

Participant's Guide



SIX SESSIONS

SOUL DETOX

Clean Living in a Contaminated World

CRAIG
GROESCHEL

Author of *The Christian Atheist*



SESSION 1

LETHAL LANGUAGE

Experiencing the Power of Life-Giving Words

The tongue is a thermometer; it gives us our spiritual temperature. It is also a thermostat; it regulates our spiritual temperature. Control of the tongue can mean everything.

RICHARD J. FOSTER, *CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE*

Welcome

Welcome to Session 1 of *Soul Detox*. If this is your first time together as a group, take a moment to introduce yourselves to each other before watching the video. Then let's get started!

Video: Lethal Language (12 Minutes)

Play the video segment for Session 1. As you watch, use the outline (below and page 11) to follow along or to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

Notes

“The tongue has the power of life and death” (Proverbs 18:21a).

The Bible contrasts life-giving words and toxic words:

“Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Proverbs 12:18 NIV 1984).

“The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit” (Proverbs 15:4 NIV 1984).

We must guard our hearts against toxic words (see Proverbs 4:23).

Truth vs. trash: When people speak words about you, is what they say true? If so, believe it and embrace it. If it's trash, reject it.

Every chance you get, speak life-giving words.

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up” (Ephesians 4:29a).

Any time you think something positive, say it. Why rob someone of a blessing by keeping a positive statement to yourself?

Don't internalize the toxic words that others speak about you. Guard your heart.

Group Discussion (46 Minutes)

Take a few minutes to talk about what you just watched.

1. What part of the teaching had the most impact on you?

Toxic Words

2. A toxic substance is something that causes serious harm or even death. *Toxikon*, the Greek origin of the English word “toxic,” refers to an archer's bow armed with a poison arrow. The psalmist uses this very image to describe the power of toxic words:

[Evildoers] sharpen their tongues like swords and aim cruel words like deadly arrows (Psalm 64:3).

The author of Proverbs draws on a similar image:

The words of the reckless pierce like swords (Proverbs 12:18a).

- Those who speak toxic words in these verses are “evildoers” and “the reckless.” How would you describe the similarities and differences in how words are used by someone who is an evildoer and someone who is reckless? If you can think of any, use examples — from the news, social media, books, movies, etc. — to describe both.
- Overall, how would you characterize the people whose words have wounded you? As evildoers, as reckless, or as something else?
- At some point in our lives, all of us have spoken words that wound. What thoughts or feelings are you aware of when you consider how the words *evildoer* and *reckless* might characterize you?

Guard Your Heart

3. Toxic words are words that lodge in the heart and cause deep wounds. When we internalize these words, we allow them to distort the truth about who we are — and that impacts everything. The Bible’s familiar wisdom about this comes from Proverbs:

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it (Proverbs 4:23).

In ancient Hebrew thought, the heart referred to more than just the center of emotions. It included the “entire inner life of a person”¹ — everything we might describe as psychological, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional. To guard your heart, then, is to guard the essence of who God created you to be.

- What examples come to mind when you think of what it means in practical terms to guard your heart? How have you done this well, or how have you witnessed someone you know doing this well?
 - How would you describe the differences between guarding your heart and being overly self-protective in your relationships?
4. The verses that follow Proverbs 4:23 elaborate on it by listing specific behaviors that guard the heart:

Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil (Proverbs 4:24–27).

The first behavior on the list — the one the Proverbs writer perhaps considers most important — directly addresses the power of words. It’s easy to recognize the impact of toxic words spoken to us by someone else, but this passage emphasizes the need to guard our hearts from *our own words*.

Take a moment to recall a recent or past occasion when you were careless or misleading with your words. For example, you said something unkind, had an angry outburst, or spun the truth

1. Alex Luc, “(leb, lebab) heart,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2, Willem A. VanGemeren, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 749.

to make yourself look better. How might you have internalized what you said? In other words, how might your careless or misleading words have harmed your heart by distorting the truth of who you are?

Life-Giving Words

5. The Bible uses vivid images to describe the impact of life-giving words:

The soothing tongue is a tree of life (Proverbs 15:4a).

Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones (Proverbs 16:24).

The right word at the right time is like precious gold set in silver (Proverbs 25:11 CEV).

- Which image resonates most with your own experience of life-giving words? Why?

- In the last day or two, what experiences, if any, have you had of giving or receiving life-giving words? How would you describe the impact these words had — on you and on the other person?

- Some words are not only life-giving but life-changing. Have you, or has someone you know, experienced life-changing words? Briefly share the situation, the life-changing words, and what happened as a result.

6. The four remaining sessions in *Soul Detox* explore the potentially toxic impact of fear, unhealthy people, false beliefs, and popular culture. These are important topics to be sure, but perhaps even more important are the ways you'll experience God at work among you — especially in how you relate to each other and share your lives throughout the study. As you discuss the teaching in each session, there will be many opportunities to practice giving and receiving life-giving, heart-guarding, and truth-telling words.

