On Talking The Talk (Part II)

Timothy Berg

Like 3

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We looked last time at just some of the admonitions of the Wisdom Literature on the tongue. But calls to curb the tongue are not only present in the OT Proverbs. They are also present in the NT.

Paul on the Tongue

Paul regularly addressed the importance of our speech, and how we must now talk like Christians, with gracious and kind words instead of angry shouts and malicious slander.

> "But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."
> (ESV, Col 3:8–10)

N. T. Wright, with his characteristic grace, explains this passage;

> "When a tide of passion or a surge of anger is felt, it must be dealt with as the alien intruder it really is, and turned out of the house as having no right to be there at all, let alone to be giving orders. This is often harder than it sounds, but it must be constantly attempted, in reliance on the grace which continually renews the life of the Christian (3:10; cf. 2 Cor. 4:16).
>
> It is far easier to drift into a sin which one does not know by name than consciously to choose one whose very title should be repugnant to a Christian. The list in verse 3:8 is another ugly one: anger, the continuous state of smouldering or seething hatred; rage, when this state breaks out in actual angry deeds or words; malice, a word which in the Greek can simply mean 'evil', but which here probably has the overtone of 'evil intended to cause hurt'; slander, speech which puts malice into practical effect (the Greek is blasphēmia, speech which dishonours God himself—in this instance, by reviling a human being made in his image); and filthy language, words which, either by their foul association or their abusive intent, contaminate both speaker and hearers. All such things are to be put away from your lips: one cannot always prevent angry or hateful thoughts from springing into one's head, but they should be dealt with firmly before they turn into words.

It is not 'healthy', as is sometimes supposed, to allow such thoughts to find expression. It is certainly healthy to recognize and face up to one's own anger or frustration, and to search for proper and creative ways of dealing with it. But words do not merely convey information or let off steam. They change situations and relationships, often irrevocably. They can wound as well as heal. Like wild plants blown by the wind, hateful words can scatter their seeds far and wide, giving birth to more anger wherever they land."
- N. T. Wright, TNTC, pg. 141–142.

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Paul urges grace not only in how we address other believers, but also in how we address unbelievers;

"Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."
(ESV, Col 4:6)

He also requires generally that sins of speech must be put away by the Christian, who is instead to model a tender-hearted kindness in his speech;

"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."
(ESV, Eph 4:31–32)

Clinton Arnold explains of Paul's list of "verbal vices" here;

Bitterness and anger can eventually lead to "yelling" [ESV/KJV, "clamour"]..., a word that can also be translated "shouting" or "screaming." The term was used "of people shouting back and forth in a quarrel." All of its uses convey the idea of an intense cry or shout, such as a war cry (Zeph 1:16) or a cry of distress (1 Sam 5:12). The progression ultimately leads to various forms of "malicious talk"...—a word that denotes "any kind of speech that is defamatory or abusive." Jesus claimed that this kind of denigrating speech has its roots in a heart that is corrupt (Matt 15:19; Mark 7:21–22). Paul told Timothy that this is a characteristic way that a false teacher speaks (1 Tim 6:4). Paul regards all of this as malicious, mean-spirited, or vicious… This term ["malice/vice"] is precisely the opposite of virtue. Believers need to give focused attention to eliminating these ugly attitudes and behaviors from their lives. They are exceedingly destructive to community life.
- Clinton E. Arnold, Ephesians, ZECNT, pg. 307–308.

James On The Tongue

James has a lengthy section urging that we must control the tongue by controlling the heart;

"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water."
(ESV, Jas 3:1–12)

Doug Moo explains the point James makes and proves;

Our words, James has now made clear, have an enormous impact on our spiritual condition. But has not James perhaps exaggerated the issue? Can our speech really have that big an impact? James anticipates this objection and now launches into a series of illustrations to reinforce his belief that a comparatively small "member," such as the tongue, has influence out of all proportion to its size. James compares the tongue to the bit that controls the horse (v. 3), the rudder that steers the ship (v. 4), and the spark that causes a forest fire (v. 5). Each of these illustrations is found quite widely in the ancient world, sometimes in conjunction with one another. James again reveals himself as a pastor concerned to bring home his message to his readers by selecting images from his world and the literature of the time.
- Douglas J. Moo, The Letter of James, PNTC, pg. 152.

Jesus On The Tongue

But were none of that enough, we must reckon with the example and teaching of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. It was a mark of the ministry of Jesus that he spoke graciously to others, a fact recognized even by those who ultimately violently rejected his message;

> “And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth."
> (ESV, Lk 4:22)

Our Savior is the one who spoke the greatest sermon of all time, the Sermon on the Mount, a model of winsome but firm exhortation. And he commanded his disciples to be wary of their own words;

> “And he said, “Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.””
> (ESV, Mt 15:16–20)

> "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. 36 I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, 37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”
> (ESV, Mt 12:33–37)

According to Jesus, our every idle word will be accounted for, and we must live with a healthy heart, for the heart comes out through the mouth. Slander has no place on the Christian tongue.

Spurgeon on the Tongue

Charles Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers, that eloquent master of the English tongue of a previous age, had much to say about the tongue;

"If we have nothing to speak to edification, how much better to hold our tongue!"
- C. H. Spurgeon, Feathers for Arrows, pg. 68.

