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Wise Words

Simple, Salty, and Sacred



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About the Theme

From building up and doing good to tearing down and mocking evil, words have incredible power! In Proverbs, the tongue is said to give life and to take it away (Prov. 18:21); James says the tongue is a spark of a fire and a rudder—so small and yet so consequential (Jas. 3:4–6)! Likewise, creation itself comes from the Word of God (John 1:1–5), Jesus is the Word of God incarnate (John 1:14), and our Lord says that every word we utter will be measured against us (Matt. 12:36). With so much at stake, speaking like Christ and patterning our words after the whole counsel of God is one of the most important disciplines we can learn. For that reason, we are taking this month to see how God’s Word teaches us how to use our words. Join us as we seek to be sanctified in our speech.



Ten Words about Words: Getting a Grip on Godly Speech

By DAVID SCHROCK

05.19.2025

If you have done any amount of writing, there is a good chance you have ideas, articles, or even book outlines stuck in your head, saved on your desktop, scratched out on a legal pad, or even written down on a napkin. Truly, one way to know that you are a writer, and not just writing, is that you traffic in words. And these words won't go away, until you write them down and send them out. As one Wordsmithy has put it, "I write in order to make the little voices in my head go away. [And] thus far it hasn't worked."¹

Echoing Doug Wilson's sentiment about why he writes, this essay actually began in response to a controversy that swirled around the college he founded. When New Saint Andrews [released a video in 2024 intentionally aimed at young men](#) with an Ernest Shackleton-like invitation to come and do hard things, they showed a clip of Johnny Cash's "favorite finger" (the middle finger), and the Internet erupted.

For my part, I think the brothers in Moscow [answered the objections reasonably well](#), and so my attempt to take a dog by the ears and enter into a debate not my own was unnecessary. Hence, my 2500-word essay entitled, "Of Middle Fingers, Middle Earth, and Middle Knowledge," sits unfinished in a file on my computer. Nevertheless, that unfinished essay, along with the ensuing debate about using the serrated edge (see below) contributed to this month's theme and prompted this larger consideration of speech.

¹ Douglas Wilson, *Wordsmithy: Hot Tips for the Writing Life* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2011), 17. When it comes to books on writing, this one is my favorite. I read it years before I was told not to.

Speaking with All Five Fingers

In this essay, I will not consider what the middle finger means by itself, but rather I will offer a creative reflection on how all five fingers, used by themselves or in combination with others, represent various modes of speech. To put it allegorically, this essay aims to articulate a fulsome (but not exhaustive) approach to godly speech that uses a well-formed and skillful hand to symbolize a well-ordered tongue. As I will outline in ten points below (one for each finger), speech that honors God must be trained like the pianist's fingers in order to successfully communicate a wide range of notes. And if this essay hits its mark, it will help us all—from the sweetest piccolo player to the saltiest bass drummer—improve his or her use of words.

To illustrate this handy allegory: consider the ways that each finger is used for communication, and how those various uses correspond (loosely!) to various moods of speech.

- The pointer finger (or forefinger) often speaks in the *indicative* mood, as it points to the facts. But it may also be combined with *imperative* force, as it instructs others to come or go.
- The middle finger is also directive, and by comparison, it gestures with greater *imperative* force. It often commands, pokes, curses, or provokes to anger.
- The ring finger, as its name implies, communicates a covenantal commitment based upon *conditional* promises that are kept on the clumsiest finger.²
- The pinky finger is less forceful than the others, but in its delicacy, it represents the kind of *interrogative* speech that asks good questions and draws a response from others.
- Finally, the thumb, which is often used to solicit help (think: hitch-hiking), is akin to the *optative* or *subjunctive* mood, which expresses something wished for or desired. Equally, it may serve as an exclamation that affirms the statement of another.

I realize that these illustrations are crude and not exactly to scale, [to paraphrase Dr. Emmet Brown](#), but that's just the point. Speech can be used with exact precision, as in Paul making an argument based upon the singular, not the plural (Gal. 3:16). And speech can also be used more generically, as when Hebrews 2:5 says, "It has been testified somewhere." And the point I will show and tell throughout this essay is that our

² I acknowledge this claim is both culturally conditioned and subjective, but stay with me. The force of my argument is not found in the precision of my comparisons, but in the way that skilled speech is comparable to a well-trained hand.

fingers can be used as helpful reminders of how to employ words with varying degrees of precision and generality, simplicity and complexity, saltiness and sweetness, all for the purpose of grace and truth.

Indeed, in John 1, Jesus is identified as the Word made flesh (John 1:14), and immediately it says that he is full of grace and truth. This language echoes Exodus 34:6-7, which identifies God as merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*emet*). Translated into Greek, *hesed* and *emet* come across as full of grace (*charis*) and truth (*alētheia*). Truly, as the Son of God incarnate, Jesus perfectly embodies the Word, for he *is* the Word. Through his actions and speech, he perfectly reveals what speech should look, sound, and feel like. And speaking allegorically, Jesus uses all five fingers with perfect form and fluidity.³

Mature Speaking

Just as a well-formed hand has dexterity to employ its five fingers in a plethora of ways, so too human speech that blesses God and curses the devil will have countless combinations.⁴ Likewise, because we have two hands, and not just one, it is possible for one hand to hold a sword firmly, while the other strokes a cheek gently. Such are the glorious and complex ways that humans reflect the God who made them. If God can be kind and severe at the same time (see Rom. 11:32), and if Christ can speak in parables to reveal and conceal with the same words (Matt. 13:10-17), then we too can learn to speak in ways that are simultaneously (or serially) simple, subtle, satirical, and sincere.

Yet, such mature speech is rare. More often our speech *does not* adequately reflect the full range of God's speech, and if James 3 has anything to say about it, our speech is often tainted by sin and tasked to serve one's self-interest. Like children who are learning to master their native tongue, sinners who are redeemed by God's grace wrestle with the words they use. And depending on one's personality and parentage, sanctified speech will move in divergent directions. Some Christians need to learn self-control, so that they crucify their senseless words. Others need to learn how to speak with conviction and confidence, as their natural inclination is to remain silent.

Importantly, the book of Acts reveals that when the Spirit of God was poured out, it moved the disciples to *speak*. For instance, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit filled

3 Let the reader understand, I am not saying Jesus assigned his speech-acts to five (or ten) fingers, as I am doing here. Rather, I am using this analogy (or better, allegory in the technical sense) to help form a pedagogical tool, to help us get a grip on the range of ways we can and should honor the Lord with our speech.

4 And this does not even include the division of languages that came at Babel. While the human race has thousands of languages and dialects, I will restrict myself to the conventions of language within one tongue. It goes beyond the scope of this essay to consider the way that multiple languages may alter or amplify the argument being made here.

the disciples and they spoke of God's mighty works in various tongues (Acts 2:4, 11). Later, in Acts 4:8, when Peter and John were arrested, Peter was filled by the Spirit, and he testified boldly before the council. Then, after Peter and John were released, Acts 4:31 says, "And when they had prayed, . . . they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." Paul too would be filled with the Spirit and speak boldly (Acts 9:17; 13:9), and in Ephesians 5:18-19, the command to be filled with the Spirit is followed with the effect, "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" (paralleled in Col. 3:16).

Long story short, those who are led by the Spirit will speak, and these words will be filled with wisdom, grace, prayer, and praise. Yet, if the model of Jesus, the prophets, and even the Apostle Paul are any example, then Christians will also learn how to pronounce judgment (Acts 13:9), call out sinners by name (2 Tim. 4:10, 14), offend the wicked (Matt. 13:57; 15:12), tell parables (Matthew 13), and use profane language in holy ways (Ezekiel 16, 23). In other words, the range of Christian speech goes far beyond saccharine and sentimental; it also includes holy mockery, angry denunciations, and prayers of imprecatory nature.

