

In response to anti-government demonstrations, authorities in Iran have restricted the Internet and social media tools, causing problems for Iranians trying to communicate with each other, as well as with family members and friends outside the country. For this installment of *The Wired Word*, we will use this attack on free speech as an opportunity to listen for what the Bible tells us about how words can influence people, shape the world, and create new realities.

If you'd prefer a different topic, look at our second lesson, which addresses the attempt on the part of some senators to reverse the December 2017 ruling of the Federal Communications Commission that rolled back regulations governing how freely, easily and speedily data is delivered on the Internet. Moving past the technical aspects of what some call "net neutrality," we take the opportunity to discuss the nature of the gospel as a gift freely offered to all people without regard to their ability to pay for it.

The Editorial Team of *The Wired Word*



Iran Restricts Communication in Response to Protests

The Wired Word for the January 14, 2018

In the News

"How's dad?" "What's happening?" These messages were sent via the WhatsApp message service by Ben Abdi, a 45-year-old Iranian who runs a Persian restaurant in north London. He sent the messages to his sister in Iran on Tuesday, January 2, and had not received a response by the weekend. He wondered, "Was she okay? Why hadn't she read them? Where was she?"

Demonstrations began in the city of Mashhad on December 28, and then spread quickly and spontaneously across Iran. Many of the protesters are working-class young people, rallying against high youth unemployment, poor wages and rising prices. *The Washington Post* reports that for many Iranians living in exile, recent days "have been a mix of emotions -- fear, foreboding, hope -- as they intently watch, as best they can, the deadly unrest unfolding in their native land."

According to *CNN*, the protests "have become the most powerful challenge to the Iranian government's authority since mass demonstrations in 2009." Authorities have detained at least 450 people, and 21 have been killed in the unrest.

Iranians living abroad have struggled to stay in touch with loved ones because of restrictions placed on communication tools. According to some analysts, Iranian authorities are trying to control the unrest by restricting access to the internet and trying to manipulate social media. Within days of the start of the protests, authorities started restricting social media tools including Telegram, which is popular in Iran and had been used frequently by Ben Abdi's sister. Now, her account is strangely inactive.

Sanam Vakil, an Iran expert at a London-based think tank, says to *The Washington Post* that the Iranian government has been sophisticated in using social media to manage the country's communication systems, including "sending messages using social media to warn people not to join protests." They have also restricted internet access in some areas -- restrictions that have been "patchy," she says, rather than a total blackout. Iranians in Britain report that they are still getting social media messages from Iran, but they are fewer and are arriving less frequently than before.

According to *The New York Times*, Telegram's chief executive confirmed that the app had been blocked by Iranian authorities after the Telegram company refused to shut down channels of peaceful Iranian protesters. "We consider freedom of speech an undeniable human right," he said, "and would rather get blocked in a country by its authorities than limit peaceful expression of alternative opinions."

Many Iranians living abroad are afraid to talk openly with people inside Iran about the demonstrations, because they fear the brutality of the Iranian regime. One woman chose to stop using Telegram because, she tells *The Washington Post*, "it's too dangerous. It's too controlled." A man says that when he talks with his mother in Iran about the demonstrations, he uses "coded" language. "In any contact from Iran to another country," he says, "we assume they are listening to everything." The Iranian government is like the "mafia," he says, and he hopes the current protests will change things.

Mojtaba, a 33-year-old Iranian, tells *CNN* that a lot of young people want the same lifestyles they see people having in wealthier parts of Iran as well as abroad. "A lot of the kids in the smaller cities have gotten a taste for a better life through social media," he says. "They look at what they see on Instagram or Telegram and compare that to their prospects, and naturally they get angry."

While most of the anti-government protesters are young men, a pro-government movement has arisen made up of mostly middle-age and older men. On January 3, government supporters marched through the capital city of Tehran, with some chanting "Death to America" and waving national flags. Iranian officials had blamed the United States and its allies for provoking the anti-government rallies.

