The Power of Words and the Wonder of God

John Piper and Justin Taylor
General Editors
In Memory of
John Bunyan

Of whose great *Pilgrim* book he truly wrote:

This book is writ in such a dialect
As may the minds of listless men affect:
It seems a novelty, and yet contains
Nothing but sound and honest gospel strains.
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Most importantly, we thank God for the gift of his Son Jesus Christ. We say with the apostle Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).
WORDS. We think words, hear words, speak words, sing words, write words, and read words—all the time. Every day.

What do words have to do with Christianity? Almost everything. At every stage in redemptive history—from the time before time, to God’s creation, to man’s fall, to Christ’s redemption, and to the coming consummation—“God is there and he is not silent.”\(^1\) God’s words decisively create, confront, convict, correct, and comfort. By his words he both interprets and instructs.

The Opening Scenes of the Bible

If you wanted to construct a biblical theology of words, you could get pretty far in just the first few pages of your Bible. The early chapters of Genesis are replete with God using words to create and order, name and interpret, bless and curse, instruct and warn.

God speaks ("And God said, ‘Let there be . . .’"), and reality results ("and there was . . ." “And it was so”). He names ("God called . . ."), and things are publicly identified. We learn later that it is "by the word of his power" that God’s Son, Jesus Christ, continually sustains and "upholds the universe" (Heb. 1:3).

Before God creates man, he first uses words to announce his intention ("Let us make . . ."). And once Adam and Eve are created, their first experience with God involves words, as he gives them the cultural mandate (Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, have dominion), explains their freedom ("You may . . ."), and warns them against disobeying his command ("You shall not . . .").

When Satan slithers onto the scene as a crafty serpent, his first action is to speak, and his wicked words are designed to call into question the very words of God. The first step is to sow the seed of
doubt ("Did God actually say . . .?"). And the second step is the explicit accusation that the Creator was really a liar ("You will not surely die").

When Adam and Eve rebel against the only restriction they were given, they express for the first time words that are so common for us today: fear ("I was afraid"), shame ("I hid myself"), and blame (that woman—whom you gave to be with me!).

God then interprets their new fallen world for them—and also gives the first words of the gospel, foretelling the time when he will send his Son to save his people and crush the head of his enemy. God uses words to tell of the coming Word made flesh (John 1).

Jesus, the Word Made Flesh

When God’s Son eventually enters into human history as the God-man, he lives by God’s Word (Luke 4:4), keeps God’s Word (John 8:55), and preaches God’s Word (Mark 2:2). The Father gave Jesus words, Jesus gave them to his followers, and his followers received them (John 17:8).

Jesus’ words are inseparable from his person and thus can be identified as having divine attributes. To be ashamed of Christ’s words is on the same level as being ashamed of Christ himself (Luke 9:26). His words are eternal: unlike heaven and earth, Christ’s words will remain forever (Matt. 24:35). They have power: Jesus could cast out spirits with “a word” (Matt. 8:16); he merely had to “say the word” and someone could be healed (Matt. 8:8). Jesus’ words are “spirit and life,” “the words of eternal life” (John 6:63, 68). Jesus’ words dwell or abide in those who are united to Christ and abiding in him (John 8:31; John 15:7; Col. 3:16). Only those who hear and keep Jesus’ word receive blessing and eternal life (Luke 11:28; John 5:24; 8:47, 52).

Those who heard him were “amazed at his words” (Mark 10:24), hanging on every word and marveling at his gracious speech (Luke 19:48; 4:22). They recognized that his words possessed a unique authority (Luke 4:32).

But Jesus critiqued those who used the words of their prayers to conceal the hypocrisy of their hearts, heaping up “empty phrases” and wanting to be “heard for their many words” (Matt.
6:7). He accused them of using their traditions to make “void the word of God” (Matt. 15:6). His own words found no place in their hearts—some couldn’t bear to hear his words, and some heard his words but refused to keep them (John 8:37, 43; 14:24). In response, Jesus’ enemies “plotted how to entangle him in his talk” (Matt. 22:15).

Jesus warned that how one hears and responds to Jesus’ words reveals the ultimate dividing line within salvation history: on the day of judgment we will each give an account “for every careless word,” being either justified or condemned by our words (Matt. 12:36–37), for “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart” (Matt. 15:18). If you hear and practice Christ’s words, you are like a wise man building a house on a rock-solid foundation that can remain standing even during a torrential storm. But hearing Christ’s words and failing to do them is like building a house on sand, which will crumble to the ground in the midst of the storm (Matt. 7:24–26).

