A Matter of Life and Death

Guest: Nelson Searcy
From the series: Tongue Pierced (Day 1 of 3)
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Bob: The Bible says that life and death are in the power of the tongue. Pastor Nelson Searcy says, “That is so true.”

Nelson: Day to day, when we speak, our words can bring death—maybe, not physical death—but death to a relationship / death to a career. Then, words can bring life. I can build you up with my words / I can speak some encouragement into you—speaking enthusiastically in your life. That can bring life to a marriage / can bring life to a relationship—can bring life to a son, or daughter, or family member.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Wednesday, October 28th. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. Over the last 24 hours, would you say that you used your tongue more often for good or for ill? We're going to explore that today. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us on the Wednesday edition. I'm guessing that what we're going to talk about today is something that's an issue for everybody listening.

Dennis: And for those who are wondering whether you should listen to this broadcast or not, stay tuned. We're going to talk about tongue piercing. [Laughter]

Bob: In a manner of speaking.

Dennis: In a manner of speaking. Yes, we're going to talk about speaking, for sure. [Laughter] And we're going to hear an incredible illustration by our guest, Nelson Searcy; but first, I want to welcome him to the broadcast. Nelson, welcome to FamilyLife Today.

Nelson: Dennis/Bob, great to be with you.

Bob: Thank you.

Dennis: Nelson and his wife Kelley live in Boca Raton, Florida. They've been married 21 years—have one child, Alexander, who is one inch away from being five feet tall.
He’s nine years old—soon to go through Passport2Purity®. Listen carefully to my voice, Alexander, because you’ll hear it again in Passport2Purity—[Laughter]

Bob: You’ll get sick of it, Alexander.

Dennis: —with your dad. No, he won’t! [Laughter] He’s going to love it, Bob. He’s going to love it.

Anyway, Nelson has started a church in New York City. It’s called the Journey Church—and did that back in 2002—and has started a number of churches since then. How many have been spawned from that one church?

Nelson: Well, I think about a dozen have been spawned from that. We keep four that are still Journey locations.

Dennis: How about that? He’s written a book—no kidding, folks—called Tongue Pierced. I’m not going to unpack that yet because, before we came on the air, Bob was asking you about how you came to faith in Christ. You were reading a book that, ultimately, brought some peace of God to your heart.

Nelson: That’s exactly right. I was an engineer major at North Carolina State University. I had been leaning that direction my entire life. Didn’t grow up in a Christian family but had the opportunity to speak with a gentleman, who had written a book. I went to buy that book, thinking I would take it to the speaking engagement and have him sign it—thought that would be a cool thing to do. While I was there, buying that book, I saw Peace with God by Billy Graham. Now, I was so unchurched, at the time, I actually thought Billy Graham was a historical figure. I didn’t even realize he was still alive and still doing his ministry. [Laughter]

Bob: Wow!

Nelson: I bought the book, and I took it to a little park there beside the school and began to engage it.

Dennis: So, you had no kind of background in Christianity at that point?

Nelson: To say, “No,” would be a little too strong. I had gone to church on occasion. My family would occasionally go to a revival meeting, or my parents would seek cheap childcare at a Vacation Bible School—[Laughter]—but very little familiarity with Christianity.

Dennis: Describe your life. Peace with God—were you in turmoil or just empty?

Nelson: Empty would be the right word; but I think, when you are living apart from God, there is turmoil in your heart. I do remember lying awake at night, thinking, “What would
happen if I die?” and being confronted with that. I was old enough, as a freshman in college, that I’d experienced death—had some friends who had had some tragic things happen. So, I do remember thinking, “What would happen if I die?” Graham answers that question. Also, understood that humanity was pretty broken, and I’d made some decisions that were not the best decisions as well. So, all of that resonated.

I prayed that prayer that day, and something phenomenal happened in my life. It wasn’t an immediate change, but I knew the change was real enough for me to seek help—to ask what it means to follow Jesus and to learn more about this new life. I haven’t been perfect since I made that decision, by any stretch of the imagination, but I am forgiven. I can say, now, when I lay my head on the pillow at night, I think: “If this is my last day, I’m going to be with Jesus. I’m going to be saved, and I have a home in heaven.”

