

# war of words

getting to the  
heart of your  
communication  
struggles

Paul David Tripp

**R&R**

P U B L I S H I N G

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# Contents

Preface	ix
<b>Part One: Talk Is Not Cheap</b>	
1. God Speaks	3
2. Satan Speaks	17
3. The Word in the Flesh	33
4. Idol Words	51
<b>Part Two: A New Agenda for Our Talk</b>	
5. He Is King!	67
6. Following the King for All the Wrong Reasons	85
7. Speaking for the King	105
8. Getting to the Destination	123
9. Citizens in Need of Help	135
10. On the King's Mission	157
<b>Part Three: Winning the War of Words</b>	
11. First Things First	177
12. Winning the War of Words	199
13. Choosing Your Words	221

# Preface

WHAT makes someone write a book? Sometimes authors write because of expertise. Through education and experience they have gained a specialized knowledge and understanding of a particular topic. Their writing allows their readers to grow in the same area without undergoing all the training and experiences themselves.

An author may also write out of *desperation*. In his life there is a weakness or struggle that needs to be addressed. He examines, studies, meditates, and applies what he has learned to help himself grow. He then puts the fruit of his labors down on paper in the hope that others will benefit as he has.

I have not written this book out of expertise, but out of desperation. I have told many people during the writing process that I did not write this book, it wrote me!

When I was sixteen years old, I was rehearsing early one Saturday morning for a statewide speech competition. My mom heard me from her bedroom next door. She got up, came into the room and asked, “May I interrupt you for a moment?” I didn’t really mind because I was ready to take a break. Then she said something that was nothing short of prophetic. “Paul,” she said, “God has given you a special ability to communicate, but watch out, because it will also be your

greatest struggle.” Those words ring much truer to me today than they did the morning she spoke them.

It is true that our greatest strengths are also our greatest weaknesses. This book has been penned out of weakness—my weakness. But it is weakness that has been tempered by the intervention of God’s amazing grace and the powerful insights of Scripture.

In the pages that follow, we will examine something that sets us off from the rest of creation, something we do repeatedly every day: we talk. This book, however, is different from most on the topic. It is not a discussion of the techniques and skills for effective communication. Rather, it is the story of the great battle for our hearts that is the reason for our struggle with words. Yet there is more here than just an examination of the battle. We will also get a grasp of God’s plan for our talk and celebrate his enabling grace.

Thank you to all the people whose words God has used to change my heart. May God change yours as well, through the pages of this book. Thanks also to Sue Lutz, whose skill with words has made this a better book.

**(part one)**

# talk is not cheap

Words kill, words give life;  
they're either poison or fruit—  
you choose. (Prov. 18:21)

*That temper of mine!  
Forgive me, Lord—  
I let it get the better of me again.  
When will I ever learn to wait  
until I've heard the whole story,  
to respond under pressure  
as Christ would,  
to meet evil with good?  
I'm growing, Lord,  
but my growth is far too slow.  
Till my life—  
break up clods of pride,  
root out weeds of selfishness,  
plow under every vestige of stubbornness.  
Cultivate me and sow liberally  
more of the Spirit's  
fruit-bearing seed.  
Send showers  
and storms (if need be);  
shine brightly on my soul.  
Then I will sprout forth  
patience and kindness and love—  
and self-control—  
in abundance,  
And my tongue will learn  
to help and heal  
and praise the Name  
of the One through Whom  
I pray,  
Amen.*

## Chapter One

# God Speaks

And God blessed  
them and said to  
them . . .

(Gen. 1:28)

NO matter where you live, no matter what you do every day, there is one thing that you do all day long. You talk. From the first “Is it time to get up already?” to the final “Good-night, I gotta get some sleep,” you talk. In

the bedroom, bathroom, hallway, and kitchen, in the car, the store, the factory, and the boardroom, you talk. To your spouse, children, friends, family, neighbors, and fellow-workers, you talk. It is what human beings do, almost without interruption and often without a thought about how important it is to human life. The ability to communicate is one of the things that separates us from the rest of creation. We are people and we talk. We need to recognize how “wordy” our lives actually are.

The word itself doesn’t seem to carry the freight. “Talk” seems so normal, so ordinary, so unimportant, so harmless. Yet there are few things we do that are more important. And underneath the normality of it all is a great struggle, a war of words that we fight every day. Here are some familiar ways we talk about our struggle with words.