Words and the Gospel

In the book of Acts and in the Epistles, the gospel message—the good and glorious news that “another true and obedient human being has come on our behalf, that he has lived for us the kind of life we should live but can’t, that he has paid fully the penalty we deserve for the life we do live but shouldn’t,” 3 with all of the personal and kingdom implications that that entails—is referred to as “the Word.”

As you read God’s Word and consider the deep implications of the gospel for your life, you’ll begin to discern a pattern: (1) God has holy standards for how we are to speak words and listen to words. (2) This side of heaven we will never fully measure up to God’s holy standard regarding the use of our tongue. (3) Jesus fulfilled what we (along with Adam, Israel, and every prophet, priest, and king) failed to do: his words were perfect words, without sin. By his punishment-bearing, substitutionary death, his words can become our words. (4) Our day-by-day failure to use our tongue as we ought—for God’s glory and for the good of his people—comes from a functional rejection of Christ the Word. It is only as we look to Jesus, rejoicing in him and in his atoning provision, that we are freed to walk—and talk—in his way. 4
How Should We Then Live?

If God is a God of words, and if Jesus and his gospel are inseparable, then how should we—those who seek to follow him—use our words?

The book of Proverbs is an excellent place to start, giving pithy statements about what godly and ungodly speech looks like. For a sampling, consider these contrasts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROVERB</th>
<th>GODLY WORDS</th>
<th>UNGODLY WORDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10:32</td>
<td>The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable.</td>
<td>The mouth of the wicked knows what is perverse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:18</td>
<td>The tongue of the wise brings healing.</td>
<td>Rash words are like sword thrusts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:1</td>
<td>A wise son hears his father's instruction.</td>
<td>A scoffer does not listen to rebuke.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:3</td>
<td>Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life.</td>
<td>He who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:10</td>
<td>With those who take advice is wisdom.</td>
<td>By insolence comes nothing but strife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:18</td>
<td>Whoever heeds reproof is honored.</td>
<td>Poverty and disgrace come to him who ignores instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14:3</td>
<td>The lips of the wise will preserve them.</td>
<td>By the mouth of a fool comes a rod for his back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14:25</td>
<td>A truthful witness saves lives.</td>
<td>One who breathes out lies is deceitful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:1</td>
<td>A soft answer turns away wrath.</td>
<td>A harsh word stirs up anger.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But there is so much more that can and should be said. In the pages of this book you'll find six authors who are striving to help us understand God's perspective on words. Whether it’s the words of relationships, words of eloquence, words of sarcasm, words of story, or words of song—all of these have to do with who we are and how we speak. What follows is an attempt to summarize briefly their chapters.
Paul Tripp
Tripp explains what all of us already know: our world of talk is a world of trouble. But in order to understand the war of words, we must first understand the war for the heart. Word problems are heart problems. Within each of our hearts there is a war between two kingdoms—the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God. One of the two is always ruling our hearts and shaping our talk. And only when our hearts are ruled by love—marked by self sacrifice for the redemptive good of others no matter what—will we overflow with wholesome words of love and grace.

Sinclair Ferguson
Ferguson expounds James 3:1–12, identifying four driving principles regarding the tongue: (1) the tongue is difficult to tame; (2) the tongue has a disproportionate power; (3) the tongue causes destruction; and (4) the tongue is plagued with a deadly inconsistency. After unpacking this imagery and showing the gospel implications, Ferguson exhorts us: (1) to realize that the depth of our sin, the pollution of our hearts, and our need of saving grace are all evidenced in our use of the tongue; (2) to recognize we are each a new creation in Christ; and (3) to continue in the Word.

