

Sound Speech - Bible Study

By Mr. Whitney V. Myers

Introduction

Why is it important that leaders, especially Christian leaders, exemplify sound speech? When a leader does not speak soundly, what is the effect on the hearers? This lesson series teaches the principles of sound speech from the Bible – from the teaching of Jesus, the writings of the Apostle Paul, and the Old Testament. By applying these principles, we, as followers of Christ, will speak and write more gracefully in ways that build up and encourage others.

Objectives

- To help Bible students learn and apply what the Bible says about healthy, uncorrupt, and truthful speech that brings grace to others
- To learn and apply what Jesus said about the relationship of our heart and our mouth
- To learn when we should remain silent instead of speaking

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“In all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound^a in speech^b which is beyond reproach^c, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.” (Titus 2:7-8)

All scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible* (Ref. 1) unless indicated otherwise.

1. Who is Paul Writing To?

Titus was one of the Apostle Paul’s converts to the Christian faith. Paul refers to Titus as “*my true child in a common faith*” (Titus 1:4). Paul commissioned Titus to complete the work in Crete, including appointing elders in each city (Titus 1:5).

Titus was not a new convert. He accompanied Paul to the Council in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:1). Titus helped Paul with the church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 7:13). Paul further describes Titus’ role, “*As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, they are messengers of the churches, a glory to Christ.*” (2 Corinthians 8:23)

Titus also went to Dalmatia, a coastal region of modern Croatia (Ref. 2) (2 Timothy 4:10).

Considering the assignments given to him, Titus “obviously was a capable and resourceful leader.” (Ref. 3)

Yes, Paul directs Titus in what to say to people about their duties. In Titus 2:2-6, Paul describes the duties of older men (2:2), older women (2:3-4), young women (2:4-5), young men (2:6), and slaves (2:9-10). However, the key focus for this lesson is on what Paul says about speech to Titus as a Christian leader, and by extension, to us.

2. How is Sound Speech Defined?

In the Apostle Paul's letter to Titus, Paul includes these words of instruction regarding speech:

“In all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound^a in speech^b which is beyond reproach^c, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.” (Titus 2:7-8)

Paul's instructions to Timothy are similar:

“Retain the standard of sound^d words^b which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 1:13)

The key words are defined as follows:

^aSound – The Greek word is “hugiēs” (*hoog-ee-ace*) (Ref. 4 Greek #5199) = healthy, well (in body), true (in doctrine)

^bSpeech or Word – The Greek word is “lōgōs” (*log'-os*) (Ref. 4 Greek #3056) = something said (including the thought), a topic, reasoning (the mental faculty), speech, word

^cBeyond reproach – The Greek word is “akatagnōstōs” (*at-ak-ag'-noce-tos*) (Ref. 4 Greek #176) = unblamable, that cannot be condemned

^dSound – The Greek word is “hugianō” (*hoog-ee-ah'-ee-no*) (Ref. 4 Greek #5198) = to have sound health, i.e., be well (in body), fig. to be uncorrupt (true in doctrine)

Paul uses the Greek word “logos” for “speech” in Titus 2:8. Logos means “something said.” Logos also can refer to a topic (subject of discourse) and to the mental faculty of reasoning.

As followers of Christ, we are to have healthy reasoning and healthy speech. Our speaking, reasoning, teaching, and doctrine should be healthy, uncorrupt, and true. Paul gives more examples of sound speech in the verses discussed in the next sections.

Think about (self study)/discuss (group study):

Why is it important that leaders, especially Christian leaders, exemplify sound speech?

What are some examples today of “unsound” speech?

What are some examples of sound speech?

3. Wholesome, Edifying, Timely, and Grace-Giving Speech

In Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul teaches us four characteristics of sound speech:

“Let no unwholesome^e word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification^f according to the need^g of the moment, so that it will give grace^h to those who hear.” (Ephesians 4:29)

a. *Wholesome* (as opposed to “bad” words)

^eUnwholesome – The Greek word is “saprōs” (*sap-ros*) (Ref. 4 Greek #4550) = rotten, i.e., worthless, bad, corrupt

b. *Edifying* (building up others, as opposed to tearing them down)

^fEdification – The Greek word is “ōikōdōmē” (*oy-kod-om-ay*) (Ref. 4 Greek #3619) = architecture, a structure, building, edification, edifying

c. *Timely* (sometimes it is not the right occasion to speak)

^gNeed – The Greek word is “chrēia” (*khri'-ah*) (Ref. 4 Greek #5532) = employment, i.e., an affair; also (by impl.) occasion, demand, requirement, destitution, business, lack, necessity, need

“Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances.” (Proverbs 25:11)

d. *Grace-Giving*

^hGrace – The Greek word is “charis” (*khar'-ece*) (Ref. 4 Greek #5485) = graciousness of manner or act, especially the divine influence upon the heart, and its reflection in the life – favor, gift, grace, joy, pleasure, thanks.

