

WORDS MATTER

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Genesis 2:18

A DIVINE CALLING

Words are powerful. From the time we are first able to understand them, they help create, shape, define, and explain our reality. They help us engage and understand the world around us. Words are essential to the relationships we build, the work we do, and the problems we try to solve. They have the power to create as well as destroy. They have the power to strengthen and encourage or the power to demean and demoralize. The impact of words transcends culture, socioeconomic status, educational background, and gender. Men and women alike use their words in ways that are both constructive and destructive. So why a study on women and their words? We look to the book of Genesis for answers.

In Genesis 1:26, the Lord determined to make man in his own image. So he created human beings to be a reflection of himself and to represent him to the rest of creation (Genesis 1:26–28). Humanity

was created for a specific and divine purpose—to represent God and to be a blessing to the world. Genesis 2 continues this theme, giving specific insight into God's rationale for creating the woman:

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him."

Genesis 2:18

The Lord looked at his labor and declared it to be good. But then he looked on Adam, who labored alone in the garden, and for the first time declared, "It is not good." So God determined to make a helper, an *ezer-kenegdo*, for Adam.

The Hebrew word *ezer* means one who helps, one who brings that which is lacking to the aid of another. An *ezer* assists another toward accomplishing a goal. Thus the word *ezer* actually connotes an inherent strength. The word *kenegdo* means corresponding to. Joined together, *ezer-kenegdo* means an essential counterpart or corresponding strength.

An *ezer* is someone who is for you, an ally—someone who supports, aids, rallies to your cause, and brings you strength. And God entrusted his *ezer* nature to women that they might reflect his character in this distinct and powerful way. [1]

The word *ezer* is used twenty-one times in Scripture: twice in reference to the creation of woman and three times as a military term. But it is used sixteen times in reference to God as our *Ezer*, as the one who brings strength and life to his people through relationship with him.

The life-giving strength of God's *ezer* nature is on display in Psalm 146:

Don't put your confidence in powerful people;
 there is no help for you there.
 When they breathe their last, they return to the earth,
 and all their plans die with them.

But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their *help-*
er,
 whose hope is in the Lord their God.
 He made heaven and earth,
 the sea, and everything in them.
 He keeps every promise forever.
 He *gives justice to the oppressed*
 and *food to the hungry*.
 The Lord *frees the prisoners*.
 The Lord *opens the eyes of the blind*.
 The Lord *lifts up those who are weighed down*.
 The Lord loves the godly.
 The Lord *protects the foreigners among us*.
 He *cares for the orphans and widows*,
 but he *frustrates the plans of the wicked*.
 The Lord will reign forever.
 He will be your God, O Jerusalem, throughout the genera-
 tions.
 Praise the Lord!

Psalm 146:3–10 (*emphasis author's own*)

This psalm depicts the *ezer* nature of God as one who comes to the aid of those in need—the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, the outcast, the downtrodden, the foreigner—those who are in a position of vulnerability, weakness, and dependency. He brings strength, aid, refuge, nourishment, and support. God is accessible, knowable, and available to those who have nothing to offer him in return. He enters into their lives and brings all of his resources to bear in such a way that they become more of who he intends them to be. Those who have God as their help, as their *ezer*, are blessed (Psalm 146:5).

This divine calling has been entrusted to women. God created women to reflect his *ezer* nature—bringing strength, life, aid, support and refuge in and through their relationships. This is the God-giv-

en power of femininity, which he intends us to use for the good and blessing of others. Using our strength to come to the aid of another, as their ally, cannot occur apart from relationship with them. Words have a huge impact on forming and developing relationships. This means living out God's call as an *ezer* will happen, in large part, through the words we use—whether written or spoken.

While being an *ezer* is the same calling for all women, there is freedom of expression according to each woman's individuality and season of life. A woman's individuality—her personal uniqueness—includes personality, background, upbringing, experiences in life, sin struggles, strengths, and weaknesses. Each of these shapes how a woman lives out her *ezer* calling. But a woman's season of life—whether she is a student, a wife, a mom, a single, a working woman, a caregiver for a disabled family member or aging parents, a divorcée, a widow, an empty-nester, a grandparent—also informs how and with whom she lives out her calling.

The *ezer* calling is reflected through each woman's capacity to invite, nurture, and partner with those in her life. These capacities are simply attributes of God that reflect his character. Inviting is the gateway that brings us into relationship with others. This is where the *ezer* calling begins. *Inviting is welcoming others into a safe, life-giving, and unselfish relationship where they can find strength and refuge.* As a woman invites those around her into this type of relationship, she is reflecting the hospitable nature of God.

Nurturing is caring for and fostering the development of another with the goal of independence. A woman who nurtures others is bringing all of her resources, including her words, alongside another in such a way that enables them to flourish. A woman's capacity for nurturing is not dependent upon whether or not she is a mother. This attribute of God can be reflected in all of her relationships.

While nurturing is bringing your resources alongside another to help them become more of who God desires them to be, *partnering is aiding another in accomplishing a goal.* In partnering, a woman brings all of her skills and resources alongside another, carrying real

weight and responsibility in such a way that the other person feels a portion of the burden lifted and a sense of true partnership in accomplishing the goal together.

These perfect capacities of God are specifically reflected in women, but as a result of the fall in Genesis 3, the reflection of God's *ezer* nature through femininity is distorted. Rather than coming alongside others and bringing strength to them, we corrupt this calling by leveraging our strength and influence over others instead. Rather than living in an interdependent relationship with others where we bring strength and life, we withdraw from relationships in self-protection or we overpower our relationships through self-promotion. Both self-protection and self-promotion are the outworkings of the core sin of autonomy—our desire to be self-governing and have moral independence in our lives—which impedes our ability to live out our *ezer* calling. [2]

Words are not just a woman's issue—every man, woman, and child struggles to control the tongue. But because of the distinctiveness of a woman's calling, to bring strength in the context of relationship, it is imperative to consider our words and how we, as women, struggle to speak in ways that reflect our calling. We demonstrate our autonomy by using our words to control our circumstances and steer our lives, or the lives of others, in the most favorable direction. More often than not, this manifests itself in the life of a woman through some manner of self-promoting or self-protective speech.

