

WHEN TO SPEAK UP AND WHEN TO SHUT UP

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Chosen

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This book is dedicated to those who were moved to speak up boldly in the midst of adversity and to those who were directed by God to remain silent while He moved in their presence.

I pray that this book will encourage each reader to be a voice in the wilderness of life: a voice of reason, of passion, of encouragement, of leadership, but most of all, of love and grace.

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In Appreciation . . .

A special thank-you to Noreen, Debi and Alma. You encouraged me on days when I needed a pat on the back and a smile of friendship.

To the people at Chosen and Baker—Jane, Ann, Karen S., Karen V., Sheila and the rest. I am honored to be associated with such a professional group of people.

To my faithful wife, Joyce, thank you. You are an excellent wife and, truly, my crown.

Never Again

I was mute with silence, I held my peace even from good; and my sorrow was stirred up.

Psalm 39:2

“I can’t take it anymore. I am going to a lawyer to start divorce proceedings.” The words were sharp. Sandra was adamant in her decision to divorce Ken, unwilling to listen to any contrary opinion. It appeared that a thirty-year marriage would end in brokenness and hurt.

I was fresh out of graduate school with my master of social work degree. While I was working full-time in the school system as a social worker, many people in our small community approached me for counseling services. Directors of the local mental health facility asked me to contract with them to help with their unmanageable caseloads. In addition, several local pastors called upon me to meet with some of their members who needed counseling. It was through one of these church

contacts that I began counseling Sandra regarding her struggling marriage.

Sandra was an intelligent, energetic individual who worked in the local bank, and her husband, Ken, was a hard-working electrician. They had two children. Their older son was married and their daughter was a senior in high school. It seemed that the imminent “empty nest” was creating panic within Sandra. Most of Ken’s leisure time was spent in front of the television or a newspaper, while Sandra was involved with housework and community activities. It had been years since the two of them had taken a vacation or enjoyed a weekend away. In Sandra’s words, “Our marriage is dead. We are a married couple living separate lives.” The thought of no children in the home and living with “just” Ken for the rest of her life was overwhelming.

I began meeting with Sandra on a weekly basis. She did not want to include her husband in our sessions, stating, “It wouldn’t do any good.” I attempted to guide her toward some sort of plan or focus that would bring freshness to the marriage. While her words were usually positive, her actions revealed a deeper truth; she was tired, hurt, discouraged and angry. Due to these emotions, Sandra was unwilling to allow for the possibility of change. She had Ken trapped in a prison of blame. I was prepared to challenge her in this area when she made her announcement.

It hit me like a bombshell. I knew that she was reluctant to press into a deeper understanding of her marriage, but she had never mentioned divorce. Being relatively new to the counseling arena, I searched my memory banks from my counseling classes to aid me in my response. Many textbooks discuss the potential damage from letting personal feelings impinge on one’s counsel. The university professors concurred, emphasizing that as a counselor one should help the person find what he or she wants to do without imposing one’s personal values.

And to a certain extent this is true. Individuals who come for counseling are often at a weak emotional state and susceptible to damage by those who would want to dominate them. But on the other hand, anyone who seeks help from a Christian counselor must expect that counselor to express any personal observations that support sound biblical teaching. In that regard, this situation—though in a professional setting—was not unlike any other situation in which we have to decide whether or not to speak our minds.

Still, on more than one occasion, the professors at the secular university chastised me for my personal Christian convictions. (I had refused to counsel a woman on how to obtain an abortion, for instance. Another time, I refused to support a man's involvement in pornography.)

So here I faced a dilemma. Should I follow the route set before me in the classroom and simply help her through the emotional impact of her decision? As I mentioned earlier, she was not willing to listen to any other options. Or should I state my personal conviction that divorce was not the plan of God for Sandra and Ken? I felt sure that God could heal their wounded marriage if they were willing to allow Him to guide their thoughts and actions.

After a quick analysis, my decision was made. I agreed to "help her" through the process of divorce. While uncomfortable with this decision, I felt resigned to the inevitable. She would meet with an attorney before our next session and share with me the results of that meeting.

