

The Life *The Gospel of John*

The Word of God in Our Words: How God Communicates Through Us **John 14:22 – 31**

Followup to John 14:22-31, given to Stanford grad students 1996

Introduction: Why Study Words?

This weekend, we've been thinking about the importance of words. We discovered in John 14 that Jesus could only communicate certain things through words. Hence, I'm going to say that, as Christians, words are the highest form of communication, even higher than actions. In relationships in general, words can communicate many things that actions cannot, like intentions, expectations, emotions. And in relationships where Jesus Christ is present, words can communicate many things that actions cannot. In fact, I'll go so far as to say that as Christians, your actions mean nothing...except to confirm that your word is true.

Before I go in and clarify all this, I want to explain what got me thinking about this. My relationship with my mom had been deepening, especially in the past four years. I don't remember having real conversations with my mom until I got to college. So the times of openness and honesty we were having was very important to me. In August of 1995, I moved into East Palo Alto, into an apartment complex that is 98% lower income Hispanic. In November of 1995, I invited my mom up from Los Angeles to visit me for a weekend. But when she came to visit me, everything changed. She started to say unkind things about Hispanics, encouraging me to stick to my own kind. Then she criticized me, saying that I had wasted my education, that I was endangering my future, that I was embarrassing her when she had to explain where I lived, and that I had always been abnormal. After she flew home, she called me every day for a week, every time more angry than before, and told me that if I didn't move out of East Palo Alto, she would disown me. I could not believe it. My mom and I had been getting closer for three years. Throughout that week, I had tried to reason with her in different ways but she was still ready to throw all of that away. That's when I came face to face with what I think is the most difficult aspect of Asian culture, that love and respect in relationships, especially between parents and children, is based more on actions than on the quality and depth of verbal communication. And I really had to think. What form of communication is more important in relationships? Actions or words?

So I thought I would start us with what seemed like the exception to everything we've talked about so far: Asian culture. If you identify strongly with the Asian style of relating, you believe that actions are more important than words as a means of communication. I'll address that specifically because it's so relevant to us.

So this is going to be an unusual study. Last night we discovered that Jesus' primary ministry was speaking, because his word communicated his desire for relationship by his Spirit. His actions did not communicate this apart from his words. So ultimately, this reflection on speech is a reflection on Christ in us, communicating himself through us. And what we'll find is the same thing. Actions are secondary. Words are supreme.

The Scriptures

Now, if you're like me, you probably have a lot of questions: Where is that in the Scriptures? What exactly do you mean? Let's consider the Scriptures.

Genesis 1-2 Man's most important responsibility in creation was to speak.

How did God rule and bring forth life by in creation? His Word! How would you expect man to rule in creation and bring forth life in the garden? By his word. Somehow we have inherited a view that Adam and Eve were like farmers, with rakes, shovels, and hoes. But tools weren't invented until the generations after Cain, Genesis 4. They didn't have to tame the animals because man and the animals didn't have a bad relationship until after the flood, Genesis 9. So what work was there to do in this creation? It was already perfect. All that was left to do was to continually transform creation into endless permutations of perfection by speaking to it.

I think that creation was responsive to man's word. Adam named the animals. The animals probably understood and spoke as well. That's why no one was amazed when a serpent spoke to Eve. The vegetation and the land probably responded to man's voice, too, because it was only afterwards when he had to sweat. It must have been like C.S. Lewis' Narnia, where everyone and everything had a voice. And Adam and Eve, made in the image of God, cared for life in the same way as God, by their word.

Then, there was marriage, the first human relationship. What is the primary responsibility of the husband out of Genesis 2 and Ephesians 5? Speaking. Cleanse her by the washing of water by the word. Husbands are expected by God to speak, specifically to communicate the things of God. Why the word? Because words can communicate things nothing else can, specifically, things about the Lord and about the heart.

Genesis 11 Babylon and speech

This is a point we've been coming to over and over. Words can communicate things that actions or pictures cannot, namely, things for the heart. It's not that words never lie, but that words open us up to more levels of communication. Words can lie. What happens when man uses the word to produce propaganda, to lead our hearts away from God? Then we get Genesis 11.

In Genesis 11, we find the Tower of Babel. Many times, we think of the Tower of Babel as the story of two things: 1) humanity getting together to build a tower and 2) humanity incurring God's judgment, which becomes the source of the many languages we speak. Both views are slightly off. The main point of man's rebellion is not building the tower, but in making a name for ourselves. What does naming something mean? Having authority over what you name. So man wants to situate themselves as the final authority. They want to free themselves from God's authority. So they say, "Let's not let God name us anymore. Let's make a name for ourselves."

