



# TONGUE PIERCED

how the  
**WORDS YOU SPEAK**  
transform the  
**LIFE YOU LIVE**

**NELSON SEARCY**

and

**JENNIFER DYKES HENSON**

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*transforming lives together*

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*To my family, who modeled for  
me the power of words.*

*Chapter 1*

# **THE POWER OF WORDS**

*Words have an inherent power, a force capable of lighting one's paths and horizons. Used correctly and positively, words are the first building blocks for success and inner peace. Used incorrectly and negatively, they are capable of undermining even the best of intentions.*

Stephen R. Covey

*Death and life are in the power of the tongue.*

King Solomon (Prov. 18:21 NKJV)

*Once upon a time ...* Countless stories throughout human history have begun with these four words. They have introduced tales of joy, tragedy, victory, defeat, love, and sacrifice to us for centuries. As children, hearing these four words let us know that something significant, something fantastic was about to follow. We listened, and the once-upon-a-time stories we heard shaped our worlds. As adults, we may not hear these words often, but every story we encounter begins with them, whether spoken or implied—including your story and mine.

Even though they likely weren't said aloud in the delivery room on the day you were born, your story began with a definite sense of

*once upon a time*. As you made your entrance, a new tale opened: Once upon a time, a woman gave birth to a baby. That baby grew, learned, and matured. Now a full-grown individual, that person holds in his or her hands a book on the significance of words that could greatly influence the direction of his or her story from this point forward. But I'm getting ahead of myself. For just a moment, let's look more closely at the significance of *once upon a time*.

A group of sociologists intrigued by the impact words have on daily life recently conducted a study on the most powerful words in the English language.<sup>1</sup> They took an interesting approach. Instead of looking at individual words, they set out to discern the most powerful four-word phrase, the most powerful three-word phrase, the most powerful two-word phrase, and the single most powerful word in our collective vocabulary. You've probably already figured out what they found the most powerful four-word phrase to be: *Once upon a time*.

This phrase resonates with us deeply because we all live in a story. Every day, the story of your life and mine is being played out on the stages we've created for ourselves. These stages are full of interesting characters, conflicts, and plot twists. Who we are, what we do, who we love, our fears, passions, dreams, and goals—all of these things merge together to create our own stories, just as surely as the details and plot lines of the great fairy tales and classics that actually begin with *once upon a time* come together to tell those. Each of our lives is its own unique tale. And each one hinges, whether we realize it or not, on the elemental building blocks that comprise every story ever told—words.

No story gets very far without the collection of words that brings it to life and directs its course. So it is with our own. The words we use have a monumental effect not only on the immediate details of everyday living but also on the overarching trajectory of the story our lives are telling. Our words have the potential to open doors of opportunity for us or to close and seal them shut; they can nourish and build up our relationships or tear down the people we love. The words we speak to ourselves—our self-talk, if you will—have the power to shape our subconscious view of our worth and our abilities, thereby determining the actions we take (or don't take) on a daily basis. And the words we say to and hear from God are critical to the story we live both on this earth and when our time here is over. In short, our words create our lives.

Speaking of God, it's no surprise that *once upon a time* registers with us so profoundly. The phrase is a direct derivative of the opening line of the most important story ever told—God's story, the story in which each of our lives is a subplot. Genesis begins,

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Gen. 1:1–3)

In the beginning, God said, "Let there be," and there was. Out of nothingness, he spoke our world into existence. Genesis continues,

And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day” and the darkness “night.”

And evening passed and morning came, marking the first day.

*Then God said, “Let there be a space between the waters, to separate the waters of the heavens from the waters of the earth.” And that is what happened.* God made this space to separate the waters of the earth from the waters of the heavens. God called the space “sky.”

And evening passed and morning came, marking the second day.

*Then God said, “Let the waters beneath the sky flow together into one place, so dry ground may appear.” And that is what happened.* God called the dry ground “land” and the waters “seas.” And God saw that it was good. *Then God said, “Let the land sprout with vegetation—every sort of seed-bearing plant, and trees that grow seed-bearing fruit. These seeds will then produce the kinds of plants and trees from which they came.” And that is what happened.* The land produced vegetation—all sorts of seed-bearing plants, and trees with seed-bearing



fruit. Their seeds produced plants and trees of the same kind. And God saw that it was good.