Speaking with a Full Range of Words

To speak generally, few Christians have a full range of speech. Rather, like singers, we are usually keyed to sing the high notes or the bass notes, but not both. Yet, we should strive to increase our range, in accordance with the Scriptures. We should learn to grasp all of the good words that God has for us. This means deftly wielding our speech for maximal profit, whether that speech is soft or strong.

Again, the hand is a helpful illustration, and the one I will use as we move forward. Just as a hand may not have every finger, and some fingers may be double-jointed, while others are permanently mangled by a childhood accident, so too our ways of speech possess a wide variety of formations and malfunctions. Yet, whatever hand we have been dealt, we must learn to use each finger as best we can. And more, we should learn to coordinate those fingers in combinations that make—as in the case of playing a musical instrument—the best noise.

With our speech then, we should learn to imitate the full range of Scripture, even as we recognize that some ways of speaking are more natural than others. In the same way that some hands are better formed to play the violin and others to grip an axe, so our patterns of speech will have natural settings, too. And yet, homiletic homeostasis is not an excuse for learning how to increase our range. And so, this means that for the verbose, sanctification will include speaking more selectively and perhaps more gen-

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tly, too. By contrast, the timid will have to learn how to speak without qualification, or even to employ the serrated edge of satire.

There are too many variations on this theme to list them all. But in what follows, I will use the ten fingers to highlight ten modes of speech that maturing Christians should embrace (in various ways and at various times) as they pray, praise, and proclaim the truths of God. Even more, Christians should learn to apply these modes of speech in all areas of life, not only in the gathered church. From business contracts to family communications, from church services to online interactions, and from letters to the editor to political activism, these modes of speech should be employed with growing wisdom and proportional skill.

In other words, these different ways of speaking are context-specific, and as I will attempt to show, the mature Christian will know when and when not to use the middle finger—to highlight one mode of speech. More often than not, angry speech, of which the middle finger symbolizes, is not the baseline for Christian discourse. Rather, the command to be angry (and do not sin!) is a late-stage deployment to be used against those who threaten harm to others or hostility toward to God.

Understanding this selective use of one mode of speech means that these ten words about words are not ten equally-distributed ways to speak or some cacophonous blend of speech. Rather, these ten words are ten well-crafted ways of speech that require the speaker to conform their character to God's, and to wisely employ the right finger at the right time. Like a well-worn keyboard that shows more wear on the A key than the Z key, so some fingers will be more readily used than others. And this too will require wisdom!

But enough prolegomena. Here are ten words—one for every finger on both hands—to help you, dear Christian, get a grip on your speech.

The Thumb: Wisdom from God and Prayer to God

1. *Wisdom from God*

When you look at your thumb, what do you see? Maybe you see a scar from a misplaced hammer strike, or maybe it juts to the side because you broke your thumb years ago. For scientists of the evolutionary variety, the opposable thumb is what sets primates apart from other mammals, and enables monkeys, gorillas, and humans to hang from trees or pick up fruit.⁵ In a word, the thumb is a sign of intelligence and wisdom, and in Scripture that wisdom came first when Eve grasped with an opposable thumb the forbidden fruit—because it looked good to make her wise.



Genesis 3:6 recounts the event: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, *and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate*, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” Wisdom and grasping go together, like hand and glove. And yet, from the very beginning, grabbing ahold of wisdom prematurely came with consequences. I say prematurely, because God always intended for his image-bearers to grow in wisdom and knowledge, but to do so according to his Word (Gen. 2:15–17). Psalm 19 makes this plain; it employs words and concepts from Genesis 3 to describe the way God’s Word “makes wise the simple” and “enlightens the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8).⁶

On the basis of Psalm 19 and Psalm 119, as well as a host of Proverbs, we discover that the beginning of wisdom is to seek wisdom (Prov. 4:7), or as Proverbs 1:7 and Proverbs 9:10 tell us, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” Because wisdom is mediated through speech, the first use of our words must be to rightly align our hearts with the archetypal Word (John 1:1–3, 14). If God the all-wise (Rom. 16:27) reveals himself through his Word, than wisdom comes from his Word, too.⁷ And so, our faculty of speech must begin by seeking the wisdom of his Word.

5 [“The Grasping Hand,”](#) American Museum of Natural History.

6 D. J. A. Clines, “The Tree of Knowledge and the Law of YAHWEH (Psalm 19),” *Vetus Testamentum* (1974): 8–14.

7 A longer discussion could be had with respect to the General and Special Revelation, for wisdom comes properly understanding both. In this essay I am primarily focusing on the wisdom that comes from God’s Special Revelation.

Truly, if the overflow of the mouth comes from one's hearts (Matt. 12:34), and if our hearts are naturally inclined toward evil (Jer. 17:9), then when the Spirit gives the soul grace to plea for mercy (Zech. 12:10), the wise man will confess with his mouth and believe in his heart that Jesus Christ is Lord (Rom. 10:9). Moreover, after the Spirit enables the man to repent and believe, a Christian will devote him or herself to training his tongue to honor the God who saved him.

Enter James 3, where we learn that there are two kinds of wisdom: the kind that comes from heaven above and leads to righteousness, peace, and life, and the kind that comes from below that is deadly and demonic (see James 3:13–18). Notably, James's distinction between two types of wisdom comes right after he says, "the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness" (James 3:6). Indeed, as small as the tongue is, it sets the course of a man's life (James 3:4–6). And so, anyone who wants to guard his heart (Prov. 4:23) or renew his mind (Rom. 12:1–2) must give himself to the wisdom of God's Word and learn to speak as God speaks. In this way, the thumb is an apt symbol for the way we should speak. Just as the thumb enables the hand to grasp a stake (Jael), a snake (Moses), a fish (Peter), or a dish (Martha), so human speech enables us to grasp the wisdom of God.

Yes, our speech can also reach for and regurgitate the wisdom of the world, but this is why it is so important to let the full counsel of God's Word shape our speech. For unless we permit Scripture to shape our praise, our prayer, our mockery, and our meditations, we will easily adopt the lisp of the Laodiceans or the prayers of the Philistines. As James 3:2 implies, no tongue is perfect, save that of Christ. Therefore, we should seek to imitate our Lord's speech, as well as all the apostles and prophets who were led by his Spirit. And when we do, we will soon discover how desperately we need help. For in fact, while it might be easy to speak like our Lord in one particular way, maturity calls us to conform *all* our speech to his. And this leads to another use of the thumb.

2. Prayer to God

If the thumb is used to grasp things, it is also used—at least in the West—to affirm things (think: thumbs up!) and petition things (think: hitch-hiking).⁸ And from these two representations come a second use of speech—namely, the need to articulate prayer. To return to James, Jesus's brother who chooses to identify as the Lord's servant (James 1:1), he says that the man who controls his tongue would be the perfect man. Remarkably, James is one of a select few who grew up with a perfect man who never sinned with his words. So, he knows what he is talking about. Yet, in his letter, he not only warns of

8 Admittedly, these uses of the thumb are culturally conditioned. I've been told the thumb is equivalent to the middle finger in places like the Middle East. Fine. My point is not to define types of speech by cultural hand gestures, or to compare of contrast sign language in different countries. Instead, writing to English-speakers, I am using common gestures in the West to help conform our speech to the wisdom of Scripture.

the way that earthly wisdom leads to evil speech (James 3), but he uses his own words to encourage saints to seek wisdom in their hour of need. And notably, he frames this in terms of perfection (or completion).

He writes in James 1:4, “And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” The same word (perfect = *teleios*) is used in James 1:4 and James 3:2 (“And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a *perfect* man”).⁹ By comparison, we can acknowledge that while no man is perfect in his speech, because no man is perfect in his heart, the aim of Christian sanctification is maturity in Christ. Put differently, the man who has been brought to life by the Word of God (James 1:18) is intended to grow in wisdom, so that his speech is trained to be like his Lord’s. This is a major point of James’s letter, and it reinforces my point here. Namely, those who will use speech to seek wisdom will do so prayerfully.

