

ZONDERVAN

Speak Love

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Stories told in this book are retold to the best of the author's memory. Due to the nature of some stories, certain names have been changed.

Beth Moore passage on page 14 taken from *Believing God: Experiencing a Fresh Explosion of Faith* by Beth Moore (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2004), pages

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Contents

Foreword from Jamie-Grace	9
Introduction: Words Matter	11

Part 1: Conversations with God

Chapter 1: The Power of Words	21
Chapter 2: An Apology	31
Chapter 3: God Speaks Love	43
Chapter 4: Talk to God	63

Part 2: Conversations with Others

Chapter 5: Your Family	89
Chapter 6: Your People	103
Chapter 7: The Mean Girl	121
Chapter 8: Your Online Life	139
Chapter 9: Celebrities Big and Small	153
Chapter 10: Talking about God	171

Part 3: Last but Not Least? You.

Chapter 11: Believe Truth	191
Chapter 12: Love You	209
Conclusion: Speak Love	225
Appendix	231
Acknowledgments	237
About the Author	255

Foreword from Jamie-Grace

He was “the cute guy” in my circle of my friends. He had “that” hair, the great personality, was a Christian, and could sing and play guitar. What wasn’t to like? I remember going to a youth event one afternoon with my sister. There were hundreds of kids there, but I wanted to hang out with “our group,” particularly ’cause Mr. Awesome would be there. When we first walked in, I saw him far off with everyone else. They saw me and I immediately headed over. Everyone was laughing and joking, and I figured we were about to have an amazing time.

As I got closer I realized that they weren’t welcoming me, and while they were joking it was far from funny. See, they had recently found out about my tic condition, Tourette syndrome, and thought it would be hilarious to mock my twitches when I walked up. I was humiliated and wanted to cry, so I looked over at you-know-who hoping he would notice, bail me out, tell them to quit. He looked at me and blurted out, “Retard!” starting the laughter all over again.

I can’t begin to tell you how much I wish homeboy had some Annie F. Downs in his life. Yes, this book may be for girls, but let’s be real: everyone’s going to love it and the whole universe can relate to it. We’ve all heard someone say something mean,

or maybe thought it or said it ourselves, or maybe even been the victim of cruel words. It's a moment where we realize that what we say isn't just random words flying out of our mouths but the chance to either build someone up or completely tear someone down. It may sound cliché, but the words that we choose on a daily basis really do affect others. (And not just people that hear the words! Saying things behind someone's back is also uncool.) And in the long run, the things we say can also change us too. The cool part is, the choice is ours. We can choose to let our words be those that make us feel good for the moment but wreck the heart of someone else, or we can use the words that mirror the kind we could hear our Savior say!

Annie has a challenge for you—for me, for us—to let our words speak hope, truth, joy, peace ... we gotta speak love.

Introduction: Words Matter

I started writing on February 21, 2006.

Wait. Let me back up.

I've always loved writing and reading. My maternal grandmother was a high school librarian and my paternal grandparents owned a used bookstore, so I probably teethed on novels.

I read voraciously as a child—it was rare that a book was not within reach. I read in the car, when I should have been sleeping, at the dinner table, and in the bathtub. Which, I am sorry to tell you, did lead to a few soaked books, namely *Harriet the Spy* and *Starring Sally J. Freedman As Herself*. Have you ever dropped a book in the bathtub? The panic-induced behavior that follows is hilarious and splashy and full of wrinkled pages and regrets.

I only remember attempting to write one book as a kid, a dramatic retelling of a seventh-grade library book where the main character's best friend is in the hospital. My rendition—written in pencil on lined paper in a three-ring notebook—was three chapters long and absolutely terrible, but the original story was pretty terrible too (and not much longer than my version), so I blame my first literary failure on bad mentorship.

While I may not be one of those authors who wrote books throughout her childhood, I always told stories. Maybe it is

because I'm from Georgia and this is the Southern way, but my memories are full of storytelling nights on the front porch or at my grandparents' house across the driveway or down at the local campground every August when it was Camp Meeting. For you guys not from around these parts, quick explanation: The campground is full of cabins and then one big pavilion. Every August, families from East Cobb United Methodist Church go across the street—yes, the campground is literally across the street from the church buildings—and stay there, and they have church meetings every night. And at every meal and in the cool of the evening, people sit around and tell stories. I soaked them up, hearing tales from one hundred years ago in that very spot.

