

Controlling Our Speech

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Because all of us as human beings are different, we have different spiritual strengths and spiritual weaknesses. The sins that tempt me may be a matter of indifference to you, and vice versa. However, I suspect that every Christian, at some point in his life, struggles with the sins of the tongue. Even those of us who are naturally quieter, which I certainly am not, may still be guilty of an angry outburst at a spouse or child, or of a promise made they didn't keep.

This morning, then, we're going to spend our worship time focusing on ungodly speech. However, we're going to avoid the more familiar areas of this subject. All of us know we shouldn't use bad language or tell dirty jokes. All of us know we shouldn't lie. However, there are plenty of other ways that we can anger God with our speech, and we often have more trouble with those because we don't consider them. Let's look, then, at controlling our speech.

Five Problems

We're going to begin this morning by looking at five problems that commonly appear in our speech. In this portion, as in most of the lesson, I'm going to be relying mainly on the book of Proverbs. It is true that Proverbs isn't part of the law of Christ. However, every one of these proverbs is still true, and I believe that every one is a valid application of a New Testament principle. The first of these applications warns us against **TALKING TOO MUCH**. Solomon warns against this in Proverbs 10:19. This proverb is an application of the law of large numbers. If there's a 1 percent chance that a particular statement of mine is going to be sinful, the more I run my mouth, the more chances to sin I'm going to have, and the more I'm going to sin. Sure, it's fun to be the center of attention at parties and have everybody listening to you. I identify with that completely. However, for those of us who do love to talk, we need to recognize that the more we make ourselves the center of attention, the more likely we are to say something we will regret.

A problem that is closely tied to this one is the problem of **SPEAKING RASHLY**. The Scripture condemns this behavior in Proverbs 12:18. Usually, it is true that the more we talk, the less we think about what we're saying beforehand. If we're doing our best to hold up both ends of a conversation by ourselves, there simply isn't time to weigh every word we utter. All of that thinking time costs us valuable talking time. We blurt out the first thing that crosses our mind and then see what happens. This is certainly the way that I am naturally inclined to speak, so let me speak with the voice of experience. For those of us who are inclined this way, it's a lot of fun. However, this mode of speech is extraordinarily unwise and destructive. It destroys our relationships with others, it destroys our reputation in the church and in the community, and it destroys our ability to achieve our goals. If we speak without thinking, either we will spend a lot of time apologizing, or other people aren't going to like us very much.

One of the most popular forms of speaking rashly is **ANSWERING BEFORE HEARING**. Solomon points to this problem in Proverbs 18:13. Usually, we do this when we think we know what's going on, or we think we know the people involved, so we don't need to hear what the other guy has to say before we rush to judgment. I do this myself, even though I can't think of a good reason why I should do it. What's the harm in making sure we have a good understanding of the situation before we have our say? By contrast, the harm when we do answer without hearing is obvious. First, it often happens that there are other facts that we're not aware of, that we would have learned if we listened, that will make us look foolish when we speak before we learn them. Second, when we cut somebody else off to tell him what we think, that shows him that we think his own words are a waste of time. Third, if we're proud enough to blurt without listening, we're probably also proud enough to have trouble backing down, so that initial rash answer may well lock us into a position that isn't worth defending. None of those things are good outcomes. We need to avoid them.

Another problem that arises in our speech is the problem of **BELITTling** our neighbor. Solomon brings this problem up in Proverbs 11:12. Belittling isn't simply saying something unfavorable. Instead, when we belittle somebody, we diminish him in his own eyes or in the eyes of others. Sometimes, we do this intentionally, as when we gossip about a brother in Christ in a way designed to exalt ourselves and our audience at his expense. At other times, though, we belittle thoughtlessly, without regard for how our words might be received. For example, let's say Josh is leading singing one Sunday morning, and I think he does a terrible job, and I go out to eat with some brethren afterward, and I say, "Boy, the songleading was terrible this morning!" Whether I realize it or not, in taking a shot at Josh's songleading, I've also taken a shot at Josh, at his talent, at his preparation to lead. Those thoughtless comments hurt, brethren! When Josh finds out that I said that—and let's be real, he's going to find out—I am not going to be able to defend myself by saying, "I was just talking about your SONGLEADING. I have the highest respect for YOU," because in criticizing his songleading, I am criticizing him. We need to be very, very careful in expressing our criticism of anyone or anything, especially in a church context. If we do have something negative that must be said, we must always speak the truth in love.