“I never thought when we were going together that he would talk to me the way he does now!”



“I can’t believe what I’m hearing when my son talks to me!”

“She hung up on me right in the middle of a sentence.”

“My parents never talk to me unless I am in trouble.”

“He only talks to me nicely when he wants something.”

“He talks so much it’s hard to get a word in edgewise.”

“I’m not comfortable with the way she talks to me about other people.”

“It seems like we never have enough time to talk.”

“He talked a long time, but I don’t have a clue about what he was trying to say.”

“Why do we always seem to end up in an argument?”

“What happened? We seemed to be so close and now we hardly ever talk.”

“I feel like I spend all my time breaking up my kids’ arguments!”

“Yes, he asked for my forgiveness, but I’m having a hard time letting go of the hurt. What he said was so cruel.”

“I wish our family could go through an entire day without someone yelling.”

“I don’t know why I waste my time talking. It doesn’t seem to make a bit of difference.”

“We’ll never get to the bottom of things if everyone keeps talking at once!”

“She always has to have the last word.”

“He talks so sweetly to me when we’re in public.”

“Sometimes I think it would be better if we quit talking altogether.”

These are all things that families have said to me in counseling. Taken together, they capture the struggle with words that all of us have. Who among us has not been hurt by the words of another? Who hasn’t regretted something we ourselves have said? Who hasn’t had to referee an argument? Who hasn’t wanted to talk seriously with a loved one, yet there seems to be no time? Who among us can say, “My words are *always* appropriate to the situation and they are *always* kindly spoken”?

This world of talk—the world that exists behind the pub-

lic calm and kindness we are all able to muster—is what this book is about. If you are able to say, “I have no problem with my words,” then you don’t need to read any further. But if you recognize, like me, that there is still a war of words going on in your life, if there is still evidence of a struggle with fitting and loving communication, if there is still room for growth in your world of talk, then this book is for you.

The purpose of this book is not just to hold out the lofty standard God has set for us and then remind us how far we all fall short of it. Most of us are painfully aware of the distance between where we are and where God wants us to be. No, this book is meant to be a book of hope. It is a book about change, change that is possible because of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the *Word* who is the only hope for *our* words! In him alone do we find victory in our own war of words.

I have written this book because I am convinced that we do not understand how radically the gospel can change the way we understand and solve our communication problems. We do not have to be discouraged! We do not have to live “stuck,” and we do not have to give in to the cynicism that is such a temptation in this harsh and fallen world.

This book is a book of hope because it is rooted in four fundamental, life-altering principles:

- God has a wonderful plan for our words that is far better than any plan we could come up with on our own.
- Sin has radically altered our agenda for our words, resulting in much hurt, confusion, and chaos.
- In Christ Jesus we find the grace that provides all we need to speak as God intended us to speak.
- The Bible plainly and simply teaches us how to get from where we are to where God wants us to be.

In every chapter of this book we will consider God’s plan, our sin, his grace, and Scripture’s map. My prayer is that this

will lead you to a new awareness of God's design for his children, a new insight into your personal struggle with sin, a renewed reliance on God's abundant grace, and a practical biblical wisdom that results in a more God-honoring, people-benefiting life of talk.

## Our Talk: The Real World

We drove through Philadelphia in silence. Finally, we had a night out with each other, yet we drove along with neither of us saying anything. It wasn't supposed to be this way. The silence was deafening and it seemed to last for hours, even though it was actually only a few minutes. In our heads we both were playing the videotape of what had happened earlier, nursing our hurt and reaffirming our innocence. Fortunately, it wasn't long before the silence was broken, forgiveness was sought and received, and we were once again enjoying rather than tolerating each other's company.

It all had started so innocently and so typically. Both of us were at the end of a long Friday at the end of a long week. Both of us had our own agenda for the evening and our own set of expectations for the other person. Both of us were more demanding than serving, and thus quickly hurt when the other rejected our ideas for the evening. Finally, both of us spoke out of that hurt. We accused rather than listened, criticized rather than looked at ourselves. Each of us gave up on the other and slid into the cocoon of our own hurt and anger.