Here's an interesting side note about Camp Meeting: When I was a senior in high school, my youth pastor hit a line drive in the softball game and the softball (which is not even a little bit "soft") hit me right in the nose. And broke it. And I have the lump on my nose to this day to prove it. Check it out next time we're in the same place.

See? I'm a storyteller.

I come from a long line of storytellers and story-enjoyers.

Unfortunately for me, fairly early in my life, ugly crept into the purity of storytelling.

And I started to lie.

My first real memory of lying was in the first grade. Alex, in my class, had a crush on an older girl who rode my bus. I don't recall her name, but she was tall and had stringy blonde hair to her shoulders. I told him she was my cousin. He started bringing toy cars to school to give to her; he would hand them to me expecting me to give them to her since, you know, she was my blood relative and all.

Truth? I never spoke to her once. I lined the cars up on my bookshelf and told Alex that stringy-haired blonde loved them. I told elaborate stories of how she responded when I gave them to her.

Remember, I am a storyteller. It may not have been true, but it was a good story.

It's a complicated tale, recalling to you all the reasons I chose to lie as a kid: to be popular, to be loved, to be right. But I remember thinking that the truth wasn't enough—that it wasn't sad enough, or exciting enough, or dramatic enough. I needed to spice it up. Here's just a little sampling of the things I told people (and these are just the ones I remember; who knows how many more there are): I saw an angel in my bed in sixth grade, I kissed a boy during play practice in eighth grade, I had to go home from a sleepover because I had started my period in fourth grade (when actually I had merely peed in my pants ... you're welcome for that story), I lost four pounds in one day, and I knew the twin brother of the boy on the *Barney* television show.

Spoiler alert: the actor on *Barney* doesn't have a twin brother.

Here's the kicker: I was a Christian. I accepted Jesus in my heart as a five-year-old, and I meant it. Through elementary and middle school, I honestly was growing in my relationship with the Lord and I did begin to recognize that lying was a sin. I started to feel that twinge of guilt that comes on immediately after you do anything wrong—steal, lie, cheat, whatever. I slowly began to replace the lies with truth, and started spending time reading the Bible, though sporadically at best. But anytime you can put truth in you, no matter how little, it will wash out some lies.

I grew and matured in my faith, and in my desire to speak truth over lies, throughout high school and college. I knew God had forgiven me and I knew I was actively working on speaking the truth all the time. In the winter of 2006, I was a twenty-five-year-old elementary school teacher living in Marietta, Georgia, and truth was my friend, not lies. I was working through Beth Moore's *Believing God* Bible Study, when she introduced me to a city called Gilgal.

Week eight of that study is titled "Believing God to Get You to Your Gilgal." This city was once the place of the Israelites' greatest defeat. In Joshua 4–5, God brings them back to that place, gives them a huge victory, forgives them, and restores them. Beth says, "Consider our Gilgals the places where we realize that God has rolled away our reproach, proved us victorious in a do-over (an opportunity to go back and get something right), or taken us full circle in a significant way."

That night, February 21, 2006, when I underlined that sentence in the *Believing God* workbook with my green pen, I knew immediately what God was doing with my life. He was giving me a chance to go back and get it right as a storyteller.

So I set the workbook aside and pulled my computer onto my lap and began to type. Six pages later, I exhaled.

Here's part of what I wrote that day, February 21, 2006.

"And here is my Gilgal, or at least one of the parts of my Gilgal. The cycle was one of lies and deception and I believe He's bringing me full circle to a place where instead of declaring lies for my own glory, I will declare truth for His glory."

Those words? That day? That's when this book was born, but I didn't know it yet. I dreamed of being a writer, and now it is my full-time job.

Seven years later, seven being God's number of completion, I'm writing a book on the power of words and how to use your words well to make a difference for Christ.

And that, my friends, is a full circle. Gilgal.

Nice to Meet You

My life is pretty different today than it was in 2006. Now I'm a proud resident of Nashville, Tennessee. I lead a college small group and spend my days writing books, blogs, or tweets, and planning for speaking events. I also hang out with my friends and eat Mexican food every chance I get, go to great concerts and sporting events, and pretty much have a great time. But some of the best moments of my days? Just sitting around and talking with my closest friends.