President Trump tweeted that the Iranian government was repressive, "brutal and corrupt" and that it was "TIME FOR CHANGE!" French President Emmanuel Macron spoke with the Iranian president, expressed concern over the violence and deaths, and called for restraint.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[As Protests Go On, Iranian Exiles Wrestle With Fear, Foreboding and Coded Messages, *The Washington Post*](#)

[Iran's Revolutionary Guards Claim Protests Over, *CNN*](#)

[Rouhani Urges Calm in Iran as Protests Continue, *The New York Times*](#)

Applying the News Story

Words are powerful and creative, so much so that Rabbi Abraham Heschel once said, "words create worlds." Recent restrictions on communication in Iran give us an opportunity to reflect on the power of words -- both human and divine -- to influence individuals, events and the shape of the world around us.

The Big Questions

1. What words have had the biggest influence on you? Words spoken by a family member, a friend, a colleague, a mentor, a politician or a religious leader? Describe.
2. Words play a significant role in protests, political campaigns, reform movements and religious revivals. When have you seen the world shaped by the power of words?
3. When a person says, "I forgive you," a new reality is created. In similar fashion, words such as "I love you" or "I hate you" have a profound impact. What words have changed your personal life, for good or for ill?
4. The chief executive of the Telegram app said, "We consider freedom of speech an undeniable human right." What limits, if any, should be put on speech? On speech that incites violence? On speech that promotes hate?
5. In your experience, where have you experienced the power of the Word of God? What effect did it have on you?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (For context, read 1:1-13.)

According to the book of Genesis, God does not create the heavens and the earth out of raw materials. Instead, God creates by speaking the words: "Let there be light" ... "Let there be a dome" (v. 6) ... "Let the earth put forth vegetation" (v. 11), etc. The Word of God brings order out of chaos, and creates good things where there had once only been "a formless void." In addition, God gives names to the things he has created: "God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night." These names are words that help us to understand the world around us.

Questions: What do you believe is the significance of God creating the universe out of nothing, using only words? How would you describe the power of the Word of God? Where do you find value in names being given to things, to people and to places?

Proverbs 25:11

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.(No context needed.)

The writer of the wisdom sayings in Proverbs finds great value in "a word fitly spoken." Although we tend to disparage words today, saying that "talk is cheap," the writer of Proverbs finds a good word to be extremely valuable. A "word fitly spoken" is a truthful word that is spoken at the right time, in the right place, in the right way.

Questions: What damage is caused when words are not "fitly spoken"? When have you experienced the power of truthful words spoken at the right time and in the right way? What steps can you take to move your speech in a positive direction?

John 1:1-5, 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.(For context, read 1:1-14.)

According to John, the Word of God existed before the creation of the heavens and the earth, and this Word participated in the work of creation with God. In particular, the Word was responsible for the creation of life, "the light of all people." In time, this Word took human form and lived among us as Jesus Christ, God's only son. Christians call this the Incarnation, meaning God "in flesh." In his earthly ministry, Jesus spoke the Word of God with unparalleled clarity and power.

Questions: What do you find to be important about the link between the Word of God and Jesus Christ? Why was it important for the Word to be involved in creation? How does Jesus clarify and interpret for you the many words of God that appear throughout the Bible?

Ephesians 4:29

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.(For context, read 4:25--5:2.)

The apostle Paul gives the Christians at Ephesus a set of rules for their new life in Christ. He begins by telling them to put away falsehood and "speak the truth" to their neighbors (v. 25). He goes on to command them to "[b]e angry but do not sin" (v. 26), and to replace stealing with honest work that allows them to share with the needy (v. 28). Then he instructs them to avoid "evil talk" and say only "what is useful for building up," so that their words will give grace to their hearers. In all of this, they are to be "imitators of God" (5:1).

Questions: Why do you think Paul includes commands about proper speech in his rules for life in Christ? What "evil talk" do you hear today, in church or in the community? How can you speak in ways that "give grace" and are "useful for building up"?

James 3:7-10

For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been

tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue -- a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. (For context, read 3:1-12.)

James speaks about taming the tongue, a body part that is "a restless evil, full of deadly poison." He encourages Christians to control their tongues in the same way that a rider controls her horse with a bit and a ship captain controls his ship with a rudder. Without proper control, says James, the tongue "stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell" (v. 6). He marvels that "[f]rom the same mouth come blessing and cursing," and laments that people continue to use their tongues in this way.