You may be thinking, *Paul, what a depressing way to start a book that is supposed to be filled with hope!* But this mundane encounter on an unremarkable night in the Tripp family captures everything this book is about. This book is about God's wonderful plan for our words, which protects us from the pain and pressure of such moments. It is about our sin, which misdirects and distorts our words so that they are more about the desires of self than love of another. This book is about the

amazing grace of the Lord that calls us back to God's purpose; grace that rescues, restores, forgives, and delivers. And this book is about simple biblical steps of repentance and change. It is about a glorious Lord who is willing and able to take our troubled worlds of talk and transform them to places where love is the motivation and peace is the result. God is at work, taking people who instinctively speak for themselves and transforming them into people who effectively speak for him.

That night, my wife Luella and I did get out of his plan for a moment, but we have learned that his grace is sufficient, that his strength is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). We have seen that there is a way out. In the midst of utter personal failure, we can, by his strength, win the war of words. That is what this book is about.

## Words Have Value

Words are powerful, important, significant. It was meant to be that way. When we speak, it must be with the realization that God has given our words significance. He has ordained for them to be important. Words were significant at Creation and at the Fall. They are significant to redemption. God has given words value.

He has a design for our communication, a specific plan and purpose for the talk of the body of Christ. I hope to lay a solid biblical foundation for understanding communication by starting where we first hear words spoken, then moving to the Fall to see the part words played in this world-altering event, and finally considering words from the vantage point of redemption. All the talk in the world is related to these events. Understanding this will orient us to the significance of our words, the reasons we struggle so much with them, and the design God has for the talk of his people.

Most communication books focus on techniques and skills without any recognition that our struggle with words goes much

deeper. The war of words has its roots in the Garden of Eden. As you understand how these moments shaped our world of talk, you will begin to understand your own struggle with words and the way out that God has provided. This book will take an honest look at the problem so that it can offer you change that is more than temporary and cosmetic. If you understand the roots of your trouble, you can experience change that will last.

## God Speaks!

You do not really understand the significance of words until you realize that the first words that human ears ever heard were not the words of another human being, but the words of God! The value of every piece of human communication is rooted in the fact that *God* speaks. Into the sights and sounds of the newly created world came the voice of God, speaking words of human language to Adam and Eve. When God chose to reveal himself that way, he raised talk to a place of highest significance as his primary vehicle of truth. Through words, we would come to know the most important truths that could be known—truths that reveal God's existence and glory, truths that give life. As we seek to understand the world of human talk, it is vital that we understand it from the perspective of Genesis 1—the only time in human history when there was no war of words.

In Genesis 1, the world of communication was a world of peace, truth, and life. Words were never used as weapons. Truth was never used to tear down. Words were always spoken in love, and human communication never broke the bonds of peace.

It is a world that can teach us a lot about communication. First, *God reveals himself, his plan, and his purpose in words*. Immediately after creating Adam and Eve, God spoke to them. It was his choice to reveal himself, to define his will, and to give identity to Adam and Eve by means of human language. All of his other means of self-revelation were explained and defined by this one central means.

God, the sovereign Creator and Lord, spoke to Adam and Eve in words that they could understand! Let the wonder of this grip you. The infinite and almighty One makes himself knowable and understandable through human language! From the moment of creation, God is not distant and aloof. He is not hiding in silence. He comes near and uses words to reveal himself and explain everything else. God is not just a God who *does*, he is a God who *speaks*—powerfully, elaborately, consistently, comprehensively, and clearly to his people. Each phase of his work is marked by his words. He does not leave his people without a witness.

God's communication is lovingly designed to address the need of the moment in simple words that can be understood. Before he works, God reveals what he is about to do; as he is working, he talks of what he is doing; and when he has finished, he interprets what he has done. He is a God who can be known because he is a God who speaks. Scripture presents him as the great standard for all communication.

Through his words God defines his character, his will, his plan and purpose, and his truth. Words like *rock, sun, fortress, shield, shepherd, father, judge, lamb, door, master, water, and bread* explain who he is and what he is doing. We are so familiar with these words that we tend to forget their significance. But these are the words by which we have come to know the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords! You cannot understand human communication without starting here, with the glory of God and his amazing grace in revealing himself to us in terms we understand, yet which radically alter our perspective on all that is.

