Zip It

The Keep It Shut 40 Day Challenge

By Karen Ehman

To my father
Howltan Wayne “Pat” Patterson
You passed on to me your gift of gab but also your habit of daily reading God’s word. My love for you is beyond measure.

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Introduction

Words. Each day we use thousands of them in dozens of places. We utter them to our family members. We speak them at work. We strike up a conversation with a complete stranger or give a reply to our nosy neighbor. We ask a question of our child's teacher or try to patiently answer a toddler for the fifth time. And in addition to the words that roll off of our lips, we have the ones we type with our fingertips—the text, blog comment, or social media reply.

There is one thing certain when it comes to our words: They are powerful and they have consequences. They can encourage or embitter, bless or badger, build up or break down. Proverbs 18:21 states that the tongue has the power of life and death. I know there have been many times in my life when my words have been less than lovely, bringing about guilt and causing regret or even ushering in the death of a relationship. In fact, as I surveyed my life a few years ago, I observed that almost every relationship I had over the years that was tense or fractured I could tether back to something I'd said. As God began to deal with me about the way I used my words, I learned to apply the vast advice the Bible has for us about how we should—and should not—speak. This led to me writing the book *Keep It Shut: What to Say, How to Say It and When to Say Nothing at All*.

Since writing *Keep It Shut*, I have heard from countless people about their own struggles with their words. Rarely a week goes by that I don't get an email or comment on social media from someone who has read the book and is trying to go down a new path, using their words for

good and for God. But I am also often asked if I would consider writing more on the subject and providing some practical ways to implement the Bible's advice when it comes to how we speak to those in our lives.

The result of these requests is the book you now hold your hands. It is my prayer that you will use this as a tool to dive deep into scripture, discovering its relevant advice that can enable your interactions with others and your relationships in life to be at their very best.

The forty short entries each give a scripture for the day and a story or example that helps to punctuate its theme. The "Today's Takeaway" section presents bullet point nuggets to ponder for the day. The "Lesson for the Lips" feature gives practical challenges and doable activities to empower you to effectively live out the truths of scripture. Each entry also concludes with a focused prayer. The layout is arranged in eight chapters of five entries, each on various themes that relate to our words such as anger, when to be silent, when to speak up, and how to make our words both salty and sweet. It is designed for you to use Monday through Friday over an eight-week period.

Please know that I will be continuing alongside you in this lifelong quest to temper our tongues, cheering you on all along the way. My prayer is that both of us will purpose to make our thoughts come in line with scripture so that when our thoughts turn into words they are pleasing to God and a gift to those who are listening.

Are you ready? Then turn to Day One as together we discover what we should say, how best to say it, and when we might better just keeps our lips zipped!

In Christ,

Karen

Week One

The Power of Our Words

Day 1

A Matter of Life and Death

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

Proverbs 18:21 (ESV)

I have learned something in my decades of relationships here on this earth: Words are powerful, and they have consequences.

Words have always set events into motion. Often what we read about in our history books or experience in our own lives came about because of someone's speech. Combative words have sparked wars, bringing about death and destruction. Soothing words have calmed souls, quieted hearts, and prevented potentially volatile situations from escalating and producing dire consequences. Encouraging words have imparted bravery and empowered doubting souls to be able to accomplish something they never dreamed they could. Loving words have birthed relationships and bonded soul mates.

Can you think back on your own life and find evidence of the power and lasting impact of something someone said either to—or about—you? I know I can. These phrases echo in the chambers of my mind and recall for me either pain and sorrow or love and inspiration.

When a neighborhood mom told my mother that I was a "bossy child" who "acts like the mother hen of the subdivision," it hurt my heart. It made me think from an early age that my large-and-in-charge personality was a detriment and that no one really liked me; rather, they were just tolerating me. And so I longed instead to be a quiet-as-a-mouse little girl like Patti, a girl who lived behind me. But try as I might, I just couldn't be meek and mild, let alone quiet.

