

Editorial: Right words for wrong times

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The words we say to and about one another and when we say them matters. We know this, which adds to the pressure we feel to say the right thing at the right time.

I've not always been good with words. Some would say I'm still not. Others would say that's a gross understatement.

One of my earliest and most shameful memories is the day I waxed eloquent about a friend's mom. Despite how nice I was trying to be to her, what never crossed my mind—until the next day when her daughters defended her—was how hurtful my words were. I was very young. I still wish I could erase those words.

In college, rather than taking the mature route, I took the lily-livered route in breaking up with a young woman. I was silent when I shouldn't have been and stupid when I finally spoke. She was furious, and rightfully so. I wasn't quite a man, yet, and I've not stopped wishing I'd been more mature sooner.

The wrong words

In certain situations, no words are better than wrong or weak words.

[John MacArthur](#) would have been less than honest if he had remained silent about Beth Moore. He doesn't believe women should preach, but he could have said something other than "go home."

Jesus didn't tell women to "go home," not that we can read in the Bible. He

did tell men to go home after he healed them. He told a man who had been demon-possessed: “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19).

And I don’t think Jesus meant, “Go back where you came from.” The context is clear; Jesus meant the man was the best person to witness to the people near him.

Also wrong are the two words [spray-painted on a “spirit rock”](#) in Davidson County, North Carolina several weeks ago. They were covered quickly but shouldn’t have appeared at all.

Were those two words a stupid juvenile prank? Spray painting a call to kill certain people in no way can be defended as a juvenile prank, though it can be described as stupid.

Jesus simplified the Law and the Prophets into two commands we can paraphrase in five words: Love God and love others (Matthew 22:37-40). Those are the right words every time.

The right words

We don’t always have the right words at the right time. We don’t always know what to say and when to say it, but some words are right more often than they are wrong.

Please.

Thank you.

I’m sorry.

I don’t know.

I love you.

These words are some of the first we learn and some of the first we forget. They are simple yet powerful. Though they knit us together, they go against

the grain of our culture.

Among people who expect to get what they want when they want it, “please” and “thank you” are considered unnecessary and illogical, an affront and an offense against the self.

Among people who think they are never wrong and that their way is the only right way, “I’m sorry” is weak and shameful.

Among people who can never show weakness and must be fully capable, “I don’t know” is a sickening admission of incompetence.

Among people who are self-absorbed, “I love you” is a fetter to another person, an unthinkable admission that someone outside the self has inestimable value.

Despite flying in the face of our culture, all these words are right more often than they are wrong. We need to speak and live them more often.

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