John Piper
Eloquence involves combining words in order to make an impact on the listener or the reader. The apostle Paul said that he was sent by Christ to preach the gospel, but not to preach it with “eloquent wisdom” or with “lofty speech” (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1). In fact, Paul, says, using such eloquence would empty the cross of its power. Piper, through a study of 1 Corinthians, explores whether this means that eloquence—which the Bible itself seems to exhibit!—is discouraged. Piper concludes that Paul is discouraging a certain form of eloquence that is motivated by the exploitation of self and the belittling or ignoring of God. Biblically sanctioned eloquence, he argues, should humbly exalt Christ with the hope that God will use our language to help listeners retain interest, increase sympathy, awaken sensitivity, and feel the words powerfully.
Mark Driscoll
Driscoll argues that Scripture specifies four functions of the way in which shepherds should relate to those inside and outside the church. They are to feed the sheep (Christians, the flock of Jesus the Good Shepherd); rebuke the swine (who claim to worship God but live unrepentant lives in filthy sin); shoot the wolves (heretics, false teachers, and anyone who ravages the flock and feasts on the sheep); and beat the dogs (who bark at God’s people in an effort to control, intimidate, manipulate, use, abuse, terrify, harm, and devour them). The people in the undershepherd’s flock, in return, should pray for their pastor-shepherds, that God would give them a discerning mind, thick skin, a good sense of humor, a tender heart, a humble disposition, a supportive family, and evangelistic devotion.

Daniel Taylor
Taylor (related to me only in Christ!) argues that the best way to conceive of the Christian faith, and the faithful life, is to see yourself as a character in the greatest story ever told—a story to be lived, and not merely a set of propositions to be believed. The Bible, in other words, tells a master story and invites us to make it our personal story. Because all good stories are centered on characters making difficult choices with uncertain outcomes, we need to understand how the story of faith necessarily shapes how we live. Taylor illustrates all of this with a few stories of his own, showing that stories come from God and need to be passed on to the next generation.

Bob Kauflin
Kauflin argues that Christians tend to fall into one of three categories when it comes to the relationship between music and words: (1) music supersedes the word; (2) music undermines the word; (3) music serves the word. Arguing for this third paradigm, Kauflin suggests three implications: (1) Singing can help us remember words, which means that we should use melodies that are effective, sing words that God wants us to remember, and seek to memorize songs. (2) Singing can help us engage emotionally with words, which means that we need a broader emotional range in the songs we sing, and that singing them should be an emotional event. (3) Singing can help us use words to
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demonstrate and express our unity, which means singing songs that unite us instead of divide us, recognizing that musical creativity in the church has functional limits and that it is ultimately the gospel, not music, that unites us in Christ.

Our Prayer
When Moses stood before the Israelites, he spoke to them the words of a prayer-song, which began like this:

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak,
    and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.
May my teaching drop as the rain,
    my speech distill as the dew,
like gentle rain upon the tender grass,
    and like showers upon the herb.
For I will proclaim the name of the LORD;
    ascribe greatness to our God! (Deut. 32:1–3)

This is our prayer for this book as well. May our great and glorious God graciously use these imperfect words to equip and encourage you in a path of using life-giving words to honor his name, edify the church, and call the lost to the gospel of Jesus Christ.
I DON’T KNOW VERY MANY OF YOU, but there are three things that I know about you.

Three Things I Know about You
1) You Talk
First, I know you talk. Oh, my goodness, do you talk. Some of us more than others—some of us have trouble stopping—but all of us talk every day. Yes, even though we aren’t always aware of it, every day of our lives is filled with talk. Every moment is infected with talk. Every relationship and situation is dyed with words. We’re word-ish people. You could hardly identify a more formative aspect of our daily lives than our world of words. Yet whenever I begin to think, speak, or write about this topic, I experience a bit of frustration. What frustrates me is the vocabulary of communication. The terms are so mundane—words, talk, dialogue, conversation, communication. They just don’t seem to carry the freight of how profoundly significant and important this area of life actually is.

Think with me about the significance of this part of our lives. We have to start by acknowledging that the very first words ever spoken were not spoken by a human being. The very first words ever spoken were spoken by God. Perhaps one of the ways that
I’m most obviously God-like is that like God, I talk. You and I will never understand the profound importance of words unless we start here. Words belong to the Lord. What this means is that whenever you take words as belonging to you, your words lose their shelter from difficulty. You have never spoken a word that belongs to you, because words belong to the Lord. We think that words are not that important because we think of words as little utilitarian tools for making our life easier and more efficient, when they are actually a powerful gift given by a communicating God for his divine purpose.

All of us are tricked into thinking that words aren’t really that important, because they fill all those little mundane moments of our lives. Maybe that’s exactly why they are profoundly important. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but you only make three or four big decisions in your life. Most of us won’t be written up in history books. Several decades after you die, the people you leave behind will struggle to remember the events of your life. You live your life in the utterly mundane. And if God doesn’t rule your mundane, he doesn’t rule you, because that’s where you live.