In James we can see this in three places. First, in James 1:5–7, immediately after identifying the aim of seeing the Christian become mature (*teleios*) and complete, he invites those who lack wisdom to ask for wisdom. Indeed, these verses are an invitation to pray, with the promise that those who pray in faith will avoid being a double-minded man. In other words, the wise Christian knows he is lacking in wisdom, and so he asks repeatedly for wisdom, trusting that God gives generously. And in this way, his lack of wisdom becomes the source of his plenty.

Second, in James 4:1–3, the idea of asking repeats in the context of anger. To those who are angry because they do not get what they want, James identifies how they ask with wrong motives, and hence do not receive an answer to their prayer. In this way, James teaches Christians to conform their desires to that of the Lord (James 3:17–18) and to forsake the desires that come from worldly wisdom (James 3:15–16). For when they do, they can have confidence to pray, knowing that “if we ask anything according to his will he hears us” (1 John 5:14; cf. Matt. 7:7; John 15:7; 16:24). Indeed, the connection between wisdom and prayer is made explicit in James, and it should teach us to pray for wisdom (James 1) and pray according to wisdom (James 3–4). Thus, the thumb remains an apt symbol for our speech, as it calls us to affirm God’s Word (thumbs up) as we petition God for aid.

Third, James 5:13–18 instructs Christians how to pray, praise, confess sin, and call for the aid of the elders. Set in opposition to grumbling speech (James 5:9) and making vain oaths (James 5:13), James calls the church to bring their words to God. Indeed, before speaking to others, complaining about earthly conditions, or making promises that would obligate one to earthly labors, the mature Christian will pray. God did not simply give us speech to speak to one another, but he gave his people words to bring

⁹ Linguistically, the word *teleios* has the sense of “meeting the highest standard” or “mature” (BDAG), and it points in the direction that Christians should strive to grow up in their speech.

praise to this throne and petition his mercies to fall from heaven to earth. And thus, when we think about wise speech, it begins, continues, and ends with speech to God. In fact, in everything else that follows—from issuing condemnations on wickedness (think: protesting against abortion) to making covenantal commitments (think: marriage vows), these words to the world should be preceded by and animated with prayer. For without prayer, our words will be largely impotent and easily misdirected or improperly proportioned. Yet, with prayer, all that we say pleases God and promises to bring his will from heaven to earth, as Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6:9–13.

⁹ “Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
¹⁰ Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,
¹² and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

The Forefinger: Pointing to the Truth and Defending the Faith

If our speech is shaped by the wisdom of God and empowered with prayer, then it leads the Christian to be able to put his finger on a number of things. Or to say it differently, when the Spirit brings light to the heart and the Word of God renews the mind, it leads the Christian to be able to speak truth and oppose error. Certainly, this two-sided speech is what qualifies a pastor to shepherd a flock (Titus 1:9), but the ability to point to truth



and contest falsehood is something that all Christians should cultivate.¹⁰ And for that reason, Christian speech, like the forefinger which is best suited to point things out, must include straightforward proclamation and unbending polemics. Let’s consider each.

¹⁰ On the need for pastors to have two voices, see Josh Daws, “[The Two Voices Every Preacher Needs](#),” May 16, 2025.

3. *Pointing to Truth*

As noted at the outset, the forefinger (or pointer) is best likened to the indicative mood. In grammar the indicative mood is the one that conveys a fact or grounds an argument. It is not wishful, nor demanding, nor contingent; it just is. And for Christians, our speech should be filled with such propositional truth. As I have recently written in my book, *The Business of Is-Ness*, Christians should be the ones who are able to best articulate what is true, good, and beautiful. Our speech should match reality, and that reality is best interpreted by the truths we find in the Bible. Certainly, there are truths that go beyond the Scripture. Creation is filled with general revelation and wise Christians should be able to explain the rules of nature (i.e., natural law). But this all depends on a use of speech that is fundamentally NOT postmodern.

Postmodernism's denial of objective truth means that it lacks the ability to point at a tree and say, without qualification, *this is a tree*. Or more often, *this boy is a boy*: he will grow up to be a man, and he cannot at any time be a female/girl/woman. Steeped in a world of personal experience and qualified propositions, not all Christians are equally adroit in their ability to speak plainly and point to the truth. The mood of our age is one of reticence and hesitation to speak without qualification to esteem one totalizing worldview (which Christianity is) over another.

Yet, any forefinger that shrinks back instead of pointing out the facts that hell is real, Christ alone saves, and same sex-attraction is inherently sinful—to name only a few—needs to spend more time with the wise and prayerful thumb. Indeed, of all people, Christians should be the best at pointing out the truth. But this depends upon being saturated with true wisdom and devoted to true prayer (see above). Nevertheless, because Christians are born by the word of truth (James 1:18), they are both able and deputized to go into the world as Christ's witnesses. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:20, the church is an assembly of ambassadors. As we have come to faith by the "word of the truth" (Eph. 1:13), proclaimed by preachers sent out for the truth (Rom. 10:14–17), we are called to abide in that truth (John 8:32), and speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Truly, the church is founded on the truth of Christ (1 Cor. 3:10–15), and it is sanctified as the word of God (John 17:17). And so, Christians ought be the most plain-spoken and unflinching in pointing to Christ and his truth. In other words, their pointer fingers must be ramrod straight.

At the same time, the straightness of their indicative speech should be coupled with touch. In other words, just as the forefinger points to something beyond itself, it's also the finger most often used for touch. Indeed, when we speak wisely, we will have various tones, volumes, and word choices. And thus, mature Christians will not only speak directly, they will also speak skillfully. For in fact, the same truth needs to be calibrated to the idle, the fainthearted, and the weak (1 Thess. 5:14). Mature Christians also need

to distinguish straight speech between the spiritual man and the natural man (1 Cor. 2:14–16), the young and the old (1 John 2:11–14), male and female (cp. Job 28 and Proverbs 31), and various degrees of repentance (2 Cor. 2:5–11; 7:5–13) or the lack thereof (Matt. 18:15–20). All of this means that we need straight speech that points to Christ and to all of his truth, and we need sensitive speech that is properly attuned to the impact that our words have on others.

4. Defending the Faith

Sticking with the forefinger, we need to consider the way that our words should fight. Someone who grows up in a home where yelling is constant and anger is always unchecked might assume that fighting words are what Christians should always and entirely avoid. Yet, a careful reading of Scripture teaches us that Old Testament saints were defined by warfare, and that this reality doesn't change in the New Testament—only the weapons are different (see below).

Supporting this notion that warfare is commonplace for the people of God, consider Judges 3:1–2, which inform us that God intentionally left enemies in the land so that the younger generation would learn to fight. To many, this is a strange concept. Why would God desire his people to *keep fighting*? Why wouldn't he seek peace at all costs? There are multiple answers to this question: God himself is a warrior (Exod. 15:3), Jesus came to the earth to win a victory over the devil (1 John 3:8), and perhaps most relevant, God's children learn how to love good and hate evil as they take up arms to fight the enemies of God.

In fact, in Psalm 144, David praises God for training his fingers for war. He says, “Blessed be the LORD, my rock, *who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle*; he is my steadfast love and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield and he in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me” (Ps. 144:1–2). As a type of Christ, David exemplifies a kind of holy war that Christ himself would pursue. Only, Jesus did not win the victory by way of sword and bow (Ps. 18:34); his decisive victory came by way of sweat and blood on the cross. Nevertheless, prior to laying his life down as the final sacrifice (John 10:17–18; Heb. 9:26), Jesus regularly picked up the sword of speech, as it was foretold of him in Isaiah's second Servant song (Isa. 49:2).

