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# [Week 4] War of Words - Idol Words Manuscript

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Good morning and welcome to our fourth class in this *War of Words* AM seminar. Let’s **PRAY.**

Welcome to our fourth class in this *War of Words* AM seminar. You’ll notice on the back of your handout that today’s class concludes Part 1 of the series. (A quick word about the series.) For the benefit of those joining us for the first time today, the content for this AM Seminar is adapted from a book entitled *War of Words* by Paul Tripp, and the quick recap of the first three weeks is that this seemingly normal, ordinary thing we do every day called “talking” is actually more profound than we realize. As human beings, we are unique in all of creation in being able to talk because three weeks ago we saw from Genesis 1 that we are created in the image of the Great Speaker. God has given our words significance and value. We do not really understand the significance of words until we realize that the first words that human ears ever heard in Genesis 1 were not the words of a human being, but the words of God. Think about that! The value of every piece of human communication is rooted in the fact that *God* speaks. And yet, despite the truth that God speaks, and the truth that everything we say has its origins in his words to us, there was another speaker in the Garden of Eden. His arrival began the great war of words that we now fight daily, hence the class two Sundays ago, Satan speaks, because sadly our words often also image the Great Deceiver of Genesis 3. Then last Sunday we considered the hope we have for our words through the Word in the flesh – the incarnate Word who was in the beginning according to John 1. We saw from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians the resources we have in Christ for our war of words - namely our hope, our riches in Him, his power, and his rule.

This morning we begin with a fictional story about a husband and a wife here in Nairobi. Picture the husband sitting in his office thinking about his lovely wife. He realises how blessed he is to be married to such a woman for so many years. He reflects on the fact that he asked her to marry him when he was in his early 20s, which makes him realize that he hardly had the maturity back then to make such a serious decision and that his marriage today is a testimony to the love and the grace of the Lord. As he sits in his office with a heart full of gratitude to God, he also thinks about how hard it is for him and his wife to have quality time alone with each other these days. They have four children still living at home, and there isn't much quiet around their house. They are way beyond the days when they could put their kids to bed and spend time alone together. Nowadays their children are always still up when they decide to go to bed. In fact, his children often wake him up as he's dozing and ask him, “Why don't you just call it a day and go to bed?”

Anyway, as he's thinking about his wife, being thankful to God for her, and bemoaning the pressures of family life that keep them from spending more quality time with each other, he has a brilliant idea! He decides to surprise her that evening with dinner at a restaurant of her choice. He's excited about the idea and he just knows that she will be excited as well. When lunch hour comes around, he dashes to a nearby shop to buy his wife’s favourite perfume as an expression of his love for her. As the afternoon continues, he is more and more captured by the prospect of a night out with his wife. He starts to daydream in the office about the evening ahead. In his mind, he pictures himself driving up to their house, throwing open the front door, and finding his wife waiting for him. He pictures his wife saying, “My dear, you're finally home! I've been waiting for you! Oh how I look forward to your coming home each evening!” (I think you can begin to tell whose fantasy this is.)

In his daydream, he responds to her, “I've been thinking all day about how much I love you and how blessed I am to have you as my wife. And I have a great idea. Let's go out to dinner tonight. Just the two of us - you choose the restaurant. He pictures her responding, “Oh, how sweet! Most of the women I know would love to be married to a man like you!” “Oh, I have another surprise,” he says, as he pulls the perfume out of his pocket. “I bought you your favourite perfume.” “Wow!” she replies. “This is too much! I'll go get ready right away. I can't think of anything I'd rather do than spend an evening with you.” (Again, this is all happening in the husband's mind as he's daydreaming in the office.)

And so the afternoon passes by, as his mind keeps rehearsing this upcoming surprise for his wife. Now imagine that his day in the office is finally over, and he's on his way home. By this time, he is fully captivated by the idea of an evening out with his wife. He's also fully convinced that she will think the idea is wonderful too. And so he makes his way home, singing all the way. He parks in front of the house, opens the front door, but no one is there.