And evening passed and morning came, marking the third day.

*Then God said,* “Let lights appear in the sky to separate the day from the night. Let them be signs to mark the seasons, days, and years. Let these lights in the sky shine down on the earth.” *And that is what happened.* God made two great lights—the larger one to govern the day, and the smaller one to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set these lights in the sky to light the earth, to govern the day and night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.

And evening passed and morning came, marking the fourth day.

Then God said, “Let the waters swarm with fish and other life. Let the skies be filled with birds of every kind.” So God created great sea creatures and every living thing that scurries and swarms in the water, and every sort of bird—each producing offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and

multiply. Let the fish fill the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth.”

And evening passed and morning came, marking the fifth day.

*Then God said*, “Let the earth produce every sort of animal, each producing offspring of the same kind—livestock, small animals that scurry along the ground, and wild animals.” *And that is what happened*. God made all sorts of wild animals, livestock, and small animals, each able to produce offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. *Then God said*, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.”

*So God created human beings in his own image.*

In the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them. (Gen.  
1:4–27)

God didn't simply think through what the oceans and continents should look like and then they appeared. He didn't draw a blueprint and gather a team to get things started. He didn't write out a description of the sky and the stars and the fish and the birds

and then breathe those things into being. No, his words alone set the world in motion. From the beginning of time, words—God’s words—have been the tools that carry the power to create reality. And he has passed those tools to us, filled just as surely with the power to create and shape our lives. In fact, you and I are never more like God than when we use our words to speak the truth of his will for our lives into existence.

## THE POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Oh, but how easy it is to forget the inherent power of our words. We gloss over their significance because they are commonplace to us. We take them for granted the way fish take water for granted. We are used to talk; it just is. We are full of, surrounded by, and constantly inundated with words, words, words. Stepping back and seeing the weight and impact of our ingrained linguistic choices takes intentionality. But when we are able to do just that, we will begin to see that each of our little, carelessly thrown around words actually carries the power of life and death. Don’t take it from me; King Solomon, widely considered the wisest man to ever live, said so himself: “The tongue can bring death or life” (Prov. 18:21).

Life-and-death issues are nothing to take lightly. Until we start realizing that our word choices carry enormous consequences, we will continue to underestimate how they work for us or against us.

What you say today will—not *can*, but *will*—do one of two things: either lead you down a path toward a more purposeful, abundant life or move you toward destruction. Not physical destruction necessarily—though words can definitely be a catalyst for health

issues—but the destruction of relationships, careers, momentum, joy, peace, hope, and contentment. In his essay “War of Words,” Paul David Tripp wrote:

We think that words are not that important because we think of words as little utilitarian tools for making our life easier and more efficient, when they are actually a powerful gift given by a communicating God for his divine purpose....

You have never spoken a neutral word in your life. Your words have direction to them. If your words are moving in the *life* direction, they will be words of encouragement, hope, love, peace, unity, instruction, wisdom, and correction. But if your words are moving in a *death* direction, they will be words of anger, malice, slander, jealousy, gossip, division, contempt, racism, violence, judgment, and condemnation.<sup>2</sup>

As you and I become more conscious of the way we use language, we can begin to take advantage of its power to create the lives we want. In the process we can stop inadvertently sabotaging others and ourselves with words that bring death and destruction. If knowledge really is power, then intentional awareness is the live wire.

Still, we should be let off the hook just a little. Our ignorance on this issue isn't completely our fault. Our understanding and manipulation of language is largely a learned behavior. Most of

our harmful speech patterns are etched into our subconscious from an early age. Have you ever opened your mouth to speak to your children and heard your mother come out? Have you ever said something to your spouse only to be struck by how much your comment sounded like your father? Maybe you've found yourself in a conversation with a coworker or a friend and heard a tone escape from your lips that you hate—but one that's been pointed in your direction many times in your own life.