Dennis: There is an image in the Bible, where it has Christ speaking: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock;”—[Knock, knock, knock]

Nelson: Exactly. Yes.

Dennis: — if anyone hears My voice and opens the door,”—His promise is certain—He says, “I will come in to him...[Revelation 3:20]”

Nelson: Yes.

Dennis: And that’s what happened to you.

Nelson: It did. That verse means a lot to me because Jesus was knocking on the door of my heart that day. Maybe, He’s knocking on the door of someone’s heart, as we’re talking here today. Words are powerful; and I said those words to God: “God, I’m a sinner. I accept Your love. I want to follow Jesus as my Lord and Savior.” Those words changed my eternity.

Dennis: Well, I want us to fast-forward—and this is going to sound like kind of an abrupt change of topics here—but it really isn’t. It’s taking that same decision that you made to be a follower of Christ—and it’s practically applying it around one of the most dangerous parts of our body—our tongues.

You were giving a sermon at your church in New York City, and you decided to illustrate this in an unusual way. Share that story with our listeners because—I think, Bob, we’ve introduced a lot of broadcasts in some unusual ways—this may be the most unusual.

Bob: This is one of them, right here.

Nelson: Well, it is an unusual story—and this is not my normal pattern—but I had this awakening of how many times the Bible talks about your tongue. I said: “I’ve got to
teach on this. How did I miss all of these verses?” Of course, I’d hit on them over the course of the years; but really, wanted to drill down on that.

At that time, all of these tattoo/piercing shops were popping up all over the city. So, I thought to illustrate this: “I’m going to go and buy a tongue piercing.” Now, to be clear, I was not going to get my tongue pierced—no way am I going to do that!

Bob: There’s a kit you buy for this—is that how it works?

Nelson: Well, I think they do it for you; but before they do it, you have to pick out the size, the diameter, and the different shapes of these piercings that you can receive. I’d seen it—I’d seen the advertisements. So, I go to a little shop—for those familiar with New York, it was on St. Mark’s Street, down in the Village. I proceeded to tell the lady behind the counter, “I would like to buy the largest tongue piercing that you have available.” She sized me up, from top to bottom, and said: “You’re not ready for the largest. You need to start with something smaller.” [Laughter]

I, then, explained that this was for an illustration that I wanted to do on a teaching about the power of words. We had a nice conversation. So, I purchased this—about the size of your thumb—piercing that, literally, you have implanted in this muscle in your mouth.

Bob: This is like a spacer or something that they put in there.

Nelson: Oh, my dentist friends tell me this is the worst possible thing you can do to your mouth; but yes, that’s exactly right.

Dennis: So, it makes a hole—

Nelson: Like a bolt.

Dennis: —in your tongue the size of your thumb?!

Nelson: The portion that goes through your tongue may be slightly smaller; but the portion that you see on the top was probably the size of your thumb.

Dennis: So, how do you talk?

Nelson: No idea—I have no personal experience with this. [Laughter]

Dennis: So, Sunday morning comes around?

Nelson: Sunday morning comes around. I’m teaching—I share the example of how people are piercing their tongues. I made the point that you should really pierce your tongue to the cross of Jesus Christ—not literally. You don’t have to have a tongue piercing, per se, but imagine what it would look like, if every word came out of our
mouth was filtered through the cross of Christ, and we spoke the way God would have us speak. That was part of what the book is about and different things.

But about two weeks later, I’m in my office. I receive a call from our human resources department. My credit card statement had come in for the month, and I was called into give justification—

Dennis: Accountability; accountability!

Nelson: —for why I would invest $35 / $38 in this particular shop—which, unbeknownst to me, had a rather unusual name that I will not share on the broadcast. [Laughter] Needless to say, I had to justify my actions.

Dennis: Oh, that’s so funny. Well, Bob quoted a passage of Scripture that—it’s Proverbs 18:21—you write about it in your book: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

Nelson: Yes.