How did they accomplish this? By speaking. What might they have been saying? Maybe it was something like this. "What is the most important thing in life? It's not God; it's the family...that's what is ultimately meaningful in life. Here's where you'll find who you are, what your place in life is, how to relate to others, and how you define success. Or, if they were more American, it would have been the individual. "Become a therapeutically self-actualized person and realize your potential." Or maybe, progress. Or, if they were like scientists, human life regardless of whether God exists or not.

See, what are they doing here? They are establishing a new conceptual basis for human life. They're messing with what is foremost in our hearts. How do you do that? Only by words. Only words can deal with the heart, and therefore spiritual foundations which are unseen. One only has to consider the power of Marxism to understand how powerful words can be. The propagandists at Babel wanted to rivet everyone's heart and mind to their banner, their rallying point, their cause. And they do this by their word. Let's make for ourselves a name: a new conceptual identity.

It's at that moment that God intervenes. He curses their language. Just like Adam and Eve, He doesn't curse them, because He is very kind. But He curses something about them. In this case, it's their words. I always assumed that this is why we have all different kinds of languages, but there are various textual problems with that. The word for "language" is almost always translated "lip" elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. It seems to mean "whatever human beings say". What I think is happening is that God sucked the power out of their words. From now on, as long as man tries to advocate something over God, whatever human beings say, there will always be some dissatisfaction. We can listen to Americans saying that we should center our lives around the individual, but there's always a "really?" We can listen to Asian parents say that we should center our lives around the family, but that produces the same doubts. We can listen to political philosophers say that it should be the nation, or the human race, but it's all unfulfilling. It's emptiness and we know it.

One man who stands out in my mind as a great communicator unlike the ancient Babylonians is my friend David Miyahara. David disciplined me for three years when I was in school, and one day, I came to him with a problem. The problem was that I was on a leadership group for a fellowship, and the leadership had decided to embark on an ambitious program of tutoring as a way to minister to others. Although I agreed with it at first, the idea didn't sit well with me because of the enormous amount of time and energy it would take. David told me something I'll never forget: "Mako, there may be certain people who need that kind of

help. And in a sense, it's loving to help someone that way. But in another sense, most people are enslaved by the lie of educational security. On the whole, it may be more loving to say, "Don't value that. Be free from it." I'll never forget those words because they went straight to my heart. Words as from the Lord.

Only words can direct us to God for life. When words direct us to something else, the human word incurs God's curse on Babel. It's that our words become empty and dissatisfying when we try create a new conceptual basis for life. I realize those are huge paradigm shifts from the way we are usually taught to think about these texts. But I thought it would be useful to go over them because they are so foundational. Now we come to Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ

Mark says that Jesus' main ministry was teaching. Matthew elaborates on that teaching. Luke emphasizes Jesus' parables and story telling. And John concentrates on Jesus' ability to communicate with anyone he met. How did Jesus become such a brilliant communicator? By being disciplined by the Father. In Isaiah 50:4, Jesus prophetically describes his discipleship. He says, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word." When everyone else was speaking about trivialities, Jesus' words spoke to our hearts about God. So Simon Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Who else has the...actions of life?...no!...the words of life." And then, when this Jesus comes to live in us, what would we expect him to do but speak?

Let me illustrate how I learned about how important and how powerful words are to me. It was late one night, and I had just gotten back from a party. I should have been happy, but I wasn't. It was about 1:30 am, so I changed and climbed into my bed. My roommate was awake. So we talked for about a half an hour in the dark. During the course of that conversation, I told him, "The party was okay. But I couldn't really enjoy myself because the alcohol, and being around people drinking lots of alcohol, reminded me of my father." There was a brief silence in the darkness. Then, my roommate changed the flow of conversation to something much lighter. We talked for about 5 more minutes, then decided to go to sleep. When I could hear that he was asleep, I cried. Because after sharing something very personal to me, I had hoped for words from my roommate to come and meet me, to explore me. I wanted very much at that moment a relationship deepening and growing by words. You see, how much comfort could my friend have brought me by a word? How much more if my friend was indwelt by the Spirit, and God was speaking through my friend to me? We desire words to reach our hearts!

It's very interesting that the early church believed the human word had enormous power. When it left a person's mouth, a word took on a life of its own. And when it was breathed out by the Spirit, through the lips of a human being indwelt by the Spirit, the other people listening would breathe that word in. They would ingest it, wrestle with it, pray through it. And the Spirit would brood on it until it worked its way through the human heart. Then it became something that could be breathed out to others. That was the view of the early church.

But what about when James condemns the tongue? Or when Paul rebukes women for speaking? Those texts aren't really against speaking in general. Those texts are against abusing speech: speaking out of turn, speaking flippantly, speaking in a harmful way. It's clear that Jesus, John, Paul, and James all want us to speak well. In fact, Paul says to men and women in 1 Corinthians 14, "I want you all to prophesy!" which is essentially letting the Spirit speak through you. I'm going to tell you two stories of how I learned about this.