Those innate patterns reflect our early experiences with words; they are the result of conditioning that began before we even knew how to speak. Before you ever said “Ma-ma” or “Da-da,” you began to internalize the meaning and tonality of the conversations taking place around you. When you started finding your voice, you learned to talk by repeating what you heard your parents and other family members say. The words of our closest relatives literally become our words, until we develop words of our own. Even when we begin to craft our language in the ways we want, those initial subconscious linguistic roots hold strong. Without awareness and intentionality, we are destined to repeat the patterns we grew up with—which can be either a blessing or a curse.

Did you like the way your parents spoke to you when you were a child? If not, hopefully you have been intentional about making changes in your own word choices when addressing your children. The way you speak to them now is likely the way they will speak to their own children twenty or thirty years from now. Your words will influence not only your own life's direction but also the lives of generations after you. Similarly, think about how your father spoke to your mother, and vice versa, while you were growing up.

Did you like the way they communicated with each other? Do you like where it has left their relationship today? If not, be mindful or those same words will come out when you talk to your spouse—and they will lead to the same results. The creative force of words cannot be overestimated.

## THREE TRUTHS ABOUT WORDS

To start changing things for the better, we first need to recognize three essential truths about the nature of words. If we can begin to work these truths into our thinking, they will help us steer away from words that bring death and toward words that create life. We'll explore each of these truths in more detail in the pages ahead, but here's a brief overview.

### *1. WORDS ARE A GIFT FROM GOD.*

The ability to use words at all is a gift that has been given to us by our Creator. As such, we have a responsibility to use our words well. As we've seen, God was the first one to harness the creative force of words—and he has entrusted us with the same ability to use words to create the world around us. Given the substantial nature of this gift, we can't just throw our words around any old way we please; they contain too much power. The only acceptable response to the gift we've been given is to show respect to the Giver by using it well.

Imagine if someone you love were to pull you aside one day and hand you \$10,000, saying, "Hey, this is my gift to you, free and clear. I want you to use it to create a better life for yourself and to

help make life better for others.” You would be intentional about how you spent that money, right? You wouldn’t go out and blow it on worthless junk. You would be careful to spend it wisely, squeezing all the possible good out of it. Well, believe it or not, our words are infinitely more important in shaping our lives than any amount of money—and they have been given to us with those exact instructions: Use this power to create a better life for yourself and to help make life better for others. With that gift comes responsibility. As Jesus’s disciple Luke wrote in his gospel:

When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required.  
(12:48)

## ***2. WORDS CAN BUILD UP OR TEAR DOWN.***

As a kid, you probably chanted the phrase “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” I know I did. With a little age and experience, we come to realize that even though it sounds good in theory, the phrase is just plain wrong. Words *can* hurt. I bet you don’t have any problem remembering the last harsh words that were spoken to you or the last encouraging words you received. Other people’s words make an incredible impact on us, usually whether we want them to or not. They have the ability to create the atmosphere of our lives. They also have the ability to create atmosphere for others.

Not long ago, while I was boarding a flight from Los Angeles to New York, I got an unwelcomed reminder about the potential

words have to create an air of negativity. I had just put my bag in the overhead compartment and was settling into the aisle seat I had booked weeks in advance when a burly guy walked up to me and huffed, “You’re in my seat!” I pulled out my boarding pass and double-checked it. I was in the right seat—but that didn’t make any difference to him. This guy was adamant. Getting angrier by the minute, he used a few choice words to tell me how stupid I was for sitting in his seat and how I needed to move out of the way so he could sit down.

About that time, a flight attendant realized what was going on and stepped in to settle things. She looked at our boarding passes, which, sure enough, both indicated the same seat number. But there was one major difference: my accuser’s ticket was for a flight to San Francisco, not to New York. He had boarded the wrong airplane. As you can imagine, he didn’t take the embarrassment well. Barreling back down the aisle toward the exit, he berated the attendants for allowing him to get on the wrong flight and spewed venom about how he would be filing a complaint with the airline’s management.