I hope that's what you feel like we're doing. And now that I've told you that I was a liar as a kid, I kinda feel like we are friends. Just sitting down, across from each other, at my favorite Nashville coffee shop. And with our hands wrapped around warm mugs, let's have a real conversation about God and words and things that matter.¹

I have been thinking about some things. I've been having

1. *I'll have a soy chai. There are two reasons that I will now explain: I don't drink dairy and I don't drink coffee. Luckily, I actually prefer the taste of soy in combo with chai tea. (But not the foam they put on top—yuck. That stuff tastes like it came out of the ocean by way of some man's boot.)*

conversations with God and other people, and I think we should talk too. My life in the last year has taken some major shifts and turns—I lived in Nashville, then I was a missionary to college students in Edinburgh, Scotland, and now I’m living back here in Nashville, where I write books and speak to audiences of teenagers. And today, I’m wearing very trendy boots in Portland Brew, my coffee shop/office of choice. And during that transition, I’ve had a realization.

The transition was pretty quick, by the way. Like, some of my clothes still smelled of Scottish detergent kind of fast. One day in July 2012, I flew from Edinburgh to Phoenix, and things have never been the same.

Your Words Matter

I wore my lucky shirt that day in July in the heat of Phoenix. I had only owned it for approximately three weeks, a birthday gift from some of my besties, but I knew it was lucky. Short-sleeved and navy blue with tiny birds all over it, and once paired with skinny jeans and sparkly flats, I was set to go. It was my first Girls of Grace speaking event and I was ready to rock it.

Or I was ready to throw up. Depending on the minute. Because sister here was nervous. Like whoa nervous.

After leaving Scotland, here I was in Phoenix, Arizona, jet-lagged and scared, speaking on a topic that was new to me: the power of words. Well, it was new to me in the “stand up in front of thousands of girls and talk about it” kind of way. I paced around the church all day while the event was happening, not sure where I was supposed to sit or stand or rest or read. I intro-

duced myself to people who didn't know me (almost everyone), and oh, did I mention this? My table was empty.

Yep, five boxes of my first book, *Perfectly Unique*, never showed up.

So that made me feel like puking too. Not only was I the new girl speaker/author, I was the new girl speaker/author with an empty book table.

(Do you feel like throwing up for me? Thanks. That's real friendship.)

But like the good little soldier I am, I trudged forward. Other speakers killed on that stage all day, and then lunch passed, and before I knew it, I was being miked and it was my turn.

When the host introduced me, she said my book title wrong and was confused by my self-description of being a "nerd." (I am a nerd, by the way. And proudly. DFTBA.² I love the library, shows on PBS, sleeping with socks on, the Internet, and playing the French horn.)

So I went out on stage with two strikes against me and an empty book table. Huzzah!

There's this thing that happens when I speak, which is between me and God. It's like the whole time I'm talking I'm totally focused on the words and the audience and the next point, but I have one ear turned upward to hear if God is whispering anything. When I'm onstage, I feel like He is super focused on the moment and we are co-speaking. It's hard to explain but super sweet.

It happened that day in Phoenix. I felt Him with me. And

2. For the uninitiated, that's "Don't Forget to Be Awesome." Google "Vlogbrothers" and/or "Nerdfighters" now if you've haven't before—I'll wait.

as I talked about the power of words and truth and how we were meant to create life with our words, every sentence became more and more true.

Afterward, girls rushed to my table. Yes, the empty one.

Do you know what they wanted?

(Not books, I hope. Sigh ...)

They wanted to talk.

They wanted to tell me how they were verbally bullied by other girls. They told stories of heartbreaking words others had said to them, how they understood some of the stories I shared. They said to me, “I love Jesus and I want to use my words to honor Him.” Moms thanked me, repeatedly, for saying the things they were teaching at home: to use words for good, not evil. Then other women—the youth leaders and small group leaders—teared up and spilled their guts too.

And y'all? I was all, “We’ve hit a nerve here.” I realized the topic was important, but didn’t know it was THIS important. I had no idea.

Words. Words have done this.

I was stunned. Insert previously mentioned realization here:
Your words matter.

But after many more Girls of Grace events and literally hundreds of conversations with women and thousands of teens hearing this message, this is the truth: Words kill. And words give life.

PART 1



Conversations with God

When I used to teach elementary school, one of my priorities was learning my students' names. I would stare at each face every morning of that first week and repeat names in my mind until they stuck. Every time I called on someone, I called that kid by name. Repetition was my friend, and within two days I had a good grip on most of the kids, and by the end of the first week, I was money.