There was one particular time where I sat down with a friend of mine to tell him about some difficulties I was having in some of my friendships, and also some other things that were happening in ministry. I said, "Alex, I'm going to just vent. I'm not going to worry about saying something theologically incorrect. I'm just going to tell you everything that's on my heart. Please tell me what you hear me saying." He sat patiently and listened to me, and then at the end of my longwindedness, he said, "Mako, it sounds to me that in some of your relationships, you're trying to duplicate the relationship that your father has with you. You're trying to relate out of authority rather than out of friendship." Those words ripped me to the core. I knew that there was truth to that. God addressed something so deep in me that day through my friend, I had to immediately go off and pray.

Sometime much later, the Lord gave me a very exciting opportunity. At work, I have a friend named Tracy. He is a computer science major at Berkeley and is working part time at Intel. He's a very capable person, probably in large part because his family always moved around when he was growing up. I respect this guy very much. One Friday evening, Tracy explained to me that he believes that he will have enormous freedom in the future, because the world will be run by computer technology and he'll know tricks and things to take advantage of the system. I listened very carefully to this, wondering how to respond. The engineering community appreciates bluntness, so I prayed, "Lord, do you want me to communicate that way?" Finally I replied, "Tracy, you are totally enslaved. You think you'll be free from the system, but you'll be dependent on the same education, the same technology, the same flow of information, and the same tools, as everybody else. You'll be completely tyrannized by the system." We talked for an hour and a half after that.

But the most exciting episode came with my mom. When I first started to understand this, it was an awesome thing for me. When my mom said she would disown me for staying in East Palo Alto, it was around Thanksgiving. She demanded that I move out immediately, but I didn't give in. Instead, I talked with her because to me, our relationship had been getting better for years, and it was stupid to through it away. Now, to tell you the truth, I was willing to let this issue divide my mom and me, because although I value my mom's opinions very much, I wanted to make clear to her that I was taking responsibility for my life. On the other hand, I was determined to make this issue deepen our relationship and deepen our understanding of each other, so I didn't give in automatically. We talked in circles. She was afraid I wouldn't take care of her in her old age. She was ashamed of having to tell her friends that her son lived in an unsavory place. She was afraid of me being too Christian. The Lord let her fume at me. And all the time, I kept telling her that I wanted a relationship with her, asking her questions, drawing her out.

Then Christmas time came. Still, I had no answer from the Lord on whether to move out or not. I had been asking for more time to think, but I couldn't put my mom off any longer. We had two big discussions for hours across the kitchen table. She fired a question at me, "How come you have to give so much love to those people?" I answered, "Because I've experienced that kind of love from Jesus Christ. Haven't you experienced that kind of love?" That made her stop and think. She wasn't expecting that and that basically ended our first conversation on a great spiritual note.

Two days later, my mom and I went to drop off a gift to our neighbors. I noticed that my mom made an excuse and went back home very quickly. That night, we had another long talk. The Lord asked very gently (and it was a good thing it was him, because I was very annoyed at this point), "Why are you uncomfortable with Sam and Carol? They've been our neighbors for 22 years." She made the amazing confession. My mom had always been insecure around almost everybody. Since she was a Japanese immigrant who spoke okay but limited English, she had very few people she felt comfortable around, and she was worried that she wouldn't be able to live near me when she got older.

That was amazing to me. You see, that was a deepening of relationship, and it happened by words. So in that gentle moment, I was then able to say, "Mom, I will do my best to care for you and always help you. I want to stay, but for our relationship, I'll move."

So our relationship deepened by words, and the Lord was introduced by words. If I had just given in right away and moved out, if I had tried to let actions communicate things, our relationship would have gone no where. Without words, there would have been no deeper understanding of each other, no statements of appreciation, no spoken commitment of desiring relationship. You see, actions can only keep a relationship where it is. Only words can take the relationship deeper. My mom and I became closer through that than ever before. But all that is just secondary. Words, not actions, introduced spiritual truth into our times together. At the risk of making some of you very uncomfortable, I have to share my opinion with you on this. If you think you can communicate Christ's love to non-Christian Asian folks by your actions and without your words, if you just do everything they want you to, you are only communicating your agreement with their belief system. That is not being a witness. Furthermore, that is not even a relationship. That is being a doormat. On occasion, you may need to do actions to maintain the relationship, but it's only words that can take it deeper.