Throughout his ministry, Jesus did not simply preach the gospel and teach about the kingdom, but he also excoriated the wickedness of the Jerusalem priests (Matthew 23), he spoke parables against false teachers (Luke 15:3ff; 20:19), he sought to embarrass religious leaders with questions (Luke 20:1–8), and he used invectives such as “brood of vipers” (Matt. 12:34; 23:33), “blind guides” (Matt. 23:34); “unmarked graves” (Luke 11:44), and offspring of the devil (John 8:44). In other words, Jesus came not only to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), but he came to expose the unbelief of hardened hearts

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(see John 6:60–71). Despite the ways that Jesus is portrayed today as a buddy, or a therapist, or a dispenser of endless grace, the true picture of Christ includes a willingness to call out the unrepentant sinner (John 10:26). In this way, Jesus’s speech is straight. It does not bend to please any man. Truly, he was perfect in all of his ways, and this included his immovable commitment to the purposes and plans of God.

When he was tempted, he combatted the devil with the word of God (Matt. 4:1–11), and throughout his ministry he did the same. When he was accused, misunderstood, and rejected by men, he did not charm the snakes who bit him or chase the goats who left him. Instead, Jesus’s commitment to God was singular, and it shaped every word that proceeded from his mouth. Notably, Jesus constantly explained himself by means of quoting and applying Scripture. “Have you not read?” was his common refrain (see Matt. 21:16; Luke 6:3; cf. Mark 12:26; Luke 10:26). And if you follow Jesus through the Gospels, you will see that he was constantly engaged in verbal sparring matches. Unlike David, his sword was not made of metal, but Jesus did come wielding the word as a sword, as he says in Matthew 10:34, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

So, with a life trained like the soldiers who went to war with giants, Jesus took up the sword to put the serpent to death. On Golgotha, the Lord himself was pierced through—and his hands, feet, and head were made bloody—but by his self-substitution on the cross, he won the victory *and* he used his [seven words from the cross to explain the meaning of his death](#). In this way, Jesus finished his course pointing to the truth of God’s Word and combatting all those who sought to deny him as the Word of God made flesh. As the Psalm 1 man, who perfectly embodied the Law, Jesus earned the right to sit at God’s right hand, just as Psalm 2 foretold. Yet, notably, as a new David, as well as a new Joshua (cp. Psalm 1 to Joshua 1), Jesus’s entire life on earth was a battle. And in that battle, it was his words that did the warfare.

The same is true for those who follow him. Though we lack his perfection, Jesus’s followers are taught to speak the truth in love to build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11–16). But we are also called to “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete” (2 Cor. 10:4–5). In other words, the faithful witness to Jesus Christ is able to affirm the truth and deny every falsehood.

Throughout the rough and tumble of life, this will be an ongoing challenge. Like the rider who can fall off either side of the horse, the all-too-gentle Christian may have a hard time uttering anything but an encouraging word. Conversely, the Christian who is by nature more disagreeable may feel that it is a sinful compromise to withhold criticism of those who are in error or are associating with others who are in error. Yet, what remains true for all of us is that faithfulness includes affirming truth and denying error. Those who have a straight forefinger will be able to commend what is good and con-

demn what is evil. Every person carries this out by different ways and means, but if they follow Christ, then carry it out they must. Parents must be able to affirm and encourage their children *and* they must be able to deny and correct their children, too. Indeed, I dare say this is a perennial challenge, but one that taken seriously will produce great maturity in the life of the believer.

Alternatively, the refusal to utter a sharp word and to speak only positively will eventually disfigure the forefinger, such that even straight affirmations are pointed askew. At the same time, if someone's speech is only and always critical and condemning, then their ability to say plain things will be truncated. Our speech should be long enough to reach out and touch someone, but if our reputations for speech are only negative and naysaying, that first use of the forefinger will be lost. That said, when Christians are filled with wisdom and prayer, and they begin to point to the truth and contend against falsehood, then they are ready to employ some of the more advanced modes of speech that are represented by the middle finger.

The Middle Finger: Righteous Anger and Serrated Speech

As we come to the middle, let me reiterate my intentions in this essay. I am not working an exegetical approach to speech, let alone a standard of speaking that is rigidly tied to the Ten Words (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5) or the wisdom of Proverbs. I assume and affirm both of these moral standards, and believe that all speech that violates the Decalogue and the dictates of Scripture is sinful. That said, many of the ways that Christians police speech are based on cultural, familial, or traditional sensibilities. By contrast, my intention here is to say that godly speech has a wide range, and that just as the human hand has fingers that serve a variety of ends, so too does speech.



Properly speaking, two modes of speech that are associated (or that I am associating) with the middle finger are expressions of anger and applications of satire. Let's look at each.

5. *Expressing Righteous Anger*

When debates broke out in 2024 concerning Johnny Cash's middle finger, I did a little Internet sleuthing. I googled "Johnny Cash Middle Finger Russell Moore," because I knew that somewhere along the way Russell Moore, whose esteem for Johnny Cash is well-known, would have had something to say about it. And, in fact, he did.

On February 25, 2013, when Moore was still at Southern, he gave a defense of remembering Cash. Acknowledging the singer's checkered life, [he argued for why Cash still mattered](#), and he included a nugget about Cash's middle finger.

To be sure, Cash's Christian testimony is a mixed bag. In his later years, he took out an ad in an industry magazine, with a photograph of himself extending a middle finger to music executives. And yet there is something in the Cash appeal to the youth generation that Christians would do well to emulate.

Ironically, Moore pointed to Cash's middle finger and proceeded to encourage a younger generation to learn something from Cash. If you read his whole article, you will learn that Moore's lesson is not one of flippantly flying the bird. But rather Moore commended Cash, middle finger and all, because of the way the "man in black" dealt with the painful realities of life and death, judgment and forgiveness of sins.¹¹

Now, I set Moore's unremarkable article against the seemingly radioactive response to New Saint Andrews College's advertisement. In that [fast-paced video](#), Nate Wilson (the narrator) invites men who are defiling pagan shrines with twenty-percent of a wave (i.e., using the middle finger) to come to New Saint Andrews and learn the way more excellently. In context, the Johnny Cash picture is set in direct opposition to pagan festivities of the Olympics, which included a transgender depiction of DaVinci's Last Supper.

While still frames of Johnny's finger splattered the internet after the video released, the original is but one part of a string of images. And in that string I do not take New Saint Andrews to be suggesting that students in Moscow are going around dropping

¹¹ While it has been over a decade since Moore highlighted Cash's middle finger with the slimmest qualification, I don't recall any negative reactions. Yet, by highlighting the obscene gesture, was he not committing the same error? The same sin? Or, because he used words instead of a video, does that change the situation? If so, why? How does Moore's use escape critique, but New Saint Andrews' use invites the swiftest condemnation?

The question is rhetorical, but I suspect the answer is related to something other than the finger. When Moore was an evangelical darling, he could point to Johnny Cash, weave his middle finger into his narrative, and escape unscathed. By contrast, New Saint Andrews is not an evangelical darling, but perceived to be an evangelical bully, and when this is considered much of the pushback to the New Saint Andrews comes into focus.

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F-bombs, cursing old ladies, or discovering new ways to cuss. Instead, I have it on good authority that New Saint Andrews students actually break into spontaneous praise.¹²

Now, I've never been to Moscow, but from all the reports I have heard, I believe that psalm-singing outweighs cursing pagan shrines. And I accept as sincere the testimony of New Saint Andrews' president Ben Merkle (who we [interviewed in the Fall of 2024](#)) and others who explained their rationale for using Johnny Cash's middle finger. In context, it aimed to attract a certain kind of young man (raw and untaught as he might be) who would forcefully resist the invitation to bow down to false idols and would do everything in his power to stand against the moral evils of our day. In other words, if there are any of Shadrachs, Meshachs, or Abednegos out there, this video was their homing beacon.