Finally, we must guard against **SPEAKING AND NOT DOING**. Solomon gives one example of this in Proverbs 25:14. The specific example here is when we promise to give a gift to somebody and never follow through on the promise, but the principle is much larger than that. Before we tell another that we're going to do something, we need

to search our hearts and make sure that we know we are going to follow through on it. I've mentioned before that I can remember my father doing all the mowing at the church building when I was a little kid. Here's the way that went down. A whole bunch of men at that congregation made the commitment to take turns mowing the lawn, but as time passed, the other men forgot, or they had other things to do, and so the rotation fell apart, leaving my dad as the only one to do the mowing, because he was the only one who could be counted on. He's still upset about that. Friends, it's great to promise to do things for others. It's great to promise to do things for the Lord. However, if we don't back up our words with actions, we and everybody else would be better off if we had never spoken at all. Let's live up to our promises.

Jesus and Speech

Although there are certainly earthly benefits to avoiding unwise speech, that's not the reason why we resolve to speak wisely as Christians. We do it because we know that our Lord expects it of us. Before we partake of the Lord's Supper in a few minutes here, we're going to consider what Jesus had to say about our speech. First, we see that Jesus taught that speech was **FROM THE HEART**. Let's look together at Matthew 12:34-35. This is a restatement of one of the core principles of Jesus' ministry. What we do comes from who we are. When I speak rudely to my wife or gossip about my brother in Christ, that's not an isolated incident that has nothing to say about me. It reveals a deficiency in my character. We need to own our speech in the same way that we need to own our other actions. When I shoot off my mouth, that's not because I was angry or upset or tired or any other excuses we like to offer. It's because I was nurturing evil in my heart, and the evil found an outlet. All of us are responsible for the things we say, and we have to admit that, even about the ugly things. If we have a mouth problem, then, we don't only have a mouth problem. We have a heart problem, and we need to solve that problem both by governing our speech and by erasing the attitudes that cause it.

Because our speech is a true reflection of who we are, we **WILL BE JUDGED** for the things we say. Jesus could not be clearer about this in Matthew 12:37. Imagine, if you will, this scene on the day of judgment: Joe Bob Christian is up next, and he comes strutting up to the throne of God, knowing that he has been baptized for the forgiveness of sins, that he never missed a church service in 60 years of being a Christian, that he never tolerated pianos or orphan homes or any of those other things. He's expecting to get his ticket punched and sail right on through the pearly gates. However, God says to him, "Joe Bob, what about all those times when you spoke hatefully to those with whom you disagreed, including your brethren? Joe Bob, what about your willingness to gossip and slander and backbite your brethren? Joe Bob, what about the times when you drove people away from Christ by your rash and ill-considered speech? Did you ever repent of those sins, Joe Bob? Did you try to work on them? Did you pray about them? Did you even acknowledge that they were wrong?" And so it will be that Joe Bob and Christians like him will end up spending eternity someplace different from what they were expecting. Once again, the problem here isn't simply the words. The problem is the heart. Joe Bob is going to meet with condemnation because throughout his whole life, he was a hateful, mean-spirited, vicious man who thought he could please God by going through the motions. That won't cut it.