As we started our session the following week, Sandra's body language showed weariness and resignation to a burdensome decision.

"The lawyer suggested I wait a year before I file for divorce," she said. "He felt that I should wait until my daughter graduates. If I proceed with the divorce now it will ruin her last year in school. So, I guess I will just hang on." With this, she began to sob. I had few words of consolation to offer. Honestly, I was

relieved. I was glad that the lawyer had, at least temporarily, put the divorce on hold.

Later, my conscience gnawing at me, I shared the general facts of the case with my wife, Joyce. She posed a simple question: "Why didn't you give your perspective on the situation?" All my education, all my so-called wisdom was deflated. I realized that my voice had been non-existent. What had prevented me from speaking out? I cared about Sandra and Ken, yet I had accepted Sandra's insistence and agreed to help her with her decision. Perhaps professionally that was the correct course, but as a Christian counselor I was stunned that I had been willing to allow them to walk a road of pain and suffering without helping her see a different perspective. The weight of my silence stunned me.

The following days brought hours of prayer and soul-searching. I consider myself to be an individual who speaks his mind and is not afraid to share his thoughts. In fact, there are times my friends say I share too freely. (In other words, I need to keep my mouth closed.) I did not want to be a person who was overwhelmed or intimidated by situations and circumstances and unable to speak the truth of God.

A Life-Changing Experience

About two weeks later, a situation forever changed the way I view silence. The phone rang. It was Sandra. She was crying uncontrollably, her breath heaving with every word. As she spoke, my stomach knotted and a deep mourning filled my spirit. Ken had suffered a heart attack. He had collapsed in the living room while Sandra and her daughter were making breakfast. The paramedics pronounced him dead before he was even placed in the ambulance.

As my wife and I visited the mourning family, God quickened a disturbing thought to my mind. What if Sandra had filed for divorce? How would her children have coped not

only with their father's death but also with the knowledge that she wanted to divorce him? And what of Sandra? Could she have lived with herself, thinking that the heart attack might have been related to the divorce? The ramifications could have been staggering. An incredible sense of relief and thankfulness came over me. I began to cry, thanking God for His mercy in this situation. It was difficult enough for the family to deal with the loss; having to factor into the equation the strain and stress of an impending divorce could have resulted in irreparable damage.

Yes, Sandra did have to come to terms with guilt over her feelings. She found solace in the fact, however, that she had never spoken of her intention to divorce Ken to anyone in the family, nor had she directed hostility toward Ken by using the idea of divorce as a weapon. God, in His sovereign way, spared Sandra—and me—years of “what-if” and “if only I had.”

As I look back on that situation, I realize it was foundational for my beginning to understand the two sides of silence. The predicament I found myself in was not an uncommon problem: whether to share my personal feelings and risk being rebuffed or to remain silent, maintaining “peace” but not being true to myself. I remember that dilemma as if it were yesterday instead of twenty years ago. I now feel more prepared to ask God the question “Should I remain silent or should I speak?”

In the chapters of this book we will discuss the many sides of this question. We will explore ways that you can approach difficult situations with a godly intent and with a strategy that will enhance, not inhibit, communication. We will look at our motives for our decisions. We will address ways of dealing with peer pressure and authority—times you may feel uncomfortable about your position. We will investigate how an untimely word, a bad attitude or spiritual arrogance can create a wedge and a barrier to God's divine plan. We will learn how to make appeals and deal with anger and much more.

Because of a misuse of the spoken word, destinies have been derailed, disunity has replaced unity, nations have been destroyed. Our very lives, both physical and spiritual, depend upon our ability and willingness to speak out at the proper moment. And by the same token, silence can bring pain, destruction and the inevitable onslaught of sin. Or it can allow the time for God's healing power to work in a life.

It is my prayer that the following pages bring clarity and purpose into your life about when to speak up and when not to.

One Final Thought . . .