The book of Proverbs is, in ways, a treatise on talk. I would summarize it this way: words give life; words bring death—you choose. What does this mean? It means you have never spoken a neutral word in your life. Your words have direction to them. If your words are moving in the life direction, they will be words of encouragement, hope, love, peace, unity, instruction, wisdom, and correction. But if your words are moving in a death direction, they will be words of anger, malice, slander, jealousy, gossip, division, contempt, racism, violence, judgment, and condemnation. Your words have direction to them. When you hear the word talk you ought to hear something that is high and holy and significant and important. May God help us never to look at talk as something that doesn’t matter.

2) The Saddest and Most Celebratory Moments of Your Life Have Been Accompanied by Talk

There’s a second thing I know about you. I know that the saddest and most celebratory moments of your life have been accompanied by talk. When I stand up to speak or sit down to write, I feel like there’s a company of a hundred people behind me who have all contributed
to everything I know, everything I speak, and everything I think about the ways of my Lord. These people have written and spoken into my ears glorious and celebratory truths that have penetrated my heart and changed everything in my life. I’ll celebrate God’s gift of the words of these people forever.

I also have sat with people who are thirty-five, forty-five, or fifty years old who’ll talk to me about horrible things that their mom and dad said to them decades ago. When they begin to recount the ugly words of yesteryear, they’ll weep as if it happened yesterday. In these moments, I’m confronted again with the scary, painful, long-term shelf life of ugly, hateful, abusive talk.

On the other hand, what’s more exciting than waiting for a child to speak his or her first words? Little Jimmy toddles into the room and he goes *blu-blah-blah-blah*. And Dad says to his wife, “I think he said ‘John Calvin.’ I’m sure. I’m sure it was ‘John Calvin.’” Well, it was probably just gas, but the parents are expectant and excited because Jimmy is on the cusp of something that is magnificently human—he is getting ready to talk!

What is sadder in all of life than when a human being goes silent? I remember it well with my dear mom. We actually had some preparation. She had been sick for a while, and we were called to her bedside. We knew that this was the end, but we were privileged to spend her final week with her. We sang to Mom every hymn in Christendom. I finally bent over her bed and whispered in her ear, “Mom, we’re out of hymns, we’re going to sing to you the Beatles.” She smiled. But with all that preparation I was not ready for that moment when Mom fell silent. There was something horrible and de-human about that moment. I wanted to hear her say “I love you” one more time. I wanted to finish conversations that we had never finished. I had so much that I wanted to say, so much that I wanted to hear. But she had spoken her last words.

You see, talk is a very, very important dimension of your humanity, your God-likeness. So your saddest and most celebratory moments of life have all been accompanied by talk.

3) Your World of Talk Is a World of Trouble

There’s a third thing that I know about everyone reading this book: your world of talk is a world of trouble. I know this for sure, not
because I know you but because I know me. It’s to my grief that I am not writing these words as an expert. No, I’m writing as a man in moment-by-moment need of the rescuing grace of my Redeemer. And you are reading these words as a person in the same kind of need. Who of you would be quite comfortable if I were to play a public recording of everything you said last month? I don’t think any of you would volunteer.

My wife, Luella, and I have been married for thirty-seven years. During those thirty-seven years, Luella and I have had a particular struggle in our marriage. Well, it’s really my struggle. It’s over the issue of time. Luella was raised in Cuba, and she has a combination of a sort of island view of time and a Latin view of time. She lives on a bit of a vibe. People go to the islands because time slows down. On the other hand, I was raised by a man who thought that the sole litmus test of the value of a human being was punctuality. If you’re on time, you can live. It’s an understatement to say that being on time is a bit of a struggle.

Let me illustrate for you. Once, when our children were young, we decided to go to a state park for a picnic, and we agreed we would leave at three o’clock. For me, a time set the law of the Medes and Persians that cannot be broken. For Luella, it’s a rough estimate. At about 3:15 I realized that we wouldn’t be leaving on time, and I began to get upset. And Luella informed me of something radical: we didn’t, in fact, have an appointment at the park. No one was going to remove our table and suck the water out of the lake and roll back the grass and remove the trees. It was okay if we arrived a little later.