When in college a campus instructor made a comment to my face about my weight (at that time I was about ten pounds over my doctor's recommended weight for my height and age), I allowed her words to cling to my consciousness. And I wrongly surmised that any rejection I ever felt was due to my weight. If a guy dumped me, it was because I was fat. If I didn't get invited to an afternoon of shopping at the mall with girls in my dorm, it was because they didn't want to be seen with a heavy girl. I even sometimes combined both of the hurtful phrases from my past, attributing rejection to the notion that I must be one bossy, obese gal!

But thankfully, I have also—although a little less often—had words spoken to or about me that have lifted my spirits and from which I could draw strength—sometimes even decades later!

My seventh-grade English teacher wrote on one of my progress reports, "Karen is an excellent writer—especially with poetry." Later, one of my college professors told a colleague how much I would be missed when I graduated since I was a resident assistant, sports editor of the school paper, and director of the campus's social life activities, and I took the jobs very seriously. Yet another voice from my past echoes still to this day. A church staff member I knew in high school simply told me one day, as I discussed my uncertain future with her, "You will go far. I believe in you."

Yes, words are powerful and they have consequences. The consequences may be stellar—or sorrowful. They may be amazing—or awful. They may impact lives for the better—or affect souls for the worse. Proverbs goes so far as to assert that, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (18:21).

As we begin this 40-day journey together, we have a choice. We can use our speech—both spoken and written—for good or for evil. Our words can bring life-giving refreshment or

deal a deathblow. Words can be warmth or a weapon. How we wield them will affect our relationships with others and also with God.

Let's vow to learn all we can in these 40 days to align our words with God's holy Word. Are you ready to begin? Your speech can help to change someone's world for the better, writing a story of love and peace.

Today's Takeaway:

- *Words are like super glue.* Remember the old childhood chorus: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." What a lie! We may have felt a tad better taunting our playground enemies with this chant, but we knew better. The truth is that bruises fade and bones eventually heal, but a scorched heart may take years to mend. Words stick. And not just sorta stick, like the creamy white school glue we used in third grade. They are more like super glue, nearly permanent and painful to peel off. This week, think about the truth that words stick. Before you lash out at someone in anger, or leak a little sarcasm from your lips, remind yourself that your words not only have power for good or evil, they also have staying power.
- *We have a choice. Choose wisely.* Be choosey. Don't let words tumble off your tongue haphazardly or flippantly. Select your speech shrewdly. Craft your emails and texts and social media posts with care. A moment of cautious thought now can save boatloads of misunderstanding and pain later. Be conscientious, not careless. Impart life, don't dole out death.

Lesson for the Lips:

Think back over your life. Can you recall any phrases that were either spoken directly to you, or said about you, that still echo in your mind today? Perhaps it was something that was encouraging and brought life. Or maybe it was something critical, caustic, or cutting that has stuck with you over the years, leaving an ache in your heart or pain in your soul. What words have stuck with you over the years? How does thinking about their lasting impact shape your perspective on how you use your own words with others today?

Prayer:

Father, your Word tells us that words are powerful and they have consequences. Make this truth stay close to me this week as I use my words to interact with others. I want to speak life into my relationships and not utter words that bring about death. May my speech glorify you today. In Jesus's name, amen.

Day 2

The Great Know-It-All

Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.

Psalm 139:4

For the first decade of my marriage, I was involved in working with teenagers. My husband was a youth pastor and I was a volunteer in the junior and senior high youth program at church. This included lots of Bible teaching and teen counseling but also the weekly duties of snack making and game organizing. One of the kids' favorite games was a little show my husband and I put on. I refer to it as "The Great Know-It-All."

In this little amusement, my husband would leave the room for a few minutes while I chose one of the teens to play the game. That teenager would select an object in the room to be "it." It might be the clock on the wall, a book on the shelf, one of the girls' purses, or a can of soda pop on the snack table. Then my husband would rejoin us. I would go around the room pointing at various objects asking him, "Is this it? How about this? Is this it?" Every time without fail, my husband was able to correctly guess which item the teenager had chosen.