“Let your speech always be with grace^h, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.” (Colossians 4:6)

Think about/discuss:

What happens when leaders do not speak soundly? What is the effect on the hearers?

How can God help you to apply the principles of Ephesians 4:29 to your own speech and writing?

4. Other Characteristics of Sound Speech in the Bible

The Bible describes several other characteristics of sound, healthy speech:

a. Praising God continually

“I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.” (Psalm 34:1)

“Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.” (Hebrews 13:15)

Think about/discuss:

What does it mean to you to offer a “sacrifice of praise” to God?

b. Being thankful in all circumstances

“In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:18)

“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father...” (Ephesians 5:18-20)

Think about/discuss:

Consider a situation where you or someone you know is going through an especially difficult time such as grief or loss. How does “being thankful in all circumstances” give us peace? (See Philippians 4:6-7)

c. Discussing spiritual topics often

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

The Bible instructs us that we should frequently discuss God’s word at home and as part of our everyday lives, not just on Sundays.

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Think about/discuss:

What are some practical ways to implement this scripture passage in your own life or in the life of your family?

What practices of your parents or grandparents or other relatives or friends have been good examples to you in this area?

d. Truth-speaking

“O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart.”
(Psalm 15:1-2 NRSV) (Ref. 5)

“These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord.”
(Zechariah 8:16-17 NSRV)

e. Gentle

“A gentleⁱ answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Proverbs 15:1)

ⁱGentle—The Hebrew word is “rak” (*rak*) (Ref. 4 Hebrew #7390) = tender (-hearted), soft, or weak. The same word is translated as “soft” in the King James Version for Job 41:3, Proverbs 15:1, and Proverbs 25:15.

“... the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” (James 3:17)

Think about/discuss:

If you need to instruct or counsel someone, how can you best prepare what you will say?

Ask the Lord to give you gentle words to say, to help you know the right time to say them, and that your words will bring grace to the other person and build them up.

f. Encouraging

“Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up.” (Proverbs 12:25 NRSV)

Think About/Apply:

Is there someone near or far away that you can encourage today?

g. Comforting

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

Think about/apply:

Is there a person whom you write to or contact today to give them comfort? Ask God to guide you in what to say.

h. Kind

“Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (Ephesians 4:32)

Think about/apply:

To what person could you show an act of kindness or forgiveness today or in the near future?

i. Brief

“Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few.” (Ecclesiastes 5:2)

Table 1 summarizes the attributes of sound speech – what our speech should be like.

Table 1: Attributes of Sound Speech

Healthy	Titus 2:8, 2 Timothy 1:13
Uncorrupt	Titus 2:8
True	Titus 2:8, Psalm 15:1-2, Zechariah 8:16-17, Philippians 4:8
Wholesome	Ephesians 4:29
Edifying (Building up)	Ephesians 4:29
Timely	Ephesians 4:29, Proverbs 25:11
Grace-giving	Ephesians 4:29, Colossians 4:6
Praising God continually	Psalm 34:1, Hebrews 13:15
Being thankful in all circumstances	1 Thessalonians 5:18, Ephesians 5:20
Discussing spiritual topics often	Deuteronomy 11:18-21
Gentle	Proverbs 15:1, James 3:17
Encouraging	Proverbs 12:25
Comforting	2 Corinthians 1:3-4
Kind	Ephesians 4:32
Brief	Ecclesiastes 5:2

Suggestion:

Memorize Ephesians 4:29, and apply the four attributes of sound speech to your words in the coming weeks.

“Let no unwholesome^c word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification^f according to the need^g of the moment, so that it will give grace^h to those who hear.” (Ephesians 4:29)

Page 4 provides the definitions of the superscripted words in the Ephesians 4:29 quotation.

5. Our Heart and Our Mouth

a. *What we say defiles us in God's sight*

When Jesus spoke to the Pharisees and scribes in Matthew 15:1-20, he spoke primarily to people that did not (yet) believe in him or accept his authority. However, the concept of the relationship between our heart and our mouth still applies to us as Christians. What we take into our hearts, or allow into our hearts, determines the quality of our speech.

Matthew 15:1-2 describes the Pharisees' question:

“Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.’” (Matthew 15:1-2 NSRV)

Jesus' response turns the focus of the discussion from human rules about hand washing to the more important subject of being clean in our hearts, speech, and thinking.

“You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts^k are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, ‘Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles^j a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.’” (Matthew 15:7-11 NSRV, underscore added)

^jDefiles -- Greek word is “kōinōō” (*koy-nō'-o*) (Ref. 4 Greek #2840) = to make (or consider) profane (ceremonially) – common, defile, unclean.