Take a few moments to consider the kinds of words and conversations that are important to you in this setting. What do you need or want to hear from the other members of the group? Use one or more of the sentence starters below, or your own statement, to help the group understand the best way to speak life and truth to you. As each person responds, use the chart on pages 16–17 to briefly note what is important to that person and how you can companion them well.

It really helps me when ...

I tend to withdraw when ...

I'll know this group is a safe place if you ...

In our discussions, the best thing you could do for me is ...

| NAME | THE BEST WAY I CAN COMPANION THIS PERSON IS ... |
|------|---|
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| NAME | THE BEST WAY I CAN COMPANION THIS PERSON IS ... |
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Individual Activity: What I Want to Remember (2 Minutes)

Complete this activity on your own.

1. Briefly review the outline and any notes you took.
2. In the space below, write down the most significant thing you gained in this session — from the teaching, activities, or discussions.

What I want to remember from this session ...

Closing Prayer

Close your time together with prayer.

Personal Study

● Read and Learn

Read chapter 3 of the *Soul Detox* book. Use the space below to note any insights or questions you want to bring to the next group session.

● Study and Reflect

When someone says something to or about you, train yourself to categorize the words [as] Truth or Trash. Analyze the message and source before swallowing and digesting what someone else wants to feed you. Are their words true? Based in Scripture? Supported by data over time? If so, embrace them. Allow those life-giving words to minister to your soul and conform you to the image of Christ. If their words are untrue, mean-spirited, and critical without being constructive, then call them what they are—toxic waste. Reject those words. Don't let them into your soul. Take out the trash and leave it by the curb. Delete toxic words and insert the truth.

Soul Detox, page 60

1. Toxic words are words that wound and distort the truth of who God created you to be. Which of the significant relationships listed below have been sources of toxic words in your life? Check all that apply.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parent, guardian, or other childhood caregiver | <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher, coach, or other student leader |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grandparent | <input type="checkbox"/> Friend |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sibling | <input type="checkbox"/> Pastor or other spiritual leader |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Son or daughter | <input type="checkbox"/> Boss or supervisor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Extended family member | <input type="checkbox"/> Work colleague |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spouse, fiancé(e), or other romantic relationship | <input type="checkbox"/> Neighbor |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: |

Briefly review the relationships you checked. Which ones stand out most to you? For example, perhaps you recall their words most vividly, they continue to harm you with their words, or what they said had long-term consequences. Of the relationships you checked, circle up to three that stand out most to you.

In the left column of the chart below, write down the toxic statements these people have made. You could write one statement for each relationship you circled or multiple statements made by one person. Use the right column to briefly describe the impact these words had on you.

| TOXIC WORDS | THE IMPACT THESE WORDS HAD ON ME |
|-------------|----------------------------------|
| | |
| | |
| | |

When you guard your heart from toxic words, you filter what others say to you or about you to distinguish truth from trash. Keeping in mind the toxic words you wrote down and the impact they had on you, read through the twelve truths on pages 22 – 23. Place a checkmark next to any truths that catch your attention.

Using the truths you checked as a filter, what distortions or lies can you identify in what you wrote on your chart?

How do the truths themselves impact you? For example, do you find it difficult to embrace them as truths that apply to you personally? Resonate with them deeply? Believe them more with your head than with your heart?

What do you need from God, or how do you want God to help you in connection with the toxic words that have impacted you?

TWELVE TRUTHS

| ✓ | TRUTH | SCRIPTURE |
|---|--|---|
| | I am a child of God. | <p>But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12 NLT).</p> <p>God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:5a NLT).</p> |
| | I am loved by God. | <p>Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us (Ephesians 1:4a NLT).</p> <p>But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ (Ephesians 2:4–5a).</p> |
| | I am free and forgiven. | <p>He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins (Ephesians 1:7 NLT).</p> <p>So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1 NLT).</p> |
| | My body belongs to God. | <p>Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price (1 Corinthians 6:19–20a NLT).</p> |
| | God is close to me. | <p>The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth (Psalm 145:18).</p> <p>Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13b NLT).</p> |
| | I am attractive/ beautiful from the inside out. | <p>You should clothe yourselves instead with the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God (1 Peter 3:4 NLT).</p> <p>People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7b NLT).</p> |

| ✓ | TRUTH | SCRIPTURE |
|---|---|--|
| | God will never abandon me. | The Lord has promised that he will not leave us or desert us (Hebrews 13:5b CEV). So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God (Isaiah 41:10a). |
| | I am gifted by God. I can accomplish great things. | A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other (1 Corinthians 12:7 NLT). Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father (John 14:12). |
| | God cares about me and my problems. | Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you (1 Peter 5:7 NLT). For [God] will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help (Psalm 72:12). |
| | God gives me strength and protection. | The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one (2 Thessalonians 3:3). For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways (Psalm 91:11). |
| | I have a future. | “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us (Philippians 3:13b–14 NLT). |
| | With God’s help, I can change. | And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image (2 Corinthians 3:18b NLT). I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart (Ezekiel 36:26 NLT). |

2. Toxic words are always painful, but not all painful words are toxic. Sometimes it's the truthful words that hurt the most. And the Bible encourages us to welcome the wounds that come from these words:

Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy (Proverbs 27:6 NLT).