Still, his enthusiasm is undiminished. He walks into the dining room and he hears voices coming from the kitchen. They are not happy voices. In the kitchen, he finds his wife standing between two of their children, refereeing an argument. In his excitement, he doesn't wait for a pause in the conversation. He just blurts out, “Honey, I have a great idea!”

Okay. No one seems to have noticed that he has entered the room so he blurts out his announcement again. And this time, his wife responds, “Did you say something?” “Yes,” he says excitedly, “I've been thinking about you all day and I have a great idea. Let's go out to dinner, just the two of us. You choose the restaurant and I'll make the reservation while you're getting ready to go.” She looks at him for a moment and responds with a sigh. This is not a positive sign. “Maybe you didn't understand me,” he says, trying again, “I want to take you out for a special night at your favourite restaurant, just you and me.” His wife sighs again (things are not looking good at all!) and then she begins to speak.

“Do you know what my day has been like? I feel like I've been the sole peace negotiator in the middle of World War III. I am totally exhausted physically and mentally the thought of getting dressed up and going out to a fancy restaurant doesn't seem attractive at all. I do appreciate that you think about me and that you love me, but I have a better idea. Why don't you take the money you are going to use for the restaurant and take the children out for pizza or something. You can have an evening out with the kids and I'll take a long, warm bath and go to bed early.”

The husband can hardly believe what he's hearing. And so, he replies, “God has blessed you with a husband who loves you, a husband who thinks about you and really wants to be with you and this is how you respond? Sure, the bath idea is a great idea for you, but what about me? Do you know what happens to the blessings God gives you when you don't properly use them? Do you know how many women would love to be married to a man like me? We will never have the relationship God wants us to have if we both aren’t committed to working on it! There seems to be just one thing that we have in common: I am concerned about you and you are concerned about you. Sure, I'll take the kids out if that's what you want! You enjoy yourself and soak until your skin wrinkles – and by the way, stick this in the water,” he says, as he pulls out the bottle of perfume. “But you better think about our relationship and how much you are really committed to it.”

Now, fortunately this is a fictional story, but unfortunately, it might be all too familiar to some of us. What went wrong? How did an idea born out of thankfulness to God and love for his wife end up in such anger and accusation? How did the person who was the focus of his love and appreciation become the target of such anger? What unleashed this flow of blame, guilt, manipulation, self-righteousness and accusation? It's easy to see that the problem here is not just communication technique. He clearly has no trouble making himself heard and using words to advance his point. Something deeper is going on. The problem with his words is that they are idol words – Not I-D-L-E. But I-D-O-L – Idol words. Many of our communication problems occur because we are speaking idol words. To understand what this means, we’ll look at two passages. Let's begin with the words of Christ in **READ Luke 6:43-46.**

Jesus uses a metaphor with which we are all familiar, a tree. There's an organic connection between the roots of a tree and the fruit it produces. The same is true with our words. They are the fruit of the root issues found in our hearts. Word problems are always related to heart problems. That's why we will not solve communication problems by dealing only with our words, any more than we would solve a problem with a plant's fruit production by dealing only with the fruit. If a plant isn't producing good fruit, there is a problem with the plant system itself, down to its very roots.

Jesus' brilliant metaphor reveals that our words are shaped and controlled by the thoughts and motives of our own hearts. It is very tempting to blame others (“She makes me so angry” or “He pushes all my buttons”) or to blame the situation around us (“I just didn't have the time to sit down and discuss it calmly,” or “With four kids in the house all talking at once, a soft answer just doesn't work”). Christ says that a person's words come “out of the overflow of his heart.” In our opening story, it was tempting for the husband to blame his wife for his self-centered, angry guilt-inflicting words. He wanted to say that he got upset because she was being selfish. But Christ would say no. His wife did not cause his words. She was simply the occasion, the trigger, for his heart to express itself. His words revealed the true desires of his heart.

If we're going to understand our trouble with words, we must begin with the heart. Our tongues are a restless evil because the heart is “deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). Word problems reveal heart problems. The people and situations around us do not make us say what we say; they are only the occasion for our hearts to reveal themselves in words.