What is ironic (and tragic!) is the way that such a bold invitation to smash idols is dismissed by Christians today. How many pastors and professors have gladly commended the right of their Hindu neighbors to build golden shrines to false gods, [but then turn around and chastise their fellow Christians for daring to call for the destruction of the same](#). Without rehearsing all the arguments related to religious liberty, many evangelicals have a strong allergy to expressing righteous indignation toward soul-damning idolatry.

And so, it is not surprising then, when New Saint Andrews dared invoke the middle finger as a symbol of pronouncing a curse upon the false gods of this age, they ran afoul of many Christians. Yet, such hyper-sensitivity toward Christian infelicities is often matched by a quiescent indifference towards [the wickedness of Democrats](#) and [the](#)



David Talcott
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Spontaneous student psalm sing happening in the downtown square (pic from my office window). Men are carrying their parts well. [@NewSaintAndrews](#)



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¹² David Talcott (@TalcottNYC), "Spontaneous student psalm sing happening in the downtown square (pic from my office window). Men are carrying their parts well. @NewSaintAndrews," X, August 22, 2024, 3:03 p.m., <https://x.com/TalcottNYC/status/1826696829364568261>.

[cultured elites of blue cities](#). As Josh Daws rightly observes, evangelism has become an idol that determines every mode of speech. He writes,

When reaching the lost becomes not just a priority but the ultimate purpose that supersedes all other biblical mandates, pastors begin filtering every decision through the lens of perceived evangelistic effectiveness. Suddenly, clear biblical teaching that might offend the culture becomes an “obstacle to evangelism,” while accommodating unbiblical ideas becomes “building bridges for the gospel.”¹³

For far too long, Christians have feared offending their neighbors, because they reason that if they oppose their immorality or their pagan gods, they will lose a hearing to share the gospel. Therefore, they only can speak in delicate and vulnerable ways. To be clear, there is a place for this speech (see the pinky), but in the public market of ideas, where gods are stationed on every corner, Christians need to learn how be angry and not sin (Eph. 4:26). Paul himself modeled this when he was in Athens, a city littered with false gods. Acts 17:16 reads, “Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was *provoked* within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”

The word provoked has the sense of being provoked to wrath, and it is used to describe the sharp disagreement that stood between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:39. Notably then, something in addition to love impelled Paul to speak. Like Jesus who was angry at the crowd in Mark 3:5, when he healed the man with a withered hand, so Paul was moved to proclaim Christ in large part by a hatred for the false gods in Athens. Like his Lord, Paul did good with the anger that gripped his heart. And so too will any Christian who is led by the Spirit. They will not wallow in wrath or pursue violence with their anger. Instead, trained by God’s Word to hate evil and love good, the Christian’s righteous anger will lead him to speak against every evil promulgated today.

Yet, such forceful speech is not the *lingua franca* of our generation. To borrow an illustration from Tim Keller, he contrasted the Gay Anglo-Saxon Warrior with the Manhattan Gay Man.¹⁴ In the former, the Warrior was conditioned to put down his same-sex desires and unleash his anger; the Manhattan city dweller was conditioned to do the opposite. Without getting into the source of these desires, it’s enough to acknowledge the way modern man has adopted softer, gentler speech patterns. The reasons for this are diverse, but the result is the same. Twenty-first century men are taught to eschew masculine patterns of speech that are labeled as toxic, and in their place they are encouraged to be well-mannered, nice, tame, and safe.

And yet, this is where the middle finger comes in. The middle finger symbolizes a way of speech that is not safe, but it is (for the Christian) good. While the angry young man or

13 Josh Daws, “The Two Voices Every Preacher Needs,” *Christ Over All*, May 16, 2025.

14 Tim Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 135–36.

the uncouth woman might “fly the bird” for patently sinful reasons, the Christian must retain a genuine hatred for evil that may or may not result in a middle finger. Again, my point here is not to find a way for Christians to justify sinful anger under the banner of Christian liberty. No, what I am arguing for is that Christians should be able to articulate speech that is both good and angry. In a word, there are times when our speech must snap!

Think about it. When the middle finger is coordinated with the wisdom and prayer of the thumb, the resulting language snaps. And in the Old Testament, we see this with Elijah, when he uses scatological mockery to battle the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs. 18:27). Likewise, Isaiah knew how to employ piercing satire when he mocked the idol makers in Isaiah 44. So did Amos, when he called the women of Israel the “cows of Bashan” (Amos 4:1). Ezekiel’s word for “idols” (*gillul*) is word that calls to mind feces, and Daniel Block—one of the foremost commentators on Ezekiel—says “had [Ezekiel] been preaching today, he would probably have identified these idols with a four-letter word for excrement.”¹⁵ One might suggest that these prophets had a special vocation or inspiration to keep their anger righteous. But if 2 Timothy 3:16 means anything, it means that “all Scripture” is worthy of imitation.

And of course, what the Prophets modeled in the Old Testament is continued in the New, as John the Baptist identifies the Pharisees and Sadducees as a “brood of vipers” (Matt. 3:8), as Paul invites the Judaizers to imitate Lorena Bobbitt (Gal. 5:12), or as Paul mocks the gloryhounds of Corinth when he says, “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you” (1 Cor. 4:8). In each of these instances, the authors of and the actors in Scripture are expressing anger righteously, and they are employing speech that corresponds. So too, we who want to conform our speech to the full range of Scripture must not restrict ourselves to types of speech that are permitted and dubbed pious. Instead, we need to define piety the way Scripture does, and this, in my estimation, includes expressing anger righteously and mocking evil effectively.¹⁶

15 Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 226.

16 For a vision of piety that extends beyond personal holiness and expands the virtue to manly virility, see C. R. Wiley, *The Household and the War for the Cosmos: Recovering a Christian Vision for the Family* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2019), 13–46.

6. *Cutting with the Serrated Edge*

In a chapter entitled, “The Goal of Giving Offense,” Douglas Wilson writes about the need for employing the serrated edge—his term for biblical satire.

Few subjects are as badly neglected in the modern Church as the applied field of biblical polemics. As a result, we have done very little thinking on the goal of this kind of satire in controversy. Of course, the point of everything is to glorify God, but how does satire glorify God?¹⁷

This question (How does satire glorify God?) was answered by Clinton Manley, in his essay, “[How Then Shall We Mock? Ten Principles for Wielding the Sword of Holy Satire.](#)” And I would commend his tenfold defense of holy satire. For my purposes, I do not want to relitigate the goodness of satire. Rather, I want to take Manley’s last point—“Holy satire is a late-game strategy (normally)”—and illustrate it here. Fitting his point to my illustration of the hand, the use of the middle finger never leads the way. Rather, it should follow prayer (thumb), direct speech (forefinger), and wise and delicate engagement (thumb and pinky). Nevertheless, as we will see with the man born blind (John 9), satire is especially fitting for those who have demonstrated hostility toward God and his people. And therefore, wise Christians, especially Christians who are called to speak in the public square, should know how to employ this tool. For in fact, it is a tremendously effective mode of speech, especially when one must answer a fool (or fools) according to their folly (Prov. 26:5).

To illustrate this point, consider the man born blind, whom Jesus heals in John 9. In that account, the man is miraculously healed by Jesus, and as soon as he is, he begins to speak. First, he speaks to his neighbors who question him and he says that Jesus healed him (John 9:8–12). Next, he is brought before the council and testifies that Jesus is a prophet, even though the priests declare that Jesus was a law-breaker (John 9:13–17). After this episode, the man departs and his parents are questioned (John 9:18–23). Fearing expulsion from the synagogue, they offer up their son to answer for himself (John 9:22). And so their son is deposed a second time.