Let the godly strike me! It will be a kindness! If they correct me, it is soothing medicine. Don't let me refuse it (Psalm 141:5a NLT).

Consider these passages first from the perspective of the person who *speaks* a wounding truth, and then from the perspective of the person who *receives* a wounding truth. What thoughts or feelings arise when you consider the prospect of both speaking and receiving a painful truth?

Both verses describe qualifications for the one who delivers a wounding truth: the person must be a "sincere friend" and "godly." "Speaking the truth in love" is also an essential requirement for Christ followers (Ephesians 4:15a). When you reflect on your significant relationships, how would you characterize the degree to which you and the other people in your life either meet these qualifications or are intentional about trying to do so?

We tend to avoid or actively resist things that cause us pain, but is there anything about the practice of giving and receiving difficult truths that intrigues you or stirs up hope in you for your own relationships? What good things would you hope to gain if giving and receiving truth were a normal part of your relationships?

Your words matter. They are either giving life or taking life. Choose to give life.

Soul Detox, page 62

3. We can avoid the most obvious verbal sins and still “take life” with how we use, or fail to use, our words. Take a moment to recall some of your conversations over the last day or two and then review the following list. Place a check next to any behaviors you engaged in during your recent conversations.
- ☐ Exaggerating
 - ☐ Impression management (spinning the truth to make yourself look better)
 - ☐ Talking too much
 - ☐ Yelling
 - ☐ Cursing
 - ☐ Bragging
 - ☐ Complaining
 - ☐ Saying something false or damaging about someone
 - ☐ Being critical or judgmental
 - ☐ Trying to say something smart, funny, or spiritual to impress someone

- ☐ Withholding truth or other important information
- ☐ Using phrases like “You *always*” or “You *never*”
- ☐ Gossiping
- ☐ Interrupting
- ☐ Belittling or diminishing someone else’s experiences or views
- ☐ Keeping a conversation focused on others as a way to avoid revealing anything about yourself
- ☐ Denying authentic emotion (for example, saying you’re not angry when you are angry)
- ☐ Being harsh rather than loving with truth
- ☐ Dominating a conversation
- ☐ Retaliating
- ☐ Flattery or sweet talk (using compliments to earn favor or get something you want)
- ☐ Self-justifying
- ☐ Refusing to apologize or acknowledge a fault
- ☐ Using humor or sarcasm to zing someone else or to avoid being vulnerable
- ☐ Other:

Now take a moment to consider how your conversations over the last day or two have brought life to your relationships. From the following list, place a check next to any life-giving ways you used words during your recent conversations.

- ☐ Celebrating others’ accomplishments
- ☐ Praising good behavior or good work
- ☐ Withholding an unnecessary comment
- ☐ Extending grace instead of judgment
- ☐ Offering forgiveness or an apology
- ☐ Speaking words of comfort or encouragement
- ☐ Saying thank you
- ☐ Withholding a complaint
- ☐ Asking “How are you?” and really wanting to hear the answer
- ☐ Speaking the truth in love
- ☐ Listening without calculating how to switch the focus of the conversation back to you

- ☐ Expressing your belief in someone
- ☐ Practicing simplicity in speech (what the Bible describes as letting your yes be yes and your no be no)
- ☐ Refraining from gossip or idle chatter
- ☐ Blessing rather than cursing someone who hurt you
- ☐ Praying for someone
- ☐ Pausing to consider your reply before giving it
- ☐ Saying, “Tell me more about that.”
- ☐ Being graciously honest about your thoughts or feelings (not engaging in people-pleasing by withholding your opinion or denying anger or hurt)
- ☐ Expressing contentment or gratitude for the good things in your life

Compare what you checked on both lists (pages 25–27). What do you notice? For example, is there a significant difference in the number of things you checked on each list? If so, why? What similarities or differences are there between the kinds of people or situations that prompt you to use life-taking words and those that lead you to use life-giving words?

4. Like us, the psalmist also struggled with controlling his words, and sought God’s help to use them well:

Take control of what I say, O LORD, and guard my lips. Don’t let me drift toward evil or take part in acts of wickedness (Psalm 141:3 – 4a NLT).

Let my words and my thoughts be pleasing to you, LORD, because you are my mighty rock and my protector (Psalm 19:14 CEV).

Briefly review the items you checked in response to the first list for question 3 (pages 25–26). How would you describe your greatest weaknesses or the ways in which your words tend to “drift toward evil”?

Now review the items you checked in response to the second list for question 3 (pages 26–27). How would you describe your greatest strengths or the ways in which your words are routinely pleasing to God?

● Guided Prayer

God, your words have changed my life. Thank you for all the ways you communicate your love and care for me.

I need your help with some toxic words that have hurt me. Please show me how I can let go of the trash and hold onto the truth with this situation . . .

I also want my relationships to be characterized by truth, but painful truths are hard for me. Prepare my heart to give and receive hard truths, especially in my relationship(s) with . . .

Forgive me for the life-taking words I have spoken recently . . .

Lord, guard my lips and keep me from being reckless with what I say. I want all of my words to give life and be pleasing to you — this day and every day. Amen.