Dennis: “And those who love it will eat its fruits.” The tongue really is one of the most powerful members of our bodies because of the impact our words have on people.

Nelson: Yes, to use language and to speak like we speak, it is almost a godlike power. You know, if you go to the very first chapter in the book of Genesis, it says that God spoke creation into existence—that’s how we all came about. So, this very power that God used to bring all of creation about is now the same power He gives to us. Now, we’re not gods, and we don’t have that kind of power in our language; but we do have the ability to speak life and to speak death.

Now, in my case, when I prayed that prayer, back in the park—in reading that book by Billy Graham—my words / when I confessed, with my mouth, that Jesus is Lord—that gave eternal life to me. That’s pretty powerful. At the same time, day to day, when we speak, our words can bring death—maybe, not physical death—but death to a relationship / death to a career. We’ve seen politicians give speeches where it brought the death of their campaign; right?

Dennis: Yes.

Nelson: Then, words can bring life. I can build you up with my words. I can speak some encouragement into you—speaking enthusiastically in your life to build you up / to give you a higher state of life. That can bring life to a marriage / can bring life to a relationship—can bring life to a son, or daughter, or a family member.

Bob: Years ago, you [Dennis] used a different metaphor about the power of words. You talked about them as seeds that get planted in a garden.
**Dennis:** They grow something. They are either going to grow weeds, or they are going to grow vegetables / good fruit. And the little song goes: “What you plant is what you grow. So, be careful what you sow.”

**Nelson:** And we remember those seeds that were planted. If we had the time—we could go around, just this room today, or we could ask those listening—to recall words that were spoken to them—sometimes, 20 years ago, 40 years ago, 50 years ago. Those seeds were planted, and they’re still bearing fruit today.

Now, unfortunately, we often remember the negative words in our life—but as we work on this, as followers of Jesus, moving away from that kind of seed to a much more positive seed—words that give life. And many of us, if we are pushed, we can remember a teacher that spoke life into us—perhaps, it changed the course of our career. Or we can remember a pastor who spoke life into us—or even from this broadcast / things that have been said here, that have given life to people. Those are powerful things.

**Bob:** Let me give you an illustration; okay? So, I was—this would have been the fall of 1974. I’m a freshman at the University of Tulsa. I went down to the local campus radio station because I wanted to be on the radio. I went down, and I asked if I could get a shift. They—you had to pass a test, and they tried you out. They ultimately concluded that I could do the 9 pm until 1 in the morning shift every Tuesday—play records and do all of that.

First time I ever had—I was so excited. I’m getting four hours on the radio, playing whatever records I want to. It was—nobody was listening—so it was fine. [Laughter] I could play whatever I wanted to play. So, I’m there, doing my shift, every Tuesday night. Well, I’d been on the air, maybe, four or five times. I walked into the station one day in the daylight hours, and the station manager was in there. He said, “You’re the guy doing Tuesday night; right?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Where did you work before you worked here?” I said, “This is my first time to do radio.” He said, “Really?! Well, you’re doing a good job.”

**Nelson:** Wow!

**Bob:** I can show you the spot on the carpet where I was standing when he said that. I remember Gary Chu’s words ringing in my ears. There are things like that that mark a person for life.

**Nelson:** And think of how that has impacted you—

**Bob:** Right.

**Nelson:** —all of these years. You’re here in radio today—
Bob: Yes.

Nelson: —because he said you did a good job.

I bet all of us, if we think about it, we can remember a teacher who said: “You are leader. You have ability.” We can remember a pastor—I remember, right after I went in ministry, a pastor came up to me, at altar time in a church, put his arm around me, and said, “Make prayer the center of your ministry.” Now, that was of the Lord. That was a life-giving word to me. I haven’t always obeyed it; but I remember it and have tried to make prayer the center of my ministry—the power of words.

Dennis: Yes—and positive words like you’re talking about. Someone said that praise owes its value to its scarcity. I think we don’t spend enough time praising people, thanking people, appreciating people—especially those in our immediate family. Maybe, the challenge right now, for the listener is: “Why don’t you, for the rest of the day / the rest of the week, find ways to express appreciation to your spouse / to each of your children—not necessarily for their performance—but just for who they are and for maybe some positive quality about them.”