And here is where his mocking begins. With a clear sense of the court’s desire to ruin him, the man born blind invites the priests to become disciples of Christ (John 9:24–27)! That is both funny and deeply satirical. In response, they revile him and boast of their allegiance to Moses (John 9:28–29). And what is the man left to do? Is he supposed to meekly and quietly depart and leave the Pharisees to mock the Christ who is the light of the world (John 9:5)?

17 Douglas Wilson, *A Serrated Edge: A Brief Defense of Biblical Satire and Trinitarian Skylarking* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 97.

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I suspect that some with gentler dispositions would say something like this: “There is nothing more to say, but in order to avoid expulsion from the synagogue and to leave a door open for another evangelistic conversation, the man should quietly depart when they permit him.” Yet, that is not what happens. The man does not go quietly into the night, but instead, he employs another line of satire as a late-game strategy to defend the prophet who gave him sight. Verses 30–32 record:

³⁰ The man answered, “Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind.”

Don’t miss the hyperbole, exaggeration, and mockery here. This is holy satire at its finest, and it is used with great effect to show the priests how foolish their unbelief was. Applied today, I would say that this use of mockery is exactly how Christians can and should employ the serrated edge of satire. Notably, the man born blind did not begin with satire. But after his plain speech was rejected on more than one occasion, he rightly employed the middle finger of speech, as it were.

To put all of this together, if a man or woman is quick to lacerate others with their tongue, or if they use such satire against those in the house of faith, then they haven’t learned where and how to use such powerful speech. That said, if satirical speech is set on a dimmer switch, we might recognize the way that teasing is a low-level mode of language, and one that parents and friends and roommates can use to move loved ones away from folly and towards virtue. Certainly, teasing can lead to bullying or other forms of cruelty, but short of that there are ways to show others the folly of their interests and pursuits. And in such cases, the posture of the recipient is usually the determining factor in deciding whether the humorous counsel is received.

And this is the last thing to say about the serrated edge: those who use it well must have a generally cheerful disposition. In other words, a bitter soul that takes up satire will poison the speech and harm the intended recipient. But a soul that is filled with joy in the Lord will be able to employ satire with deep-seated interest in doing good to others. For those who mix joy, love, and wisdom with satire, there is a powerful combination of speech that has potential to do immense good. Yet, it might also do great harm; satire, like the quick growing weed kudzu, overcomes the conversations where simple, promise-making speech is most needed.

The Ring Finger: Speaking Simply and Making Promises

Just like the thumb, the forefinger, and the middle finger, the ring finger has characteristics that resemble the way we speak. For instance, the ring finger is the proper location for wearing a wedding ring, which is a symbol of covenant love and marital fidelity. Thus, for our purposes, we will consider the ways in which speech make promises and keeps covenant. Yet, prior to considering that point, we should see how the ring finger, taken by itself, is probably the



the least tactile and the most basic of the fingers. While the first three fingers are used constantly to exercise fine motor skills, the ring finger usually comes to assist them, and not to lead the way in touching, typing, texting, or tracing. I am sure someone might demur, and illustrate their exquisite ring finger skills, but for my point here, I am simply suggesting that the ring finger approximates the ability and need to speak simply. Let's consider this first.

7. *Speaking Simply*

If our forefinger symbolizes the use of speech that points to truth and points out error, and our middle finger does something similar with speech but in contexts of conflict, the ring finger best represents the kind of honest speech that befits a marriage, a family, a church, or another association. In other words, while there is a place for proclaiming and persuading others to know Christ, or to heed wisdom, or to buy our hand soap, there is another type of speech that that is far more basic. It is the kind of speech that we need in times of confession (see below), and it is the kind of speech we make when we give promises. In other words, it is speech that is unimpressive and easy to understand. It is the kind of speech that friends share, and the kind of speech that permeates a trusted relationship.

Notably, this is a type of speech that *did not* characterize Jesus's ministry until he was nearing the cross. As he says in John 15:15, "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." In this verse, which is set in a context of Jesus's Upper Room discourse (John 13–17), Jesus begins to pull back the cur-

tain on his plans for the Holy Spirit and the church. As Psalm 25:14 says, “The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant.” And only now, after Judas had departed could Jesus speak plainly.

Prior to the departure of Judas, Jesus was always with a mixed crowd. And this is why he always spoke in parables (Matt. 13:13). At the same moment that he was revealing himself to some, he was actively hiding himself from others. During his ministry, he told many not to announce his presence (e.g., Matt. 16:20; Mark 1:43; 8:30). And even on the road to Emmaus, he reserved his identity from his disciples (Luke 24:16). Long story short, because of the hostile context of his ministry, he was very reticent to freely disclose himself. Yet, this all changed on the night before his crucifixion, when he says in John 16:25, “I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father.” This verse highlights a critical change in his relationship to his disciples and it explains what Jesus said about his disciples being friends, not just servants.

Equally, this change in speech should alert us to the frequent use of the serrated edge. Notably, every place where Jesus employs the serrated edge he does so in the presence of his enemies. And just the same, when the prophets before Jesus and the apostles after him employ satire, they do so against men and women who have proven to be enemies of God. And as we read Scripture, it is often apparent who is a white hat and who is a black hat. Seeing the enemies of God today is more challenging, and as satire has a definite place in our arsenal of speech, frequent use can make unvarnished, simple speech more difficult.

Personally, this has been pressed on me by my fellow elders. As occasions arise in the church, there is often a need to write something to a member. It may be a matter of formative discipline or maybe something more corrective, but I have often been chastened by my fellow elders for using metaphors, similes, and other turns of phrase that seek to add rhetoric or persuasion to an email or letter. The feedback has been that simple words are better, for they are less likely to sting or be misunderstood. While I enjoy writing with vivid illustrations and rhetorical flourishes—the illustration of ten fingers is an example—there are times I need to make the speech plainer. And within the household of God, this is especially true.

To apply this more broadly. I think that those who are skilled in rhetoric, who swim in the waters of Wodehouse, and who echo the wit of Chesterton, may have a hard time resetting the gauges to speak simply.¹⁸ And this is doubly true if one spends most of

18 If one is ignorant of who P. G. Wodehouse and his literary works, they will have a difficult time understanding the satire of Douglas Wilson. Likewise, if anyone suggests that Wilson is the first evangelical satirist who takes shots at Wheaton (which he does at the beginning of *The Serrated Edge*), they would do well to read Joseph Bayly, of [Gospel Blimp](#) fame. While Christians with satirical wit would do well to speak more simply, lest they cause their brethren to stumble unnecessarily, the

their literary life grappling with God-haters and engaging with Big Eva. For the record, these two groups are not the same, but similar rhetorical turns of phrase might be applied to both. And once that steam engine gets rolling down the track, it might be difficult to shift gears from one to the other. And as a result, those who do plain spoken and gentle speech well, and who think satire should be employed but rarely, are going to have a fine time of talking past one another.

If it is not clear what I'm talking about, let me speak more like a fourth finger. In my estimation, Doug Wilson's use of satire is entirely defensible, as he lays out in his book on the subject. Furthermore, his explanation of "[bad words, mockery, and sarcasm](#)" is far more sound than those who have charged his manner of speaking with "bad form." While I have seen a copy of all his vulgarities floating around, I have always thought that if one was introduced to his use of questionable language through a list of crass instances—instead of starting with his stated principles—one would misunderstand what he's doing with his rhetoric, as outlined in *The Serrated Edge*. For my money, I've approached Wilson's satire by his own principles. And in so doing, it has provided a better scale to weigh his words.