In verses 15-20 (below), Jesus explains more about what defiles us.

b. *Our heart is the source of the evil (and the good) we speak*

“But Peter said to him, ‘Explain this parable to us.’ Then he said, ‘Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart^k, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart^k come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.” (Matthew 15:15-20 NSRV, underscore added)

^kHeart -- Greek word is “kardia” (*kar-dee'-ah*) (Ref. 4 Greek #2588) = the heart, fig. the thoughts or feelings (mind); also the middle

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Luke 6:43-45 expands the discussion to include good as well as evil that comes from the heart:

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart^k produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart^k that the mouth speaks." (Luke 6:43-45 NRSV)

At the time I first created this lesson on sound speech for my Adult Bible Study class at church, I was working as a computer programmer for a large company. When designing computer programs, I created "HIPO" (Hierarchical Input Process Output) diagrams which were popular at that time. To illustrate the concept of our mouth as our primary "output" device, I presented to my class a HIPO chart like Figure 1. In today's culture with texting and instant messaging, we probably should include our "fingers" as output devices as well. However, the concept still applies.

Our mouths are our primary output device (Figure 1, and Matthew 15:11, 18). The quality of what comes out of our mouths depends on the quality of the "Input" we take in to our heart.

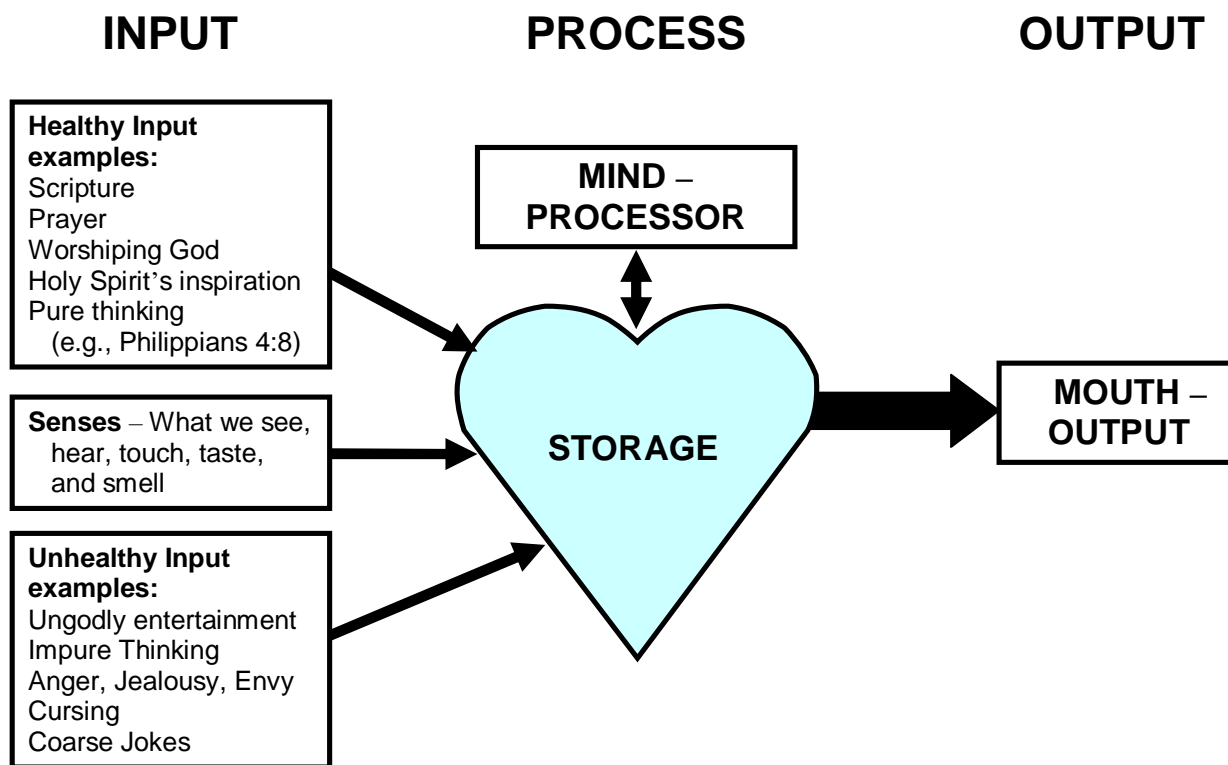


Figure 1: What We Say Comes from Our Heart

Think about/discuss:

Why is it important to guard our heart and mind?

c. Guarding our Heart

It is important to guard what we take in to our heart. The purity of what we take in will determine the purity of what is in our heart (Figure 1 and Matthew 15:19-20). We need to be careful about our entertainment choices (such as movies, TV, and reading) as well as unwholesome speech (e.g., coarse jokes, cursing) because these can contaminate our heart and our thinking.

