

## **A Tool and a Weapon** **1 Corinthians 14:26-40**

God has fitted each of us with something that can be used as a powerful tool for building people up or a powerful weapon for tearing them down, and it's the tongue – the words we speak to other people. This morning I want us to think about: How much attention do you give to the things you say to people throughout the day? How much control do you have over your tongue?

I think a lot of people don't pay much attention to what comes out of their mouths. I have an air compressor at home and when the pressure reaches a certain point, the relief valve blows. I think our tongues can be like a relief valve on a really low setting. (Picture) Whatever fills our thoughts comes spitting out of our mouths without a lot of filtering. Words flow pretty easily, and those words can be good, but they can also be harmful. They have the power to build up or to tear down. They can be a healing ointment or a deadly arrow. How much attention do you give to what you say?

Today we're going to look at an interesting passage in 1 Corinthians. Paul is going to address a problem he saw in the church of Corinth and the principle behind what he teaches them is a principle we need to take to heart when it comes to the way we use our tongues. God doesn't want them to be a relief valve, he wants us to have control and use them for good.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:26.

*What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.*

After spending several hours in this passage, I started to see this verse a little differently than I've seen it before. I think Paul was acknowledging that whenever the people in Corinth came together for worship, everybody had something they wanted to say – for some it was a hymn, for others a lesson or revelation, for others a tongue, and others an interpretation. He noted earlier in chapter 14 that they were eager for manifestations of the Spirit and I think what he's pointing out here is that everybody wanted to say something when they got together.

But that was the problem. Since everyone was speaking it was chaotic and disorderly and it wasn't helping anyone. Imagine a whole church where hundreds of people are trying to get their turn at the mic! It wouldn't be helpful!

So Paul is trying to bring order and he begins by bringing a new standard to go by. Rather than being a free-for-all and everyone saying what they wanted to say, he says, *"Let all things be done for building up."* That's the goal. Let speaking be done in such a way that it builds up the church. And as we'll see in the following verses, that means not everyone can speak! Not everyone can say what they want to say. A lot of people are going to have to be quiet and listen. It's not just about saying what you want to say when you go to church, it's about building up the church. And in order for that to happen, not everyone can speak.

So who should speak and who shouldn't? That's where Paul goes next. In their context he could see three situations where changes needed to be made in who was speaking in order for their church gatherings to be beneficial for everyone. So he gives them some instructions for each of these situations. The first had to do with those who had the gift of tongues.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:27-28.

*If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret.<sup>28</sup> But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.*

So even though there were a bunch of people that wanted to speak in tongues when they went to church, Paul says most of them should keep silent – only two, or at the most three should speak. They should speak in turn and not all at the same time, and there should be an interpreter. And if no one was there to interpret, they should all remain silent in that setting.

This would have been a huge change from what was going on. But Paul was trying to shift their thinking – it isn't about everyone saying what they wanted to say, it's about building up the church. That's what would need to happen with those speaking in tongues in order for them to build up the church.

The second situation Paul saw that needed to change was with those who came with words of prophecy to share. Again, there would have been several who

wanted to speak and it appears that's what they'd been doing. But it was going overboard and causing problems. So these are the instructions Paul gives them so that the gift of prophecy could actually build up the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:29-33a.

*Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. <sup>30</sup> If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. <sup>31</sup> For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, <sup>32</sup> and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. <sup>33</sup> For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.*

So again, even though there were several people who wanted to share words of prophecy, most of them were to keep silent. Only two or three should speak and they were to do so one at a time. When they spoke, the others were to weigh what was said. The gift of prophecy was different than the prophecies in the Old Testament. According to the Reformation Study Bible, *"The gift of prophecy is speech that reports something that God spontaneously brings to mind or "reveals" to the speaker, but which is spoken in merely human words, not words of God. Therefore, it can have mistakes and must be tested or evaluated."*

That's how I think Paul understood it and why he said that one person should speak at a time while the others weighed what was said. And if in that process, someone else receives a revelation right there and then, the original speaker should stop and be quiet while they listen to and test that revelation. That's how the church could be built up..

Again, this was very different than what they had been doing and experiencing, but as Paul says in verse 31, this is the way to share prophetic words so that all may learn and be encouraged. God is not a God of confusion but of peace, which implies that when you gather together for worship to hear from God, there shouldn't be chaos and confusion. There should be order and peace. So again we see the principle that it's not about everyone saying what they want to say, it's about building up the church.

The third situation Paul saw that needed to change had to do with what was going on with some of the women who were speaking in the church. These verses can sound very harsh toward women, but if you understand what was going on in that

church and culture it can help to see where Paul was coming from and why he writes what he writes. So I'm going to read the verses and try to give some context and explanation.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35.