No better example exists than the words of Isaiah 40.

*You who bring good tidings to Zion,  
go up on a high mountain.  
You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem,  
lift up your voice with a shout,  
lift it up, do not be afraid;*

*say to the towns of Judah,  
 "Here is your God!"  
 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,  
 and his arm rules for him.  
 See, his reward is with him,  
 and his recompense accompanies him.  
 He tends his flock like a shepherd:  
 He gathers the lambs in his arms  
 and carries them close to his heart;  
 he gently leads those that have young.*

*Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,  
 or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?  
 Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,  
 or weighed the mountains on the scales  
 and the hills in a balance?  
 Who has understood the mind of the LORD,  
 or instructed him as his counselor?  
 Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him,  
 and who taught him the right way?  
 Who was it that taught him knowledge  
 or showed him the path of understanding?*

*Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket;  
 they are regarded as dust on the scales;  
 he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.  
 Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires,  
 nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.  
 Before him all the nations are as nothing;  
 they are regarded by him as worthless  
 and less than nothing.*

*To whom, then, will you compare God?  
 What image will you compare him to?  
 As for an idol, a craftsman casts it,  
 and a goldsmith overlays it with gold*

*and fashions silver chains for it.  
A man too poor to present such an offering  
selects wood that will not rot.  
He looks for a skilled craftsman  
to set up an idol that will not topple.*

*Do you not know?  
Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?  
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?  
He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,  
and its peoples are like grasshoppers.  
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,  
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.  
He brings princes to naught  
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.  
No sooner are they planted,  
no sooner are they sown,  
no sooner do they take root in the ground,  
than he blows on them and they wither,  
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.*

*“To whom will you compare me?  
Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.  
Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:  
Who created all these?  
He who brings out the starry host one by one,  
and calls them each by name.  
Because of his great power and mighty strength,  
not one of them is missing.*

*Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and complain, O Israel,  
“My way is hidden from the LORD;  
my cause is disregarded by my God”?  
Do you not know?*



*Have you not heard?  
 The LORD is the everlasting God,  
 the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
 He will not grow tired or weary,  
 and his understanding no one can fathom.  
 He gives strength to the weary  
 and increases the power of the weak.  
 Even youths grow tired and weary,  
 and young men stumble and fall;  
 but those who hope in the LORD  
 will renew their strength.  
 They will soar on wings like eagles;  
 they will run and not grow weary,  
 they will walk and not be faint. (vv. 9–31)*

Here is human language at its highest, functioning as the window through which God is seen.

God's words not only define him, they define his creation as well. They give identity, meaning, and purpose to all God has created. We only know *ourselves* when we listen to the words he has spoken about us. God tells us who we are, defines what we are to do and the way we are to do it. None of these things could we discover on our own! The only hope for Adam and Eve was that God would speak to them, giving them identity and purpose, and making sense out of the world in which they had been placed.

God's words set boundaries and give freedom. His words create life and bring death. God created talk and his first words to Adam and Eve demonstrate its significance. Words are not cheap. Words reveal, define, explain, and shape.

## People Speak

As we look at communication from the vantage point of creation, we also need to notice that *Adam and Eve talk*. Perhaps

this point seems too obvious to bear mentioning, but we should not let its significance slip by us. Adam and Eve's ability to communicate in words made them unique in all of creation. They could take their thoughts, desires, and emotions and share them with each other. They were like God; they could talk! By giving them this ability, God was setting the shape of their lives.

There is nothing we depend on more than our ability to give and receive communication. In quiet conversation over coffee, in anxious conversation in a busy airport, in defending why we are late for a curfew or didn't complete the task at work, we talk. In teaching our children or intervening in an argument, in a lengthy congressional debate or an intense discussion with a friend, people talk. In a quiet good night, in words of athletic challenge, in romantic words of love, in words of correction and rebuke, anger and irritation, people talk. In the confusing patter on a railway platform in India, with the voices of children walking home from school in Soweto, people talk.

Words direct our existence and our relationships. They shape our observations and define our experiences. We really come to know other people through conversation. We want to be alone when we have heard too many words and we feel alone when it has been a while since anyone has spoken to us.

