

Godly and Ungodly Speech

M. W. Bassford, 4-10-11

As just about all of us know, one of the most difficult areas in our lives to govern is the area of speech. Let's consider what James has to say about this in James 3:2. His point is that the tongue is so difficult to bridle that if we ever succeed in controlling our speech, we must have developed enough self-control that we can control everything else in our lives as well. Clearly, no one ever actually reaches that level, so James is telling us that we can expect to struggle with what we say for as long as we live. Even men like Paul got in trouble on more than one occasion because of ungodly speech.

Nor are our challenges in this area made easier by the world in which we live. When so many around us have thrown off every Biblical restraint on their conduct, they hardly feel compelled to speak in godly ways either. When I was in high school and college, I was constantly surrounded by people who cussed a blue streak, and I'm quite certain that today's students are just as vulgar in their speech. Just about every Christian who works outside the home today has either a co-worker or a supervisor with a potty mouth, and much of the humor that is prevalent in the workplace is founded on dirty jokes. When we're exposed to so much corrupt speech, it's easy for our speech to become corrupted as well.

Of course, there's nothing new under the sun, and all of this is just the latest expression of a problem that is as old as mankind. There are countless recorded examples of the crude humor that was popular with the Greeks and Romans, and I suspect that sailors back then didn't speak any more politely than sailors today do. The early Christians fought the same battles with their speech that we do, and to help them in that struggle, God gave them numerous instructions on what their speech was supposed to be like. Let's look at these as we consider godly and ungodly speech.

Concerning God and Righteousness.

We particularly need to control our speech in areas **CONCERNING GOD**. We see a valuable reminder of what our attitude and speech toward God are supposed to be like in Hebrews 12:28-29. Every time we even mention God's name, we are to do so with reverence and awe. Sadly, so many around us are so far from this reverence and awe that they use the names of God and Jesus as expletives. How often do we hear people in the world say, "Oh, God", or "Oh, Christ", for the same reason that they would use some crude term for a bodily function? Even more sadly, how many Christians have become so calloused that they will do the same? Let me be clear, brethren. Using the name of God in an irreverent or disrespectful fashion is sinful and wrong. Such irreverence should never pass the lips of God's people. He is a holy God, and in our speech, we must treat Him as holy, or we can expect to suffer the consequences.

Instead, when we refer to God, we must do so in ways that give Him the glory for His power and goodness. Look at Paul's instruction in Colossians 3:17. We are to be a thankful people, and that thankfulness should be evident in our speech. For instance, we should make an effort to eliminate words like "luckily" and "fortunately" from our speech. When something good happens in our lives, that's not the product of random chance. It's the product of God's blessing. That being the case, we should give Him the glory for those good things by saying "thankfully". Likewise, when we're describing some hoped-for human event, we should keep in mind that the future blessing depends on God, and make it clear by our speech that we will receive that blessing only if the Lord wills. Nor should these become phrases that we say reflexively or unthinkingly. Instead, we should only use them as we are mindful of our trust and reliance on God.

Similarly, we should guard our speech in areas **CONCERNING RIGHTEOUSNESS** and sin. Paul gives us an important instruction about this in Ephesians 5:3-4. Let's pay attention first of all to what Paul is not saying here. He's not saying that we shouldn't ever talk about sexual immorality or other sins. Obviously, those are things that we must discuss sometimes, if only so that we can warn our children and one another about them. However, these discussions must always be carried out in a sober manner that makes the gravity of the topic clear to everyone.

In the next verse, Paul points out three main ways that we can speak inappropriately of immorality and other sin. The first is through filthiness. Another way to translate this word would be "obscenity". This refers to people who love to talk about things that are dirty or nasty, or who love to use crude, disgusting language. As a quick test, if you wouldn't use a word in front of your grandmother or one of the elders, it's probably crude and disgusting. We might think of this as the verbal equivalent of pornography. Not only is it classless, but it is also ungodly, and never befits the Christian.

The second inappropriate way to discuss such things is through foolish talk. The person who engages in this kind of foolish talk isn't just not very smart or not very wise. Instead, he is a fool because of his lack of moral character. He is ignorant of spiritual wisdom and cannot be taught. Foolish talk is what you get when this kind of fool starts talking about sex and sexual sin. In this category, we might include the co-worker who comes into the office on Monday morning bragging about all of his exploits over the weekend. It's also evident in a certain kind of women's magazine, the kind that attempts to lure purchasers through sexually laden teasers on the cover. These things are off limits for the child of God.

