# 

# [Week 12] War of Words - Winning the War of Words Manuscript

# 

Good morning! We’ve arrived at our penultimate class in this series, and I don’t know about you, but the Lord has really used it to work on my heart, especially during the weeks that I’ve been preparing to teach. It has prompted me to pursue peace with multiple fellow members, and to seek their forgiveness either for things I didn’t say that I now wish I had said, or things that I said that I wish I hadn’t said. If that’s you, and you need to make amends with a fellow brother or a fellow sister, let me encourage you to prioritize doing that even today. Use the material from last week’s class on repentance, to identify heart attitudes that we’re called to “put off”, as well as heart attitudes that we are called to “put on.”

You’ll notice on the last page of your handout that today’s class bears the same title as Part Three of the series, namely “Winning the War of Words”. Last time, due to the amount of material we had to cover, we didn’t have time left for questions and discussion at the end, so this time I’ll seek to leave some time for that at the end. Let’s begin with prayer.

**PRAY**

So we've identified the battle. From the beginning, we’ve kept saying it's not just a war of vocabulary or techniques, rather it's a war for the control of our hearts. Will we submit to the King, rest in his loving control and seek to represent him in our relationships? For most of us, this means repenting of a self-centeredness that causes our words to hinder the work of God. It means committing ourselves to a view that ministry is not one small aspect of our lives, but a lifestyle. And that this lifestyle reflects our calling by God to be his ambassadors in the everyday situations of life.

Our words are the principal tool God uses in the work he does through us. So we confess to our selfish, wandering hearts (putting off, as per Ephesians 4:23-25) and instead, we commit to “put on” a new way of speaking, one that takes our calling seriously. But this raises a question: How can you and I achieve a lasting victory in the war of words? That brings us to our first point on p.1 of your handouts: what winning looks like.

**What Winning Looks Like**

Winning the war of words involves choosing our words carefully. It's not just about the words we say but also about the words we choose **not** to say. Winning the war is about being prepared to say the right thing at the right moment, exercising self-control. It is refusing to let our talk be driven by passion and personal desire, but communicating instead with God's purposes in view. It is exercising the faith necessary to be part of what God is doing at that moment.

Galatians 5 explains in detail what it means to gain a lasting victory in the war of words. Could someone please **READ** **Galatians 5 from verse 13 to chapter 6 verse 2**.

So the first thing we see from this passage is that winning the war involves recognizing the destructive power of words. We see that in verse 15. Paul warns us, “Watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” In the Garden of Eden we saw the life-altering power of words as the serpent convinced Eve to eat the fruit. All over scripture the importance of what we say and how we say it is depicted. We will never win the war of words as long as we minimize how critical a battle it is. God has ordained us to be people of influence. Husband influences wife and vice versa. Parents influence children. Friend influences friend, Pastor influences his flock, and so on. And the most powerful way we influence each other is through words, which encourage, rebuke, explain, teach, define, condemn, love, question, divide, unite, counsel, judge, reconcile, slander, edify, and so much more. People have influence and words have power. It is the way God meant it to be.

So we must never minimize our sins of communication (saying things like “I didn't really mean it.” or “I just wasn't thinking.”) Paul reminds us that what we say has consequences. We are always representing the Lord. It is never okay to communicate in ways that contradict his message, his methods or his character.

It ought to grieve us to think of the amount of talk in our families that does not recognize the seriousness that Paul gives it here. Granted, we might not necessarily have big fights in our families, but there can be a lot of thoughtless, unkind, irritated and complaining talk that slips by every day – even in Christian families. We might be tempted to minimize these quote unquote “little” sins of talk because our home is free of physical and verbal abuse and we really do love one another. But Paul's words in this passage yank us back to reality. Words that “bite and devour” are words that destroy, as our sister Leah exhorted us last Sunday. They are not okay. So we must do all we can to assign words the importance Scripture gives them, remembering that God says we will give account of “every careless word” according to Matthew 12:36.

A second thing we see from this passage (point #2 in your handout), is that winning the war means affirming our freedom in Christ. We see that in verse 13. It is right to glory in the fact that God's grace frees us from the unbearable weight of the law (Paul covers that in vv.1-6). We are accepted into God's family solely on the basis of the righteous life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His righteousness has been assigned to our account. In this way, we are happily free from the law.