Now consider another fictional couple, who find themselves in yet another conversation that has gone from a simple recounting of the week to a full-blown volume of accusations. This seems to happen every time they attempt to talk. Do they have serious communication problems? Yes. Are there biblical principles that relate to the way they talk to one another? Of course. But this couple's inability to have a sane, loving, restrained, and mutually beneficial conversation powerfully reveals the root of their problem. Until they face what is going on in their hearts, they will not stay inside God's communication boundaries. Now imagine if the wife says to her husband, “For years, I have blamed you for our inability to talk. I have complained to my friends about how difficult you are. But God has shown me this week that I have been bitter against you for years. I have kept a record of wrongs and looked with a critical eye at everything you have done. It hit me today that as long as I continue to hate you in my heart, I will not love you with my mouth.” This God-given insight then leads her husband to confess similar sins of his own heart. And in their mutual confession, this couple lays a foundation for lasting change in their communication. You see, the problem with the words that the husband in our opening story spoke to his wife is that they were idol words. They revealed the true love that dominated the husband's heart, and it wasn't his wife – it was himself! An idolatrous heart will produce idol words.

**Ruling Desires**

What are ruling desires? We now turn to our second passage: **READ James 4:1-10**. When James asks why we speak quarrelsome words, or why we are better at making war than we are at making peace, this is **NOT** how he answers the question in v.1: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? “Don't they come from your lack of skill in conflict resolution? You want to avoid conflicts, but you haven't learned the strategies and techniques to be successful at it.” No, James goes in a radically different direction. He directs us to examine the desires of our own hearts. What I speak is directly related to what I want. My words are one means I use to get what is important to me.

Let's look again at the specific words of this passage. James says in vv.1-2, “Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have…” According to James, quarrels are caused by desires battling within our hearts. Now, we need to be careful here. James does not say it is wrong for us to desire. When you quit desiring, you are dead. We will always desire something. Notice also that James does not say that the problem is evil desires, that is, that we are desiring things that are bad in and of themselves.

Think back on the opening story of the husband's desire to spend an evening with his wife. The problem was not that he desired her. That desire was natural and good and healthy. Nor was the problem that he had some kind of evil desire toward his wife. The original desire to be with her was born out of heartfelt appreciation for her and thankfulness to God. James is not saying that it is wrong to desire or that our problem is that we are desiring bad things. What then is the problem?

The answer is found in this important phrase, “Is it not this, that your passions (or desires) are at war within you? There is a war going on within our hearts, a war for control. James is saying that when a certain set of desires battles for “territory” in our hearts, it will affect the way we deal with the people around us. Whatever controls our hearts will control our words. In fact, you could argue that if a certain desire controls my heart, there are only two ways that you can respond to you: if you help me get what I want, I will enjoy and appreciate you. But if you stand in my way, I will experience (and probably express) anger when you are around. I want something, but because of you I cannot get it, so what do I do? I quarrel and fight!

In the opening story, something very important happened to the husband during the day. A good desire for time with his wife, waged war in his heart until it had taken control. Personal desires battled for the authority that only God should exercise over his heart. When God no longer functionally ruled his heart, the desire took on a new character. By the time he reached home, the desire that motivated him was no longer an expression of love for his wife and worship of God. No, it had become an expression of self-love. He no longer was looking for a way to serve his wife, to communicate his love and appreciation for her. Rather, he wanted to possess her for the evening for his own pleasure! The problem is that he did not see that the original desire had morphed into something very different.

If he had been, motivated by love for his wife, he would have had a wonderful opportunity to express that love by giving her a quiet evening of relaxation. He would have had a wonderful opportunity to serve God by teaching his children, by example, to look for ways to love their neighbour as themselves. But he was no longer seeking to express his love and appreciation for his wife. He wanted her for himself and he would not let her say no. The desire had become a demand. At that moment, it effectively replaced God as the controller of his heart. Scripture calls this an idol. Idolatry is when my heart is controlled or ruled by anything other than God.