Questions: Why do you feel the tongue is so hard to control? What damage is done by words that "curse those who are made in the likeness of God"? How can the church set standards for speech, so that words are focused more on blessing than on cursing?

For Further Discussion

1. Two leaders of the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace write](#), "We should continue to look for ways to enable the information technology and social media tools that connect Iranian citizens to the world and to one another." Why is it important for Iranians to be able to talk to the world and to one another? What contribution, if any, would be made by improving information technology and social media tools? What are the pros and cons of social media here in the United States?
2. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the Gospel of Matthew tells us, "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching" (7:28). What do you think caused the crowds to be astounded at the teaching of Jesus? What was distinctive about the authority behind his words? Where do you hear words with real authority today?
3. In the United States today, we receive information from emails, text messages, phone calls, Facebook postings, Tweets and other forms of messaging. What do you find to be good and bad about each of these methods of communication?
4. Last week, [CNN reported](#), "The day after Oprah Winfrey delivered a speech [at the Golden Globes awards ceremony] that thrust her into the conversation about the 2020 presidential race, Democratic strategists and activists largely agree: "It's not crazy. And she could win." What are the qualities of a speech that can create this kind of reaction? Clearly, our most recent presidents -- Barack Obama and Donald Trump -- have demonstrated an ability to rally their supporters through speech. When have you been inspired by the words of a political leader? When have you been angered? Why?
5. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul says, "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (10:17). How has your faith been strengthened by what you have heard, if at all? What kind of speech is clearly generated by the word of Christ?

Responding to the News

Pay attention to the words you hear on the radio, from the television, and on the internet, and think about how those words shape the world we live in. Realize that your own words have power -- for blessing and cursing -- and take care to speak in ways that are truthful and useful for building up the people around you. As Rabbi Heschel said, "words create worlds."

Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you for the power of words. You brought the universe into being through your divine speech, and your Son Jesus is nothing less than your Word in human form. May we be careful with the words we speak, so we will be able to communicate clearly while sharing grace and peace with the people around us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

Some Senators Seek to Override "Restoring Internet Freedom" Order of the FCC

In the News

Forty senators have joined Democratic Sen. Ed Markey of Massachusetts as co-sponsors of a bill he introduced in December after the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) passed the "Restoring Internet Freedom" order, ending the "net neutrality" protections that were in place since 2015.

Markey's bill calls for Congress to formally disapprove and block the action of the FCC. Since more than 30 senators have signed on as co-sponsors, Markey can force a vote on the Senate floor, under the Congressional Review Act (CRA). In order for the resolution to take effect, a simple majority vote in both the Senate and the House would be required, and the president would also have to sign it into law.

On December 14 of this past year, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) passed the Restoring Internet Freedom Order (FCC 17-166) by a 3-2 vote along party lines. This order repealed another FCC order from 2015, which placed the internet under utility-style regulation, which in part superseded the bipartisan Telecommunications Act of 1996, passed by a Republican Congress and signed by President Bill Clinton.

The 2015 order reclassified the internet from "information services" to "telecommunications services," effectively placing the internet in the category of an essential "utility" subject to federal regulation.

"Last month, the Federal Communications Commission turned a deaf ear to millions of Americans standing up for a free and open internet and instead gutted net neutrality," Markey

stated at a news conference Tuesday morning, indicating that he and his allies would "fight these actions in the halls of Congress and in the courtroom."

If Markey's bill were to overcome Republican opposition in both houses of Congress as well as the White House (which seems unlikely), the effect would be to prohibit internet service providers (ISPs) from showing favoritism toward some websites over others by blocking or slowing down some while giving others a faster "lane" in exchange for a fee. The co-sponsors of the bill want ISPs to treat all web content equally.

It should be noted that under the 2015 "net neutrality," this favoritism was also allowed, as long as the FCC approved it as "reasonable."

If the decision of the FCC stands, ISPs like Spectrum, AT&T, Comcast and Verizon would be permitted to charge companies extra to transmit their web content, assess more fees from customers who want to access certain data, or arbitrarily deliver data at different rates of speed.

Critics of the FCC decision fear that those who can't or won't pay up might lose their ability to deliver or access data as ISPs could create an unfriendly business environment for competitors or websites they don't like. They also express concern that ISPs could have more control over what their customers can see, limiting their free access to a variety of viewpoints and services without consumers even knowing that is happening.

