**A new voice**

Text: Ephesians 4:25-5:17

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**Scriptures:** Matthew 12:33-37; James 3:1-12; Ephesians 4:25-5:17

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 51b, 371, 479, 209

**Series:** Ephesians (#19)

**Theme:** The Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesian believers about the speech of new self in which the image of God is being restored.

**Proposition:** Put on the voice of Christ!

**Introduction**

Do you all have a tongue? Move it around in your mouth. The anatomy of the tongue is a marvel of detailed design. This muscle on floor of the mouth manipulates food to enable chewing and swallowing. It is the primary organ of taste. Its upper surface is covered in papillae. It is richly supplied with nerves and blood vessels. It is able to form many different shapes positions. The tongue is able to move in nearly every direction, expand, and compress. There are many examples of careful tongue control:

1. A skilled opera singer positions her tongue carefully to produce perfect pitch in combination with her lungs, throat and lips.
2. A circus sword-swallower puts a sharp blade on the floor of his mouth and holds it there without drawing blood.
3. You and I chew food regularly, but we very seldom bite our tongue!

The tongue is also a critical organ for speech, together with the lips, teeth, hard and soft palates, larynx, and lungs. So important is the tongue for talking that we refer to languages as ‘tongues’. When James writes in chapter 3 about the tongue, expanding on his earlier statement in chapter 1 verse 26 in which he says: “*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless*”. He is referring to the ability to control what we say. Now consider these examples of an ‘untamed tongue’:

1. When the skilful opera singer comes home to find her husband has not picked up his clothes off the bedroom floor and she lets rip with a torrent of angry words.
2. When the expert sword-swallower is unexpectedly told that the circus is closing down and that he is going to be out of work. Then he swears at the ring master in uncontrolled rage.
3. When you or I finish eating at the dinner table and then use corrupting talk, speak slander or talk foolishly.

The good news is that when we come to Christ in repentance and faith He gives us a new voice. We need to ‘put on’ this new voice every day. That is what this sermon is about. As we’ve seen over the past few weeks, from the letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul uses the word picture of changing clothes to describe the pattern of life of the old unconverted self in contrast to the new self, as a creation in Christ. In verse 24 of chapter 4 he writes: “*put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*”. The clothing of the ‘new self’ is the restored image of God.

In our text, Paul describes a number of items of ‘character clothing’ which make up the new self, in contrast to a number which are only fitting for the old self. I have chosen to organize these items of ‘character clothing’ in three groups and to focus on each one of these in turn in three messages from the same text: Ephesians 4:25-5:17. The three categories refer to the type of ‘clothing’, they are: attitude, speech and behaviour. Last week we looked at ‘a new attitude’. Today our focus is on how we use our tongues to speak. In the next sermon in this series, God willing, we’ll look at the parts of Ephesians 4:25-5:17 dealing with behaviour. Let’s focus our attention now on the speech of the ‘old self’ under the heading ‘the old tongue’.

1. **The old tongue**

Did you know that the average human tongue is 100mm in length? It is not a large organ, yet it has a huge effect in life, as James wisely states: “*The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things*” (James 3.5). James uses three images to demonstrate how small the human tongue is in comparison to its huge effect:

1. A small piece of metal in the soft part of the mouth of a horse – a bit – is used to direct the powerful muscular body of this large animal.
2. The small rudder on a ship is used by the pilot to direct a mighty vessel.
3. A small fire can quickly spread and burn down an entire forest.

The ‘tongue of the old self’ is described well by these words of James: “*It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison*” (James 3:8). We are going to look now at the items of ‘character clothing’ associated with the evil tongue of the ‘old self’ from our text. These ‘items’ are:

* Falsehood (4:25)
* Corrupting talk (4:29)
* Clamour (4:31)
* Slander (4:31)
* Filthiness (5:4)
* Foolish talk (5:4)
* Crude joking (5:4)

**Falsehood**’ is an intentionally untrue statement, a lie, or a deception. Paul writes in verse 25: “*Having put away falsehood*”. The English word ‘pseudo’ is derived from the underlying Greek word translated ‘falsehood’. Pseudo means ‘not genuine, spurious or a sham’. The ninth commandment prohibits being a ‘pseudo witness’, that is lying against others by speaking falsehood (Ex 20:16). When we speak falsehood, we mirror the ‘father’ of the old self – Satan ‘the father of lies’ (John 8:44). Those who have not been made new creations in Christ display the fallen human condition of suppressing the truth about God which is evident in the creation which He has made and thereby exchanging truth for a lie (Rom 1:25). Lying is part of the ‘character clothing’ of the old self.

Paul writes in verse 29: “*Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths*”.

**Corrupting talk** is literally ‘rotten’ language and includes any speech which defiles either the person being spoken to or the one being spoken about, or the person speaking or all three. Such talk includes vulgarity, gossip, and discourteous, impertinent, insolent, disrespectful speech.