This little shenanigan completely dumbfounded the kids. No matter how many times we did it, they never could figure out how my husband knew which item had been selected. (Hint: It had to do with what item I pointed to *before* pointing to the one selected and not at all with the one they'd chosen. And no, I will not divulge the secret of "The Great Know-It-All!")

Psalm 139 paints a breathtaking portrait of how intimately God knows us. Long ago, he saw us as we were being formed in our mother's womb (vv. 13–16). And today, he is acquainted

with our daily activities, knowing when we sit down or stand up (verse 2). Why, God knows what we are going to say long before we even say it! Verse 4 boldly states, "Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely." I observe two astonishing things tucked inside this verse.

First, God knows our words long before they ever leave our lips. Since he knows them before they are on our tongues, he also knows the thoughts we are mulling in our minds. In fact, in Psalm 139:2, we are told that God understands our thoughts even from far away. Before words are uttered audibly, they first originate in our minds. Thoughts turn into words.

Second, this verse shows us not only that God knows the words we are about to speak, but that he knows them *completely*. He doesn't just have an inkling of what we might say, but rather he thoroughly and completely knows what words have formed in our minds and are about to leak out of our lips.

What a sobering verse to ponder today! God really is the Great Know-It-All. He knows what we are thinking. He knows what we are about to say. He understands and ascertains us completely. There isn't anyone more intimately acquainted with our communications.

Today's Takeaway:

- *Know your nakedness.* The truth of Psalm 139:4 should startle us a bit. Often—before our thoughts have formed into words and actually proceeded from our mouths—we think we can hide. All the times I have thought something unkind and so longed to say it but held back, I think I have scored a major victory. But guess what? God still knows those thoughts. All our ways are laid bare before him. We can't hide. Our minds are naked before him. This should cause us to try

to rein in our thoughts and keep them in line with God's Word. We may be able to hide from others, but we cannot hide from God.

- *Ponder what is pure.* Philippians 4:8 reads, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." God sure stresses the importance of our thought life. We are to ponder what is pure rather than let our thoughts paddle around in pollution. The best way to think of things that are right, pure, lovely, and admirable is to meditate on Scripture. When our thoughts are in alignment with God's Word, our speech has a better chance at being uplifting, wholesome, and godly.

Lesson for the Lips:

Today, let's not focus on our words so much but rather on our thought life. How would you rate your thinking on the following scale?

1—I often have less-than-lovely thoughts about others and even plot to do evil.

2—I occasionally have less-than-lovely thoughts about others and only sometimes plan to do wrong.

3—My thought life is a pretty even mix of good and evil.

4—Most of the time my thoughts are uplifting and godly and only occasionally do I struggle with keeping them in line.

5—I really don't have trouble keeping my thoughts in alignment with Scripture.

Now, in order to help to keep our thought lives in order, choose one of the verses mentioned here and try to memorize it this week. Write it on a sticky note and post it in a

prominent place where you will see it often. Or type it out on your cell phone and make it your lock screen. Continue mentally rehearsing it, and even saying it out loud, until you memorize it. Then, in the future, when your thoughts want to migrate to a place where they will not be pleasing to God, quote the verse out loud.

- Psalm 139:4: "Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely."
- Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I know I cannot hide from you. I cannot hide my words nor even my thoughts. May I be mindful today to bring both my words and my thoughts into line with your Word so they will be pleasing in your sight. In Jesus's name, amen.

Day 3

Shutting Down the Motor Mouth

When there are many words, transgression and offense are unavoidable, but he who controls his lips and keeps thoughtful silence is wise.

Proverbs 10:19 (AMP)

It was a sound I had never heard before. The loud rumbling seemed to shake the house. The noise was coming from the basement and I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was. All I knew was that it sounded dangerous. I was tucked cozily in my home office writing, so I put down my coffee mug and ventured downstairs to investigate. However, by the time I reached the basement, the rumbling had stopped. The mystery remained.