Here and elsewhere in Scripture, Jesus warns us against three particularly dangerous kinds of speech that aren't on the familiar path of lying and cussing and so on. The first of these is **HYPOCRITICAL SPEECH**. Jesus lays out this scenario in Luke 6:42. For some reason, whenever we think of a hypocrite, we think of someone who is knowingly saying one thing and doing another. However, this does not appear to be true of the hypocrites Jesus describes here. The guy with the beam in his eye doesn't seem to know that the beam is there, but because he's "helping" somebody else with speck removal when he himself needs help with beam removal, Jesus still calls him a hypocrite. We too could be hypocrites without even knowing it. This tells us, then, that we must invest a lot of time and effort in considering ourselves before we go to working on the spiritual problems of others. Beam Guy didn't know the beam was there, but he certainly should have known, and that's why Jesus charges him with hypocrisy. If we speak thoughtlessly about sin in someone else's life before we consider our own sins humbly and thoroughly, Jesus will likely charge us with the same thing. This doesn't mean that we have to be perfect before we talk to a brother about his sins. It does mean, though, that we must be aware of ourselves before we speak, and that will probably change what we say a great deal.

Second, Jesus urges us to beware of **ANGRY SPEECH**. This appears in Matthew 5:22. You talk about those sins that are easy to commit! Is there any one of us who can claim never to have spoken heatedly to another because we were motivated by unrighteous anger? I daresay that the devil has found a way to pick us all off with that one. As has been true of all of these, this is a heart problem as much as it is a speech problem. When I nurture anger and even hatred in my heart, those evil attitudes are inevitably going to make themselves known in my speech. Every time. Without fail. Trying to keep unrighteous anger from coming out is like trying to stop up all the holes in a colander. We want to hurl that anger outward and blame somebody else for it. In reality, though, that flare of rage should focus our attention inward. We need to ask why the devil is able to use this situation to tempt us to be angry in the first place. Above all, we need to restrain our tongues from doing his work. When I speak from unrighteous anger, I'm never glad I did. I always wish I had held my peace instead. Let's remember that, and discipline both our tongues and hearts when we're angry.

Finally, Jesus discourages **CARELESS SPEECH**. This comes from the same context we looked at earlier, in Matthew 12:36. To us, this doesn't seem to belong on the list. Even though we may well engage in hypocritical and angry speech, we would still admit that those things were wrong if we thought about it. However, idle, careless speech doesn't strike us in the same way. It came out of our mouths, yes, but we tend to feel that it doesn't really represent us because we didn't think about it before we said it. Jesus wants us to understand that oh, yes it does represent us. It represents our thoughtlessness. It represents our lack of concern for others. It represents our lack of wisdom in considering the consequences of our actions. It shows that we are not the people God wants us to be. We must understand, friends, that just because some thought wanders across our minds doesn't mean that it needs to pass our lips, because that thought could as easily be coming from the evil inside us as from the good inside us. Idle speech is not something we can shrug off about ourselves. Speaking idly and thoughtlessly is sinful and evil and wrong. We need to treat it accordingly.

These things are not merely good ideas. They are part of the requirements of our discipleship, and Jesus expects us to do them. In His life, He never spoke unrighteously, and He demands that we follow in His steps. This morning, as we examine ourselves before we partake of the Lord's supper, let's give particular thought to our speech.

Five Wise Ways to Speak

We're going to finish up this morning, now that we've explored many of the undesirable alternatives, by looking at five wise ways to speak. The first of these five wise steps is to **LISTEN**. Solomon makes this point, among other places, in Proverbs 20:12. God gave us eyes because He wants us to pay attention, and He gave us ears because He wants us to listen. Note that this is more than remaining silent while someone else is speaking. I can certainly think of times in my life when someone else was talking, but I wasn't quiet because I was paying attention to what they were saying. I was quiet because I was thinking of what I was going to say next. Listening requires more from us than quietly preparing our rebuttal! Instead, when we listen, we do our best to understand and evaluate what the speaker is saying. Usually, we have the easiest time listening when we agree with him already, and we're mentally cheering him on as he's saying all these things that line up with our way of thinking. That might be pleasant, but it's not particularly productive. Listening is most relevant and most important when someone else has a viewpoint that we haven't thought of, and especially when he has a viewpoint that we don't agree with. At least in my experience, though I may think that someone who disagrees with me is an idiot, that's usually not the case. Usually, there is at least something there to learn from. We need to make that effort.

