

# I Would Rather Speak Five Words

5afterEpiphany

Pastor Josh Frazee

1 Cor.14:12b-20

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Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever tried to learn a foreign language? Perhaps you know another language, or even a couple other languages.

In the process, you are usually taught the alphabet first. This enables you to pronounce the words of the language with the right sounds. This applies in Spanish, as well as Greek and Hebrew—you learn the alphabet first, and then start learning the vocabulary and how to conjugate the verbs into the proper tenses—that is, past, present, future...

Yet even as you continue learning a language, you get to the point where you can begin reading. When you're first starting out, you can read—that is, you can pronounce, most of the words, even without realizing what they mean. It is only as you pick up more and more vocabulary that those words you can pronounce begin to have any meaning for you.

What is the purpose of learning a language, or a new language or two? To be able to communicate. But for us, as Christians, it is even more than that: it is so that we may proclaim the Word of God in a way in which those who hear us can understand what we are saying—what God is saying to them through us.

In our text today from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we'll consider how much good it does to use languages—your own native language or others you may pick up—when others cannot understand you, and when they can. After all, what good would it be for me to stand up here and lead the liturgy and preach in Swahili if you could not understand it?

## Verse 1

“(S)trive to excel in building up the church. Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.”

Just as in learning a language, you can begin pronouncing words without knowing or understanding their meaning. If you pray to God a prayer written in Greek, and you have not learned Greek, you would be praying all right, but you would be receiving no benefit. Your mind is not bearing fruit.

That is why we learned as children and teach our children to pray in our own language—so that it may be fruitful to us and that it may be fruitful for them.

Anna and my niece Daisy is getting old enough to start joining us in prayer at the dinner table. She recognizes when it is time to fold her hands and when to finish folding her hands, but right now, she hasn't learned the significance of the words we adults are speaking. How much more it will mean to her to say “Amen” with us when she has learned what the words mean that we are using, and that we have a God who is benevolent toward us for the sake of Jesus, and who grants us our daily bread!

“Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?... (Y)ou may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.”

## Verse 2

“I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

Going one step further, if it is not beneficial for you to read words with the right pronunciation but having no understanding of what they mean is a problem for basic reading, how much more of a problem would it be in speaking about the Gospel to one who has never been to church reading them passages in Swahili that neither of you understands? Like Paul, LCMS pastors are taught at least Biblical Greek, if not also Hebrew, and, in cases, Aramaic. They know a few languages—which is more than one who only knows his or her own language, yet may be fewer than one who understands thirteen dialects, like Kebede, a young man from Africa I met at Seminary. He had lived in a region which required him to know each of those thirteen dialects to be able to communicate with those around him.

“Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.” The goal of sermon writing is always the benefit of the hearers. Sermons truly belong to the congregation, not to the pastor. If they are written in such a way that they cannot be understood, then they are of no benefit.

In the Old Testament, God would often complain that His people were dying from lack of knowledge. That’s why He sent the prophets—so that they might proclaim His Word and some of the people would hear it and live. Today God still desires for His Word to be heard, so He calls pastors and missionaries and deaconesses and all laypeople to proclaim His Word in its full truth and purity, so that others may hear it and live.

All humanity is dying from a lack of knowledge. They do not know that they are dying because of their lack of obedience to God. By breaking even one of His commands, they are worthy of eternal death and suffering. But God does not want this. He does not and He did not, which is why He proclaimed through the prophets of old that He would be sending a Messiah, a Savior. Then He sent His only-begotten Son to be that very Savior. God took on human flesh and lived among us. Then He died by our hands at the cross. On the cross, Jesus suffered the eternal death and separation from God the Father we deserve by only one of our sins. On the third day, God raised Him from the dead. Not long after, God was sending His apostles and Paul and everyone to spread the Word that He had won the battle over sin, death, and the devil himself. God didn’t want anyone to die from lack of knowledge, and He still doesn’t.

## Verse 3

“Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.”

Sin is the reason we were dying; we should not continue in it! “Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.” That is, now that you have been set free in Christ, do not pursue evil and how to do it more or better. Instead, pursue righteousness. Become mature in the Word and how to proclaim it to others, so that they might understand what you are saying.

It is and always will be better to speak five words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ than to speak a thousand of any other kind. By His blood and death, we have been spared the wrath which we deserve. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