Well, all of that background is to help you understand the particular situation I am about to share with you. It was Easter morning in the Tripp family. I think that those of you with children can relate to this; Sunday morning isn’t often the most relaxed time of the week. We stuff children in vans saying, “Shut up. We’re going to worship.” But this was not just another Sunday; this was Easter morning, and our church, for reasons I don’t really understand, had decided that one of the best ways to celebrate the resurrection was to have a full breakfast before the service, which meant that we had to wake and leave about an hour and a half earlier than the usual Sunday time. I woke up with feelings of utter futility.
About forty-five minutes later, I walked into the bathroom where Luella was, along with my then nine-year-old son, and I could tell by the way she was dressed that she was not near being ready. So I began to say helpful things to her, like informing her that it was not an Easter dinner; it was an Easter breakfast. She found that very helpful. I told her that a couple of our children were already in the car, as usual, waiting. I reminded her that I was an elder in the church and my arrival before the ham and eggs was very important to my ministry.

About then my nine-year-old son said, “Daddy, may I say something?” I should have said no. I said, “Sure, you can talk.” He said, “Daddy, do you really think this is the way a Christian man should be talking to his wife?” Now, I’m a counselor sort of person. I’m pretty good at these conversations, so I said, “What do you think?” trying to escape the conviction. And little Darnay, not trying to be imper- tinent, said out of his little heart of faith, “Daddy, it doesn’t make any difference what I think. What does God think?” I slogged out of the bathroom being duly chided, and as I got to the threshold of the door, I heard his little voice say to me, “May I say something else?” I wanted to say, “No, no, please don’t!” He said, “What I mean, Dad, is what does the Bible say about it?”

I went to my bedroom and was hit immediately with a couple of thoughts. First my pride reared up. I wanted to be a hero to my son. I was embarrassed that he had seen through my harsh communica- tion, and he had hurt for his mommy. But that thought didn’t last very long. I was filled with the wonder of his question. How could it be that God would love me this much that he would give a twit of care about that mundane little incidental moment in the Tripp family? This is just one moment in one morning of one day of one week of one month of one year of one family living on one street in one neighbor- hood in one city in one state in one nation in one hemisphere in the globe in one moment of time. And God, in the glory of his love, was in that moment. God cares for me so much that he would raise up a nine-year-old boy to rescue my heart one more time. That is love so magnificent I can’t wrap my brain around it.

You see, that love, that redeeming love is not just a big-moment love. That love reaches into the private recesses of your everyday life. It reaches into those secret, quiet moments, even into seemingly trivial
moments in a bathroom on a single day. That’s how zealous that redeeming love actually is, and because of that I can have—you can have, we can have—the courage to look at this difficult area of our talk. The gospel is so robust we don’t need to be afraid of looking at the horror of the trouble of our world of talk, because Jesus is—and because he’s our Savior.

So What’s the Struggle with Our Talk Anyway?

In this chapter I want to take you on a bit of a biblical tour, and I want to ask, What is the trouble with our talk? What is the difficulty? Why is it that all of us get into talk trouble? Why do all of us look back and wish there were words we had never said? We all have had conversations we wish we could snatch out of history. We wish we could remove them from the memory of the people that heard them. I wish I could say that I’m proud of everything I’ve said to my children and to Luella, but I cannot say that. We simply have to ask, “What is that trouble with our words?”

Before we answer, I want to make a comment on the Bible that will provide the basis for our answer. I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but your Bible isn’t arranged by topic. Some of you are irritated by that. You wish it was chopped up into topics, and if there were topical tabs on the side of your Bible, that would make it even easier. The Bible isn’t arranged that way, but not because of accident or oversight. It’s arranged that way because it was God’s intention to give us his book in the form that we have it. The Bible is essentially a story. It’s the grand narrative of redemption. It is actually more accurate to say that the Bible is a theologically annotated story. It’s a story with God’s notes. There are propositions alongside the story that are truth statements that help you to understand the plot of God’s story. Also alongside the story are principles that apply the story to your life so you can live inside of the plot of God’s story. God has given his Word in this way because his call to us is that we would live with a “God’s story mentality.” This means that in the situations and relationships where God has placed us, we are to live in a way that is consistent with the plot of God’s story. God’s Word is not just given to be informational but transformational of the way we live.

If all you do is run to the obvious communication passages in