And this brings me back to simple speech. If there is one caution I would offer to anyone who consumes large portions of Wilson's words—aside from the covenantal issues that separate us ecclesially—I would suggest that his imitable verve in writing, if that is all you are consuming, should not crowd out simple speech in your own life, home, church, and speaking. In other words, when anyone is only known through the medium of his writing, we cannot know the whole person. And I have no doubt that what I am saying here about simple speech in the context of family, church, and close associations is what Wilson and others practice in Moscow—mood or no mood. But one could easily get the impression, with the effect of imitation, that such complex rhetoric is the *only* way to speak. And within the bonds of Christ and in the bounds of covenant relations, plain speech is going to be the norm, not satire. The wise reader should be able to understand this fact, but in case they don't, wise Christians need to cultivate more than the serrated edge. That's the point. Hopefully, it's clear enough.

8. Making Promises

Building on the foundation of plain and simple speech is speech that makes promises. Indeed, the making and keeping of promises stems from the whole Bible (see Acts 13:32–33). God himself is a promise-making, oath-taking God, and the whole of redemptive history is tied together by biblical covenants. Equally, those who are in covenant

weaker brother would also do well to allow for satirists to serve the Lord in their own way (cf. Rom. 14:4). Indeed, the church would be a lot more dull without satirical apologists and the defense of the truth would be a lot less sharp, too.

with him must learn to keep their word and not break their promises. Indeed, it might be close to hyperbole to say this, but only if one is unaware of the biblical revelation: *to be human is to be a covenantal being*.

That is to say, born in Adam, we enter the world in covenant with God, even if that covenant now leads to death. The story of the Bible follows a series of covenants and results in a new covenant of eternal life and peace that was, is, and forever will be dependent on the covenant promises of God fulfilled in the Word made flesh. Indeed, the refrain, “I will be your God and you shall be my people” runs through the Bible (see e.g., Gen. 17:7; Exod. 6:7; Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 34:24; 36:28), and all those who are Christians will depend entirely on this promise and will learn how to make and keep promises too.

Marriage is such a promise. Church membership is too. And in fact, there will be occasions in business and nation-building, where contracts will be signed and oaths will rightly be made. And in each of these times, the fidelity of a man to his word proves the character of that individual. As Psalm 15 frames it, the one who is righteous and has a right to ascend the hill of the Lord will “swear to his own hurt and not change” (Ps. 15:4). Similarly, Jesus will require that his followers keep their word and let their yes be “yes” and their no be “no,” for as he says in Matthew 5:37, “anything more than this comes from evil.” As we learn in the Ten Words, bearing false witness is a violation of God’s law (Exod. 20:16) and breaking one’s word comes with severe punishments (cf. Deut. 19:16–20; Prov. 19:5, 9; 21:28; 24:28; 25:18).

Thus, few activities done with one’s mouth are more important than keeping your word, and knowing when it is not possible to do the same. For instance, in James 4:13–17, we discover that it is evil to make plans to travel, or do business, or do anything without acknowledging the Lord. God alone can speak words that absolutely come into being. For us, everything that we plan and every promise that we make depends upon God. In this way, our promises are reliant on prayer and stem from the Word of God that gives us wisdom to know what to commit to and what to decline. As Psalm 37:5–6 reminds us, “Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.”

Truly, it is man’s responsibility to keep his word, and it is a matter of wisdom and character to know what words he can keep. As Jesus says with respect to following him in discipleship, a builder will count the cost before constructing a tower, and a king will do the same with his army before marching to war (Luke 14:25–33). Importantly, when people are depending on our word, wise men will seek counsel before making a promise (Prov. 11:14). And thus, the making of promises is more than just the promise proper, but it includes all the speech that leads up to the promise and all the action that flows from it. To say it differently, our words do things, and *we* do things by our words.¹⁹ And

19 The concept of words doing things comes from the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin and John R.

thus, the wise Christian will learn how to employ his words so that all that he promises, by God's sustaining grace (Ps. 90:17), comes to fruition. Truly, we can do nothing without God (John 15:5), and that is why our words should be saturated with and directed by God's Word (John 15:7-8). If we want our words to stand, we must seek to live by the Word of God, for truly it is our life (Deut. 32:47).

The Pinky: Delicate Compassion and Vulnerable Confession

Finally, if it is good and right to have solicitous, straight, satirical, and simple words, it is also proper to have delicate and even vulnerable words. For such are the words represented by the least of the fingers—the pinky. As we come to the fifth finger, it is no trouble to imagine that this digit is the one that is the smallest, weakest, most delicate, and most vulnerable. Yet, for any action of the hand the pinky must be included, and if we do not know how to involve it in our actions, we will run into trouble.

When I was in sixth grade I broke my pinky when I punched a classmate in the head. I don't think he was employing the middle finger when I struck him, but he was definitely saying things to provoke a fight. Yet, as my right hook landed sideways, I learned that pinky's are not designed for punching, as my boxer's fracture confirmed.

That said, hands do more than hit, and when the fifth finger joins the others, the hand is ready to comfort and care for those in need. And so, the pinky deftly symbolizes the gentleness that speech should exhibit. Just the same, it is also the finger that best represents the earnest question. For truly, Jesus and his followers are not just truth tellers in the indicative mood, but following our Lord, we will also learn to ask good questions.

Thus, as we wrap up this meditation on speech, let's consider the place of delicate and vulnerable speech that is best served to offer comfort, provide counsel, and ask questions.



Searle. On that subject, see Gregg Allison, "[Speech Act Theory, Scripture, and the Holy Spirit](#)," *Christ Over All*.

9. *Delicate Compassion*

By delicate speech I am reflecting on the way that Christians learn how to speak to the needy, the hurting, and the dying. In other words, speech is not only for the strong, it is also for the weak. And in such occasions, the mature believer learns how to express tenderness, sympathy, and compassion. Yes, empathy can be sinful, but genuine compassion is a virtue that all Christians should pursue.

Indeed, Jesus was gentle and lowly (Matt. 11:28). He wasn't only these two attributes, but make no mistake, he came to seek and save the lost, and throughout the Gospels we witness him healing the sick, cleansing the leper, and demonstrating compassion for the contrite.²⁰ Just the same, we see him taking time to ask questions to unearth the heart of others (Matt. 15:21–28). Yes, sometimes these questions exposed hypocrisy (Matt. 15:1–20), but equally they revealed Jesus's love for the lost (Mark 10:21).

Demonstrating this compassion all the more, Jesus knew how to administer person-specific grace in the hour of need. In John 11, for example, when he received the news that Lazarus was sick, he waited until he had died, and *only then* did he make his way to Bethany (John 11:1–6). Finally, when he arrived, Martha came to meet him, and then Mary. And remarkably, they both spoke to him the same words (John 11:21, 32). Yet, he did not treat them the same. He gave Martha his truth and he gave Mary his tears. Jesus's words were perfectly tintured to meet each need, and they model for us the way that we should do the same.

In Romans 12:14–15, we find these words: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Here, Paul is talking to the members of the church in Rome, and he calls them to share one another's sorrows and joys. Among members of the church, we do not need to exercise bold proclamations and rhetorical polemics—at least, not often. Instead, pastors and parishioners alike should learn that encouragement and mutual edification are the normative mode of speech. Gentleness and patience is the rule, and a stern rebuke is the exception. Recognizing grace in the life of another and helping one another to see more of Christ is the way church members minister to each other. And a chief means to accomplishing that end is asking genuine questions and then waiting around for the answer.

Indeed, sheep are often weak, and the burning candle wicks of the saints are often faint. Hence, it is our privilege and duty to ministry grace and peace to one another. For the apologist who is always ready to give an answer (1 Pet. 3:15), delicate speech might not be a natural. Likewise, for the foreman who is accustomed to barking orders on the job

²⁰ See the range of Jesus emotional life in places like Matthew 8–9, where he taught, healed, fed, and ministered to the sick and dying.

site, speaking softly and gently to his baby girl may be a new experience. Yet, it is exactly this kind of range that the Lord seeks to produce in his saints.