Bob: And even if the kids aren’t at home with you today—even if they are grown and have kids of their own—you can still be planting those kinds of seeds in the lives of your children.

Dennis: You can. In fact, this past weekend, I drove to Houston, Texas, to perform a wedding. I helped marry my nephew, which is still amazing that he asked me to marry him since I took him snipe hunting—[Laughter]—but he forgave me for that—still is amazing.

Anyway, we went down there and back with Barbara’s mom, who is 89 years old—and she does email. I just thought, at the end of the day yesterday—I thought, “I think I’m just going to write her a note and tell her what a delight she was to travel with.” I mean, think about being 89 years old—it’s seven-and-a-half hours down there and back. I wrote her a note and guess what was waiting in my inbox this morning when I came to work? It was a note from her. It said, “It really was fun, and you helped make it that way.”

It was just an exchange of pleasant words; but I think, many times, we go through life, thinking those thoughts / having them—some fond memories about someone—but we don’t express them. What you are saying in your book, “Go ahead and say it.” Find a way—either through a handwritten note, phone call, or a kind word, face to face—to express appreciation to another person.

Nelson: Yes. I don’t recall if I tell this story in the book or not, but I remember sitting in a restaurant. My wife and I had been married about ten years at the time. That particular
evening—there were two couples—in my mind, one was on the left / one was on the right. One represented the sheep / one represented the goats. We watched this one couple that had clearly been married for a long time. The whole evening, they picked at each other—they were sarcastic toward one another / they were a bit critical of one another. Then, on the other side, there was a couple—they said, “Thank you,” they said, “Please,” they had manners with one another. I remember my wife and I walking away from that restaurant, saying, “We get to choose which of those couples we’re going to be.” We had spoken vows / powerful words to one another—

Dennis: Oh, yes!

Nelson: —words that have to be remembered / have to be restated. I talk in the book about stating your vows over and over to your spouse; but to make the decision that: “We’re going to continue to be gracious, to say, ‘Thank you,’ to be nice to those that are closest to us.” Why is it?—that it’s those that we’re closest to—we sometimes take for granted the most?

Bob: Well, and you point out in your book that the reason that this is a challenge has less to do with the mucous membrane in our mouths and more to do with the heart it’s connected to.

Nelson: Yes. Jesus said that so profoundly in Matthew 15—He says, “The words you speak come from the heart.” That’s a challenging statement because, if my words are more negative than positive, what does that say about my heart? When I get my heart right, and then from that heart flows these powerful words.

Dennis: We used go on vacations, as a family—this was back when our kids were preteens and teenagers. Sometimes—and I don’t know if it was a genetic disorder tied to me—but our kids would just gripe and complain. Finally, Barbara and I would have enough of it. We would get a jar—we would set it on the dashboard of—I forget what kind of vehicle we had for six kids, but it was a big one—and we would set that jar of quarters on the dashboard. We would say: “You know what? When we get to the location, we’re going to take the remaining quarters that are left in the jar, and we’re going to get ice cream.” Bob knows that’s the biblically-approved way to celebrate good behavior. [Laughter]

Anyway, when we were driving down the road, and when there was bickering between them—snipey comments, critical gripping/complaining: “When are we going to get there? How long? I need to do this. I need to do that,”—we’d take a quarter. Then, there would be: “Oh! I can’t believe he took a quarter!”—I’d take another one. [Laughter]

Nelson: He’s tough.

Dennis: So—oh, yes, I was tough. I want you to know it didn’t take many miles before the disappearing quarters stopped. [Laughter] I mean, we know what we’re doing; but
we get in habits and we need leadership. We need someone to instruct them, and that’s what you’ve done in the book. You’re instructing us about what to do with our words.

Nelson: Yes, the big idea I’m trying to make in the book is that there is a stewardship responsibility to our words. Just as we would be a steward of other aspects of our life—whether it’s our time, our talent, our treasure, as we often teach in the church—there is a stewardship responsibility toward our tongue.

