

SUNDAY JANUARY 28
9:00AM | 11:00AM

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P O W E R JANUARY 2024
SERMON SERIES

Sunday, January 28, 2024
“Building Up” | Charlie Berthoud
Ephesians 4:25-32

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So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up.”

Wouldn't it be nice if we lived by that? Building up is hard work; tearing down is easy. We need to remember that we are all beloved children of God.

In John 3.1 we read “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.”

We make this affirmation in baptism, celebrating the one being baptized as a beloved child of God, remembering that we all are **all** beloved children of God.



**I am a
beloved
child of God!**

In some way we all are wearing little signs that affirm who we are as beloved children of God.

However, the “evil talk” that too often comes out of our mouths tear apart our signs. I’ve asked three people to help illustrate this point. Note: I gave them the words to say.

“Charlie, you are weird.”

“Charlie, you are stupid.”

“Charlie, you are ugly.”

Words can hurt. Words can damage us.

Fortunately, the good news is, as far as I know (!), those three people don’t really think those things about me.

And even more important good news is that despite whatever evil talk is around us, God continues to love us, to claim us as beloved children.

Words matter, words have power. This is why we’re doing this five-week series called WORD POWER.

If you didn’t hear Megan’s sermon and Betsy’s testimony last week about the importance of words and their power to hurt and to heal, it’s worth your time.

The sad reality is that words are often used to hurt people. We live in the midst of a bullying epidemic. Bullying has always been a problem, and it has been amplified by the social isolation of Covid, and the ever-expanding world of social media. It is especially bad for kids. And it’s even worse for any kid who is “different” in any way.

This past week I watched a news report about a nine-year-old girl getting bullied for having the “wrong” kind of water bottle. Too often we hear tragic results from bullying.

If you are being bullied or have been bullied, I hope you know that there are people who care about you, and that you are a beloved child of God.

While I would guess that few of us here are actively bullying other people, I'm guessing a lot of us speak hurtful words—maybe from lingering bitterness, or insecurity, or trying to be funny.

There is an old saying “Don’t lift yourself up by putting others down.”

Out of my own insecurity and my desire to be liked, in my teen years I was quite sarcastic, always trying to make people laugh with jokes about other people. I was really good at trying to lift myself up by putting others down.

One day at summer camp, a fellow camper had heard enough, and he yelled at me, saying something like “Charlie, stop with the sarcasm. It’s not funny and it’s not nice.”

I was embarrassed and ashamed at the time, but over the years, I’ve been grateful for the truth of his words, which have helped me watch my words.

We need to be careful with our words because hurtful words stay with us.

I know I could hear 10 or 20 or 100 nice things said about me, but I’ll focus on the one negative or hurtful. I’m guessing I’m not the only person here who feels like that.

There is an old story with many variations which is appropriate to share here. Once upon a time, in a faraway village, a rich man used to say mean things about people and spread gossip about people.

One day, he came to himself, and realized that his words had hurt many people, so he went to visit the shrine on a mountain overlooking the village. He told the holy man that his words had hurt many people and he wondered what he could do to make amends.

The holy man said, “Bring me a pillow.” The rich man thought this was strange, but he got a pillow and brought it back up the mountain. The holy man cut the pillow open and shook all the feathers out and he blew down into the valley.

Then the holy man said, “Now go get all those feathers.” The rich man said, “that would be impossible, they have spread all over the place.”

The holy man responded, “So have your words. Go apologize to all the people your words have hurt and be mindful of your words from this day onward.”

When we say something hurtful, it’s out there, and it’s often impossible to get it back. One hurtful sentence, or one hurtful email, or one hurtful social media post can do a lot of damage. And once it’s out there it really can’t ever fully disappear.

So, we need to be careful and smart and prayerful with our words.

In the little book of James, we are admonished to tame our tongues.

More often than we realize, the best option is to say nothing. As the old saying goes: If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.

A few weeks ago, I came across a delightful quote from an unnamed novel, where the mother says to her adult daughter: “You have lost many opportunities to say nothing.”

I’m reasonably sure that each of us has lost opportunities to say nothing.

Other times we need to say words to encourage, support, and build up each other, as our scripture from Ephesians reminds us.

Let’s say it together:

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths,
but only what is useful for building up.”

These words come from the little book of Ephesians, which was written to help people learn that the Christian life is about transformation, about living in new ways, as new people.

The core of the letter is in Ephesians 2 where we read:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith... For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.”

Much of the rest of Ephesians contrasts the old life and the new life, inviting us to grow into newness, to become new people, to change, to improve, to become more Christ-like.

As Christians, we are called into a new life. Part of that new life means using our words carefully to build up the people around us.

Our words have the power to build up people.

I remember when our kids were younger, we heard that for every criticism or re-direction you give your kid, you should give three or five or ten affirmations. Our kids (now in their 20s) are great, but some days it was hard to find all those affirmations. It's important to build up kids. And adults too.

It's so easy to see the mistakes, the faults. It's so easy to criticize and be negative. The same is true in work relationships and in marriage. A good relationship is built slowly, day by day, brick by brick. Every good and kind and helpful word is another brick in the construction. The scary thing is that one hurtful sentence can take out a lot of bricks.

Building up each other doesn't mean we always just say nice things and ignore wrongdoing or mistakes. Sometimes we have to confront people and deal with difficult topics. This is when we need to pray a lot and then do our best to speak the truth in love.

We are people of the Book, the Bible, and the Bible is all about the Word of God. So we read and study and ponder the word. This is why we're spending time in Exodus this month.

So in our tradition, we value the word of God.

- In Genesis, we read how God's words make the world happen; God speaks creation into being: "Let there be light, and there was light."
- In the gospel of John, we read how Jesus is described as the word made flesh, dwelling among us, full of grace and truth.
- In Colossians, we hear the admonition: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

My takeaway is that God is speaking God's word to us; God's word is a gift to us. The hope is to get God's word of love in our hearts, in our lives, in our world--and in our mouths, in the words we choose to speak and write and share.

Building one another up with our words requires attention, focus, deliberate effort. In the spirit of deliberate effort to help our words build up, I wrote in our weekly CONNECTIONS email. (If you're interested in getting that email, contact the church office.)

I suggested that you take Ephesians 4.29 or another one like it about the power of words and tape it to your bathroom mirror, or wherever you brush your teeth, to help you remember to use your mouth, your tongue, and your words for goodness, and kindness, and love.

Since then, I've been thinking. Between our email and our worship service, something like 500 people have heard the encouragement to use words to build up. What if those 500 people all intentionally said one positive thing, one encouraging thing, one up-building thing each day, over the next week.

That would be 3500 words of building up in our community. Imagine the impact. Imagine if we did that every week.

Lots of people would have stronger "I am a beloved child of God" shields. Lots of people would feel better about themselves. Lots of people would find new courage and new strength to persevere in challenging circumstances.

God's word builds us up. May our words build up each other and thus continue the life and ministry of Jesus, to make this world a better place. Amen.