I remember my own efforts at self-protection a few years ago when my husband was making a decision I had convinced myself would be harmful for our family. I badgered him, asking question after question. I belabored points—rehashing them over and over again. The more fearful I became, the more withdrawn and curt my words became. The decision he was making would cause the two of us significant discomfort, but ultimately it would be the best possible decision for our son. The problem wasn't his decision; it was that I didn't like his decision—I didn't want to make the sacrifices his de-

cision would require. My allegiance in that season was to myself and my own desires, and my words were the evidence of my devotion.

Self-protective speech can take many forms: deflecting, blame-shifting, evading, telling half-truths, rationalizing or justifying our actions. Below are a few examples of self-protective speech:

- It's the woman who has never experienced the affirming love of a father, and who is deeply critical of her own husband. Deep down she fears she is unworthy of love, so rather than risk being vulnerable to him, she finds it easier to tear down and criticize.
- It's the woman who blame-shifts or deflects during conflict. She would rather the other person feel guilty and be wrong than have to bear the responsibility of her own failings.
- It's the woman who won't take action without asking a thousand questions—clarifying and re-clarifying—not out of a desire to understand but because she can't risk failure.
- It's the single woman who verbally trashes men in order to feel better about being single.

Self-promoting speech also takes many forms. It might look like bragging, which is simply an attempt to control others' opinions of us. This can happen in obvious or subtle ways; sometimes we even cloak our bragging behind a façade of spirituality or false humility, strategically inserting statements about our volunteer work into conversations with others. Maybe it looks like flattery—using insincere or excessive praise in order to endear others to ourselves. Perhaps we exaggerate details or even lie to others in order to elevate ourselves. Here are just a few examples of self-promoting speech:

- It's the young woman who is wounded by a breakup and attempts to win others to her side. She would rather elicit pity

and vindication for herself, and incite anger and division among her peers, than be seen as unworthy or undesirable.

- It's the disenchanting wife who seeks out those who will jump on the husband-bashing bandwagon with her—validating her, affirming her frustration, legitimizing her complaints—rather than seeking those who will speak hard truth, challenge her perspective, and encourage a spirit of humility and oneness.
- It's the woman who discredits her coworker by subtly pointing out their weaknesses or failings, which just happen to point to her own strengths. She skillfully undermines her co-worker in an attempt to elevate herself.
- It's the mother who criticizes and blames the teacher for her child's failure in the classroom. She would rather destroy the teacher's credibility and reputation than have her child's struggles reflect negatively on her in some way.
- It's the woman who shares her opinion without first weighing her words. She doesn't take time to think about how what she says or the way she says it could impact the person. What she has to say is far more important than the person she is saying it to.

At the root of self-promotion and self-protection are our own self-centered desires, and *words are the tools we often use to satisfy those desires on our terms*. We exert our autonomy, using our words to manipulate others and control the world around us.

I am sad to say this reminds me of a conversation I once had with my husband. I remember I was irritated with him at the time; some of my frustrations were legitimate and some weren't. During this season, I wanted to buy something, but we were on a tight budget and I knew he would probably say no. One day I approached him and masterfully laid out my argument. I calmly and respectfully expressed

my frustrations with him—weaving in elements of truth with elements of guilt and manipulation. I cloaked it in false humility, saying “I am sure it’s probably just me,” and then I made my closing argument by pointing out what I thought could help me—which just so happened to be what I wanted to buy. In the end, I got what I wanted—which, I am ashamed to admit, was to make my husband feel bad about what I considered his failings and to be able to purchase what I wanted. Shortly afterward, I got a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach. I knew something wasn’t right. After a few days and some self-examination, the Lord exposed the selfish motives of my heart, and I was able to go and confess them to my husband and ask for his forgiveness.

The insidious nature of this scenario is that I wasn’t even aware of what I was doing at the time. It all made perfect sense in my own mind, and I felt completely justified in my thoughts, words, and actions. I was blinded, self-deceived. My allegiances were to myself and myself alone. I wanted what I wanted—vindication for my husband’s alleged wrongs and to satisfy my desires for material gain. I sacrificed my husband on the altar of my own agenda. My allegiance in that moment fueled my words—conniving, scheming, manipulative—which ultimately reflected the character of Satan more than it did the Lord in whose image I am created.

The undergirding fact is we love ourselves more than we love God and neighbor. We want to create our own personal utopia—a world we are able to manage and control to ensure our ultimate happiness, comfort, and security. And we will sacrifice others in order to attain it. Ultimately, what all of this means is this: *Our words reflect our allegiance.* We are either devoted to ourselves and fulfilling our own agenda, which is autonomy, or we are devoted to God, submitting ourselves to his call on our lives and entrusting ourselves to his care.

The goal of this study is to explore the impact our words have on our calling as women. As an *ezer*, our calling is fulfilled through our relationships with others. Relationships are primarily built on words.

And words will either strengthen and bring life to a relationship or they will destroy it. Words matter.

Questions for Reflection

1. Is there anything that surprises you about the definition of *ezer* and what it means to be a woman?
2. Self-promotion and self-protection are two ways our calling gets corrupted. Which of these is more characteristic of you?
3. If someone recorded all of the words you spoke in the last month—who would they say you are devoted to?
4. What is your own personal struggle with your words or speech?