The third kind of sinful speech mentioned here is coarse jesting. That's just a fancy way of saying "dirty jokes". It covers everything from humor that is just out-and-out crude to innuendo and double entendre. Sex as such is not dirty or wrong. It's a precious gift that God has given to husbands and wives. When we take this gift from the privacy and sanctity of the marriage bed and start joking about it with friends and co-workers, we inevitably coarsen and cheapen it. Admittedly, some dirty jokes can be really funny. That's not the point. The point is that they're wrong.

Instead, we should work to ensure that our speech is sound. Let's look together at Titus 2:7-8. This kind of attention to our speech is important not just when we're conducting a Bible class, but all of the time. The key test here is, if some enemy of ours or of the gospel's heard us talking, would they be able to use our speech to discredit either us or our Lord? We must always speak as though someone is waiting to put the worst possible spin on our words, waiting for an excuse to call our faith into question or to claim that all Christians are just a bunch of hypocrites. This level of caution is important all the time, but especially when we must approach the topic of sex and sexual immorality. Those are delicate matters, and we must speak of them exclusively with delicacy and sensitivity. Only then will our words glorify God.

Concerning Edification and Others.

Even outside the sexual realm, it's important to speak with care and good judgment. We should keep this in mind **CONCERNING EDIFICATION**. Look at Paul's warning against corrupting speech in Ephesians 4:29. At first, it doesn't make sense that this is opposed to edification, but things come into focus once we start looking at the word that's used here in the Greek. It carries with it the sense of rotting to pieces, like an old dead tree that drops a limb every time there's a stiff breeze. If we're not careful, our speech can carry this kind of rottenness into the hearts of those around us. This can occur when we're loudly critical of the church, its leaders, or its members. Even if we don't intend to, that kind of talk can drive others away from the church entirely. Likewise, our words can have this effect when we intend to correct others. If we're harsh and angry instead of compassionate and forgiving, our rebuke can become all too personal and make our hearers start to shrivel up and die inside. Our children are especially vulnerable to this. Countless people can still quote some thoughtless negative comment their parents made decades ago, because the wound that comment made is still open and bleeding. If we're not careful, decades from now, our children could be quoting us.

The answer to this is not to avoid the subjects of misbehavior and sin. It's to be wise in the way that we mention those things, so that our words have the effect of building others up, rather than tearing them down. Paul illustrates this method with a useful metaphor in Colossians 4:6. His point is that we have to be careful in the way that we season our speech. I don't really understand it myself, but there are people out there who cook without salt or spices or anything. They can use the best ingredients available, but when you sit down at their table and take a bite, it's just as bland as can be. You choke the meal down so as not to be rude, but it's really only barely palatable. Now, on the other hand, if you take those same ingredients and hand them to a cook who knows how to use spices, and tell him or her to make the same dish, it's a night and day difference. The same meal that was a chore becomes a pleasure.

The seasoning of wisdom can make just as much difference in our speech. We can have a basically wholesome message, but if we just blurt it out without taking any thought for how we say it, we may actually accomplish the opposite of what we intended. We can hurt feelings and tear down self-esteem. On the other hand, if we put a little care and forethought into what we're going to say, exactly the same message will go down a lot more smoothly.

Finally, we must take care for our speech **CONCERNING OTHERS**. Let's begin this by examining the critique that Paul pronounces in 1 Timothy 5:13. Among other things, Paul was concerned that enrolling younger widows on the list would give them leisure to become gossips. Gossip, though, can be just as much a problem for any of us. There's a slimy little part in just about everyone that takes delight in discussing the failures and shortcomings of others. I think we like to do it because when we tear somebody else down, it makes us and those we're talking with feel morally superior in comparison. We're so busy focusing on another's sins that we don't have time to worry about our own. This doesn't mean that we can't ever bring up someone else in conversation, but it does mean that we have to be honest with ourselves about why we're bringing them up. Are we doing it because we genuinely love them and care about them and want to help them, or because we're just looking for an opportunity to establish a little temporary Society of the Self-Righteous? Brethren, if there's anything God hates, it's self-righteousness. Let's be diligent to guard against it.

In fact, if we see sin in a brother or a family member, and we're truly concerned about their souls, there's one really obvious step that we're going to take. James mentions it in James 5:19-20. The one we love isn't going to be freed from the grip of that sin until he repents of it, and the most straightforward way to get him to repent is to go to him and persuade him to do so. This is clearly an area where we need to season our speech. There are few more delicate subjects than bringing up a sin in a brother's life, and it is imperative that we speak to him carefully, lovingly, and humbly. We can't barge in, blast him, and then strut off, convinced that we've done our spiritual duty. That doesn't save him. It just makes us as sinful as he is. Instead, we must use the same empathy and compassion that Christ showed in His dealings with sinners. If we do this right, we don't just make a life-and-death difference. We make a heaven-and-hell difference.