But we cannot stop here. Affirming our freedom in Christ not only has a **from** aspect; it also has a **to** aspect as well. Paul says it this way: “But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.” It is **never** biblical to say, “Because Jesus has freed me from the law, I can live any way I want.” Any such idea completely misunderstands the purpose of grace. Paul wants us to affirm that our freedom makes it possible for us to live as we could not live before. We **can** actually live and speak in a way that pleases the Lord.

We have been freed, not only from the requirement of the law for salvation, but from the bondage to sin in everyday living. We have been freed **from** the weight of the law **to** live a godly life. We cannot glory in what grace takes us **from** without also accepting what it calls us **to**. For more on this, could someone please **READ** **Titus 2:11-14** listed in your handouts. (As you’re turning there, Lord-willing I’ll be preaching from this text in 3 weeks’ time, if you’d like to start praying for me).

Self-Indulgent, sin-indulgent talk contradicts our identity as the children of grace. It turns us back toward the very bondage from which we have been freed. It forgets the position we have been given by Christ and the power he has given us by his Spirit. Which leads us to Paul's next point.

Number three. Winning the war means saying no to the sinful nature. We see that in verse 13 and verse 24. This passage is very honest about what it is like to live in a fallen world as people who still sin. And this includes members of Christian families! What parent hasn't had to deal with a child doing something foolish and irresponsible? What wife hasn't been disappointed by her husband? What husband hasn't thought that his wife has failed to give him his just due? What child has not felt misunderstood and mistreated by his or her parent? What sibling has not been hurt by a brother or sister? What friend has not been failed by a friend?

Which of us has not provoked? Which of us has not been tempted to selfishness, to anger, to jealousy and greed? Which of us has not forsaken love to fight for some piece of the creation that we desperately wanted to possess? Galatians 5 is a sinners-in-a-world-of-sin passage. But it is more. This passage declares that we have power inwhat Christ in the face of provocation.

In exhorting us not to indulge the sinful nature, Paul summarizes a powerful gospel reality that we do not want to miss. He says in v.24 that, “Those who belong to Christ have crucified the sinful nature with its **passions** and **desires**.

A passion is a fervent or intense emotion. A desire is something the heart craves. As sinners in a sinful world, we are going to experience both, Paul says. They will seem so powerful that we cannot act against them. This experience is exactly Paul is addressing. What has Christ given us to help us deal with such intense temptations? Must we be controlled by what we feel and crave? These questions lead Paul to the work of Christ.

When Christ went to the cross, he did not purchase for us the **possibility** or **opportunity** to be saved. No, his work was personal, effective and complete. It accomplished its purpose; it did not simply make salvation available as an option. Jesus went to the cross carrying the names of his children with him. When Christ died, we died. When he was buried, we were buried with him. When he arose to newness of life, we rose with him. This is the truth we must grasp if we are ever to gain a lasting victory in the war of words. When Christ was crucified, my sinful nature (**with** its passions and desires) was crucified with him! I no longer live enslaved to sin. I no longer must submit to the intense emotions and the powerful cravings of my sinful nature.

The mastery of my sinful nature over me has been forever broken in Christ. For the first time, I can offer the parts of my body as instruments of righteousness – including my mouth (take some time later today or this week to see Romans 6:1-14, listed in your handout). So Paul says, in effect, “Don't indulge the sinful nature. Don't feed its passions and desires. Don't allow your words to be dictated by powerful feelings and cravings. Remember, because of what Christ has done, you have the power to say no.”

Few truths are more important in winning the war for the heart. As sinners in a sinful world, we will be tempted and provoked, and in those moments powerful emotions and desires will grip us. But because of our identification with Christ, we have the power to say no. We **can** speak as his ambassadors even in the middle of real temptation and provocation! If we are living under the rule of emotion or the rule of desire, we are denying the gracious, rescuing work of our Saviour.

There will be the little situations. Imagine a Christian couple in bed with sleep fast approaching and then the phone rings. It’s their son who is at the bus station and needs a ride home. The wife says to the husband, won't you please go? The husband is immediately hit with powerful emotions and powerful desires. He's frustrated that the call has come so late. He is irritated that it just happens to be the coldest night of the year in July. He feels as if it's always him who has to go. He wants to stay in bed! He wants someone else to be the driver for a change.

If he allows his heart to be ruled by these emotions and desires, there's no way he will communicate as he should. His words will be selfish, angry, accusatory and full of self-pity. But for this moment, he has been given Christ. Sure, this is a little situation but we all live in little moments like this. And they really do determine the character of our talk.