Mistakes and missed opportunities are a part of our growth cycle in life. There will be times when we speak out instead of remaining silent and there will be times we are silent when a voice should come forth. This book is not intended to create guilt or condemnation about those times we make errors in judgment. Instead, it is hoped that each one of us can evaluate our past choices and gain insights into our own personal lives, thus influencing our future decisions.

As I share my own personal triumphs, failures and shortcomings, I trust each reader will be encouraged to seek greater understanding into his or her own personal communication patterns. This truly is a book about love . . . loving one another enough to understand when we should remain silent and when we should speak—and if we do speak, doing so with words that promote and encourage further communication.

1. Think back over the years and find an example of one major lesson you have learned about not speaking up.
2. In examining your own personality and attitudes, do you have a tendency to be silent in troubling situations or to speak forth? Do you usually feel directed by God or by your own desires?

When Silence Isn't Golden

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak . . .

Ecclesiastes 3:7

The controversy of “keeping silent v. speaking out” is not a new one. It has, in fact, been examined for thousands of years. And its study is not isolated to one group, culture or religion.

While there are many authorities that speak on this topic, one of particular interest to me is the Talmud, a collection of literary works from many Jewish scholars written more than two thousand years ago. It spanned a period of seven hundred years, from approximately 200 B.C. to A.D. 500. Having been raised in a Jewish home, I heard often about the Talmud and the sage writings within the book. But it was not until the age of 22, when I turned my life over to Christ, that I first read the Talmud—and subsequently discovered its comments on

the topic of silence. This subject is observed by A. Cohen in a book called *Everyman's Talmud* (Schocken Books, 1975):

The misuse of the gift of speech is often the subject of warning. The Rabbis appreciated how unruly a member the tongue is, and for that reason, they declared, God provided it with exceptional controls. "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the tongue, All the limbs of man are erect but you are horizontal; they are all outside the body but you are inside. More than that, I have surrounded you with two walls, one of bone and the other of flesh."

Over much talking is deprecated. The proverb, "Speech is silver, silence golden," has its counterpart in the Talmud: "A word for a coin, silence for two"; "Silence is a healing for all ailments"; "Silence is good for the wise, how much more so for the foolish"; "All my days I have grown up amongst the wise, and I have found nought of better service than silence."

These Jewish scholars placed a high premium on silence. Likewise, many parents, teachers, historians and scholars seem to encourage silence, especially of younger individuals. The adage "It is better to be seen than heard" is a familiar one that discourages children from speaking out. Even historically the message seems to come through that silence is better than going against the grain and speaking up. To be an Abraham Lincoln, a John Wesley, a Martin Luther King, Jr., a Winston Churchill or an apostle Paul is to meet with resistance.

But is silence always golden?

What about the words in Scripture that plead with us to put words to our thoughts? Proverbs 8:1, for instance, shares how we need to cry out with wisdom and understanding: "Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift up her voice?" The psalmist beseeches God to hear his voice: "Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my meditation. Give heed to the voice of my cry, my King and my God, for to You I will pray. My voice You shall hear in the morning" (Psalm 5:1-3). *Oh,*

God, our voices must not remain silent when You have directed us to speak!

The answer for us is not so perplexing: Both silence and speaking up have two sides. Both can be positive and appropriate. Both can also be negative and inappropriate. How do we distinguish?

In this chapter we will look at the issue of failing to speak when speaking is called for—those times when silence is *not* golden.

What are some of the reasons that a person might keep silent? He or she:

- May have nothing to add to a situation.
- May feel no one will listen.
- May feel intimidated by the environment and not feel comfortable expressing personal thoughts or convictions.
- May feel that it is none of his or her business to share personal impressions.
- May be fearful of repercussions.
- May simply not care.

Silence in the Garden

We need to examine the price of keeping silent when we should speak up—for there is often a cost. The best illustration comes from a story that is familiar to Christians and non-Christians alike. This story involves someone standing by, remaining silent, while another person made a destiny-changing decision. And not only did this decision alter the course of these two peoples' lives, it also had ramifications for their children and ultimately for the entire world for ages to come. This example of standing by and not speaking up is still relevant today, infiltrating schools, families, churches and businesses. Let us explore the story of Adam and Eve.