*As in all the churches of the saints,<sup>34</sup> the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.<sup>35</sup> If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.*

Sounds pretty harsh and it's definitely one of those passages that's difficult to interpret in light of what the rest of Scripture teaches about women. It sounds like Paul is a woman-hater and felt like women really had no place in the church other than to just sit quietly. But let's take a moment to think through the context.

These verses remind me of some things we saw at the beginning of chapter 11 where some of the women were pushing against the tradition of wearing head coverings when they gathered for worship. Women were supposed to wear head coverings and men were supposed to take theirs off – they did this for a reason. Taking the head covering off symbolized the glory of God in creating male and female in his image, and putting the head covering on symbolized the glory of God in creating male and female as distinct and different. So the head coverings demonstrated both the equality and the distinctiveness in the sexes. And recognizing that distinctiveness for the glory of God was important to Paul when they gathered for worship, so he established the tradition of head coverings and did not want them to toss it aside.

Now in chapter 14 I think he is confronting a similar issue where the distinctions between male and female were being discarded along with the glory of God that was demonstrated in them. It appears that women were stepping into a role that God had created for men and it had to do with headship in marriage and the church. In 1 Corinthians 11:3 Paul wrote: *“But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.”* So in the same way that the head of man is Christ and the head of Christ is God, the head of a wife is her husband. That's how God designed these relationships.

We would never support a reversal in headship when it comes to mankind and Christ. We would never say “The head of Christ is man.” Likewise, we would never support the idea that the head of God (the Father) is Christ. That’s just not how it is. And the same is true when it comes to male and female. When you look at what Scripture teaches about the distinct roles of male and female you would never come away thinking that the head of a husband is his wife. That’s not how God designed it. The head of a wife is her husband. You can see that all the way back in the original creation of mankind. You can see it in 1 Corinthians 11:3 that I just read. You can also see it in Ephesians 5:23 where Paul writes: *“For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church.”*

So Scripture teaches that a husband is to fulfill his role of headship in marriage and it would be out of place for a wife to try to take over that role. Similarly, when it comes to headship in the church, which is the role of elder or overseer, qualified men have been called by God to step into that role and it would be out of place if a woman were to try to do so. She would be putting herself in a place where she would be the head of her husband and everyone else in the church and that’s not the way God designed for it to be.

But that’s what appears to have been happening in Corinth. There was a group of women in that culture who were trying to obliterate the distinction between the sexes and that way of thinking was having an influence in the church. So some women were showing up to church and putting themselves in the role of elders and speaking as if they had elder authority over the church and Paul saw it as a barrier that would prevent the church from being built up. So in the same way he gave instructions when it came to speaking in tongues and prophecy, he gave instructions when it came to women who were speaking with elder authority. He told them to remain silent. I don’t think he was saying that women should never speak in any situation at church, because earlier on he encourages people to speak and doesn’t prohibit women. Paul deeply appreciated the ministry of women in the church and had close friends and partners in ministry who were women. But when it came to the role of elder authority, he did not permit women to step into those roles.

So hopefully that helps make sense of these verses. We could spend a lot of time digging into that particular topic, but I want to get back to the main point in this

passage – when you come to church, it’s not about everyone saying what they want to say, it’s about building up the church. If your speaking is going to cause disorder and confusion, like Paul saw happening with these three situations, you need to remain silent: *“Let all things be done for building up.”* Put your own desires to be heard aside for the sake of the church.

Now, it appears that Paul knew that by saying these things he was going to face opposition, so he finishes up by flexing his apostolic muscles a little bit...

Read 1 Corinthians 14:36-40.

*Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?*<sup>37</sup> *If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.*<sup>38</sup> *If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.*<sup>39</sup> *So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.*<sup>40</sup> *But all things should be done decently and in order.*

So he comes back to the main point and the goal for when they meet together: *“Let all things be done for building up.”*

Now, when it comes to us, we don’t struggle with having too many people trying to speak in tongues or prophecy on Sunday mornings, and we don’t have women who are trying to become elders. So as I was thinking about this text and the main point behind what he’s saying, I could see a more personal application that I brought up in the introduction. The problem with that church was that everybody was just saying whatever they wanted to say and it was causing problems in the church. So Paul was redirecting them so that the words that were spoken were intentional for building up the church. And I think that’s something we can apply to our lives as well.

What kind of effect are the words you say having on other people? Are you using your words to build people up, or just saying whatever you feel like saying? Is your tongue a relief valve or do you have it under control? Is it a tool to build others up or a weapon that tears them down? Whether we’re speaking in church or at work or at home with the family or in the classroom with friends, God wants our words to build others up. Ephesians 4:29 says: *“Let no corrupting talk come*

*out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”*

There is power in what you say and you can use that power for good or evil. Are you using your words to build people up? *“Let all things be done for building up.”*