

“DEATH AND LIFE ARE IN THE POWER OF THE TONGUE”

(Discourse below by Ted Smith given in local Ecclesia, January 18, 1981)

Our text is Prov. 18:21, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue; and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.”

Our purpose in using this text is to remind ourselves of the seriousness of the use of the tongue. It seems to me the King James translation of this text is somewhat obscure; for you would almost get the thought that the tongue is a ruling element in our lives, a power to direct our lives and final destiny. I looked up the word in Strong’s concordance. The word is #3027 and the meaning is “a primitive word, a hand (the open one, indicating power, means, direction, etc.)” So the thought seems to be that the tongue indicates the direction we are taking. The tongue itself is not directing our wills or our lives, but it indicates or manifests the direction we are taking. So in this sense the tongue is indicating whether we are headed for death or whether we are headed for life. Moffatt tells us that “Death and life are determined by the tongue,” AND “the talkative must take the consequences.” Our next text, Matt. 12:34 makes this clear: “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.” So we take seriously Prov. 4:23, “Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.”

We would like to consider the third chapter of James, beginning with the 3rd verse, “Behold, we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships which, though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things.” These illustrations are simple and easy to understand. A bit in a horse’s mouth is very small, but we can direct its powerful body by the manipulation of the bit. And the helm of a mighty ship is very small, yet the direction of the ship can be determined by the manipulation of the helm. The Apostle then proceeds to say that while the tongue is a very little member of the human body, yet its use can direct some very great issues in life, affecting our own personal lives and the lives of others.

James continues, 5th verse, “Behold, how great a little fire kindleth!” The Diaglott says, “How large a mass of fuel a little fire kindles!” And Weymouth says, “Remember how a mere spark may set a vast forest in flames.” We think of some illustrations. During the Revolutionary days of this country, we can remember how potent were the words that were uttered at the time, leading on to the Revolutionary War and the freedom of this nation from England. And then just preceding the Civil War—how fiery were the words over the subject of Negro Slavery, leading on to the bloody struggle between the North and the South. Then during World War I, powerful words were uttered which led on to the declaration of war against Germany, and the sending of United States troops across

the Atlantic to assist in the crushing of Germany. Mussolini uttered some words which inflamed his troops to carry on a war against Ethiopia. The whole world trembles at the words of belligerence that are being uttered today by the United States and by Russia and also by China.

We proceed with the 6th verse of James Three: “And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity; so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of Gehenna.” And this will be the result if we do not use our tongues rightly!

We continue on with verse 7: “For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed and hath been tamed of mankind; but the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” We read verse 8 and now we go on with James’ description: “Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.”

So then what is the solution to this problem—if no man can tame the tongue, what will tame it? We must use the control outlined in the Scriptures for the Christian. We have weapons to carry on a warfare against all the evils of the flesh. Our weapons are not carnal, but are made up of the various elements of the truth which we, as new creatures, use to “Cast down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.” We are quoting now 2 Cor. 10:4 and 5. If we bring every thought to the obedience of Christ, then “out of the abundance of the heart” the tongue will not be used to express evil, but only that which is good. It is as simple as that!

Much the same thought, but in different language is expressed in Rom. 6, beginning with the 12th verse: “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey the desires thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin; but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.” As we stop to analyze what the Apostle says here, we realize how powerful are these words—formerly we were dead in sin, but now we are supposed to be alive and be instruments of righteousness.

We continue on now with verse 16 and on: “Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. I speak after the

manner of men, because of the infirmity of your flesh; for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity, unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness. For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. But now being made free from sin, and become servants of God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” The proposition is very clear—how are we using our members?

We think Prov. 21:23 is very wholesome: “Whosoever keepeth his mouth and tongue, keepeth his soul from troubles.” And Prov. 13:3, “He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life; but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.” And Prov. 15:1: “A soft answer turneth away wrath; but grievous words stir up anger.” In Psalm 39:1 we read: “I said I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue; I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me.” There is an interesting thought here—if we are in the presence of “the wicked” there is a danger of being influenced by the wicked, so we need to be on special guard to maintain a strong degree of moral courage. Psalm 34:13 says, “Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile.” And Psalm 141:3, “Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips.” And a prayer, Psalm 19:14: “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.” More from Psalm 119:171, 172: “My lips shall utter praise, when thou hast taught me thy statutes. My tongue shall speak of thy word; for all thy commandments are righteousness.”

Job set a wonderful example, Job 2:7 to 10: “So went Satan forth from the presence of the Lord, and smote Job with sore boils, from the sole of his foot unto his crown. And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes. Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God and die.” (What an awful thing for a wife to say to a righteous husband!) “But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What! shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips.”

The Prophet gives some good advice in Eccl. 5:2: “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God; for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few.” And 10:12: “The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself.”

We need to be on our guard and study carefully our mental arguments, else we could be deceived and sin with our lips: Jer. 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”

Jesus gave us some wholesome information in Matt. 12:35-37: “A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things; and an evil man, out of the evil treasure, bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle [careless] word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment; for by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.” The same principle applies to us; and we must constantly judge ourselves in honesty and humility. We need our Advocate where we make slips. We have a perfect example to try to live up to as expressed in Luke 4:22: “all bear him witness, and wondered at the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth.” Jesus’ example is very elevating to our aspirations. Paul expresses a very elevating thought in Phil. 1:27: “Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ.” This applies to our words and all our conduct. And Paul in Eph. 4:29 says: “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.” Weymouth expresses it this way: “Let no unwholesome words ever pass your lips.” And this is easy to understand when we note the way our words should be used—they are to “edify” and “minister grace unto the hearers.” This is an important key to the proper words we should use—what they are supposed to do!