God intends for his people to be oaks of righteousness who are tough and unbending in their allegiance to God and his Word. But he also desires that his children would have hearts that are tender and compassionate for those in need (Col. 3:12–13). Wonderfully, just as a mother may stroke the face of her child with the gentleness of her pinky, so women *and men* must learn how to speak with tender compassion and delicate speech (1 Thess. 2:7). Speaking with gentleness does not make one soft. Rather, it makes one sincere. And those who are most adroit at recognizing error and addressing it sharply, should also be leading the way in speaking sincerely. And in the family of God, that sincerity will take the form of kindness and love.

10. *Vulnerable Confession*

Finally, we need to talk about words that make us vulnerable. Just as the fifth finger is in the prime location for harm, as my boxer's fracture indicated, so too, honest confession is a kind of speech that invites vulnerability. Put one way, words make us vulnerable, because they reveal our hearts, our hopes, our fears, and our feelings. Admittedly, in our hyper-sensitive age, there can be some who are too quick to share their feelings or speak their minds. Yet, a cold over-reaction against this (post)modern mood is not the solution. Rather, what is needed is a mature use of speech that expresses the desires of the heart, even as it refuses to trust the heart as an ultimate source for moral judgments.

Rather, brought before the Lord, we learn the way that we should seek to disclose the troubles and temptations of the heart. When Hebrews 4:12 says that God judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart, it means that God judges everything that our hearts "say." This means that nothing is hidden to God, but rather as Jesus says in Luke 12:3, everything that is hidden in the dark will come to the light. Based upon what we see in Scripture then, there is blessing when souls confess their sins to God and others (James 5:13–17). And in such honest moments, words become the vehicles by which man is able to confess his sin (1 John 1:9), his need (James 4:4), his fears (1 Pet. 5:7), and everything else.

Yes, such speech is always liable to expose one's inner man to uncaring eyes or the mocking tongue of others. But the alternative is to remain silent, and to suffer the consequences. In Psalm 32, David depicts the physical effects of unpardoned sin,

³For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*

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⁵I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. *Selah*

Truly, God has given us speech to do more than pray, proclaim, protest, or promise; he has also given us speech to exhale the deadly fumes of sin that constantly build up in our souls. So long as we inhabit these fallen bodies, our hearts will build up pressure of unconfessed sin. And in liturgical ways (as in confessions at church) and spontaneous ways (as in personal confession to a friend), we need to use our speech to confess our sins and our weaknesses. And more, we need to be the kind of Christian friends who use our speech to invite others to do the same. Indeed, this is where we should grow in our ability to ask questions that penetrate beyond the surface, so that the weaker parts of our natures might be strengthened by the grace of God communicated by friends exhorting us in truth and praying with us for grace.

Wonderfully, in the church of Jesus Christ, such honest speech can and should be met with grace, prayer, and encouragement. Indeed, we are not strong by nature, and we need to be able to confess our weakness to others. But such confession requires vulnerability, and that vulnerability is best established in churches that know the all-sufficient mercies of God and the terrible need we have for daily grace. In fact, when such grace is experienced, it takes the weak and makes them strong—not strong in themselves, but strong in the Lord.

And connecting the pinky to the forefinger (to continue to use this allegory), such grace-empowered strength leads the Christian to a type of confession that goes beyond the safety of the church. For in fact, confession is not simply subjective and personal. It is also objective and evangelistic. And while such proclamation is carried along by the strength of the Spirit, the one who brings that message of the gospel grace may very well endanger himself. Notably, the word witness in Greek is the word *martyr* (or *martys*). While the Greek word does not mean death, like martyr does in English, there is a connection between the vulnerability of confessing Christ in public and the harm that may come as a result.

Jesus told his disciples that others would believe in him because of their ministry of the Word (John 17:20–21). And in the same night, he said that his disciples would be hated for his sake (John 15:18–25). Nevertheless, Jesus promised to be with his disciples as they went into the world (Matt. 28:20), and as Paul declares, suffering is a gift (Phil. 1:29) and comes with the promise of deep and abiding fellowship (Phil. 3:10–11). In other words, while witnessing to others about Christ invites vulnerability, it also promises a closeness with the Lord that remaining silent does not. And thus, while remaining silent might be safer, it is not better. And ultimately, it obstructs the plans of God to

bring his Word into the world. For truly, the only way that the lost can confess their sin is if someone goes and confesses and proclaims the Christ to them.

Now, students of language will notice that I am equivocating on terms here: To use the term confess with respect to personal repentance is not the same use as employing the same term to describe an affirmation of the faith. Yet, this perfectly illustrates the way words work, and why the allegory of the hand is fruitful. If words do things—and they do!—then we need to learn how to use them, and while speaking about such use may make me vulnerable to the questions and critiques of others, this is part of what it means to grasp words that help us use our words well.

Indeed, it is not simply “pinky” words that make us vulnerable—although we should master speech that is delicate, compassionate, and able to make vulnerable confession—but before a holy and righteous God, every word is vulnerable. At the judgment, we will give an account for all our words. And this judgment is why we should take heed to all of our speech and seek to make our words count, before the Lord counts our words.

Measure Your Words Before You Give An Account for Them

In the end, this long essay is but a brief primer on the subject of speech. Unlike the Ten Words written by the finger of God (Exod. 20:1-17; 31:18), my ten words about words do not form a complete package or exhaust what God’s law says. Nevertheless, I trust that by thinking about your speech by means of this handy mnemonic device, it will help you add range to your voice. And because none of us have yet attained perfection (Phil. 3:12; James 3:2), I am confident in saying that all of us have room to improve with our words.

Thus, to rehearse what we have seen, here are the ten words about words again.

With the thumb,

- 1. Godly speech seeks wisdom from God*
- 2. Godly speech puts prayer first*

With the index finger,

- 3. Godly speech points to truth*
- 4. Godly speech defends the faith*

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With the middle finger,

5. *Godly speech expresses righteous anger*

6. *Godly speech knows how to cut with the serrated edge*

With the ring finger,

7. *Godly speech speaks simply*

8. *Godly speech makes promises*

With the pinky finger,

9. *Godly speech offers delicate compassion*

10. *Godly speech makes vulnerable confession*

As I have tried to note throughout this essay, these ten modes of speech, like the different lengths, strengths, and shapes of our fingers, will be employed in a variety of divergent ways. Moreover, it is conceivable that in learning how to speak wisely, we employ one type of speech when another would be better. Likewise, if our words are afflicted like a hand with arthritis, it is very common that some forms of speech will be easy, while others will be hard to perform.

Nonetheless, despite these qualifications and many others, maturing Christians should labor in training their tongue. We should be adding Spirit-given self-control to our foolish speech, and we should be straining to speak boldly (even satirically) by the strength of the same Spirit. To that end, we can close this longform with a few personal questions for your own consideration.

- Which type of speech comes natural to you? Which doesn't?
- What kind of words do you need to grow in? And what type are you afraid or uninterested to improve?
- Which type of speech is most distasteful to you? And why is this?
- Will you give grace to others who do not speak like you want them to? Or must someone's patterns of speech match your preferences to earn your endorsement?
- Finally, are your commendations and condemnations for others based upon the truth of their speech? Or do you find yourself more concerned about tone and style of their words?

To these questions and more, I pray this *long* longform serves as a source of meditation and reflection on how every word you speak can and should honor the Word made flesh. For as Jesus says, "On the day of judgment people will give account for every care-

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less word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36–37)

Truly, if we will give an account for every careless word, how much more for those we do count. And for this reason, we should take seriously the whole counsel of God and what it says and shows to us about our speech. We should plumb the depths of God’s Word and then, by God’s grace, work to conform our patterns of speech after all the Lord has said. For this is the best way to get a grip on godly speech, and to speak in ways that glorify our God.



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