And what you were talking about there is breaking a behavioral pattern that the world instills in us, almost from day one. If that is a pattern that has been instilled by the world—

Dennis: I appreciate you blaming the world on it. That’s good. [Laughter]

Nelson: It certainly wasn’t parents; right? [Laughter]

Dennis: It wasn’t my DNA.

Bob: No! No! No—not at all!

Nelson: I also wanted to say, “Today, I don’t know if you could do that because they would just text the criticism back and forth on their phones.” [Laughter]

Dennis: Oh, yes. You’d have to have an inspection of the phone at that point.

You use a four-word phrase at the beginning of your book that just talks about the power of four words and the life they can give.

Nelson: Yes. Probably the most powerful four words in the English language are the words: “Once upon a time...” If I said that appropriately, or you said it appropriately, in everybody’s mind, right now, we went back to that childlike state of hearing stories. You know, we are a story-driven culture. Jesus spoke in parables—connected with that. So, we think about the power of those four words—“Once upon a time,”—and what a magical place that can take us to.

Dennis: Takes us to Disneyland—

Nelson: Yes.

Dennis: Yes. Really—Disney World, where you had great childhood memories. They were fueled by, hopefully, good words / pleasant words between family members instead of the negative words and the disappearing quarters from the jar on the dashboard.
**Bob:** You know, I think the point you’re making here is that there is more in our words than we give our words credit for. We need to be more intentional, more purposeful, have a better understanding; but also recognize, as you said, that our tongue is connected to our heart. If the wrong words are coming out, it tells us something about the condition of our heart.

This is a great book for helping diagnose our hearts. It’s a book called *Tongue Pierced*, and it’s by Nelson Searcy. We’ve got it in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center. You can go, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com. Click the link in the upper left-hand corner of the screen that says, “GO DEEPER,” and look for information about the book, *Tongue Pierced: How the Words You Speak Transform the Life You Live.* Again, our website is FamilyLifeToday.com. You can also order a copy of the book by calling 1-800-FL-TODAY—1-800-358-6329. That’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then, the word, “TODAY.”

Let me also mention—we have a study guide that we’ve designed for couples to go through together with other couples called *Improving Communication in Your Marriage*—and another one called *Building Up Your Spouse.* You may want to get together some other couples and address this issue in community by going through one of our *Art of Marriage®* Connect studies—either the *Improving Communication in Your Marriage* study or the *Building Up Your Spouse* study. Find out more, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com; or call 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then, the word, “TODAY.”

You know, I think all of us can understand, at a gut level, how powerful words are because all of us can think of hurtful words that have been said to us in the past or words of praise that gave life to us in the past. One of the things we try to do, here at FamilyLife Today, is to remind you, every day, that your words matter, your actions matter, and the choices you’re making in your marriage and your family—it all matters for you and for future generations. Our goal here is to daily provide you with practical biblical guidance / help and hope to help strengthen your marriage and your family.

And we’re grateful that many of you partner with us to help make this happen—either as Legacy Partners or as folks who contribute occasionally to this ministry. It’s always good to hear from a FamilyLife Today listener, and we’re grateful for your support.

If you can make a donation, right now, we’d like to express our thanks by sending you a resource that Barbara Rainey has developed called “Untie Your Story.” The goal of this resource is to help equip you / make it easier for you to have dinnertime conversations that go deeper than normal. You can use this for holiday meals, or you can use it at the family dinner table any evening. It’s our gift to you when you make a donation in support of this ministry.

Go to FamilyLifeToday.com and click the link in the upper right-hand corner of the screen that says, “I care,” to make an online donation; or call 1-800-FL-TODAY—make
your donation over the phone. Or you can mail your donation to FamilyLife Today at PO Box 7111, Little Rock, AR; and our zip code is 72223.

Now, tomorrow, we’re going to talk about cussing/cursing. So, if that’s an issue for you or for one of your kids, you might want to tune in. I hope you can be back with us.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back tomorrow for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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