Then there are the big situations. Imagine a husband who is shocked when he gets home one day to find his house emptied of everything except a bed, a lamp, a kitchen table and some chairs. His wife had been plotting to leave him for months. The movers came while he was at work. On the table he finds a note with the phone number of his wife’s lawyer. In just a few weeks, she has secured permanent custody of the children.

It would be hard to describe the fear, rage, hurt, and sadness that gripped this man as he stands in that empty house. In one moment, his world has changed. He desperately wants to turn back the clock and give his wife what she really deserved. As he stands there, his emotions rage and his mind races from thought to thought and desire to desire. In this moment, his only hope as a Christian is found in Christ. He **can** rise above his passions. He **can** say no to his desires. Even in **this** situation, he **can** speak as an ambassador of Christ. And so by God’s grace, in the midst of his pain, he goes on to become a peacemaker. He speaks the truth in love. He overcomes evil with good.

Many of us are quite skilled at living under the rule of sin’s passions and desires. When we indulge them, our words add layers of interpersonal difficulty to the original problem. As we indulge the sinful nature we will tend to personalize what is not personal and turn moments of ministry into moments of irritation and anger. We will strike back at those we are meant to serve in order to satisfy ourselves. Self-Indulgent talk never accomplishes God's purposes. It forgets the truths of the gospel and our identity as Christ's representatives. Paul reminds us that because of the work of Christ, we can do better.

Winning the war of words also means saying no to any rationalization, blame-shifting, or self-serving arguments that would excuse talk that flows out of the passions and desires of the sinful nature.

Number four. Winning the war means speaking to serve others in love. We see that in verses 13 and 14. We say no to the rule of passions and desires, not only because Christ gives us the power to do so, but also because we have been called to serve. The opposite of indulging the sinful nature is not saying, “I must not, I must not, I must not.” We are called to **put off** self-indulgent talk, in order to **put on** talk that flows out of a love for others.

Paul could not make the call here any stronger. He tells us that the entire law is summarised by this one command: Love your neighbour as yourself. Speaking in a way that serves the needs of others is at the heart of God's will for us, and his enabling grace makes it possible. The picture in this passage is of a God who is relentlessly at work by his Spirit, conforming his people to the image of his Son. He wants to use us to accomplish that purpose.

Serving out of love does not mean becoming a slave to the agenda of everyone around you. It does not mean being a doormat. Rather, it means living with redemptive purpose. Love desires the highest good of another. The highest good I could desire for anyone is that he or she would become like Christ, that is, take on the fruit of the Spirit. God does this work in the normal events and relationships of daily life. He works for this good in every situation.

Could someone please **READ Ephesians 4:29** which describes what it means to speak out of love (“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs that it may benefit those who listen.”) Unwholesome talk forgets the other person and concentrates on what I feel and what I want. But Paul calls us to talk that is other-oriented. If I am going to serve another with my words, Paul says, there are three things to consider:

1. I must consider the person, right? Only what's helpful for building up. What do I know about this individual that would shape what I say?
2. I must consider the problem, right? According to their needs. What is this person's real need in this situation and how should it guide what I say?
3. I must consider the process. That it may benefit those who listen. I'm not just spouting off. My communication should have redemptive purpose; it should benefit the listener.

Frankly, in our own strength, none of us are this nice! Sin makes us intensely selfish people. We instinctively think about our own needs and wants. We are primarily committed to our own welfare. But as we humbly admit our selfishness, we can begin to appreciate and rely upon the enabling grace of Christ. He **has** broken the mastery of our sinful passions and desires. He **does** equip us by his Spirit to speak as his ambassadors. We **can** speak out of a commitment to serve others in love. Winning the war of words comes from serving. Winning comes from loving, from talk that is free from bondage to me (my passions and desires) and is therefore free to minister to you.

Number five, page 3 of your handout, winning the war means speaking “in step with the spirit.” which we see in Galatians 5:25. Keeping in step with the spirit means speaking in a way that reflects his work in me and encourages his work in you. In this passage, the Spirit's work is made quite clear. He is working to produce in us a harvest consistent with the character of Christ: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. As an act of faith and submission, I hold my speaking up to the standard of this fruit. I look at difficult situations as God-given opportunities to see this fruit mature in me. Problems are not obstacles to the development of this fruit, but opportunities to see it grow.