I still do the same thing when I meet new friends: I say their name too much. It's probably annoying to some people, but unfortunately for those around me, it doesn't annoy me. So I keep doing it. It ensures that I can remember them in the future.

At least, it usually does. Sometimes, not so much.

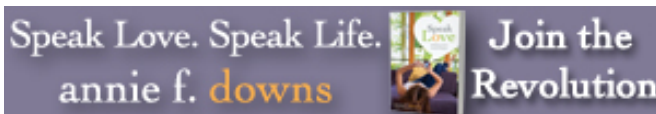
In thirty-three years on this planet, I've met a lot of people and I've tried to remember a lot of names. Unfortunately, I think my brain may be full. I keep meeting people and not remembering their name, just like trying to shove just ONE

MORE MARSHMALLOW in your mouth during the classic youth group game Chubby Bunny. That last marshmallow usually pops out and takes some others with it ... or you choke.

I've been choking a lot lately when it comes to remembering names. I accidentally hurt people's feelings and make them feel unimportant, and it makes me feel sick. I am flawed and human, and I offend other humans when I can't remember their names. It's the worst.

But God never forgets. He knows our names, each of us, and more than that He knows our hearts. In fact, He knows how many hairs are on my head and on your head and on my dad's head, though his is a much easier count than most. (Bald joke. Sorry, Dad.)

God knows your voice and loves to hear from you. You don't have to introduce yourself every time you pray, just like you don't have to introduce yourself to your parents every morning at breakfast. He knows you. He wants you to talk to Him. And He is always speaking too. So let's learn how to carry on conversations with God.





CHAPTER 1

The Power of Words

“Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

—Proverbs 12:18

God Spoke

Before there was Earth as we know it, there were words. God spoke long before we ever even took a breath. “And God said, ‘Let there be light.’” Genesis 1:3—the third verse in the whole Bible. That’s pretty early for God to start using words. But He did. God spoke. And the world began. That’s it. He spoke and there was an ocean, and He spoke and beaches blocked the water from overtaking the land. He spoke and giraffes poked out their long necks, stars shined, dogs wagged their tails, trees blossomed, humans breathed.

God could have created any way He wanted to, right? I mean, He could have coughed out clouds or molded hippos with His hands; He could have merely thought about mountains and they would be there.

But He chose to use words to create. And it was good.

Every time God speaks in the Bible, things change. You can see it throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament. Whether it is a circumstance, a heart, or a weather pattern, things change when the Father says it or Jesus commands it. Remember? It was THE WORD that became flesh (see John 1:1).

And we are made in His image, modeled after Him. The One who creates life with words, that is our makeup, our DNA.

We do the same thing.

Create

We have two options when we use our words: we can build or we can destroy. The Bible puts it even more seriously than that:

Proverbs 18:21

The tongue has the power of life and death. (NIV)

Words kill, words give life. (The Message)

And that's true for you too, isn't it? I know it is true for me. I can tell you story after story of how someone's words gave me life, built me up, strengthened me. And I can tell you stories of how words have broken my heart.

They. Are. Powerful.

I know this because I've felt it over and over. But this one time in seventh grade left a defining mark on my heart. Words changed me forever.

That year, my social studies teacher was Mr. Samson. His classroom was the first one on the left. It had lots of windows and the desks were squished together. I sat between two boys and behind my best friend. I watched, one day, as one of the boys borrowed a tiny green piece of paper from my friend Jessica and

began to make some sort of list. I don't know how I knew, but I knew that list was about me. I couldn't see it, but watching him write told me everything. I was equal parts worried and curious.

Class ended. Mark ripped the green paper into tiny squares, and as he walked out of the classroom he dropped them in the trash can. After the classroom cleared, I slowly packed up, and with Mr. Samson's eyes following my every move I knelt down and scooped up those tiny squares from the trash and shoved them into the left front pocket of my acid-wash jeans.

(The 90s, y'all. You missed some great jeans.)

I rushed out of the room. I never looked back. I didn't want to acknowledge what my teacher and I both knew: I was going to regret digging in the trash.

I got home that afternoon, and after dinner I went upstairs to my room and spread those squares out across the carpeted floor. Like completing some type of evil puzzle, I mixed and matched pieces until the frayed edges met and the words began to come together. I taped the pieces as they lined up, and since the pieces were so small the paper started to feel laminated with Scotch Tape.

