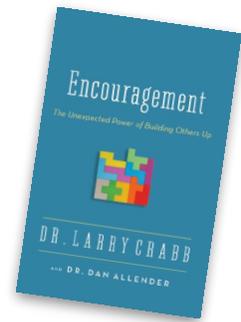


The Power of a Well-Timed Word¹

By Larry Crabb

Chapter 2



When Sigmund Freud discovered that symptoms of emotional distress could sometimes be relieved simply by talking in certain ways to his patients, he was puzzled and intrigued. Years of medical training had conditioned him to think of people as merely biological and chemical entities. He had concluded that problems like anxiety, depression, or phobias must reflect some physical disorder treatable only through medical intervention.

Had Freud spent time studying the book of Proverbs, perhaps he would have been less surprised to discover that mere words can have such strong impact. Listen to what the inspired writer says about the power of words:

The tongue has the power of life and death. (Proverbs 18:21)

Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up. (Proverbs 12:25)

The soothing tongue is a tree of life. (Proverbs 15:4)

Gracious words are ... sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. (Proverbs 16:24)

The Scriptures also say that speaking light words of cheer at the wrong time is “like one who takes away a garment on a cold day” (Proverbs 25:20).

Words are important. They have very real power. James warns us that although the tongue is a small part of the body, it has the power to determine the whole course of human existence (James 3:5 – 6).

When God instructs us to encourage one another whenever we come together, he is including the admonition to harness the power of words for a specific purpose. Of course, there are many ways to encourage one another by kind deeds as well as by kind words — taking food to sick friends, visiting people in the hospital or inviting guests in church to dinner. But the capacity of words to do serious damage or great good makes verbal encouragement an especially important topic to consider. And that is the theme of this book: encouragement through the careful selection of words that are intended to influence another person meaningfully toward increased godliness.

The key passage in Hebrews which instructs us to encourage one another uses a word for encouragement that means literally “to stir up, to provoke, to incite people in a given direction.” Verbal encouragement includes the idea of one person’s joining someone else on a journey and speaking words that encourage the traveler to keep pressing on despite obstacles and fatigue.

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I can recall standing by the finish line at many track meets, waiting for my son to come straining down the last stretch of a two-mile run. Exhausted by the labor of pushing himself to his limit and sometimes bothered by a variety of aches and cramps, he was sorely tempted to collapse fifty yards short of the finish line.

As each of our team's runners came into view, the line of paunchy, out-of-shape fathers would take up the cry, "C'mon, only a few yards to go! Push! Push! Kick up your legs! You can do it!" And most of the young athletes would respond to these words by grimacing with determination, narrowing their eyes, and pumping their legs with renewed strength until they crossed the line.

I have never yet heard a father call out to his son during that final stretch, "You look tired! Why don't you quit? You're in the back third of the field anyway. Maybe running isn't your sport." Yet I have overheard a Christian say to a young man after he had taught his first class at church, "When is the regular teacher coming back?" There really isn't much difference between the words.

Some parents at track meets have stood quietly in a visible place while their sons puffed by. In more than one instance the boy has looked over, caught a quick glimpse of his beaming parent, and then picked up the pace. Sometimes the power of words depends upon timing. A comment like "You looked great!" was reserved for that special moment when mother and dad handed a welcome glass of cold water to their parched, grateful son. "How good is a timely word!" (Proverbs 15:23).

Shallow Words

Many people seem to live in utter disregard of the effect of their words on others. A visitor from another culture once related to me the nearly crushing disappointment he experienced during his first few months in a North American church.

After a weekend service in which he had been warmly introduced to the church, a number of people went out of their way to greet him. Several added to their welcome an implied invitation: "We'd love to have you over for dinner sometime soon." The young man was delighted. He spent the next week eagerly waiting for the phone to ring, sometimes rushing home from work in order not to miss the call he knew would come. It did not come — not until three months later. He told me that to adjust to American culture, he had to learn that many words were spoken without meaning.

