

Beyond Words (Limitation of Language)

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5/10/2015

INTRODUCTION

Many people buy greeting cards to communicate thoughts that they otherwise may feel unable to express.

Mother's Day is the third most significant day in the year for giving and receiving of greeting cards, standing behind only Christmas and Valentines, but ahead of Father's Day.

Based upon a lunch-time conversation with Emilee Mayberry, who works for Hallmark, I performed a Bing Search this afternoon, asking "How many cards are sold on Mother's Day?"

The very first search linked to information provided by the Greeting Card Association [<http://www.greetingcard.org/>], a U.S. trade association serving the greeting card and social expression industry. Here is some information on their general facts page:

- Americans purchase approximately 6.5 billion greeting cards each year. Annual retail sales of greeting cards are estimated between \$7 and \$8 billion.
- The most popular Everyday card-sending occasion by far is Birthday, followed by a number of secondary occasions that include Sympathy, Thank You, Wedding, Thinking of You, Get Well, New Baby and Congratulations.
- The most popular Seasonal cards are Christmas cards, with some 1.6 billion units purchased (including boxed cards). This is followed by cards for Valentine's Day (145 million units, not including classroom valentines), Mother's Day (133 million units), Father's Day (90 million units), Graduation (67 million units), Easter (57 million units), Halloween (21 million units), Thanksgiving (15 million units) and St. Patrick's Day (7 million units).

We send greeting cards, thank you cards, sympathy cards, birthday cards, etc. to express love, appreciation, concern, sorrow, etc. They aid in communicating deep and profound sentiments.

THE POWER OF WORDS

Sacred Scripture is God's way of communicating with mankind (1 Cor. 2:6-13; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

1 Corinthians 2:6-13 (NASB95) — 6 Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; 7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; 8 the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; 9 but just as it is written, "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, And which have not entered the heart of man, All that God has prepared for those who love Him." 10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. 11 For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, 13 which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NASB95) — 16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation and a revelation of His righteousness (Rom. 1:16-17).

Romans 1:16-17 (NASB95) — 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith."

The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, revealing and judging man's innermost thoughts (Heb. 4:12-13).

Hebrews 4:12-13 (NASB95) — 12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

Accordingly, the angelic messenger instructed Cornelius, "Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household" (Acts 11:13-14).

Acts 11:13-14 (NASB95) — 13 "And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; 14 and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.'

We must humbly receive the word implanted, which is able to save our souls (James 1:21-25).

James 1:21-25 (NASB95) — 21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. 22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24 for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

Yet, in some regards, words are unable to fully communicate certain concepts. That's why we say, "A picture is worth 1,000 words." Yet, photographs cannot communicate touch, texture, scent or other sensations. So, in this lesson, let us consider passages that reveal certain limitations of language.

THE LIMITATION OF WORDS

A Gift Indescribable

Urging the Corinthians to complete their contribution for the needy saints in Jerusalem, the apostle Paul spoke of the blessings showered upon us from above, and concluded by saying, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" (2 Cor. 9:6-15, esp. vs. 15).

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (NASB95) — 6 Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; 9 as it is written, "He scattered abroad, he gave to the poor, His righteousness endures forever." 10 Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; 11 you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God. 12 For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God. 13 Because of the proof given by this ministry, they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all, 14 while they also, by prayer on your behalf, yearn for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you. 15 Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

The Greek adjective *anekdiēgētos*, translated "indescribable" and occurring only in the present context, a compound of the negative prefix and *ekdiēgeomai* [to tell in detail], refers to that which is "inexpressible" [Thomas 411]. BDAG define it as "indescribable, in (a) good sense."

The KJV says, “Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift.” The ESV reads, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” Both the NIV84 and the NRSV both say, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

Jesus is God’s great gift to mankind. Speaking to the Samaritan woman, Jesus said, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water” (John 4:10). Urging his audience to obey the gospel and be saved, Peter said, ““Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...” (Acts 2:38–40). Paul referred to the gift of God’s grace that he had received (Eph. 3:7). Discussing the offices that have been set in the church for our equipping and upbuilding (i.e., apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers), Paul said, “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph. 4:7ff). Truly, the gifts of God are rich and varied beyond description.

