

Have you ever been to a foreign country where you didn't know the local language? I have. A couple times, actually. Thankfully, I was always either in a touristy location, where most of the locals knew English as well. Or I had a translator nearby to help me understand whatever I needed.

But, even so, it's a little nerve-wracking. You're in a strange place surrounded with unfamiliar customs. And you can't even do something as simple as order lunch or ask for direction. It makes you feel very isolated and vulnerable and alone.

I can only imagine what those first few moments were like after God confused the languages at Babel. All these people working together with one language. Feeling very strong and united and fearless. So fearless that they rejected the power of God himself.

And then the next moment *bang* they are completely isolated. Completely helpless. Completely confused. Such that they abandon their great project and scatter to the ends of the earth. Suddenly, they become foreigners in their own country.

Language is important. We all know that. We may have even experienced it. But usually when we think about the importance of language, we think about it's usefulness. The security that comes from being able to communicate our wants and needs to one another.

But, in the Bible, we find that language isn't just important for it's usefulness. Language is fundamental to... everything. The world was created by the verbal command of God. The 10 Commandments were given to us in written language on stone tablets. Every prophecy of the Old Testament was delivered to us through the language of a prophet. The Son of God himself is the Word of God made flesh.

Language isn't just some useful thing that human beings figured out how to do and just kept doing it. Language is part of God's nature. It's one of his fundamental attributes. God communicates with his creation.

And that fingerprint of God, if you will, is written on every aspect of creation. From every song that a bird sings to every line of Shakespeare's sonnets. The fact that we communicate with one another is a reflection of the fact that God communicates with us. Language is a part of this world because God made this world and God speaks. God speaks to us.

So it shouldn't surprise us that God could and would undo the language of mankind at the Tower of Babel as a curse and punishment to them. And it also shouldn't really surprise us that God could and would miraculously restore the language of mankind on Pentecost morning as a blessing and aid to the Apostles as they shared the good news of the Gospel.

These miracles are each really no different than the plagues of Egypt or the healing of a leper. They are God working miraculously through the things he himself created.

Alright, so why does all of this matter? I mean, who really cares if God created language? It's a nice piece of theological trivia. But is it anything more than that?

Well... yeah, it is. You see, the fact that God created language, that God uses language, that God communicates His Law and Gospel to us through language, means that language is pretty important. Words matter.

Words are not just some random concept that humanity invented for it's own purposes. Words cannot simply be redefined at will. Words are not so relative and so flexible that they lose all meaning. Words matter.

And that's really at the core of a lot of issues today. What does the word marriage mean? What do the words male and female mean? What does the word person mean? What does the word sin mean? What do the words good and evil mean?

Are you seeing where I'm going with this? Our society today would say that the meaning of all these words is completely relative to the situation you're in. Marriage, gender, person, sin, good, evil... these are all things that people define for themselves. That we can change the meaning of any of these words and the thing itself will change with it.

So two men or two women can simply declare that they are married and that means they are. A man can declare that he is a woman or a woman that she is a man, and that means he or she is. I can say that a unborn child isn't a person and that means they aren't. I can say that things like greed and selfishness and hatred aren't sinful and that means they aren't. I can say that good is evil and evil is good, and that means they are.

That's how we think about words today. That they can be bent to whatever purpose we choose. But that's not how God thinks about words. Because, as I pointed out, words are part of God's nature. Words exist because he gave them to us.

So I can throw out the meaning of marriage. Or male and female. Or person. Or sin. Or good and evil. But that doesn't change what those things are in the mind of God. All it does is turn me into a babbling fool speaking gibberish. Like the fools around that tower who didn't think that they needed God.

Yet, often, that's what the world would prefer to be. And I, as a Christian, can't stop them. But that doesn't mean that I need to speak their gibberish.

But, of course, that's harder than it sounds. Because it means that we will start to feel like exactly what we are: foreigners. Aliens. Outsiders. Immigrants. To this world.

To be a Christian is to be a person speaking a different language than the people of this planet. And that is very isolating. And very dangerous. And very lonely.

Because all we want to do is feel safe and connected and loved. We want to feel like one of the natives. One of the locals. We want to talk like they talk and act like they act and think like they think.

And it's tempting to forget that they're speaking gibberish and acting like fools and thinking twisted thoughts. It's tempting to forget that we should have no part of it. It's tempting to give way to sin and become just like the world around us.

It's easy, at this point, to lose hope. To give up. To say, "Well then we shouldn't have anything at all to do with this sinful world and it's babble." Plenty of Christians have done just that over the centuries. The Amish. Monastic orders. Puritans. Saxon Germans who would later call themselves Missouri-Synod Lutherans. I mean, really, America was founded by groups of people who were trying to run from their sinful society and isolate themselves with their own kind.

But that's not the message of Pentecost. Pentecost is the story of a group of Christians who stuck to God's Word because they believed that God's Word meant something. They believed that when Jesus said, "Father, forgive them," he meant, "Father, forgive them." And when he said, "It is finished," it was finished. That all of it, their sin, their foolishness, their utter failures, were nailed to the cross.

And yet, that didn't mean that they stayed locked in an upper room, isolated from society. No, they walked out with the fire of God on their heads and the Spirit of God in their hearts. And they spoke. And that same Word of God that they believed was heard by everyone there. It was understood by thousands from every language and people and nation. Who came to know salvation through Jesus Christ.

And that was the greater miracle of Pentecost morning. Not just that all these people could understand the apostles' human language. But that in just one short sermon, they understood the grace of God found in Jesus' death and resurrection. That was a miracle.

And it's a miracle that still happens today. Because we are surrounded by a world that speaks a different language than us. That speaks, frankly, complete gibberish to our ears. But by the power of God, when we speak, they will understand.

The Spirit of God, the Helper – as Jesus calls Him – will bring to remembrance everything we need to say in that moment. As Jesus spoke words of forgiveness to us, we will speak words of forgiveness to them. We will teach them the same language of God that the Spirit still teaches to us. And many will know the peace and the love of God through Jesus our Lord.

Language is important and words matter. Words created this world. The Word redeemed this world. And God's Word reaches out through us, that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. Amen.