Friends, this happens to us a lot more than we would tend to think. The desire for success at workbecomes a demand for appreciation from the boss. The desire to have enough money to pay the bills morphs into a lust for affluence. The desire to be a good parent becomes a desire to have children who enhance my reputation. The desire for friendship becomes a demand to be accepted, and anger when I am not. What was once a healthy desire takes control, and when this happens, the desire that originally motivated me changes into something very different. Rather than being motivated by a love for God and my neighbour, I am motivated by a pursuit of what will bring me pleasure, and I am angry at anyone who stands in the way.

An idolatrous heart will produce idol words, words that serve the idol that grips us. It is hard for us to hold our desires loosely. Instead, they tend to take a hold of us. Our desires tend to get elevated to a position where they should never be. Here is what happens: A desire battles for control until it becomes a demand. The demand is then expressed (and usually experienced) as a need. (“I need sex.” “I need respect.”) My sense of need then sets up my expectation. Then expectation, when unfulfilled, leads to disappointment. And disappointment leads to some kind of punishment. To paraphrase James 4:1-2: “You want something but you cannot get it, so you quarrel and fight.” So when in v.4 James says, “You adulterous people!” he's not changing the subject. He's saying something very significant. Adultery takes place when I give the love I have promised one person to someone else. Spiritual adultery occurs when I give the love that belongs to God alone to something or someone else. James is saying that human conflict is rooted in spiritual adultery! This is a momentous thought! We will not solve our problem of angry words until we humbly address the adultery and idolatry of our hearts.

James has upped the ante here, if you will. Perhaps this does not seem comforting, but in so doing, he shows us the only solution that really goes to the heart of the problem. The promise of the gospel extends deeper than new techniques and strategies. It aims at more than a temporary lull in the storm of words. The gospel holds out the promise of nothing less than a new heart, one that is no longer enslaved to the passions and desires of the sinful nature. There is hope for real and lasting change.

How does this change begin? We need to heed James's words again as he says in v.7, “Submit yourselves, therefore, to God.” Change begins at the level of the heart. We must renounce the idols that have replaced God and turn our hearts back to him, so that our words will reflect a heart ruled by God alone. For James, this change is seen on two levels. We must “cleanse our hands,” in v.8, that is, there must be change in our behaviour. The words we say, the way we say them, and when they are said, all must be changed where necessary, but that is not enough. James also says in v.8, “Purify your hearts.” Change must include our thoughts and motives as well. We need change both in the content and manner of our talk and in what effectively controls our hearts.

In that opening story, by the time the husband arrived in the kitchen on that imaginary afternoon, a significant exchange had taken place. Without realizing it, he had exchanged thankfulness to God and love for his wife for a worship of self and a demand that his wife serve him. He entered the room unwilling to live without that evening with his wife. He no longer had a loosely held, God-honouring desire, but a demand that had grown into a sense of need. He fully expected his wife to support his idea and immediately go and get ready for the dinner outing. In the face of her disagreement, he immediately got angry at her and did everything he could to get her to yield to his wishes. The person who had been the object of his affection was now the focus of his anger. She hadn't caused his anger – rather it flowed out of his own idolatrous desires. Again, those desires were not intrinsically evil. But when they became ruling desires, they replaced God as the ruler of his heart. Though his words were selfish, angry and manipulative, the more serious problem was that they were idolatrous. Romans 1 brings this issue into clearer focus for us. It says in v.25 that, “they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”

The operative word of this passage is exchanged. This is fundamentally what sin is all about. In the heart of every sinner is a tendency to exchange worship and service of the Creator for worship and service of the created thing. All human beings are worshippers; the issue is only what or whom we worship. Idolatry gives the worship that belongs to God to some aspect of his creation. It might be a craving for human love. Or a craving for respect, for appreciation, or for applause. It might be a certain person, or position, or economic status, or living situation. There is no end to the created things that can replace God as the object of our worship.