Many of our polite greetings — "Good to see you" or "Let's get together sometime" or "How are you? I haven't talked to you in ages!" — are gracefully disguised ways of saying, "Keep your distance; I'm just being polite." It is interesting — and more than a bit distressing — to notice how often our social and business interactions say one thing and mean quite another.

I never fail to feel somewhat awkward as I file by the flight attendants after an airplane trip. I sense an obligation to make brief eye contact and smile quickly when they look at me, grin, and say, “Good to have you on board.” The whole exchange seems dreadfully insincere.

I usually make very few demands on a flight attendant when I fly. A reading light that works is pretty much all that I require. Perhaps as I leave the plane, the words “Good to have you on board” come honestly.

But when the *bon vivant*, who without solicitation assumes the role of social director during the flight and demands immediate and frequent refills of his cocktail glass, staggers through the exit, I wonder if the tight smile and the words “Good to have you on board” might really mean something else.

I suppose we must accept that everyday life will include many situations in which words are less meant than appropriate. But it should not be that way in the church. How often, I wonder, are relationships among Christians characterized by no more depth than flight attendants bidding farewell to disembarking passengers? Do our conversations often consist of the exchange of empty words that only seem to convey a message of concern and love?

There is nothing wrong, of course, with social chitchat or polite friendliness in their place. I am certainly not proposing that every word we utter be draped in priestly vestments and spoken in organ tones. The issue is not between heavy words versus light words. It rather involves sincere versus insincere words or perhaps between consistently shallow versus meaningful words. Everything is wrong with insincere and predictably shallow words. They encourage no one.

The prophet Jeremiah indicted the religious leaders of his day for healing the wounds of God’s people superficially (Jeremiah 6:14). A physician who diagnosed a potentially fatal condition that surgery could cure and who then prescribed lots of liquid and two aspirin a day would be guilty of malpractice. The priests of Israel did precisely that in spiritual matters. They recommended cheerful optimism in the face of impending judgment for sin.

We often do the same sort of thing. It is far too easy for churches to provide surface healing, a shallow lift that lasts until the benediction. But to effect temporary relief from pain through words that fail to touch the real disease and then to refer stubborn cases that don’t improve to counseling resources outside the church is nothing less than spiritual malpractice.

Local Bible-believing churches consist of people who know Christ and who therefore have the power to influence others deeply through the careful use of words. The words of Christians reflect, in some measure at least, the reality of Christ’s love and sufficiency in their lives.

Yet we settle for shallow words. “Good to have you here,” we glibly say as people file out of the sanctuary. Comments that appear to be friendly and helpful but fail to recognize the power of words to affect people have little place in the life of a healthy church. Shallow words do not encourage.

Death Words

Once we see that words can have power, we must no longer be content with shallow words that mean little. We must set out to harness that power with a clear awareness that words can both tear down and build up. They are much like a sharp knife that in the hands of a surgeon can heal, but in the hands of a careless child can kill. “The tongue has the power of life and death” (Proverbs 18:21).

Consider how words can destroy. A middle-aged man had been struggling for years with chronic depression. Several psychiatrists had agreed that the root problem was chemical and that maintenance dosages of antidepressant drugs would be required for the rest of his life.

In the course of our counseling, the man related to me that his father, the self-made head of a large corporation, had repeatedly told him, “Son, when you inherit the family business, I expect that you will ruin it.”

These words stung more painfully each time he heard them. When his father died, the man felt driven to work unreasonably long hours to prove his prediction wrong. The pressure to avoid failure that relentlessly gnawed at him was quieted only by alcohol. Soon a serious drinking problem developed. His wife threatened to leave him. Finally he succumbed to ongoing depression for which he could find relief only in drugs. His life was devastated by the power of his father’s tongue.

Several years ago, I was teaching a large Sunday school class when a particularly conscientious young man asked a question. My mind quickly came up with a comical reply, though I don’t know why. I put the thought into words and won a laugh. Six months later the young man came to me to resolve the bitterness triggered by that incident, in which he had felt terribly embarrassed. It might be argued that the man was overly sensitive. But the point remains that words were the instruments of damage.