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" And the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.

Genesis 3:1-6

This story has been recounted over and over in homes, churches, synagogues, in books, magazines and on television. Always, it is the same. The snake deceived Eve and she ate. She then urged Adam to eat. He did so and the two were condemned to a life of hardship. But was it really that simple? Was Adam "tricked" into his actions? Or was silence involved, a time when a voice should have been heard but was not?

It is clear from Scripture that Adam was present when this exchange between Eve and the serpent took place. Note: "She also gave to her husband *with her*, and he ate" (verse 6, emphasis added). The New International Version of the Bible states it this way: "She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it." You may find this hard to believe, but it is written plainly in each Bible. Go . . . take a look . . . I'll wait.

See, the Word of God is pointedly clear.

Adam heard the conversation, saw Eve's dilemma, but remained silent. All the while that his wife was being deceived, Adam watched and assessed the situation, but kept his thoughts to himself. He chose to be silent.

Can it really be that Adam, the first man, sat by passively while his wife was being tricked? Perhaps many teachings on the Garden scenario exclude this point because it seems more palatable that Eve alone was responsible. We would rather forget that her husband stood by as a silent observer. This is especially true for us men. We do not want to consider that a man's silence contributed to the most far-reaching deception in the history of the world. Heaven forbid!

Many Bible commentaries skim over verse six, choosing to ignore it rather than deal with it. Venerable Bible commentator Matthew Henry writes:

It is probable that he was not with her when she was tempted, surely if he had, he would have intervened to prevent the sin.

Surely he would have! After all, why would anyone stand by, silent, while something negative happens to a person he loves? We would never do that. Would we? Yet, Adam did.

Wait a moment. Perhaps Adam did do something. "Then the man said, 'The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate'" (Genesis 3:12). Adam did what people do best when feeling defensive: He blamed another person. Yes, Eve did take the forbidden fruit and eat it. And for this, historians, scholars, Sunday school teachers and ministers will forever speak of her sin. But what of Adam? Could he have prevented it? Does he have any culpability? It would seem that he carries some responsibility for watching his precious helpmate make a destructive decision without intervening.

And here we are today. How many of us have perpetuated the pattern established by Adam? Was the "original sin" Eve's eating the forbidden fruit or was it Adam's silence while his wife was deceived? Eve was his spouse, his companion, his friend, his co-laborer. Granted, the apostle Paul seems to indict Eve by stating that it was she, not Adam, who fell into deception and transgression (see 1 Timothy 2:13–14). But this seems to raise the

question of Adam's culpability as well. True, Eve sinned greatly through her deception. True, Adam was *not* deceived. Does this not indicate, however, that he not only failed to protect her but ate with full knowledge of his actions? The book of Job speaks bluntly about Adam's behavior:

"If I have covered my transgressions as Adam, by hiding my iniquity in my bosom, because I feared the great multitude, and dreaded the contempt of families, so that I kept silence and did not go out of the door . . . then let thistles grow instead of wheat, and weeds instead of barley."

Job 31:33–34, 40

From a practical viewpoint, what could he have done? It was true that Eve had free will. There is no indication that she asked for Adam's opinion. Perhaps he would not have been able to dissuade her. But what do you think might have happened if Adam had said, "Eve, can we talk about this? You know what God has told us about this tree; do you really think this is a good idea? I don't feel comfortable with what you are about to do." His silence only allowed Eve to press forward without godly input. She still may have said, "Leave me alone," but at least he would have tried, and his counsel might have helped in his own decision. It is interesting that their eyes were opened only after *both* ate (see Genesis 3:7).

Adam was not being caring, protective or loving. On the contrary, he was being selfish, self-absorbed and perhaps fearful. Adam was silent. The price of his silence is staggering.

A Difficult Lesson

Janet is fourteen years old and is spending the next few months of her life in a drug rehabilitation program. Drugs and alcohol have absorbed the past year of her life. Naturally,

Janet never intended to become addicted to drugs. After all, she was “in control” and making her own choices. But soon, the drugs began to control her. How did this happen to a sweet, young, energetic junior high school girl?