Speaking in step with the spirit not only means speaking in a way that reflects what the Spirit is doing in **you**, it also means encouraging the Spirit's fruit in the other person. We are prone to fall into thinking that our struggle is with “flesh and blood.” See Ephesians 6:10-16, listed in your handout. Speaking in step with the Spirit means taking time to listen, examine, reflect, and prepare. It means communicating in a way that promotes the spirit's work of grace in our lives and in the lives of others.

The sixth thing we see is that winning the war means speaking with a goal to restore. We see that in Galatians 6:1-2. Paul says, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin you who are spiritual should restore him gently…” Let's be sure we understand these words. Notice first that Paul does not say, “**If you catch** someone in a sin…” He is not talking about sneaking up on someone to catch him in the act! Rather, he is talking about how we as sinners get “caught” – that is entrapped and ensnared in sin.

Sin is deceitful. The devil is a schemer who will whisper fine sounding arguments in our ears to convince us that what we're doing is okay. Sin is a snare that tightens its hold on us **as** we believe those fine sounding arguments and use them to rationalize and justify what we've done. Before we know it, we are in deeper bondage to the sin than we ever dreamed possible. And we don't even know how we got there!

All of us are prone to sin on this side of glory. We get caught in anger, pride, self-pity, envy, vengeance, self-righteousness, bitterness, lust, selfishness, fear, disbelief, and the list goes on. And we either don't even know that we are caught or we don't know how to extricate ourselves. In one way or another, we all live “caught” in some aspect of our lives all the time. There are areas of sin we are blind to, sins that are our particular theme of struggle. There **will** be a day when the final snare falls off and we will be with Christ and like him forever! But until that time, we need to recognise that as sinners we are “catchable,” and for that reason, we need one another.

Paul then says, “You who are spiritual should restore him gently.” Is he talking about some super-spiritual elite group of restorers? No, not at all! This word “spiritual” is not being used to refer only to a biblically mature person. It really embraces **every believer**. It is referring back to Galatians 5:25, where Paul said that we are to “keep in step with the Spirit,” that is, to be sensitive to what the Spirit is doing in us and in others. When we're “keeping in step with the Spirit” we position ourselves to serve as his restorers. All of us, if we are living lives worthy of our calling, are positioning ourselves to be God's agents of rescue and restoration.

Winning the war of words means letting this restoration agenda shape and direct our relationships. The temptation for all of us is to mistakenly believe that our relationships belong to us. We tend to view other people as our possessions. Parents fall into this with their children. Then, in the teenage years, when the child fails, the parents can't see beyond their own anger and hurt to be agents of restoration for their own children.

We tend to see others as existing for our own happiness. Husbands and wives come to believe that it is their spouse’s responsibility to make them happy. They watch their spouse with vigilant, expectant eyes. Life becomes a series of final exams and yet the happiness they seek never comes. We all tend to look at the people around us with an eye as to how they are responding to us, how they are affecting us. We look for proper respect, love, appreciation, acceptance and honour, and we find it very hard to continue in relationships, where it does not exist.

Paul is calling us to something radically different here. Is calling us to the new and higher agenda for our relationships that this AM seminar describes. This new agenda is rooted in the fundamental recognition that our relationships (and the people in them) do not belong to us but to God. He owns us as Creator and has reclaimed us as Saviour. Christ has purchased the condemned house that is you and me. He has moved in and is now at work doing a complete renovation. This is the gospel foundation for relationships in the body of Christ. It is vital that we understand our position. We do not, nor will we ever, own these relationships for ourselves. We are tools in the hands of the true Owner, who is busy in the work of restoration.

Once we learn to see our relationships this way, we will begin to see the need for restoration all around us. When you're taking a holiday road trip and the children are quarrelling in the back seat, there's more going on than your expensive holiday being ruined! The need for restoration is revealing itself. You can respond to this situation as an irritated parent, **or** as a restorer who wants to be used by the great Restorer. When you are having coffee with a friend, and he is complaining once again about his boss, wondering why God hasn't done something, there is more going on than a nice evening being ruined. Here again, God is calling you to more than self-pity. He has positioned you to be a restorer.

When husbands and wives disagree over the same old stuff once again, they need to do more than curse the fact that their marriage just doesn't work or that their spouse never seems to have a clue. The need for restoration is made clear by these themes of struggle. They need to see where they are “caught” and they need to respond to one another, not with a demand agenda, but with a restoration agenda.