"Slander occasions distress of the most grievous kind. Those who have felt the edge of a cruel tongue know assuredly that it is sharper than the sword. Calumny rouses our indignation by a sense of injustice, and yet we find ourselves helpless to fight with the evil, or to act in our own defence. We could ward off the strokes of a cutlass, but we have no shield against a liar's tongue. Silence to man and prayer to God are the best cures for the evil of slander. It is of little use to appeal to our fellows on the matter of slander, for the more we stir in it the more it spreads; it is of no avail to appeal to the honour of the slanderers, for they have none, and the most piteous demands for justice will only increase their malignity and encourage them to fresh insult. However, when cries to man would be our weakness, cries to God will be our strength. The ear of our God is not deaf, nor even heavy. He listens attentively, he catches the first accent of supplication; he makes each of his children confess,—"he heard me.""
C. H. Spurgeon, The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons, 58, 480.

"A human tongue is soft, but it can cut to the very quick; and the wounds from a cruel tongue are not easily healed. Many a man will bear, as long as he lives, the scars that were made by a slanderous tongue. God can save us, however, even from this great trial, and enable us actually to rejoice in this sharp affliction."
- C. H. Spurgeon, The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons, 50, 96.

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- C. H. Spurgeon
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"Judge a bird by its song and a man by his utterance. The censorious measure our corn, but they use their own bushels. You may know very well what a man is by what he says of others. It is a gauge of character which very seldom will deceive you, to judge other men by their own judgment of their fellows. Their speech betrays their heart. Show me your tongue, sir! Now I know whether you are sick or well. He that speaks with an ill tongue of his neighbour has an ill heart; rest assured of that. Let us begin our Christian career with the full assurance that we shall have a great deal to forgive in other people, but that there will be a great deal more to be forgiven in ourselves, and let us set our account upon having to exercise gentleness and needing its exercise from others, 'forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you'."
- C. H. Spurgeon 365 Days with Spurgeon (Volume 4), 62.

Christians simply don't have the option to refuse to be gracious in their speech. We follow our Lord, and he commanded gracious words from us. Even when engaged in a debate or discussion with others on social media, we are required to assume the best of others, to not impugn their motives, and to treat them with dignity and respect.

On The Tone To Take When Arguing Against A Majority

I want to make one other note in this connection. Some situations require more humility of tone than others. I personally think that one of the situations that should require the greatest humility of tone is when one chooses to disagree with a majority. This doesn't mean never disagree - surely we must at points! But it speaks to our tone in how we do so. The humility of one's tone should increase greatly when defending an extremely minority position. When the essence of one's position is to claim that virtually all the experts in a specific field are wrong, one should, and must, tread with the humility and respect appropriate to such a minority position. The challenger of a consensus bears the greater burdens of both proof and kindness. And this is especially so when the challenger is not a credentialed expert, but wishes to claim that all (or almost all) the experts are wrong. Humble thyself.

There should always be liberty to challenge a consensus. A majority can be wrong, and has been before. And challenges to conformity of thought must be encouraged, for ideas that cannot be challenged should not be believed. But a consensus or near-consensus position becomes such among credentialed experts for a reason. Surely a consensus is no infallible arbiter of truth. But it should be duly respected for what it represents. Assuming that everyone else simply isn't smart enough (or honest enough) to reach the dissenting conclusions that you have reached for yourself is to cripple your own power of persuasion. Convincing others from such a platform becomes almost impossible, for the arrogance of the arguer rarely wins converts to his argument. Especially when others in a field know that the nature of the field means that such arrogance is sorely misplaced.

On the contrary, when challenging a consensus, or near-consensus, one must constantly show great respect for the many wise voices with which one wishes to disagree. This is humility. And yet one must not fail to challenge them to think further than they have as yet thought. This is bravery.

And to hold the two together is the rarest of virtues.

Talk The Talk

Christian, we must always guard our tongue. We must not only "walk the walk"; we must also "talk the talk." We do not have the option to refuse to be gracious in our speech, and charitable and respectful of others that we converse with. We don't have the option of shouting at each other, orally or in print, when Paul has demanded that "clamor" be put away from us (Eph. 4:31-32). We don't have the option of being unkind. We don't have the option to lie about others, or to assume the worst of their motives in what we say about them. We don't have the option to slander others and attack their character.

So before you write that next FB post, or that next Instagram comment; before you share that nasty SnapChat meme; before you dive into that heated online political discussion, follow the admonition of Solomon to be not rash with your words. Think over what you're about to say, and ask if it is befitting of a follower of Jesus. Will your words bring life or death? Will they build up, or tear down? Will they douse the raging fire, or spark a whole new one? It is not always healthy to say whatever you think. It is sometimes downright immoral. Let others say of us what they said of Jesus. Let them "marvel at the gracious words" that come out of our mouths. And let us, in so echoing our Savior's speech, point the world to him and the transformation of heart that he alone can perform by his work on the cross.

But what about the times where Jesus and the Apostles get downright angry with others? Sometimes they are even harsh. Is this a model for our own speech? Are there times when we should take a similar tone? If yes, how do we know what issues warrant such speech? To those questions we turn in our next blog post on the tongue.

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Preacher_of_the_word@hotmail.com

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