The co-sponsors of the bill say the FCC's December decision gives an unfair advantage to telecommunications giants and hurts small businesses and start-ups. Most consumers would not be able to access data through another ISP, since many live in areas effectively monopolized by a single or dominant provider.

FCC chairman Ajit Pai, a Republican, described the action of the FCC as "restoring the light-touch framework that has governed the internet for most of its existence."

But one of the FCC's two dissenting commissioners, Mignon Clyburn, said the repeal of the Obama-era rules would leave broadband providers no incentive to do the right thing and "every incentive to do their own thing."

A University of Maryland poll found that 83 percent of voters favored "net neutrality" protections, with 75 percent of Republicans and 89 percent of Democrats backing the regulations.

A vote in the Senate, while largely symbolic, would put senators on the record regarding the FCC's highly unpopular decision in an election year.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Restoring Internet Freedom, FCC 17-166](#)

[Democrats Force Senate Vote on Net Neutrality. *The Times-Picayune*](#)

[The FCC Just Voted to Roll Back Obama-Era Net Neutrality Rules. *Reason.com*](#)

[With the FCC's Repeal of Net Neutrality, Here's What to Expect. CBS](#)
[So, The FCC Repealed Net Neutrality. What Does That Mean For You? Huffington Post](#)

Applying the News Story

The question of how freely, easily and speedily data is delivered on the internet provides us with the opportunity to discuss the nature of the gospel as a gift freely offered to all people without regard to their ability to pay for it.

The Big Questions

1. How important is it to you to have the content of the Christian faith curated for you by religious authorities you trust? How important is it to you to have free and full access to the Bible and other theological documents? Which is more important to you, and why?
2. Whom (if anyone) would you trust to "curate" the content of your faith for you? What qualities would such a curator need to possess in order to be trustworthy, in your opinion?
3. In what sense is entry into the kingdom of God free, easy and open to all, and in what sense is it costly, hard and "there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14)?
4. Could the internet be a metaphor for the kingdom of God? If so, how? Where might that metaphor break down? How is the kingdom of God different from the internet?
5. Should the internet be treated as a commodity or a utility? Explain your answer. Does your faith play any role in your point of view on this subject, and if so, how does your faith influence your thinking?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Matthew 21:12-14

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. (For context, read 21:12-17.)

After Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph, his first priority was to challenge the money changers and vendors of sacrificial animals who determined who had access to the temple and what that access cost worshippers.

Anyone who wanted to offer a sacrifice at the temple had to follow rules detailing what kind of animals were acceptable and what quality of offering was required. Pilgrims who wanted to worship in the temple had little choice but to pay whatever fees temple vendors and money changers charged for their services, since they were required to purchase animals for offerings

only in the temple and with temple currency, which had to be purchased at the going rate of exchange.

The temple, which was intended as a house of prayer for all nations (Isaiah 56:7), was being perverted by greed and corruption that hurt the poorest of the poor while lining the pockets of the rich. The priestly class, which should have made access to temple worship more available to all, instead erected barriers to the poor and the non-Jew. The Court of the Gentiles, where non-Jews were permitted, could hardly have served them well as a place of prayer when filled with the noise and smell of animals in a marketplace. That's why Jesus acted to upset the system.

But Jesus did more than that. By curing the blind and the lame, he demonstrated how the temple was *meant* to be used: as a place where all could meet God and where the broken could be healed. *The Pulpit Commentary* states, "For acts of sacrilege which profaned the temple precincts, [Jesus] substituted acts of mercy which hallowed them; the good Physician takes the place of the greedy trafficker; the den of thieves becomes a beneficent hospital."

Questions: How was temple worship meant to reflect the kingdom of God? In what ways did it succeed, and in what ways did it fail to do so?

Have you ever felt unwelcome in a house of God? What do you think contributed to your impression that you were not welcome? What are some ways churches today might hinder would-be worshipers from connecting with God in our services?

What can you do to ensure that your church is a house of prayer for all people, and a place where "the blind and the lame" come to Jesus for healing?

Matthew 22:8-10

Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. (For context, read 22:1-14.)