As I sat back down, I began to notice how the energy around me had changed. One man’s thoughtless, angry words had dispersed a negative cloud over everyone in my section of the plane. The flight attendants were rattled, and my own blood pressure was skyrocketing. Mr. San Francisco had left me feeling disjointed and defensive. Because he had chosen to dole out massive negativity and criticism over what could have been a simple, easily addressed misunderstanding, he tore the entire atmosphere around him down, along with everyone within it. With his words, he shifted everyone’s reality.



### 3. *THE QUALITY OF YOUR LIFE IS DETERMINED BY THE QUALITY OF YOUR WORDS.*

The way you choose to communicate will ultimately affect every area of your life. Words aren't neutral. Every word that goes out has a consequence attached to it. How you speak to your friends, family members, and coworkers will determine the quality of those relationships. The same is true in your spiritual life. How well you communicate with God through prayer will determine the quality of your connection with him. Your internal dialogue with yourself will determine the quality of your actions and interactions each day. When you consider all these things together, it naturally follows that the quality of your very life is determined by the words you speak. Being able to express yourself effectively is crucial to living the life you've imagined.

I recently came across a study conducted by linguistic researchers on a large cross section of violent prisoners.<sup>3</sup> The researchers met with the prisoners and studied the range and type of vocabulary they used. They determined that these prisoners had about one-fifth the vocabulary of the average person in America, noting that one of the major contributing factors to the violent histories of the men was that they had no other way to express themselves. What a clear example of how the ability to use words—or in this case, the *inability* to use words—determines the quality of life itself.

## **WORDS OF POWER**

Remember the sociologists who set out to determine the most powerful four-word phrase, three-word phrase, and two-word phrase, and

the single most powerful word in the English language? *Once upon a time* took the four-word distinction with good reason, as we've seen. The other winners probably won't come as much of a shock, but lest I leave you hanging, here they are:

Most Powerful Three-Word Phrase: *I love you*

Most Powerful Two-Word Phrase: *I'm sorry*

Most Powerful Single Word: *I*

Not surprised? That's because you already know that the phrases *I love you* and *I'm sorry* and the word *I* are filled with immense power. Something within you instinctively recognizes their significance. But the truth is that all of our words are just as significant; we simply don't treat them as such.

Once you and I become aware of the inherent power words carry, we have to do something with that knowledge. As the old adage goes, "To know and not to do is really not to know." So what can we do? It all begins with being intentional. We have to be intentional about harnessing what comes out of our mouths not only for our benefit but also for the benefit of others and for God's glory. The best way to get started down this path is to discover and adopt what I like to call a "tongue-pierced lifestyle."

## **CHOOSING A TONGUE-PIERCED LIFESTYLE**

Throughout these pages, we'll be discussing what it looks like to live a tongue-pierced lifestyle—that is, a lifestyle that acknowledges the importance of using your words to love God and love others. The

words that exemplify a tongue-pierced lifestyle are words that reflect a heart filled with love—words that will impact your reality in ways that will bring you the meaning, relationships, and success you want. When you begin to live a tongue-pierced lifestyle, you will finally be able to move toward the life you were created for. But getting there requires making the decision to become intentional about the words you speak.

This doesn't mean you have to become a hypervigilant, politician-like communicator who weighs and stresses over every word you utter. We are talking about life in the real world, after all. Being intentional simply means refusing to be careless with your language any longer and becoming more conscientious of how you talk to yourself and the people around you so you can have a positive impact on your own life and on theirs.

What would it look like if you committed to choosing a tongue-pierced lifestyle? What if you began focusing on only using words that lead to life and build others up? What would it look like if everyone in your family decided to do the same? How about if everyone in your office started using words that showed love toward others? What if the people in your social circles, in your church, and in your community began intentionally choosing words that promoted life instead of allowing negativity, complaining, gossip, and other deadly words to slip in? The results would be nothing short of revolutionary. You can be the catalyst. As you dive into the pages ahead, I invite you—I challenge you, even—to commit to transforming your life by changing the words you speak. Are you ready?