Second, we speak wisely when we **DON'T MOUTH OFF**. We should draw this conclusion from Proverbs 12:16. One of the characteristics of ungodly anger is that it demands immediate action. Somebody says something we don't like, this rush of anger comes bubbling up from within, and we feel this overwhelming impulse to set the idiot straight or defend ourselves or whatever we think the situation demands. What Solomon wants us to understand is that an immediate, angry counterattack is usually the worst possible thing we can do. It might make us feel good, but we are not speaking in a loving, respectful way, we are not impressing others with our wisdom, and we are certainly not persuading the person we're lashing out at! When we shoot our mouths off, we're thinking selfishly to the extent that we're thinking at all, because we sure aren't thinking about others. Anytime our negative emotional reaction moves us to speak immediately, the wise thing to do is count to ten, see if we're still furious, count to ten again if necessary, and see if we can use our speech to do something more constructive than vent. That's what wise speech looks like.

Similarly, it is wise to **SPEAK JUDICIOUSLY**. We can learn this from Proverbs 16:23. As the junior-high class and I were talking about several weeks ago, so much of speaking graciously has to do not with what we say, but how we say it. Let's say that I learn that a brother is cheating on his wife. Once I find that out, I have a responsibility. I have to go to him, rebuke him for his sin, and encourage him to repent. The what is not really up to me. God doesn't leave me with a choice. However, the manner in which I choose to speak to him can have everything to do with how successful I am. I can go to him, speak the straight gospel truth, but use such arrogant, overbearing, condemnatory language that I leave him angry, defensive, and determined never to repent. I have fulfilled the letter of the law of Christ, but I have trampled all over its spirit. On the other hand, if I think about my words beforehand, how I can speak the truth in love, how I can persuade him to repent and return, then I'm far more likely to see a good outcome from him, and I am far more likely to please God. God needs Christians who make peace with their words, not provoke conflict.

Fourth, we are wise when we use our speech to **SEEK ADVICE**. Solomon touches on the importance of this in Proverbs 15:22. Here, rather than using our words to express what we think we already know, we are using them to seek additional wisdom from others. This doesn't mean that we're obliged to follow all the advice we get, or that all the advice we get is guaranteed to be good, but simply by the process of giving it an honest listen and sorting it out, our own understanding will be expanded. No matter how intelligent or wise we are, if we think through something completely on our own and refuse to seek input from others, the chances of our making a mistake go way up.

This points to another way that seeking advice is a useful check on our speech and actions. If I've come up with something that I want to do, and I tell myself that it's the right thing to do, but I don't seek the input of others, especially other Christians, before I do it, what does that tell me about my chosen course of action? I don't know about anybody

else, but here's why I refuse to seek advice: It's because I want to hide my thoughts and sometimes even my actions from others whom I respect. It's because I know, deep down inside, that if I present my plan to them, they're going to shoot it full of holes, and I won't be able to deceive myself about what I want to do anymore. My choice to shun the counsel of others allows me to cling to the illusion that I'm making a good decision, and on that basis, I've done things that were foolish and downright evil. Truth and wisdom can stand up to the light. Error and foolishness can't.

Finally, we use our speech wisely when we **REPEAT THE WORD**. An application of this point appears in Proverbs 22:17-18. Solomon here is speaking specifically of the wisdom of Proverbs, but the same principle applies to the wisdom of the entire Bible. How wonderful it would be if we made the Bible so much a part of ourselves that everything we said to others reflected Biblical teaching! How wonderful it would be if, anytime somebody came to us for advice, we could reply, "Well, here's what God's word says about that!" Wouldn't we like to have a friend like that? Wouldn't we like to be a friend like that? Certainly, the pure teaching of the Scripture isn't always going to make friends, but it will always make the friends who are worth having. If we study the word enough, and meditate on the word enough, that we reach that point that Bible comes out when we open our mouths, our speech will surely be wise indeed.