOUR OWN (just 2 or so each day...)

*(These scriptures were originally read from the New Living Translation Bible for this study)*

**Matthew 15:17-20**

**Colossians 4:6**

**Matthew 12:36**

**Proverbs 13:2-3**

**Psalms 15:1-3**

**Ephesians 4:29-32**

**Psalms 141:3**

**Psalms 19:14**

**Proverbs 15:1-4**

**Proverbs 10:19**

**Psalms 34:13**

**Proverbs 6:2**

**Proverbs 6:12**

**Proverbs 16:13**

**Proverbs 17:20**

**Proverbs 29:11**

**James 4:11**

**Proverbs 17:9**

**Proverbs 5:1-2**

**Colossians 3:16-17**

**Matthew 15:11**

**Proverbs 15:28**

**Proverbs 18:13**

**Proverbs 8:12**

**Proverbs 25:2 3**

**Ephesians 5:2-4**

**I Thessalonians 5:14**

**James 5:9**

**I Timothy 3:11**

**Proverbs 4:24**

**Proverbs 20:19**

**Exodus 20:16**

**Proverbs 6:16-19**

**Proverbs 11:9-13**

**Colossians 3:8-10**

**Ephesians 4:25, 27**

**Proverbs 12:17-19**

**I Peter 3:8-10**

**I Peter 2:1**

**Exodus 4:12**

**Proverbs 10:21**

**Psalms 12:3**

**Proverbs 29:20**

**Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7**

**Matthew 5:37**

**I Thessalonians 4:11**

**I Thessalonians 5:11**

**James 1:19**

**Proverbs 17:4**

**Proverbs 17:19**

**Proverbs 18:21**

**Proverbs 21:23**

**Proverbs 11:22**

**Proverbs 17:27-28**

**Proverbs 2:11**

**James 3:2-12**

**Proverbs 15:4**

**I Peter 4:8**

**Ephesians 5:10**

**I Peter 4:15**

**I Timothy 5:11-15**

**Proverbs 20:15**

**Proverbs 25:9-10**

**Luke 6:45**



## APPENDIX:

### QUICK OVERVIEW OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Many students are curious about the logistics of forming an accountability group (or having an accountability partner) and how it works. I honestly believe that one of the greatest tools that God has given us by way of developing a character that is more surrendered to Him is through friends. **Proverbs 27:17** tells us that *“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”* (NIV) When we allow a friend to help us commit to do, or commit to *not* do, something – we add one more “lifeline” to keep us afloat in our pursuit of the Christian life in this world. Accountability gives someone outside ourselves the unique position to “call us out” or to point out where we are falling short of our goals. When we can humbly allow someone to have this position in our lives, we allow God to mold us in amazing ways. The Prophet Nathan “called out” David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba. (See **2 Samuel 12**) David immediately humbled himself and recognized that Nathan was right. Nathan’s accountability to David allowed David to repent of his sin and seek restoration to God.

By way of providing a very brief overview of how to utilize accountability with others, let me encourage readers to prayerfully consider the following suggested guidelines for approaching an accountability scenario.

1. Pray for a partner(s). Be sensitive to the person(s) God will lead you to ask to hold you accountable to your pursuits of developing a godly character. This usually is someone who is near the same level of Christian growth as you and someone that you can trust to help you grow in your pursuits.
2. Choose partners of the same gender. It is important to only have accountability partners that are of the same sex (i.e., women have women accountability partners). When we meet with the opposite sex for something as soul-searching as the topics in accountability can be, we open ourselves up to awkward scenarios. I know too many girls who thought it would be “okay” to meet with a guy for accountability, then found themselves falling in love with that guy after so many deep conversations were shared (and vice versa). I also know that the topics covered in the accountability situation could potentially cause a guy to struggle with sexual sin in his own life. Accountability is not about causing others to stumble. If we love our brothers, we would not want to create a scenario that would cause them to struggle in their own walks with Christ. (*Matthew 22:37-39*) It is about building each other up and encouraging one another on toward a character like Christ. It just makes sense that it is best for women to seek accountability with other women and men to seek accountability with other men. Accountability is a very serious endeavor.
3. Keep accountability groups to *no more than* 4 persons. This is simply a practical suggestion. When groups are larger than 4 persons, it is difficult to give everyone enough time to share their individual struggles and/or accountability needs.
4. Meet on a regular basis. Bi-weekly is good, weekly is best. If too much time passes between your meetings, then you miss the effect of staying on top of the issue for which you are seeking accountability.
5. Meet in person. Today’s society makes it plausible to “talk” via cell phone, text messages, e-mail, instant messaging, etc. But the issues covered in accountability meetings are best served in face-to-face situations. Being able to read an accountability partner’s face and hear her tone of voice can play into the proper response to encourage and build her up. In addition, most topics covered in accountability scenarios are of a very private nature. The chance of an e-mail being intercepted or a text message being read by a person other than the person intended is not worth the risk.
6. Meet in private. If you are meeting at a *Starbucks* coffee house, your attention can be easily distracted and others could easily overhear the conversation. It makes sense that finding a place that will allow for open and honest discussion would include an environment where there is no risk of being interrupted or overheard.
7. Focus on self-growth. The very purpose of meeting with someone for spiritual accountability is to develop a character that is more and more like Christ. The goal is to mature in our Christian walks. To

grow, we must be willing to accept criticism and not be defensive when critiques of our character are offered. There are not many times that we should be selfish – but this is one of those times. When you meet, be ready for self-examination and introspection. *Proverbs 8:33; 9:9; 10:17; 15:5*

8. Keep it real. If you cannot be open and honest with your accountability partner(s), then do not meet for accountability. Given the purpose of accountability, what would be the point if you are not willing to open up and let others see who you really are?
9. Avoid having “therapy sessions.” It’s a natural temptation to want to make others feel better, but the purpose of meeting for accountability is to help one another *grow*. Helping another grow in their character will not always mean making them feel great about themselves – especially when poor choices are being made over time. *Proverbs 28:10*
10. Keep the issues discussed completely confidential. As discussed in the chapter on *Speech*, we are often tempted to gossip. When we know the deepest, hidden secrets of another, it can be a temptation to share this knowledge with others. But we must be women of our word. We must love and respect our accountability partner(s) enough to never, ever reveal such private information. *Proverbs 11:13; 20:19*
11. Be kind. We can hold someone accountable – pointing out areas that they can change/grow in – and still treat them with kindness. If we speak harshly, we cause the person to feel defensive toward us. The key is to confront in *love*. It is a skill that we all must learn – and I can think of no better place to learn it than in accountability situations. *Ephesians 4:32; Proverbs 15:1*
12. Ask questions. The *Study Guide* to this book provides examples of the types of questions that need to be asked when meeting for accountability. You know where you need to grow – have your partner(s) ask you questions pertaining to those areas in your life.
13. Pray for your partner(s). It is one thing to ask our accountability partner(s) questions about areas in their lives they are trying to get more surrendered to God; it is another to be praying for them each and every day in between the times we meet with them. There is no question that God has given us a powerful tool in our lives – our ability to pray to Him directly through His son, Jesus Christ. Providing accountability to and then also praying for a friend can reap the benefits of a changed life.

*“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!” **Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (ESV)***