I began to read the text in that classic middle-school dude chicken-scratch handwriting. It was a list of every girl in our class with one word to describe them.

I zeroed in on my own name. And my line looked like this:

Annie = Flabby

It's not even that this was necessarily untrue—I've been overweight a long time. But what hurt my feelings was that of all the words my friend could pick to describe me, THAT was the top one? Seriously? How about "funny" or "kind" or "silly"

or “smart”? Those were true too. But “flabby” was the one he wanted to label me. And so it was.

I can still see it. In one instant, I can pull forward that mental image of that piece of paper; probably because I kept that paper until I finished high school. Tucked safely under a box of costume jewelry in the top drawer of my dresser, this ratty green piece of paper survived far longer than any of those middle school friendships or most of the information I learned in that social studies class. (Sorry, Mr. Samson.)

I don't know why I kept it. Maybe it was just to be mean to myself (something we'll talk about later), or maybe I just felt like I had earned it or that it was a prize for my sleuthing. Either way, it broke my heart every time I saw it, whether I pulled it out of the drawer or simply saw a corner peeking out from under the stacks.

In my book *Perfectly Unique*, I tell the story of how I once duct-taped myself in high school to try to fit into an outfit I wanted to wear. Because of the words others had said to me, like in this note—and, honestly, because of the words I had said to myself—I hated me and I acted out of that.

You see, words lead to actions. Words change things.

It was words that wounded me. And words that healed me.

I could keep going. You could too, couldn't you? We could sit here and swap stories until my mug of chai was empty and the coffee shop workers began to sweep the floors and turn off the neon OPEN light. Because if you are a girl, you have experienced the pain of words firsthand.

I know you have.

I know because I've been a girl my whole life. Yes, all thirty-three years of it. And I've known a lot of girls. And I've talked to a lot of girls. And I've been mean to girls.

So, I know you know.

The question is, what do we do with that?

The Plan

We are a new generation. A loud generation. You are communicating all the time. Whether it's talking, or texting, through Facebook or Instagram or other corners of the Internet, you are using your words. So let's chat, for the next few chapters, about how we can use our words to impact our world for the better.

Because, hi, you can.

So here's how we're going to do this:

First of all, let's focus on how you talk to God and about God. Because really, friend, that's what it is all about. Maybe you know Him well or maybe you don't. But my prayer for you, by the end of this book, is that you will see Him more clearly and love Him more deeply and speak differently to Him and about Him. Also, God is always speaking love—are you hearing Him? He is our model, He is our example. How God uses His words is how we can learn to use ours.

As I told you, I've been a Christian since I was five. I remember the day I got saved, and I was serious about it. But throughout my life, I haven't always been good at talking to God. I worried that I was saying too much or not enough. Even harder for me as a teen? Talking about God. The pressure, OH THE PRESSURE, to get my friends SAVED! Everything I said mattered in a life-or-eternal-death way.¹

1. *My poor friends. My poor self. Yipes, that's a hard way to live ... like someone else's salvation is dependent on YOU. Revelation 7:10 reminds us all to take a deep breath because salvation belongs to our God.*

It's different now for me. My relationship with God is different, deeper, truer, and talking about Him is like talking about one of my favorite people. Because He is my favorite. I'm learning every day how to speak love because I see how God speaks love to me and to others.

Speaking of people, isn't that who gets the brunt of our words? The people in your world? I think of my two sisters, bless them, dealing with my word struggles for so many years. In anger, I would jab and stab with just the right words to hurt them. On purpose. You see, constructing sentences and finding great words have always been tools in my toolbox. I just used to use them to hurt, not help. To lie instead of tell the truth. To break instead of heal.

(I'm grateful for my sisters' forgiveness. And God's.)

So we're going to spend a chunk of this time together talking about other people: your family, your friends, BOYS BOYS BOYS, celebrities, enemies, teachers, those in your real life and your online life. You're using a lot of words these days, sister.

And we're going to talk about *her*. The Mean Girl. She uses her words, doesn't she? I have strong feelings toward her and how we should treat her and, to be honest, I want to get rid of the mean girls of the world.

I think we can do it.