Life Words

The bright side of the picture is that words can not only sting, but soothe. Far more important, they can even reroute a life from a bad direction to a good one. These are the words — words of life and encouragement — with which I am concerned.

The apostle Paul instructs us, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29). One illustration demonstrates how a few well-timed words suited perfectly to the need of a particular moment yielded enduring results in my life.

As a youngster I developed a thoroughly annoying and humiliating problem of stuttering. Any person afflicted with this puzzling menace can tell you that certain letters and sounds are especially hard to say. Two troublesome letters for me were L and P. My name is Larry and I attended Plymouth-Whitemarsh Junior and Senior High Schools in Pennsylvania.

In the ninth grade, I was elected president of our junior high student body. During an assembly of the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades — several hundred students — I was beckoned by the principal to join him on stage for the induction ceremony.

Standing nervously in front of the squirming, bored crowd, I was told to repeat after the principal the words, “I, Larry Crabb of Plymouth-Whitemarsh Junior High School, do hereby promise ...” That’s how the principal said it. My version was a bit different: “I, L-L-L-L-Larry Crabb of P-P-P-P-Plymouth-Whitemarsh Junior High School, do hereby p-p-p-promise ...”

The principal was sympathetically perplexed, my favorite English teacher wanted to cry, a few students laughed out loud, most were awkwardly amused, some felt bad for me — and I died a thousand deaths. I decided right then that public speaking was not for me.

A short time later, our church celebrated the Lord’s supper in a Sunday morning worship service. It was customary in our congregation to encourage young men to enter into the privilege of worship by standing and praying aloud. That particular Sunday I sensed the pressure of the saints (not, I fear, the leading of the Spirit), and I responded by unsteadily leaving my chair, for the first time, with the intention of praying.

Filled less with worship than with nervousness, I found my theology becoming confused to the point of heresy. I remember thanking the Father for hanging on the cross and praising Christ for triumphantly bringing the Spirit from the grave. Stuttering throughout, I finally thought of the word Amen (perhaps the first evidence of the Spirit’s leading), said it, and sat down. I recall staring at the floor, too embarrassed to look around, and solemnly vowing never again to pray or speak aloud in front of a group. Two strikes were enough.

When the service was over, I darted toward the door, not wishing to encounter an elder who might feel obliged to correct my twisted theology. But I was not quick enough. An older Christian man named Jim Dunbar intercepted me, put his arm on my shoulder, and cleared his throat to speak.

I remember thinking to myself, “Here it comes. Oh well, just endure it and then get to the car.” I then listened to this godly gentleman speak words that I can repeat verbatim today, more than twenty years later.

“Larry,” he said, “there’s one thing I want you to know. Whatever you do for the Lord, I’m behind you one thousand percent.” Then he walked away.

Even as I write these words, my eyes fill with tears. I have yet to tell that story to an audience without at least mildly choking up. Those words were life words. They had power. They reached deep into my being. My resolve never again to speak publicly weakened instantly.

Since the day those words were spoken, God has led me into a ministry in which I regularly address and pray before crowds of all sizes. I do it without stuttering. I love it. Not only death, but also life lies in the power of the tongue.

God intends for us to be people who use words to encourage one another. A well-timed word has the power to urge a runner to finish the race, to rekindle hope when despair has set in, to spark a bit of warmth in an otherwise cold life, to trigger healthful self-evaluation in people who don't think much about their shortcomings, to renew confidence when problems have the upper hand.

Summary

Christians are commanded to encourage one another. Because words have the power to affect people deeply, it is appropriate to consider how to encourage fellow Christians through what we say. Words can encourage, discourage, or do nothing. Shallow words accomplish little, death words discourage, and life words encourage. We must learn to speak sincerely with positive impact, using our words to help other Christians pursue the pathway of obedience more zealously.



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