Her parents, Sam and Carla, knew their daughter was starting to struggle in areas of her life. She was pushing the limits of basic household rules such as curfew, phone usage and chores. She started pulling away from her church youth group, a commitment she had always enjoyed. Her grades at school were slipping and, on numerous occasions, she had skipped classes. Janet’s teachers and school counselor encouraged Sam and Carla to talk with professionals and to get involved in family counseling. Their pastor at church attempted to meet with them on several occasions. Prior to each meeting, however, they would call and cancel, stating that “things were getting better.”

Privately, the parents expressed their fears regarding Janet’s lifestyle decisions, but they refused to confront her and let her continue to “do her own thing.” They felt Janet needed to make her own decisions and be responsible for her own behavior—and suffer the inevitable consequences. As each month passed, Sam and Carla saw their daughter spiral further into depression and isolate herself from friends and family. Before long Janet’s parents became paralyzed by their inaction. The day came when the police arrested Janet (and several of her friends) for possession of drugs. After several weeks in the county detention facility, Janet was sentenced to ninety days in a residential drug rehabilitation program.

It was not that these parents had no concern for their daughter. Nor were they blind to her self-destruction. So, what kept their lips closed? Why were they unwilling to seek guidance from professionals? Basically, Sam and Carla did not want to interfere in their daughter’s life. They felt Janet could make her own decisions; confrontation would only cause friction in the parent-child relationship. This conclusion is not

uncommon in families and among friends. After all, “I don’t want to interfere.”

Excuses for Not Speaking Up

Shall we look a little closer to home? Do any of these phrases sound familiar?

- “It’s his life. Let him make his own decisions.”
- “She’s old enough to make up her own mind.”
- “I’m not his mother.”
- “It’s none of my business.”
- “She knows the consequences of what she is doing.”

For me, personally, these phrases are all too familiar. I have used them as excuses to be silent when friends and family would have benefited more by my speaking up.

Let’s broaden this viewpoint just a bit. Please bear with me as my imagination takes a few liberties. Picture, if you will, Jesus looking out over the multitude. Here are people who need healing and release from demonic oppression, along with those who desperately want to know the Savior of the world. Now suppose that instead of His compassionate approach, Jesus says, “Yes, she does need a savior, but it really isn’t My business to tell her what to do.” Or “It’s true, you are demon-possessed, but, hey, I’m not your mother.” Or “I know he is lost to the world, but he is old enough to make his own decisions.” Yes, these are ludicrous thoughts. However, we justify and rationalize our silence with just such phrases while loved ones fall into the clutches of Satan. Oh, the price of needless silence!

Is there ever a time when silence is appropriate? Absolutely, and we will discuss this in later chapters. However, if we remain quiet when someone needs to speak up, we may

also need to accept some responsibility for the outcome. The Nuremberg war trials made a cogent, as well as legal, point on this issue. And biblically, if we use silence as self-protection, as a way to avoid confrontation or hard decisions, we do not glorify God. "The dead do not praise the LORD, nor any who go down into silence" (Psalm 115:17). Our silence will only create a spiritual death within us.

One Final Thought . . .

It can be quite difficult to balance godly discernment and fleshly impulse. In other words, there may be times that we feel the need to speak out, but we realize that our motives are not pure. And, realizing this, some of us choose to pull back and remain silent when guidance and correction are needed. Chapters that follow will take a closer look at our motives and habit patterns when talking to friends, family or authorities in our lives. The appendix describes my own battle with silence over a life-changing decision.

Do we want to continue the sin of Adam or break this cycle of sin? Why do we use silence as an excuse not to get involved? In the next chapter, we will address these areas as well as strategies for breaking out of the bondage of silence.

1. Like Adam, have you ever stood by and remained silent while knowing someone was making a bad decision? What was the impact of your silence?
2. What are some of the excuses you (or your friends) have used to remain silent?