

Sound Speech

Titus 2:8

Words are powerful things. We can see the tremendous power of God's words in the creation, As the psalmist said in Ps. 33:6, "*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.*" Though our words do not carry the same power as God's, our ability to speak is part of having been made in the image of God. But, like all things God has given us, our speech can be used for both good and evil.

In this lesson we will consider the dangers of misusing our tongues as well as God's instructions for using them properly. The goal is to better understand God's instructions for "*sound speech, which cannot be condemned*" (Titus 2:8), that we may use our words for good and not evil.

The Power of the Tongue

In James 3:1-6, James says "*Let not many of you become teachers.*" The reason for this is that few men have the discipline that is needed to control their tongue as a teacher must do. James gives this warning because of the great power that is in the tongue and because of the damage one can do with uncontrolled speech. James teaches us that the effects of our words must never be underestimated.

Like a bit in a horse's mouth or a rudder on a ship, the tongue is a small member of the body, but its effects on the body are very great. Therefore, when left unchecked, the tongue can do great damage. As a small flame that sets an entire forest on fire, a simple word or a slip of the tongue can set ablaze the lives of many people. There is a positive side to fire, and like fire our words are a tremendous asset. But just as we must respect the power and the potential dangers of fire, we must also respect the power and the potential dangers of our words.

In Matt. 12:34-35, Jesus sheds some light on eternal effects that a person's words can have in his life. It has been said that "The eyes are the window to the soul" (unknown). But, according to Jesus, our words express what is in our hearts. "*A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.*" If our hearts are full of lies and deceit, then that is what will come from our mouths. If our hearts are full of love and kindness, then that is what will come from our mouths. Thus, "*From the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*"

In Matt. 12:36-37 Jesus goes on to discuss the relationship between our words and our salvation. We understand that men will be judged both by their deeds and by their thoughts. Since our words are the result of what is in our hearts, then our judgment is directly related to our speech as well. If our words are careless and disrespectful toward God or man, then we will be judged for that disrespect. Because of this connection, Jesus was able to say, "*for every idle word that men may speak, they will give an account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*" In our culture, our "freedom of speech" is often interpreted as being able to say whatever we want without regard for the consequences of our words. But if we are to benefit from Jesus' instructions, we must be extremely careful with our words and be on our guard against sinful uses of the tongue.

Sins of the Tongue

Throughout the Scriptures God has given us the instructions we need to have "sound speech." In this section we will consider the ways in which God forbids us to use our tongues—ways which result from an evil heart.

In Eph. 5:4 Paul mentions three sins that deal with improper conversation. 1. Filthiness: “Baseness...is used of obscenity” (Vine’s). “Obscene or indecent conversation...shameful or deformed” (Barnes). 2. Foolish talking: “Talk that is insipid, senseless, stupid, foolish; which is not suited to instruct, edify, or profit” (Barnes). 3. Coarse jesting: Jestings which conveys an “obscene or offensive meaning” (Clarke).

In Col. 3:8 Paul mentions two others. 1. Blasphemy: “Universally, *slander, detraction, speech injurious to another’s good name...specifically, impious and reproachful speech injurious to the divine majesty*” (Thayer’s). 2. Filthy language out of your mouth: “vulgar, obscene, dirty talk” (Louv) “foul speaking low and obscene speech, shameful speaking” (Thayer’s).

In various other passages we are warned of the sins of speaking evil against others. In Prov. 10:18, condemnation is proclaimed against slander: “whispering, defamation, evil report” (BDB), i.e. speaking evil of others behind their back. In 1 Tim. 5:13 Paul teaches that “widows indeed” are not to be gossips or busybodies. To gossip is to “tattle...to prate against” (Vine). A busybody is one who meddles in business not his/her own. One’s heart must be devoted to the goodness of God; practicing and instructing others in the ways of God. When men and women devote their hearts, and their words, to spreading rumors, gossip, and slander about other people, then it is clearly evident that their hearts are not set on the things of God.

Euphemisms: The use of euphemisms is a sin of the tongue that is overlooked by many Christians. Many do not see the harm in using these words, but when we make the connection that our words reflect what is in our hearts, euphemisms become much more significant. In Eph. 5:4 Paul condemned “filthiness” which is obscenity. Obscene words or “swear words” are universally understood as sinful, even among many people in the world. A term that is commonly applied to these kinds of words by parents and children is “four letter words.” We all understand what these are.