There's another girl who gets our attention as well. You know her. You are her. Believe it or not, the words you use toward yourself are powerful and defining. It would be wrong of me to talk with you about every other person who gets your words and leave off the one who is often the victim ... you.

I believe in the Bible. It is true. I find hope in it, this massive collection of God-breathed words. And the more we can fill our

minds with those words, the deeper our relationship with God goes and the more our words come out of that place. So each chapter of this book is going to have a memory verse. I'm not the boss of you, so I can't make you memorize them. But I hope you will. I really do.

This one has been following me since that first Girls of Grace event in Phoenix. And as I've worked to memorize it I have grown to love it and believe it and breathe it.

Proverbs 12:18

Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Memorize it, my friend. And live it. May the Holy Spirit press on you when you are stabbing someone—or yourself—with a reckless word. And may you see the healing, feel the healing, that comes from the tongue of the wise.

The sun has set outside Portland Brew. I'm about thirty minutes from meeting two of my best friends for dinner at the barbeque place across the street. But this is one of those conversations that I wish could keep going. You know, the kind where you see the clock ticking away but you wish it would stop?

I wish it would stop.

Thanks to the magic of words on a page, our conversation can go on. So let's keep talking and work through how we will change this world by using our words to speak love.

Your Words Matter

At the end of each chapter, you're gonna see this section: Your

Words Matter. Because they do. After you read my words, you should use some of your own. This is when I think you should maybe grab your journal, head to a quiet spot, and think through some of what you've read. This will also give you some verses to read, a reminder of your memory verse, and some things you can do to speak love into your world.²

Memorize the Word

Some suggestions: Write this verse in your journal, write it on a note card and stick it in your locker, or use dry erase markers to write it on your bathroom mirror!

Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

—Proverbs 12:18

Read the Word

Here are the verses I talked about, and a few others. I've listed them in the Bible versions I use the most—if you use a different one, that's cool. Check out different translations and see what God speaks to your heart!

- Joshua 4–5
- Genesis 1:3
- John 1:1
- Proverbs 18:21
- Zephaniah 3:17
- 2 Corinthians 5:17

2. *And, if you want to go even deeper, pick up Speak Love Revolution, which not only provides lots of journaling space, it has even more Speak Love tips and stories, as well as devotions from yours truly.*

Journal Your Words

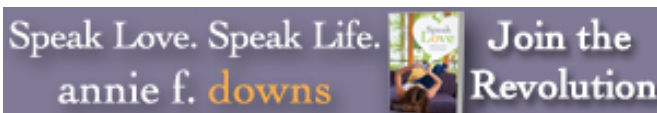
These are just a few questions and/or thoughts that you can use to jump-start your journaling.

- What part of using my words well do I find the most challenging?
- When can I remember someone being unkind to me with words?
- What does it really mean to me that words have the power of life and death?
- How do I want to be different when I'm done reading this book?

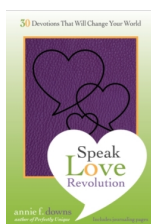
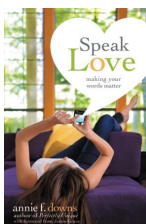
Use Your Words

Each chapter will offer you a little challenge—a way to use your words to speak love. Whether it is talking face to face, writing a note, or communicating online, you'll get practical ways to do what the chapter talked about.

- Tell someone that you are reading *Speak Love* and tell them why. Maybe it's your parents or your small group leader or your soccer coach or your best friend. Just let someone else know why this book and this topic are important to you.



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SPEAK LOVE and
SPEAK LOVE: REVOLUTION



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You've heard, 'Think before you speak' a hundred times, and probably shrugged it off just like that other insightful phrase, 'Your face will freeze like that if you're not careful.' But unlike a facial expression, our words do stick around. (Just think about middle school a sec. See?) Which means everything you say--from what tell your friends, whisper about your enemies, post online, mutter to yourself, or even say to the celebrity you ran into at the coffee shop--carries a whole lot of power.

The question is, are you ready to use that power to make a real difference? Because the truth is, you could be part of the first generation who uses their words to build up and not tear down, and even kill the mean girl mentality. Through very funny stories, Scripture, and a real understanding of the good, bad, and ugly ways we can use our words, SPEAK LOVE explores the difference you can make when you speak love to others, to God, and even to yourself. Because when you speak love, you speak life. And that's what matters.

Speak Love. Speak Life.
annie f. downs  Join the
Revolution