In creating us with the ability to talk, God has not only set us apart from the rest of creation, but he has determined the nature of our lives and relationships. Want to learn? Listen and talk. Want to have a relationship? Listen and talk. Want to get a job? Listen and talk. Want to worship? Listen and talk. Want to parent your children? Listen and talk. Want to contribute to the body of Christ? Listen and talk. People communicate; it is the nature of our existence. Words affect all the other things we do as human beings. God created our talk and gave it its value.

In Genesis 1 there was a simplicity and beauty to the world of human communication. There was no communication struggle, no war of words. Everything that was spoken reflected the glory of God. There were no arguments and lies, no words of hate, no impatient, irritated retorts. There was no

yelling, cursing, or condemnation. There were no words spoken in pride, no deceptive, manipulative words, and no selfish ones. There were only true words, kindly and lovingly spoken, and thus no need for a book like this on communication. Every word met the standard of God's example and design.

Sadly, the world of Genesis 1 is long gone. The wonderful gift of communication has become the source of much sin and suffering. Too often, human beings speak and ignore God's design, destroying what he has made. As we look back with wonder at Genesis 1, we need to look forward to the day when the war of words will be over, when we will be with God and be like him, speaking only as he has designed, forever.

## Words Interpret

There is one more thing we can learn from Genesis 1 about words. *Words define, explain, and interpret.* Even though Adam and Eve were perfect people living in a perfect world in a perfect relationship with God, they still needed God to talk to them. Their world needed definition. They needed to understand themselves and to understand life. Everything needed to be interpreted, and for this Adam and Eve were dependent on God. They could not figure things out on their own. Whatever discoveries they would make about the world and their lives would need to be explained and defined by the words of God. Words interpret. Human communication, like God's, is all about organizing, interpreting, and explaining the world around us.

From the silly little explanations that come from the mouths of children ("Mommy, I know how balloons work") to the searching questions of teenagers ("Why is it so important to be celibate before marriage?") to the frustrated questions of the adult ("Why does it seem as if I work constantly, yet there is never enough money to go around?"), people use words to communicate the meaning they have assigned to things.

Little children exhaust their parents with a thousand “whys” a week because they want to understand their world. Teenagers spend endless hours on the phone discussing the events of the day with their friends. The old man sits in the park with his friend looking back at life, wondering aloud what it was all about. We talk because we want to know; in order to know, we must talk. Talk is not cheap because interpretation is not cheap. The way we interpret life determines how we will respond to it.

## Genesis 1 and Our Talk

What should we take away from our consideration of communication in Genesis 1? First, our words belong to the Lord. He is the Great Speaker. The wonder, the significance, the glory of human communication has its roots in *his* glory and in his decision to talk with us and allow us to talk with him and others. God has unlocked the doors of truth to us, using words as his key. The only reason we understand anything is that he has spoken. Words belong to God, but he has lent them to us so that we might know him and be used by him.

This means that words do not belong to us. Every word we speak must be up to God’s standard and according to his design. They should echo the Great Speaker and reflect his glory. When we lose sight of this, our words lose their only shelter from difficulty. Talk was created by God for *his* purpose. Our words belong to him.

## Getting Personal: Communication Self-Evaluation

Below are some of the fruits of godly talk (see Gal. 5:22–23). Evaluate yourself as you begin this book.

1. Does your talk with others lead to biblical problem solving?
2. Does your talk have a “stand together” or a “me against him/her/them” posture?
3. Do your words encourage others to be open and honest about their thoughts and feelings?
4. Are you approachable and teachable or defensive and self-protective when talking with others?
5. Is your communication healthy in the principal relationships in your life?
  - parent-child
  - husband-wife
  - extended family
  - sibling relationships
  - employer-employee
  - friend-friend
  - body of Christ
  - neighbor-neighbor
6. Does your talk encourage faith and personal spiritual growth in those around you?
7. Do you talk with others to develop relationships with them, or do you only talk to solve problems during times of trouble?
8. Do you speak humble and honest words of confession when you sin and words of sincere forgiveness when others sin against you?
9. Do your words reflect a willingness to serve others or a demand that they serve you?
10. As you face the struggles of talk, do you do so with a recognition of the gospel—God’s forgiveness, his enabling grace, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit?

I encourage you to start your reading of this book with honest self-examination. Confess your sins to God and others, and commit yourself to the work of change as you continue to read.