A few days later, I was again upstairs, this time in our kitchen. Again the rumblings started. Just as before, I dashed to the basement to try to figure out where the monstrous mechanical noise was coming from. But just like before, the rumbling ceased before I made it to our lower level.

Later that day, I alerted my husband to what had been going on. We weren't sure if it was the furnace, the sump pump, or some other motorized contraption making the reverberating boom. We decided to just sit tight and wait for it to happen again.

A few days later, early on a Sunday morning, my husband arose early. After hitting the off button on his alarm, he began to walk down the hallway. He stopped in his tracks when he heard a low but constant humming sound. It was not the loud, shaking boom that I had

experienced, but nevertheless he dashed to the basement to investigate. There he discovered that our septic tank injector was running constantly, its motor clearly approaching burnout.

A quick search on the Internet showed him that this was nothing to fool with. We needed to get it repaired immediately. But before we could do that, we needed to shut off the motor, which was now making an even louder, higher pitched, hum. He shut the motor off and put a sign on the lower level bathroom telling our family members not to use it.

Yes, if the motor hadn't been shut down, the consequences could have been extremely messy. Septic and sewer issues are nothing to play around with. If left unattended, they can cause a major stink—literally!

Proverbs 10:19 teaches that this is not only true in the plumbing world, but with our mouths as well. As the Amplified version says: "When there are many words, transgression and offense are unavoidable, but he who controls his lips and keeps thoughtful silence is wise."

Have you ever let your constant stream of words get you in trouble? I sure have—more than once. When we constantly run our motor mouths, we create a situation where there is a greater chance of saying something that offends or something that we later regret. It is nearly unavoidable, as the verse clearly states. The solution? It is found in the latter half of the verse—we must seek to control our tongues and instead employ the tool of thoughtful silence. Thoughtful silence doesn't mean that we never speak; rather, it means we need to just zip our lips to avoid uttering something we later wish we could take back. It means we give careful and prayerful thought to the words we might speak, using discernment to decide if we should speak at all!

Today let's not just watch what *kind* of words roll off of our lips; let's also prudently monitor *how many*. Constantly running motors—whether machine or mouth—are prone to malfunction, thereby causing a mighty mess.

Today's Takeaway:

- *Too many words can lead to much heartache.* It is a matter of simple mathematics: the more words you speak, the more opportunities you have to slip up and offend someone—even if the offense is unintentional. An overabundance of rhetoric is often a setup for sin. By intentionally paring back the *quantity* of our words, we can make sure they are *quality* words—true, kind, and necessary.
- *Silence speaks.* Don't underestimate the ability of your silence to speak volumes. When we refuse to jump into a conversation that is full of criticism, gossip, or just idle talk, our silence speaks. It attests to our character and indicates to others that we will not be pulled into the pettiness. Give your lips a rest and seek to perfect the art of wise and thoughtful silence as advised in our verse today.

Lesson for the Lips:

Today let's talk quantity. Circle the phrase below that most closely describes you when it comes to how often you talk in social situations or interactions in your relationships:

- I am relatively quiet most of the time, usually speaking less than others in a group setting and rarely voicing my opinion.
- I am quiet sometimes, especially with people I don't know, but at other times talk a great deal in a group setting and offer my opinion when directly asked.

- I talk about as much as the average person, giving my opinions without dominating conversations.
- I am considered by most to be a chatterbox, talking more than others in almost every social situation and freely giving my opinion.

From the description that you circled, are there any changes you would like to make? Do you need to make an adjustment in how often you speak? If so, what? Write out a sentence or two with your goal in this area.

{SPACE}

{SPACE}

{SPACE}

Prayer:

Father, your Word tells me that where there is a great deal of talk, there is great potential for offending someone and even sinning. May I carefully monitor the number of words I speak today, making sure that my words are true, kind, and necessary at the moment. Muzzle me when I need to remain silent. May my words glorify you and encourage others. In Jesus's name, amen.