In verse 31 we read: “*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you”.*

**Clamour** means to cry out, bellow or howl. It is associated with the ‘old clothing’ of wrath and anger in verse 31. In contrast, the Servant of the Lord, promised in Isaiah, “*will**not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets*” (Matthew 12:19). ‘Quarrel’ here is the same word as the Apostle uses in Eph 4:31 translated ‘clamour’. When Paul spoke to the people outside the army barracks in Jerusalem about his dramatic conversion to Christ, the crowd raised their voices and said: "’*Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live’. And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air*” (Acts 22.22-23). Clamour is quarrelsome contentious shouting.

**Slander** is another item of ‘character clothing’ related to speech which Paul refers to in verse 31. To slander someone is to bring ill repute, to defame, to speak evil of them. It is ‘malicious misrepresentation’. The Greek word her translated ‘slander’ is the one from which the English word ‘blasphemy’ is derived. Slander defames, harming the reputation of others. Slander destroys or discredits another person’s good name by speaking evil of them. Gossip is closely related to slander; it has been called ‘passive slander’. Gossipers are willing for people to be hurt as they pass along dishonest and harmful information about others.

Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote: *We must not go up and down as talebearers, carrying ill-natured stories, to the prejudice of our neighbour’s good name and the destruction of brotherly love.* Sadly, some Christians, especially over the past few weeks, have been guilty of slander against politicians and other public figures. This is not ‘walking in a manner worthy of the calling to which Christians have been called.

The final verse we’ll look at in relation to the ‘old tongue’ is Ephesians 5 verse 4, where we read: “*Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place*”.

**Filthiness** here meansindecent, dishonourable, inappropriate, ugly, shameful, base, or disgraceful. Here it describes improper speech.

**Foolish talk** is speech which betrays that the speaker is foolish. The fool here is not someone who is mentally deficient, but rather someone who is morally deficient because he or she ignores God’s will as revealed in His Word.

**Crude joking** literally means ‘turns easily’. It refers to making quick replies, ‘comebacks’ or quips with clever words. The purpose of such ‘turning’ of speech is to be funny, but it is accomplished a way which is deceptive, facetious (‘treating serious issues with deliberately inappropriate humour’), coarse or vulgar. One commentator (Barrow) has written: “*Sometimes (such crude joking) is lodged in a sly question, a smart answer, or in cunningly diverting or cleverly retorting an objection*”. Good, godly, humour is possible, but not easy to practice. At times we can sense that the joking of a brother or sister is a ‘bit off’. It’s sort-of funny, and we may even laugh nervously, but we know that we’ve heard speech characteristic of the old self which is out of place for the child of God.

The late American Pastor and author Warren Wiersbe has noted that “*Two indications of a person’s character are what makes him laugh and what makes him weep”.* In our earlier reading from Matthew 12:33-37 we heard the wisdom of the Lord as He says: “*For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks*” (Matt 12:34). What we say and how we say it reveals much about what we are really like inside.

The tongue is very much tied to the heart. The corrupt communication of the ‘old tongue’, with falsehood, corrupting talk, clamour, slander, filthiness, foolish talk and crude joking is ‘out of place’ for the child of God. It is not fitting for the ‘new self’ which in which the restored image of God is to be evident.

How have you found this brief look at the ugly ‘tongue clothing’ of the old self? Have you spotted some items which are familiar and which you tend to put on from time to time even though they are harmful to you and to others when you speak? Do you agree with James that at times your tongue is untamed, a restless evil speaking forth deadly poison? Brothers and sisters, we need to throw out all these useless ‘old clothes’; falsehood, corrupting talk, clamour, slander, filthiness, foolish talk and crude joking and put on some new ones, which brings us to our second point: the new tongue.

1. **The new tongue**

As you well know some people talk more than others😊. When I am preaching like this, I use a little over 100 words every minute. So, for an average length sermon I speak about 3,000 words. It has been calculated that the average person in an average day speaks in excess of 10,000 words. That’s a little over 3 sermons every day! Working that out using simple arithmetic, that results in 70,000 words per week, 3.64 million words per year, or about 250 million words per lifetime! For most of us we do a lot of talking!

Brothers and sisters, we have plenty of opportunity to display the character clothing of the ‘new self’ when we talk. Our tongues, though small in size, can be used to give great glory to God through wise choices about what we say and how we say it. Three items of that ‘Christ-like wardrobe’ are identified in our text:

1. Speaking the truth
2. Talking in such a way that our words build up others
3. Using language which expresses thanksgiving

Let’s look at each of these ‘items’ in turn: We’ll start with ‘**speaking the truth**’ in verse 25 where the Apostle Paul writes: “*let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another*”. The words ‘*each one of you speak truth with his neighbour*’ are a quote from Zechariah 8:16. Before the exile in Babylon, the nation of Israel was ungodly for much of its history. On their return to the promised land they are called by God’s prophet Zechariah to live righteous lives in which the truth is always spoken.