There is a constant migration in the heart of every sinner away from the worship and service of God toward the worship and service of some aspect of the creation. It can be a lifelong migration – that is, a theme of a heart idolatry can characterize a person's whole life – or it can be a more spontaneous and short term migration, as in the story we have just been considering. In this case, a desire takes control for a few hours, but still wreaks havoc.

What we are considering is the bottom line on the war of words. The Scriptures tell us that if we are ever going to see lasting change in our communication, we must start from within. Only as we deal with the idolatry of our hearts will we be freed from speaking idol words. As we said in the first class 3 weeks ago, God is the Lord and Creator of human language. All of our words must be spoken according to his purpose and for his glory. To do anything less is idolatry.

One final piece of biblical wisdom will help us here. The Pharisees tried to ensnare Christ by asking him which was the greatest command in the law. His answer is one of the most significant passages in all of Scripture. READ Matthew. 22:37-40. Christ says that you can essentially boil all of the teaching of Scripture down to two areas: love for God and love for people, and that there is an order of importance here: love for God is foundational to everything else. If you do not love God, above all else, you will not love your neighbour as yourself. Any lack of love for neighbour, in word or deed, reflects some deficiency in your love for God (see 1 John 4:7-21). This is why James says that human conflict is rooted in spiritual adultery.

Jesus' statement addresses one of the principal mistakes the church tends to make when it deals with the subject of communication. Christ says that there are two drawers in God's filing cabinet, if you will: drawer one which is entitled “Love for God” and drawer two which is entitled “Love for neighbour.” Everything Scripture commands can be filed in one of these two drawers. Our mistake has been to treat the issue of communication as if it were a drawer two issue exclusively. When we deal with communication problems in marriage and family, in parenting, in friendship, in the community, and in the body of Christ, too often we immediately turn to the scriptural commands and principles that speak to this topic without examining the passages that address the heart behind the principles. In so doing, we neglect the heart issues that must be addressed if these passages are to be obeyed. Words that are spoken up to God's standard and according to his design always begin with a heart that loves God above all else, and therefore desires to speak in a loving way to one's neighbour.

Communication is both a drawer one and a drawer two issue. If we do not deal with what we really love – with what really rules our hearts – we will never be able to speak to one another in the way God has called us to speak. We must start with the heart, because as Christ said in Luke 6, it is out of the overflow of our hearts that our mouths speak. As James has said we fight and quarrel because of the desires that have taken control there. Our words are one of the ways we seek to gain, maintain, and keep what is really important to us, what we really want, and what we are really living for. If idol words are going to turn into God-honouring words, we must begin by humbly examining our hearts. What or whom are we really serving?

How are you feeling as you read this? Perhaps you're thinking. *Great. I started out with one problem and now I've got two! I've never seen these angry quarrels and words as something against God. This is really discouraging!* But don't be discouraged. God never reveals our hearts to discourage us. Convicting us of sin is one of the most profound ways He demonstrates his love for us. He is committed to completing his work in us. He will not allow us to live with hearts that are enslaved. He works in every situation so that we would know the freedom his death purchased for us. And so he exposes not only the fruit of our sin (namely our wrong words), but the roots of our sin as well (namely our heart idols). The conviction of our hearts is a sign that we are his dearly loved children, who have not only been forgiven of our sins, but are in the process of being delivered from them.

So don't be discouraged. Your Redeemer has come. He is battling on your behalf in every situation, in each relationship, so that you can win the war of words.

In what ways do you tend to blame your communication problems on things outside yourself? (In this fallen world, there will always be plenty of ways to shift blame!)

Do you tend to blame your negative communication on situations?

* traffic
* schedule
* finances
* weather
* vehicle
* job
* family
* extended family

Do you tend to blame others?

* wife
* husband
* children
* parents
* boss
* co-workers
* the body of Christ

Do you tend to blame God?

* If only I had more money
* If only I had a more understanding spouse
* If only I had a better education
* If only I had more understanding elders, more understanding fellow church members
* If only I had more obedient children
* If only I had a more loving supportive extended family
* If only I had better neighbours
* If only I had a more reasonable boss

Examine your heart with hope, remembering that, “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9).