

Sweetness of Speech

The Bible's Winning Tactic for Verbal Disputes

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We all have the unfortunate ability to be fully convinced of our own rightness and yet still be wrong. This reality should make humility our governing disposition when disagreeing with others. And yet, having a humble disposition doesn't mean never taking a strong stand, never contending earnestly on important issues, or never insisting that another person needs to be corrected. Despite our capacity to misjudge things, we also have the capacity to be right, and to know for sure that we are right.



Let's assume for now that you are right and that someone else needs to be corrected regarding an important issue. What conversational tactics will increase the likelihood of convincing the other person of his error? Should you sarcastically expose flaws in his reasoning or ridicule his views? Should you raise your voice? Should you intimidate with facial expressions? Should you attack his character, question his motives, or rehearse his past mistakes? If you choose these tactics, you may have the truth, but you are arguing for it in unbiblical and ineffective ways.

Consider the Bible's recommended winning tactic when persuading others to change their views or ways:

The wise in heart will be called understanding, and *sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness*" (Prov. 16:21, emphasis added).

What you say is important, but it will often fall on deaf ears if you don't learn how to say it effectively. If you want to actually convince others to change their views on important issues or to change their behavior in important ways, *sweeten your speech*. Make your manner of presenting the truth just as attractive as the truth itself.

Here are a few suggestions for how to do this:

1. Smile. People are put at ease by a friendly, happy face, yet they are put on guard by an overly serious look. Maintain a pleasant countenance even when discussing the most serious issues.

2. Speak in gentle tones. Rather than relying on volume or harshness to endorse the rightness of your position, let your words themselves, along with any necessary actions, do the convincing. Parents, for example, who address disobedient children calmly and rationally (and then consistently follow up with firm corrective discipline) are the ones who will persuade their little

ones to change their behavior. On the other hand, people who intimidate by facial expressions or volume often do so because they are less able to express or defend their position factually and rationally.

3. Be positive about your opponent. Make it clear that the person you are disagreeing with is not the object of your rebuttal. You are not arguing against *him*, but against *his error*. Speak to him in respectful tones, using kind and respectful words. Never use demeaning words or phrases. "You must be blind to see it that way," says the same thing as, "I don't believe you're seeing this clearly," yet only the latter preserves the person's dignity. If you slip up here, apologize quickly.

4. Listen carefully before speaking. Genuinely consider the other person's argument. Try hard to understand why he stands where he stands. Without agreeing with falsehood, you can express empathy with your opponent's viewpoint. Work hard to stand in his shoes, and let him know you are doing so. Compassionately say things like, "I can understand how you arrived at that opinion."

5. Don't emote excessively. Avoid making your feelings the main subject of the conversation or the primary reason for the other person to change his mind. Your passion by itself may evoke a favorable response initially, but unless the person is convinced by truth and reason, his agreement will likely be short-lived.

6. Say less rather than more. Too many words can be a way of simply wearing the other person down, and excessive verbiage often results in insincere agreement. In other words, the person might "agree" just to get you to be quiet. Also, the more you say, the more likely you are to sin. As the proverb says, "In the multitude of words, sin is not lacking, but a wise person restrains his lips" (10:19).

7. Agree to disagree until next time. Not every disagreement needs to end in agreement—at least not right away. Know when enough is enough for the time being, and respectfully invite the person to continue the conversation later.

Is there a disagreeable person in your life? Would you like to influence that person in positive ways—perhaps toward understanding the gospel and knowing Jesus as Savior and Lord? If you will work hard, not only at possessing the truth but also at sweetening the ways in which you convey it, the increase in your influence could be life-changing.

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