

Today's Christian Woman

Series

LEADER'S GUIDE

Words of Wisdom

What does the Bible tell us about speaking the truth in love?

Few things can keep us up at night like words that should—or should not—have been said. In “Tell It Like It Is,” Annette Smith shares times in her life when words between friends provided correction and fostered reconciliation. She also writes of careless words that caused wounds. Clearly, the world of words is too complicated to be governed by platitudes like, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.” God gave us the power of speech for good reasons, and he also gave us detailed guidance in how to use it.

Why is it so important for Christians to watch their words? How can we discern when to speak and what to say? Where is the balance between loyalty to the truth and concern for the feelings of others? These are the kinds of questions explored in this study.

Scripture:

Genesis 1:3–5; Exodus 4:10–12; 2 Samuel 12:1–10; Esther 4:9–14; Proverbs 12:18; Matthew 9:1–8; Romans 10:14–15; Colossians 4:6; Ephesians 4:29; Philemon 1:4–21; James 3:2–6

Based on:

“Tell It Like It Is,” by Annette Smith, TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, November/December 2002, Vol. 24, No. 6, Page 86



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Tell It Like It Is" from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine (included at the end of this study).



Chameleons blend in with their surroundings to avoid detection. Butterflies have eyespots on their wings to scare predators away. According to philosopher David Livingstone Smith, humans, like other creatures, lie to advance their interests and oil the machinery of society. Smith's 2004 book, *Why We Lie: The Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind*, argues that fudging the truth is such an ingrained survival strategy that we do not even realize we are lying, especially when we lie to ourselves. The epigraph for Smith's first chapter, a quote from Mark Twain, sums up our condition: "Lying is universal—we *all* do it; we *all must* do it."

One need not agree with Smith's reading of evolutionary biology (or Twain's legendary cynicism) to admit that lying is pervasive in modern culture. The 1997 Jim Carrey film *Liar, Liar!* drives home the point. Owing to his son's birthday wish, Carrey's character, a habitual liar, must tell only the truth for an entire day. This "curse" sinks Carrey as a trial lawyer and renders him unable to talk his way out of a traffic ticket, but it also snarls relations with his family and earns him dirty looks from the coworkers he usually compliments glibly. Unable to handle the consequences of transparency, he quickly decides that the safest course is to say nothing at all.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] Would your life be different if you could not tell any lies for a day?
- [Q] Have you been hurt more often by lies or by truths spoken out of turn? Describe a hurtful episode of one kind or the other.
- [Q] With whom do you find it hardest to be honest? With whom does honesty come easiest?

Optional activity: *In pairs, have group members role play one or more of the following scenarios:*

- a) *Jennifer, who has been out of the workforce for eight years to stay home with her children, is interviewing for a job at the local newspaper. Her credentials are decent, but the interviewing editor doubts she will be sufficiently devoted to the job. Jennifer has a few questions about work-home balance herself, but she needs the paycheck. Can she sell her skills without stretching the truth?*
- b) *Kathleen and Rosa are friends, as are their teenage daughters. Kathleen's daughter learns that Rosa's daughter has become sexually active. Kathleen knows that Rosa would not approve, but she also knows that Rosa's sexual past isn't spotless. In conversation with Rosa, how can Kathleen express her concern about Rosa's daughter without*



impugning Rosa's parenting skills or making Rosa feel ashamed about her own mistakes?

- c) *Amber's husband has a weakness for grand business schemes and has failed as an entrepreneur twice. One day he came home from the stable but boring job she had begged him to take and excitedly shared his idea for starting an Internet café in a vacant storefront down the street. With one son in braces and another headed to college soon, Amber doesn't think this is an acceptable risk for the family to take. She wants to be realistic with her husband without rehashing his failures.*
- d) *Sondra's daughter Libby, a college senior, comes home for fall break with a guy who does not strike Sondra as husband material. Though Sondra and Libby often clashed when Libby was in high school, especially on the subject of boys, they get along okay now. Saturday morning, before anyone else is up, Libby asks Sondra over coffee what she thinks of her new, serious boyfriend. What's a mom to say?*

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Words have power.