How has my relationship with my mom been since? Two days after I said I would move out, my mom changed her mind, and said that I could stay. Maybe she felt more secure in our relationship. And we've been closer than ever. I even wrote a parable for her. I told her over the phone about a young Japanese girl who grew up on a farm in Japan (my mom grew up like that), who becomes a prostitute to American soldiers after World War II, who returns to her house in shame, and who receives forgiveness from a very unusual father. The father is affectionate and forgiving--very unlike my mom's description of her dad. I *told* my mom that that was what God's love was like. She said she had never *heard* of such a father. That was the first time I had ever heard a softness in her voice.

Whether it's the blunt communication style of the Silicon Valley community, or the subtle storytelling of Japanese culture, words are the important thing.

I thought I'd mention that there is one last Scripture that seems to contradict this, 1 John 3:18: "Let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and in truth." But what John is really saying there is, "Let your words and actions go hand in hand, so that when you say, "Christ lives in me", people will believe your word." I think that's what loving in truth means.

So it is words that is the highest form of communication. Actions are meaningful, but only insofar as they make your words more trustworthy and powerful.

Critique of American Culture

I critiqued Asian culture so much here, I thought it would only be fair if I critiqued American culture, too. One of the various lies we are subjected to in our society is the overgeneralization, "Actions speak louder than words." But actions don't speak as clearly as words. If you do something, you want to make sure Christ in you gets the credit, not you. No one in their right mind would jump to the conclusion that someone else is indwelling you. That has to be spoken.

Then there's another cliché, "A picture paints a thousand words." Unfortunately, when we carry this into the Christian life, we run right up against the Second Commandment, "You shall not make any pictorial representation of God." God has a deep aversion to being pictured. But let's think about the cliché itself. A picture paints a thousand words only when you're trying to describe something like troop movements on a battlefield, or the complexity of human anatomy. Visual communication is more efficient at conveying functional information. But in relationship, things are different. What can other people tell about you by the way you speak? Your sincerity and your depth of conviction. If you have faith in actions and pictures, then you have faith in actions and pictures.

Lastly, there's the cliché, "It's beyond words." This gets translated in the Christian community into, "Our spiritual life with Christ is beyond words. My experience with the Holy Spirit is beyond words." At first, this seems to honor God. But it really doesn't. Because God speaks by His Word. He wants to communicate intelligently by His Word to every human being. To say that our spiritual life is beyond words is the ultimate betrayal of our God. Not only that, but it strongly suggests that other people aren't even worth our time in trying to figure out how to communicate this to them.

Closing Illustration

From both American and Asian cultures, we inherit this emphasis on actions as the highest form of communication. And we carry these cultural influences with us into Christianity. Now, your actions are important in relationships with others. I don't want you to walk away from here saying, "Mako says actions aren't important." To me, it's a question of emphasis. When Christ is in you, your actions are secondary to your words. Your words are the most important form of communication.

I want to close our time together with a story that has been passed down from the early church. It's about the Apostle John and the power of the word. When John was an old man, the last elder statesman of Christianity, he toured the churches around Asia Minor to appoint bishops and elders in the local churches. Some believe that this took place after his exile on the island of Patmos. In any case, during one of his stays, John was teaching when he noticed a young man with an intelligent, hungry look on his face. He talked with this young man for a little while afterwards and concluded, "He's got promise." He said to one of the bishops there, "Disciple this young man while I'm gone, and I'll come back for him later." After John

left, the bishop faithfully disciplined this young man. But after some time, the young man started hanging out with bad company. A gang of thieves inducted him into their order, and this young man was so smart that he quickly became their leader.

The Apostle John eventually came back. He said to the bishop, "Give me what I entrusted to you." The bishop at first thought John was talking about money: "I don't owe you any money!" But John said, "No, I'm talking about the young man. Where is he?" "He's dead," said the bishop. John said, "What?" "No, he's dead to God."

"Where is he?" asked John. He was told that the gang was stationed outside of town in the hills. So John called for the fastest horse he could find. Here was this old man getting on a speedy horse, galloping to the hideout of this band of outlaws. He came to the guardpost and refused to go away and he refused to be taken prisoner, but said, "Take me to your leader!" The guard didn't mess with this crazy old man and brought John in. The young man saw John coming. And he turned around and took off. John, an old man, ran after him. What was he thinking? Here was this old man trying to catch up with a young man in his prime. John knew that he could lasso him... with a word. John cried out, "Stop! Fall to your knees. Jesus loves you. I love you. Come back. If someone requires payment for your crimes, I will gladly pay for you with my life. Give your life back to him." The young man stopped and turned back to John, and to Jesus Christ. Why? Because he knew that John's word was true. And he was caught by a word.

As Christians who live at the end of the twentieth century, may we recover a legacy that has been forgotten by most Christians for two thousand years. May all those who hear us know that our word is true. Why? Because they are the words of Jesus, yes. But more so because these words of Jesus have been used by the Spirit of Jesus to transform us, so that Jesus Christ himself would live in us, living his life out through us.