Day 4

On Cherry Slushies and Refreshing Springs

But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and

sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

James 3:8–12

My youngest son is a high school football player whose team just won the state championship—for the fifth time in six years. GO YELLOWJACKETS! (Total mom brag moment there.) In addition to lots of excitement in the air, as a football family, our late summer and fall seasons these past few years were filled with two-a-day practices, early morning weight-lifting sessions, lots of grimy uniforms, and a larger-than-normal grocery bill. Also, as part of my son and his friends' normal routine, our vehicle made many stops at the local convenience store after practice in the beating sun. There they would grab a slushy iced drink before heading home to shower and crash.

When my son and his friends trek into the store, grab a cup, and place it under a spout on the slushy machine, they have no doubt what will come out of the spigot. If they place it under the spout marked "cherry" and pull, the frosty stream that pours out will indeed be the flavor of that sweet, red fruit. If instead, they pull the lever marked "cola," they will receive cola flavor. They needn't worry that something other than what is listed will come coursing out. (A few of his friends, however, do switch their cup from spout to spout, making a mix of cola, cherry, grape, and lemon-lime. They call this original concoction "Swamp Water"!)

Perhaps we can learn a little lesson from the slushy machine. Each spigot on the device gushes out one type of drink. Our mouths as well should also flow out only one type of speech—namely, that which is refreshing. Today's passage in James 3 warns, "Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be." And the passage starts out

with a bold statement: “No one can tame the tongue.” It is restless—even deadly. While the tongue can’t be tamed completely, we can seek to temper it.

With our mouths we may do many good things—encourage the weary, embolden the timid, calm the fretful, or soothe the hurting. We even use our words to praise our heavenly Father. And then at times we turn right around and curse our fellow human beings, who have been made in the image of God. The Bible issues a strong warning against such schizophrenic speech. Not only should we attempt to correct such conduct due to the warning in Scripture, we should do it for another reason—because others are watching our behavior.

As a Christian, we represent Christ. Represent means “to re-present” him to others. What kind of representation are we if we do not sound at all like the one we are supposed to be “re-presenting”? When our mouths flow forth both praising and cursing, we are not imitating Christ. When we curse our fellow man—people who are image bearers of God—we are not advancing the kingdom and pointing others to the gospel message.

Now before we let ourselves off the hook on this one we must realize that the type of cursing mentioned here in this passage is not the foul-mouthed, cuss-word slinging type of cursing we often think about. “Curse” in this passage means, “To put down or condemn.” Certainly this type of speech slips easily into our conversation. Sometimes more easily than a cuss word!

So today, try to avoid condemnation and put-downs. Watch for double-minded dialogue and schizophrenic speech. Such a mixture is truly like swamp water! Instead, may our lips strive to utter only praiseworthy words.

Today’s Takeaway:

- *The tongue cannot be tamed*. This fact is not an excuse for us to just chuck any notion of working on our words, nor does it mean we can escape the consequences of bad speech or pay no attention to how we use our language when interacting with others. It just means that we will never achieve perfection in our speech. We can, however, strive to improve our verbal interactions, which will in turn improve our relationships.
- *When we open our mouths, let's think praise—not put-downs.* Our speech should praise God. Not only is it an honor and a privilege to praise our heavenly Father, praise should arise naturally as an overflow of a thankful heart. However, in addition to God, let's seek to also praise our fellow human beings rather than put them down. May our praise be pure, flowing from a heart that loves the image bearers in our lives—both in our families and beyond.

Lesson for the Lips:

Today let's take the "Praise Over Put-Downs" challenge. In your interactions with others today—whether at home, work, or in your community—seek to utter words of praise and refrain from pronouncing any put-downs at all. Go out of your way to praise others for the qualities and characteristics you see and appreciate in them. Do not condemn but celebrate instead. Make it your aim for only praise to stream out of your mouth today and see if it isn't even sweeter and more refreshing than a cherry slushy on a hot summer day!

Prayer:

Father, make me mindful today of the way I interact with others. May I praise and not put down. May my words impart grace to others and not show grumpiness. I want to spring forth words of life that refresh the spirit and point others to you. In Jesus's name, amen.