One little qualifier, “just,” has become an all-purpose speech-softener in contemporary English. Phrases like “I was just thinking,” or “It’s just my opinion,” or the insidious “I was just joking” get used to cover a multitude of verbal sins. The problem is, words are never *just* words, so wrapping them in fluff can do little to blunt their force. The Bible attests to the power of words in numerous places:

- [Q] Read Genesis 1:3–5. In this account, God created the whole universe by speaking words. In what ways do our words create reality, albeit on a much smaller scale? For example, how do things such as wedding vows and presidential addresses change the lives of the people who speak and hear them?
- [Q] Read Proverbs 12:18. This passage likens words to weapons. Many figures of speech echo this idea—a person with a sharp tongue might offer biting criticisms, fling barbs at opponents, make cutting remarks, or even perform a tongue lashing. How does it feel, physically, to deliver such remarks? How does it feel to receive them? In contrast, how does it feel to deliver and receive words of comfort?
- [Q] Name the different ways words are used in Matthew 9:1–8.
- [Q] As Jesus asks in Matthew 9:5: “Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’” In what ways was Jesus uniquely qualified to make those statements, and in what ways are all Christians empowered to forgive and heal with their words?
- [Q] Read James 3:2–6. Do you think James is exaggerating the destructive potential of words? If you agree with him that the tongue is a “world of evil,” what can Christians do to control it?



Teaching point two: Truth needs to be told.

Like our other God-given abilities, the power of speech comes with responsibilities. Sometimes we may need to say things that make us uncomfortable. Read the examples below that explain necessary truth telling in Scripture.

- [Q] Read 2 Samuel 12:1–10. Nathan rebuked David for his affair with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite. As a prophet, Nathan had special knowledge of God's judgment and David's future. How can those of us who are not prophets discern when and how to rebuke others?
- [Q] Read Esther 4:9–14. In Esther 4:14, Mordecai told Esther that she might have gained a royal position so that she could tell the king about Haman's plot. What is one way you are uniquely positioned—in your family, your neighborhood, your church, or your workplace—to share truth with someone?
- [Q] Read Romans 10:14–15. We have a duty to proclaim the good news about Jesus. Specifically, this passage exhorts preachers to preach and other believers to support the preachers. How can the words of others (preachers, Christian writers, Christian musicians, etc.) help you to do the challenging work of evangelism?
- [Q] When Moses made excuses for why he could not serve as God's spokesman to Pharaoh and to the Israelites, God responded with a mixture of reassurance and rebuke. Read Exodus 4:10–12. What excuses have you made, verbally or silently, for not sharing a hard truth? Can you think of a time when God helped you speak or taught you what to say in a tough situation?

Teaching point three: When in doubt, love.

The examples in Smith's article show that sometimes friends need to be confronted, but other times, such as when they wear ratty sweaters, mum is the appropriate word. In either situation, the guiding principle is love. The Bible elaborates on this principle in Colossians 4:6, Ephesians 4:29, Philemon 1:4–21, and 1 Peter 3:15.

- [Q] Read Colossians 4:6. What does it mean for speech to be “full of grace, seasoned with salt”?
- [Q] Read Ephesians 4:29. What kinds of speech might contain “unwholesome talk”? By contrast, what kinds of speech build others up?
- [Q] Read Philemon 1:4–21. How does Paul soften his request to Philemon? What elements of this letter might be useful in other types of confrontations—with angry spouses, wayward children, uncharitable colleagues, estranged relatives?
- [Q] In contemporary American culture, evangelism is often equated with shoving your beliefs down someone's throat. In your experience, is that equation fair? Is there a difference between witnessing as commonly understood and giving “the reason for the hope you have ... with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15)?



PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Smith writes, “Touchy topics are difficult to discuss for even the closest of friends. Yet, relationships involve flawed people who make mistakes and get into messes. Friends need to be able to count on each other not just for fun and affirmation, but for careful words of instruction and correction, too.” Perfection in speech is as unattainable as perfection in relationships, but progress in one area will naturally foster growth in the other. The key is to make sure truth and love operate together, the way God intended.

- [Q]** Think of one recurring situation in which you are tempted to lie or muffle the truth. How can you be more forthright in the future?
- [Q]** Could well-chosen words help you build or mend a relationship? What are those words, and how will you share them?
- [Q]** How can you prepare to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have?