When your relationship with your teenager has gotten cold, distant and hostile, it is not time to wallow in self-pity, rehearsing all the things that you have done for him or her over the years with little respect and thanks. It is not time to give into verbal wars or to build the icy walls of bitterness. It is time to see the need for restoration. Your teenager is “caught” (maybe you are too!), and he or she is in desperate need of restoration. But you will not be a tool of restoration as long as you demand that he or she meet your expectations of relational happiness.

When your dinner table disintegrates into a war zone of competition and petty conflicts, it is not time to lash out in anger or pick up your plate to go eat in another room. Your children are demonstrating that they are “caught,” and God has positioned you to be used in restoration work that evening.

Winning the war of words means speaking redemptively, and speaking redemptively is rooted in a restoration perspective on relationships. Contrary to popular belief, the purpose of human relationships is **not** human happiness. It is the work of reconciling people to God and restoring them to the image of his Son.

Winning the war of words means never forgetting who we are. When we remember that we we are what we are because of God's mercy alone, we speak with gentleness and humility as God's restorers. How often our talk to one another lacks this gentleness and humility! We fail to speak redemptively because we have forgotten who **he** is and what he is doing in our relationships. We fail to speak with gentleness and humility because we have forgotten who **we** are and our own dependency on his grace.

**Winning Is a Journey**

Galatians 5 pictures people on a journey who are focused not just on what they have to carry, but on who else needs assistance. This is how the passage ends in Galatians 6:2. With the words, “Bear one another's burdens,” Paul broadens his call to us. Winning the war of words is not only about rescuing the one who is ensnared in sin, but about being attentive to all the places where you may struggle. In the journey of life, we must not just focus on balancing our own load properly, but our eyes are on others, too. When I see a person struggling to carry his burden, I'm called to share that weight. This is the love Christ talked about in John 13:34, and is also the “royal law” of James 2:8. The way of Christ is never selfish. It's never self-absorbed. Christ's love is directed towards others, focused on others, and is self-sacrificing.

So we are called to support one another as we journey through this fallen world. We are called to speak to one another out of this “burden-bearing” mentality. When we see people struggling with weakness, we point them to the strength available in Christ. When someone is ignorant, we speak with words of truth that give wisdom. When someone is fearful, we talk of God, who is an ever-present help in trouble. When people grieve, we seek to comfort. When they are discouraged, we seek to bring words of hope. When they feel alone, we remind them of our love and Christ's presence. When they are angry, we point them to a God of righteousness, vengeance and justice. In the midst of conflict, we seek to speak as peacemakers and reconcilers. When people are anxious, we point them to the Sabbath rest that Christ has given his children.

Winning the war of words means living with eyes open, aware not only of our own struggle, but of other pilgrims struggling on the journey with us. In so doing, we all come to realize that we are not alone. Christ has planned for the many hands of his people to join together to make an otherwise impossible load bearable. We need not despair, quit, or run in the opposite direction. Rather, strengthened and encouraged, we continue the journey.

Winning the war means choosing our words carefully. We do not want to give any room in our talk to the passions and desires of the sinful nature. In our own conceit and envy, we do not want to provoke one another to sin. We do not want to bite and devour one another with words. Rather, we are committed to serve one another in love with all of our talk. We want to speak in step with what the Spirit is producing in us and in others. We want to speak in a way that encourages the growth of that fruit. Finally, we want to speak as gentle, humble agents of restoration, as burden-bearers committed to live by Christ's rule of love.

What radical revival, reconciliation, and restoration would result if we carried this call into every relationship in our lives! How different things would be if we were consistently committed to this kind of communication! How transformed our relationships would be if we spoke to one another with words of redemption! A commitment to winning the war of words calls us to choose our words well.

**Getting Personal: Strategies for War**

1. Where in your communication do you tend to forget your freedom in Christ and wind up indulging the sinful nature? (with your spouse, boss, parents, siblings, neighbour, extended family, church members) Take time to identify personal battlefields.
2. List the powerful emotions and desires to which you need to say no. (Examples of emotions: anger, discouragement, fear. Examples of desires: vengeance, respect, appreciation, control, success, love)
3. In what specific areas is God calling you to speak out of a commitment to serve others in love?
4. Which elements of the fruit of the Spirit need to grow in you and more consistently influence the way you talk to others? (patience, self-control, kindness, joy)
5. Where do you see restorative work that needs to be done around you? How can your words help? What opportunities do you have to be part of what God is doing in others?

Remember, because of what Christ has done, we **can** say no to the passions and desires of the sinful nature. We **can** serve each other in love even in the face of provocation.