The day after Jesus cleansed the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people demanded an explanation (Matthew 21:23-27). Jesus responded with the parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28-32), the parable of the wicked tenants (Matthew 21:33-44), and the parable of the wedding banquet found in this text (Matthew 22:1-14).

The point of each parable was essentially the same: that God gives his kingdom to people who produce the fruits of the kingdom and who give to God what God is due (Matthew 21:41, 43). If the religious leaders of Jesus' day refused to honor God "on earth as it is in heaven," God would find people who would.

In this parable, Jesus described a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. Some guests declined his invitation, mistreating and even killing his messengers. Furious, the king sent soldiers to take revenge on his enemies, and invited all manner of people, "both good and bad," to attend the wedding banquet.

The chief priests and the Pharisees understood that Jesus was describing them in his parables (Matthew 21:45). Initially, the Jews were invited to share in God's kingdom. When some rejected the offer, the invitation was extended to non-Jews as well.

Paul wrote that both Jew and Gentile are all sinners who "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23); therefore none of us are "worthy" to attend the wedding banquet of God's Son. But if our inherent unworthiness were the criteria God used to include us in the festivities, the banquet hall would be pretty empty.

Questions: Whom does God invite and call to the wedding banquet of his Son? Who has access to God's kingdom, and on what does that access depend?

1 Corinthians 9:12, 18

If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. ... What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel. (For context, read 9:1-23.)

Paul began this chapter by asserting his rights as an apostle to material support and companionship of a faithful spouse (vv. 4-11, 13-14), yet he insisted that he would rather die than hinder the gospel of Christ by insisting on his rights (v. 15). God had entrusted him with a commission, he said (v. 17), for which his reward was the ability to make the gospel available to all free of charge (vv. 18-23). So as not to burden his listeners with his own need of an income, he found employment as a tentmaker at times.

Questions: When, if ever, have you witnessed Christian leaders insisting on their rights to such an extent that you felt they "put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ"? Define the nature of that obstacle.

Should every religious professional become bi-vocational, so as to avoid the necessity of asking listeners for support and to reinforce the idea that the gospel is for everyone regardless of ability to pay? Why or why not?

Do you feel any obligation to support those who are spiritual mentors to you, and if so, what do you do with that sense of obligation?

Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ -- by grace you have been saved -- ... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God -- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (For context, read 2:4-9.)

Paul here asserts that God saves those who cannot save themselves: i.e., those who are spiritually dead because of sin. We are saved by God's grace, "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). We cannot earn that grace; if we could, it would not be a gift, but wages due to us for our labor (Romans 4:4).

But in fact, since "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23) and since "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23), we all are due to receive death as the wages we have earned for our sin. "[B]ut the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

Since dead people (Ephesians 2:5) cannot work, earn wages, or raise themselves from the grave, only the tender mercies of God shown to us in the Incarnation and sacrificial death of Christ can save us and make us alive together with him.

In Acts 4:12, Peter says about Jesus that "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Question: Remembering that the name "Jesus" comes from the Hebrew, meaning "God saves," how would you explain the concept of salvation by grace through faith in "God saves"?

For Further Discussion

1. Reflect on this from martyred pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Cheap grace means grace sold on the market ... at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infinite. What would grace be if it were not cheap? ... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

2. Chew on this, also from Bonhoeffer: "Grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: 'Ye were bought at a price,' and *what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us*. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God." As you reflect on what it cost God to extend grace to you, what response do you think is warranted from you?

3. Should people be required to pay the same fees for internet access, no matter how much or little they use it? Does it make sense that someone who is streaming gigabytes of video daily should pay the same amount as someone who uses far less data and bandwidth? Why or why not?

Responding to the News

Prayerfully listen to or join in singing the hymn, ["When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."](#) paying special attention to the last verse.

Prayer (Suggested by John 1:4, 9)

We thank you, O God, for sending your Son Jesus as the light of all people that enlightens everyone. We thank you for extending your grace to us, in spite of our inability to ever repay you for your mercy. May we be clean windows that allow the light of your countenance to shine through us to others in darkness, showing others the mercy and grace you have shown to us. Amen.

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[Preview YouTube video When I Survey The Wondrous Cross - Fernando Ortega](#)