Optional activity: Choose one of the verses in this study and memorize it.

—Study prepared by Elesha Coffman,
former managing editor of *CHRISTIAN HISTORY*.

Additional Resources

ChristianBibleStudies.com

Friendships that Benefit Parenting
Developing True Accountability
Successful Relationships Course
Like the Ones You Love Course



Communication: Intimate Marriage Series, Dan B. Allender (InterVarsity, 2005; ISBN 0830821368)



Communication: Key to Your Marriage, H. Norman Wright (Gospel Light, 2000; ISBN 0830725334)



Friendship: A Way of Interpreting Christian Love, Liz Carmichael (Continuum, 2005; ISBN 0567080722)



The Grace and Truth Paradox, Randy Alcorn (Multnomah, 2002; ISBN 1590520653)



Telling Each Other the Truth, William Backus (Bethany House, 2006; ISBN 0764201573)



War of Words, Paul Tripp (P&R Publishing, 2000; ISBN 0875526047)



Today's Christian Woman

Series

ARTICLE

Tell It Like It Is

How to speak the truth to a friend without harming your friendship.

By Annette Smith, for the study, "Words of Wisdom"

I'll always remember when my good friend, Sheri, called me on the carpet about my attitude problem. I'm thankful now, but at the time ...

Sheri and I were sitting in her cozy kitchen sipping coffee and nibbling on bake-sale leftovers. "I saw Darla in Sears yesterday," she said. "She's lost a bunch of weight."

"Wonder how long it'll take her to gain it back this time," I said, reaching for a third macadamia nut cookie. "She always does, you know."

Darla-of-the-fluctuating-weight and I once had been good friends. Not any more. For more than a year, we'd barely spoken. Even though Darla had made numerous attempts to mend the rift in our relationship, one caused by a misunderstanding involving our children, I continued to nurse a grudge against her.

"Darla told me her eldest daughter just got accepted into medical school," said Sheri. "Her middle girl's engaged to an attorney, and her son's in line to be awarded the high school's art scholarship this year."

"Darla always thinks her kids are better than anyone else's," I sniffed.

After refilling my mug, Sheri looked me in the eye and said, "Annette, we need to talk. Hasn't it been long enough? What's the deal with you still having such a hateful attitude toward Darla? Everyone who knows you can tell you don't like her."

"It's that obvious?"

"It is. And Annette, listen to me." My friend put her hand on my arm. "Whatever the problem is, you need to get over it. Your attitude isn't right, and you know it."

Ouch. Sheri's honest words hurt my feelings. But they also affected me in a way a dozen sermons on forgiveness hadn't. She was absolutely right. My hateful attitude



was wrong. We talked some more, and I was overcome with shame and remorse. That night I prayed for forgiveness for myself and for blessings for Darla and her family.

Later that week, with shaking hands and a pounding heart, I delivered homemade banana nut bread and a ribbon-wrapped cinnamon candle to Darla's new house. That afternoon, over glasses of iced tea, Darla and I spoke careful words of apology and forgiveness. We avoided the specifics of what had caused our estrangement; it seemed pointless to visit that place again. What mattered to us both was our mutual desire to make things right.

Today, Darla and I are real friends again, thanks to Sheri's honest words.

Caring Enough to Correct

I'm grateful my friend Sheri spoke up. The fact she loved me enough to confront me says volumes about our relationship. I realize it wasn't easy for her to talk to me about my bad attitude and unloving behavior.

Touchy topics are difficult to discuss for even the closest of friends. Yet, relationships involve flawed people who make mistakes and get into messes. Friends need to be able to count on each other not just for fun and affirmation, but for careful words of instruction and correction, too. Committing ourselves to a friendship means that because we care on a deep, intimate level, we have the courage to speak up even when a friend needs to hear tough words of truth. For with true friendship come joy and responsibility.

The Courage to Confront

When Jasmine (not her real name) found herself teetering on the brink of an affair with a married coworker, she flew across the state to spend the weekend with her life-long friend, Dee. Tearfully, Jasmine hinted to Dee about what she feared she was going to do if the situation continued.