A Joy Inexpressible

Describing the blessings that come through facing and overcoming trials, the apostle Peter refers to joy that is “inexpressible” (1 Peter 1:6-9, esp. vs. 8).

*1 Peter 1:6-9 (NASB95) — 6 In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, 7 so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; 8 and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy ***inexpressible** and full of glory, 9 obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.*

The Greek adjective *aneklalētos*, translated “inexpressible” and occurring only in the present context, a compound of the negative prefix and *eklaleō* [to speak out, divulge], refers to that which is “unspeakable” [Thomas 412] or “inexpressible” [BDAG].

The KJV says that believers “rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.” The ESV says that they “rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and (are) filled with glory.” The NRSV connect the two thoughts, saying they “rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.” The older NIV (1984) echoes this approach, saying they are “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.”

Joy is a distinctive characteristic of Christianity. On the night of His betrayal, Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:11). While the disciples would weep and lament at His death, their grief would be turned into joy at His resurrection (John 16:20). Furthermore, Jesus said, “I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you” (John 16:22). Praying to the Father, He said, “But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that

they may have My joy made full in themselves” (John 17:13). Truly, the joy of believers exceeds description.

Words Inexpressible

Regarding the occasion when he was caught up to the third heaven, the apostle Paul says that he heard words that were inexpressible (2 Cor. 12:1-6, esp. vs. 4).

*2 Corinthians 12:1-6 (NASB95) — 1 Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. 3 And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows— 4 was caught up into Paradise and heard ***inexpressible** words, which a man is not permitted to speak. 5 On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. 6 For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.*

The Greek word *arrētos*, translated “inexpressible,” a compound of the negative prefix and *rhētos* [stated], refers to that which is “unspeakable” [Thomas 731]. BDAG say it is descriptive “(1) of something that cannot be expressed, since it is beyond human powers, inexpressible; (2) of something that must not be expressed, since it is holy, not to be spoken.” It only occurs in the present context.

Actually John describes heaven in great and varied detail. This task was not given to Paul. Scripture is not speculative. Divine revelation is specific, distinguishing between things revealed and secret things (Deut. 29:29). Respecting that authority of Scripture, we must “learn not to exceed what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6).

Deuteronomy 29:29 (NASB95) — 29 “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

1 Corinthians 4:6 (NASB95) — 6 Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.

Avoiding the sins of addition, subtraction, and/or alteration (Deut. 4:2; 2 John 9), let us heed the admonition of Peter: “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God...” (1 Pet. 4:10-11).

Deuteronomy 4:2 (NASB95) — 2 “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.

2 John 9 (NASB95) — 9 Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.

1 Peter 4:10-11 (NASB95) — 10 As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 11 Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

CONCLUSION

Communication is rooted in language. God speaks to us through the Bible, and we speak to Him in prayer. Yet, certain emotions transcend language; some groanings are too deep for words (Rom. 8:26–27; 2 Cor. 5:1–3). Paul refers to the peace of God, “which surpasses all comprehension”(Phil. 4:4-9).

Romans 8:26–27 (NASB95) — 26 In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; 27 and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

2 Corinthians 5:1–3 (NASB95) — 1 For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2 For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, 3 inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked.

Philippians 4:4-9 (NASB95) — 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! 5 Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. 9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Let us be thankful for the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God (Rom. 11:33; Eph. 3:8–10)! We are blessed with a gift that is indescribable, and a joy that is

inexpressible. For these, let us rejoice and be glad. We are blessed with a revelation of God's will and word. In this let us be obedient and content, knowing that God has given us what we need.

Romans 11:33 (NASB95) — 33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!

Ephesians 3:8–10 (NASB95) — 8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; 10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.