Concerning this idea of “four letter words” some have come to the conclusion that if they simply change a couple of letters in a word, they can say it without it being bad. These transformed words are known as euphemisms. Euphemism is defined as “*A substitution of a...less offensive expression for one that may offend*” (Wikipedia). What we need to understand is that though euphemisms may sound slightly different than swear words, they mean exactly the same thing because they are used in exactly the same way as the real things.

Consider our use of the word *baptism*. The Greek “*baptizo*” literally means “emersion”, but when the Bible began to be translated into English, sprinkling and pouring had already become a common practice in the Catholic Church. If the translators were to translate *baptism* as emersion, they would risk facing the wrath of the Vatican. For that reason they transliterated the Greek word *baptizo* into the a new word, *baptism*. Understand that the word “baptism” (though less offensive to those who don’t believe in emersion) still means the same thing!

We must acknowledge that this same principle holds true for profanity. We may change the words, but remember that our speech comes from our heart. When we use euphemisms for the same purpose as profanities, we are expressing the same attitude of heart, except that we are trying to disguise it with the euphemism.

The Lord’s name in vain: Another sin of the tongue that is commonly overlooked in our culture is taking the Lord’s name in vain. In Ex. 20:7, one of the Ten Commandments says, “*You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold Him guiltless who takes His name in vain.*” “Vain” means worthless or useless. Thus, this command forbids taking the Lord’s name in a worthless, useless, or flippant way.

We understand that, as part of the old covenant, the Ten Commandments are not our law for today. But, it is also understood that there are certain attitudes and principles reflected in the old law which God has taught all men to uphold since the beginning—such as having a proper respect for the Lord. Even in the New Testament we are taught to fear and respect the Lord (Heb. 12:28). It is in the

name of the Lord that we receive power unto salvation and we call on the name of the Lord for our salvation. The Scriptures refer to the Father and the Son in several ways: 1. God, Father, Lord, Jehovah. 2. Jesus, Christ, Lord. These are the names that we must be careful to use respectfully in our conversation.

How we refer to the Father or the Son, and how we use Their names, says a great deal about our attitude toward Them. According to Psalm 139:20, those who use the Lord's name in vain speak wickedly against God for they are His enemies. Since we speak from the abundance of the heart, if we use the Lord's name (or any word that refers to any member of the Godhead) in vain, it follows that our attitude toward God is likewise vain and worthless. Therefore, be careful how you use the Lord's name in your speech. Remember that if you use the Lord's name in a vain way, you will be required to give an account for it. Also consider that, per our discussion above, euphemisms for God's name are just as sinful.

Sound Speech

In spite of the many evil ways in which men use their tongues, our speech is meant for good. In Titus 2:8 we are told that there is a proper way for us to use our speech and that we must learn what that way is. We are to strive to be a pattern of "*sound speech that cannot be condemned.*" With sound speech we are able to build up our brethren and to honor and glorify our God.

We honor God with our speech by giving thanks to Him for all things (Eph. 5:4). We give praise to Him and glorify Him with our lips (Heb. 13:15). With our mouths we also confess the Lord Jesus Christ among men (Luke 12:28).

We benefit others with our speech by speaking those things which are proper for sound doctrine (Titus 2:1). We do this by instructing others in sound doctrine and by using that doctrine as the guidelines for our everyday conversation. In Eph. 4:15 Paul says that Christians are able to build one another up for the growth of the whole body by "*speaking the truth in love.*" With our voices we sing praising to God. But in so doing we are also "*speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, spiritual songs*" (Eph. 5:19). In 1 Pet. 3:8-12, Peter instructs us to speak those things which make for peace. Avoiding deceit we are to seek peace and pursue it. Such speech is full of kindness, gentleness, and love. It is not rude or demeaning.

When we use our tongues in this way, our speech will be "*with grace, seasoned with salt*" (Col. 4:6). It will bring honor to God. It will bring comfort and delight to our brethren, and it will encourage all to lend their hearts to God.

Finally, in James 1:19 we are instructed to be swift to hear and slow to speak. We are not to be slow to glorify God, but we are to limit our speech to those things that are necessary and beneficial. We have sayings that express this same idea. "Think before you speak": do not spout whatever comes to mind. "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." It is better for us to keep silent than to multiply words like a fool (Prov. 17:28). If we are to succeed at filling our lips with sound speech, then we must be slow to speak in order to consider each word carefully.

Conclusion

Let us seek to follow the instructions of Peter in 1 Pet. 2:1 and "*lay aside all evil speaking.*" Understand the power of the tongue and the good that can be accomplished if we use it properly. If you have used your tongue in a sinful way, repent of that and change the attitude of your heart. Let us all determine to use our speech to glorify God and to benefit our brethren.

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