Although Jasmine employed veiled words and phrases, Dee understood exactly what she was saying. Yet embarrassed and afraid, Dee didn't dole out the bitter-but-good-for-her medicine for which Jasmine had come. Dee was so rattled by her friend's revelation, she couldn't bring herself to take Jasmine by the shoulders, give her a firm shake, and demand, "What are you thinking? Run! Find a new job! Get away from this man!"

Instead, Dee feigned tiredness and went to bed early, suggesting they go shopping and to a movie the next day. Taking Dee's cue, Jasmine didn't bring up the situation again.



Sure enough, six months later in a tearful, long-distance conversation, Jasmine confessed to Dee that she'd had an affair. It was over and done now, but she faced a host of heart-breaking consequences.

This time Dee was there to comfort, support, and forgive her friend. She listened, shared her friend's tears, and offered words of wisdom and comfort. Dee was honest with Jasmine about her mistake and what she needed to do to amend the situation.

One can't help but wonder what would have happened if Dee had possessed the courage to confront Jasmine six months earlier. Would it have made a difference? There's no way of knowing for sure. Jasmine rightly accepts full responsibility for her actions. Still, Dee was in the position to speak honestly with her friend, and she didn't.

To avoid talking truthfully to a friend about a situation that's hurtful, dangerous, or out of God's will, is to dishonor both the friendship and the friend. When we've been trusted with the blessing of a friend, we must love that friend enough to be willing to experience hurt, rejection, even anger. In the end, truth heals.

What's My Motivation?

Before addressing a difficult situation with a friend, motives should be examined. If there's any self-righteousness, any feelings of one-upmanship, even the tiniest desire to get even with our friend for something she's said to us, then we should, at least for a time, keep silent. Honesty, especially when it comes to touchy subjects, must be accompanied by pure, loving motives. If our words aren't bathed in love, they'll hurt rather than heal.

Speaking honestly with a friend about a serious matter requires that we put thought and planning into our words. Doing so requires staying in tune with how our friend's taking what we have to say.

Doing the Deed

You realize the day's come for you to confront your friend. What do you say? How do you start?

Begin by bathing your friend in prayer. Ask God to give you the right words and to take away any wrong motives. Select a time when you and your friend will have privacy and won't be interrupted. Begin by affirming your love and care for your friend. Then calmly and gently share with her your observation. Take care not to pass judgment or place blame.

"I'm worried, Jill. You stopped taking your medicine. I see signs of your depression coming back."



“Katie, you’ve always said you’d never get involved with a man who isn’t a Christian, yet I see you becoming very close to Sam. I’m fearful you may be falling for him, and he says he’s not sure he believes in God.”

Your friend’s response to your words will tell you what to say next. She may become defensive, angry, or appear hurt. Match your words to her response. If she’s open, talk in greater depth about your concerns. However, if she clams up, back off. Remind her of how much you care about her, and tell her if she feels like talking about the situation some other time, you’ll be there for her. Then give her a hug, tell her you’re praying for her, and change the subject.

When to Zip the Lip

When my friend Sheri confronted me about my attitude toward Darla, I was thankful to her for being honest with me. However, last week, when she told me my new hair color made me look all washed out and that it was past time for me to retire my favorite sweater—it was pilled, you understand, and stretched out—I was a bit less appreciative of her honest words!

Topics that don’t involve moral, health, or safety issues are best left alone. A friend who’s gained ten pounds already knows it. She doesn’t need us to point it out to her, regardless of how helpful we think our words are. Some matters are simply of no consequence. When a friend out-and-out asks our opinion on a new recipe (chopped apples, Cool Whip, and ranch dressing?) or on the way we think her daughter’s hair looks fixed like that (Funny, really funny, is what pops into our mind), we’re wise if we can find something good to say before quickly changing the subject. It’s never okay to fib, but no one ever said we should say every truthful thought that pops into our head!

Honesty Is the Best Policy

True friendships are a blessing from God. Starting today, determine to be honest with your friends—about how much they mean to you, how much you treasure your time together, and how much you value the relationship you have with them. For one thing, it’s the honest truth. A friend, a true friend, is one of the Father’s best blessings. Enjoy!

*—Annette Smith, an author and speaker,
lives with her family in Texas.*

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