Brothers and sisters, we are likewise to be truth-tellers. We are to bear the image of the Creator who is ‘*the God of truth*’ (Isa 65:16). We are called to imitate Christ who is ‘*full of grace and truth*’ (John 1:14). We are to ‘put on’ true righteousness so that it is known of each one of us, both in the church and in the world, that ‘our word is our bond’.

It is generally not wise in every circumstance to tell everybody absolutely everything about a person, a situation or a subject. Not only would this take an unhelpfully large amount of time, it can also be unnecessary and overburdening for the listener. It is generally inappropriate to speak truths which are of a private nature (for example about our marriage, family or church life) to others outside. However, we must be careful to ensure that we do speak the truth in sufficient and appropriate detail so that we do not deceive others by withholding information which needs to be disclosed. The wisdom which God provides through His Word and Spirit is necessary for us to know how much to say in any given situation.

In an unbelieving world full of ‘fake news’, disinformation, propaganda, lies, deceit and falsehood, we are to glorify our Lord by always speaking the truth. The ‘new truth speaking tongue’ is tamed by love for Christ. It is no longer a ‘restless evil’ but a calm instrument used wisely for doing good to others. As Proverbs 15:23 wisely observes: “*To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!*”.

Whilst the ‘old tongue’ spews forth corrupting talk which breaks others down, the ‘new tongue speaks truth and grace which **builds others up**. This is the gospel reality that Paul expresses in verse 29. “*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*”. The Greek word translated ‘building up’ literally means to construct or erect a dwelling. As a metaphor here, it means to build up, establish, confirm, to edify other people. Remember that we saw earlier in Ephesians chapter four how Christ gives shepherds and teachers to His church in order to “*to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*” v12)?

The church grows when her ‘body parts’ put on the speech of the ‘new self’, as Paul explains in chapter 4 verses 15-16 “*speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love*”. What exactly are we to build up when we speak? The Christlike character of others. We are to serve others by helping them also to put on the ‘new self’ through careful choices, both of the words we speak, and the manner with which we speak them.

We are to speak like our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. He only ever used His tongue to speak the truth in such a way that grace flowed out from His mouth. For example, Christ’s words which we read earlier from Matthew chapter 12 where He speaks a warning about the future, saying, “*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak*” (Matt 12:36) are true. They also convey the grace of a warning so that those with ears to hear His words will turn in repentance and faith and be spared eternal death which is the separation from God that the sinner justly deserves.

How well do you control your tongue? How carefully do you choose your words? Author John Bunyan writes about the character “Talkative” in the classic Christian book “Pilgrims Progress”. Talkative was a man who spoke well but his life did not measure up to his talk. He could be described as a ‘saint abroad and a devil at home’. He sounded like a passionate pilgrim when he spoke, but his life looked better from a distance than it did close up. Mr Talkative was a hypocrite. His tongue was not really tamed, because his heart had not yielded to Christ as Lord.

Whoever we are, however, many words we speak in a day, we all need Christ, because not one of us been able to fully control or completely tame our own tongue. In contrast to this sobering reality, Peter describes the speech of Christ this way in 1 Peter 2:22-23: “*He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly*”. Christ could have spoken many true words to defend Himself when He was being questioned, firstly by the High Priest and then by Pontius Pilate (John 18), but instead He said very little and fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth*”. (Isa 53:7).

Christ gives grace to all who will hear His true words. "*Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me*” (John 14:1). Believe that Jesus, the only perfect man, with a tongue that always spoke truth and grace, died in the place of people like you and me whose tongues are naturally ‘*a restless evil, full of deadly poison*’ (James 3:8). Believe that He bore the full judgement of God against your sin, your falsehood, your corrupting talk, your clamour, your slander, your filthiness, your foolish talk and your crude joking. Believe that in Him you are a new creation and you are no longer bound to speak in the ways that you once did. You have been set free in Christ! Believe that He can tame your tongue as you daily put on the ‘new self’, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:24).

The final ‘article of new self-speech clothing’ is ‘**thanksgiving**’. Look at chapter 5 verse 4: “*Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving*”. Thanksgiving is the expression of gratitude for favour and mercy shown. We can thank God for the gift of a new voice in Christ. Thanksgiving has been by far the main type of ‘tongue’ that I have heard over the past weeks under ‘lockdown’ from you all. It has been so encouraging to hear the thankfulness of our congregation expressing gratitude for the many blessings which we have received from the Lord. Such speech demonstrates a ‘putting on’ of the ‘new self’. It is very attractive character clothing because it reflects the beauty of Christ and glorifies God whose Word is true and who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Brothers and sisters, keep putting aside the ‘old garments’ of falsehood, corrupting talk, clamour, slander, filthiness, foolish talk and crude joking and put on the ‘new clothes’ of truth speaking, talking in such a way that our words build up others and using language which expresses thanksgiving to Christ for (amongst other blessings) taming our tongues so that they speak to His glory. Use that small muscle on the floor of your mouth to do great things in Christ.

AMEN.