(1). Treasure God's Word in Our Heart

Psalm 119:9-11 describes an important method for guarding our heart – taking in and treasuring God's word in our heart:

“How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments. I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you.” (Psalm 119:10-11 NRSV)

One of the best ways to guard our heart is to develop a personal daily Bible reading habit, and taking time to pray each day.

(2). Dwell on Excellent Thoughts

The Apostle Paul states the standard for what we should think about:

“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.” (Philippians 4:8)

(3). Guard our Heart with Diligence

“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” (Proverbs 4:23 NIV) (Ref. 6)

Think about/pray:

Pray to ask God's help in guarding your heart and purifying your thinking.

6. When to be Silent

The Bible describes times when we should be silent instead of speaking:

a. *When the circumstances demand*

“There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven... A time to tear apart and a time to sew together; A time to be silent and a time to speak ...” (Ecclesiastes 3:1,7)

b. *In God’s House*

(1). *To show respect*

“What use is an idol once its maker has shaped it— a cast image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in what has been made, though the product is only an idol that cannot speak! Alas for you who say to the wood, "Wake up!" to silent stone, "Rouse yourself!" Can it teach? See, it is gold and silver plated, and there is no breath in it at all. But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!” (Habakkuk 2:18-20 NSRV, underscore added)

(2). *To listen*

“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.” (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2)

Think about/discuss:

What do these verses (Habakkuk 2:20 and Ecclesiastes 5:2) say about the way we should pray and worship?

How do you reconcile Habakkuk’s instruction, “Let your words be few” (Habakkuk 2:20) with Paul’s instruction, “Pray without ceasing”? (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

c. *To guard our souls from troubles*

“He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles.” (Proverbs 21:23)

Think about/discuss:

What steps can you take to guard your mouth?

d. To avoid transgression

“In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise.” (Proverbs 10:19 KJV) (Ref. 7)

“When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech.” (Proverbs 10:19 NRSV)

This verse generates some interesting comments:

“Loquacity leads to exaggeration and untruthfulness, slander and uncharitableness” (Ref. 8).

Speak little, "because for one sin which we may commit by keeping silence where it would be well to speak, we commit a hundred by speaking upon all occasions." (Ref. 8)

e. When we're feeling angry

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” (Ephesians 4:31)

“... But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” (James 1:20)

Recall Ephesians 4:29 (section 3 above) – our speech should provide grace to other people.

f. To be counted as wise

“He that hath knowledge spareth his words: and a man of understanding is of an excellent spirit. Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise: and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding.” (Proverbs 17:27-28 KJV)

When I was a youth, my father quoted to me Mark Twain's thought, “It is better to keep silent and have people think you are a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.”

Think about/discuss:

Recall a time in your own life where it would have been wiser for you to have remained silent (for example, not speaking, or not sending that angry response). How could have the situation been handled differently?

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g. To express sympathy

“Now when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, they came each one from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite; and they made an appointment together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him. When they lifted up their eyes at a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.” (Job 2:11-13 , underscore added)

Job’s friends were considerate. They went to visit him during Job’s time of great pain. They remained silent. They showed Job sympathy by their presence. They did not rush into providing inadequately thought out words and phrases that do little to provide comfort (Ref. 9). They waited to speak until Job himself was ready to speak (Job 3:1, 4:1).

The period of seven days of mourning may have been a cultural norm at the time. Refer to Genesis 50:15 (death of Joseph’s father) and 1 Samuel 31:12-13 (death of Saul and his sons).

Table 2 summarizes the points of this section.

Table 2: When to be Silent

When the circumstances demand	Ecclesiastes 3:1,7
In God’s House – to show respect	Habakkuk 2:18-20
In God’s house – to listen	Ecclesiastes 5:1-2
To guard our souls from troubles	Proverbs 21:23
To avoid transgression	Proverbs 10:19
When we are feeling angry	Ephesians 4:31, James 1:20
To be counted as wise	Proverbs 17:27-28
To express sympathy	Job 2:11-13

7. Life Application

Write out the way you intend to apply each of these scriptures to your life:

a. Titus 2:7-8

“In all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.” (Titus 2:7-8)

Apply:

b. Ephesians 4:29

“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.” (Ephesians 4:29)

Apply:

c. Philippians 4:8

“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.” (Philippians 4:8)

Apply:

8. References

1. Unless noted otherwise, scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
2. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalmatia>
3. *The NIV Study Bible*, Introduction to Titus, Kenneth Barker, General Editor, Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985
4. James Strong, “The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible,” Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995.
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8. Source: <http://biblehub.com/proverbs/10-19.htm>, Pulpit Commentary
9. Source: <http://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/5729/meaning-of-number-7-in-relation-to-jobs-friends>

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