Let us consider now Phil. 4:8: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.” Brother Benjamin H. Barton gave a discourse along this line, and it was entitled “CONSECRATED THINKING!” And we believe Brother Barton lived this standard.

Paul taught in Col. 4:6 that: “let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt.” The New English Bible puts it this way: “Let your conversation be always gracious, and never insipid,” (never tasteless).

Col. 3:8 gives some pertinent exhortation: “But now ye also put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth.” Weymouth says for “filthy communication”—“foul-mouthed abuse.” We are not to permit anything to come from our mouth that is SHAMEFUL. The heart must be absolutely clean.

A very happy thought is expressed in Titus 2:13, 14: “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour, Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.” So Jesus redeemed us from the condemnation that we have in Adam, AND also that he might purify unto himself “a peculiar people, zealous of good works.” Good works would not include any misuse of the tongue.

And Peter tells us, 2 Pet. 3:11: “Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness.” We are tested now to see if we are out of harmony with the things that are to be “dissolved.” A similar thought is found in 1 Peter 2:12: “Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles, that, whereas they speak against you as evil doers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.” Our lives have an influence even now, before the world’s “day of visitation.” We remember something Bro. Bender (now deceased) said years ago—he remarked about brethren who refrained from evil speaking—he noticed they “held their lips tight.”

Peter in 1 Pet. 2:1 said: “Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies and envies, and all evil speaking.” 20th verse: “For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently, but if when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.” There is no virtue in suffering patiently for the wrong use of the tongue.

There is a beautiful little poem that helps us to overcome the tendency to speak unkindly about others:

“If We Only Understood”

Could we draw aside the curtains
That surround each other’s lives,
See the naked heart and spirit,
Know what spur the action gives—
Often we would find it better,
Purer than we judge we would;
We would love each other better
If we only understood.

Could we judge all deeds by motives,
See the good and bad within,
Often we would love the sinner
All the while we loathe the sin.
Could we know the powers working
To o’erthrow integrity,
We would judge each other’s errors
With more patient charity.

If we knew the cares and trials,
Knew the efforts all in vain,
And the bitter disappointments—

Understood the loss and gain—
Would the grim external roughness
Seem, I wonder, just the same?
Would we help where now we hinder?
Would we pity where we blame?

Ah, we judge each other harshly,
Knowing not life's hidden force;
Knowing not the fount of action
Is less turbid at its source.
Seeing not amid the evil
All the golden grains of good,
Oh, we'd love each other better
If we only understood.

The above poem suggests that we should be considerate of others, as we are considerate of ourselves—we should refrain from misusing our tongues! Below is another poem well worth our careful consideration.

“Judge Not By Outward Appearance”

Judge not; the workings of the brain
And of the heart thou canst not see;
What looks to thy dim eye a stain,
In God's pure light may only be
A scar, brought from some well-won field,
Where thou wouldst only faint and yield.

The look, the air, that frets thy sight,
May be a token that below
The soul hath closed in deadly fight
With some internal, fiery foe,
Whose glance would scorch thy smiling grace,
And cast thee, shuddering on thy face.

The fall thou darest to despise:
May be the angel's slackened hand
Hath suffered it that he may rise
And take a firmer, truer stand;
Or, trusting less to earthly things,
May henceforth learn to use his wings.

And judge none lost; but wait and see,
With hopeful pity, not disdain;
The depth of the abyss may be
The measure of the height of pain
And love and glory that may raise
This soul to God in after days.

Perhaps we are all familiar with the short verse below:

“Three Gates of Gold”

Let every thought thy lips would utter pass three gates of gold,—
But, if through these it fails to pass, then let it not be told;
And o’er each gate in silver letters written thou wilt find,
Above the first one, “Is it True?” the second, “Is it kind?”
And “Is it necessary?” o’er the third one and the last.
Then guard thy thoughts, let none escape, save those these gates have passed!

(Incidentally, this applies to personal affairs and not to teachings or false teachers.)

We must pass tests of Christian love down here on earth before we are prepared for joint-heirship with Christ. “Though I speak with the tongue of men and angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things... And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is love.” 1 Cor. 13:1-13.

We have five manna comments that appeal to us as very appropriate to our subject: Feb. 20, May 25, August 1, August 8 and Oct. 1. We start with Feb. 20th.

“If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue ... this man’s religion is vain.” James 1:26. Because the tongue is the index of the heart, because “out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh,” therefore the unbridled tongue, speaking selfishly, enviously, bitterly, boastfully, slanderously, proves that the heart from whose fullness these overflow is unsanctified, unholy, grievously lacking of the spirit of Christ—hence, whatever religion it may have attained is thus far vain, as that heart is not saved, nor in a salvable condition. But the Good Physician has pointed out antidotes for soul-

poisoning—medicines which if properly taken according to directions, will sweeten the bitter heart.

Now May 25th: “Be not overcome of evil.” Rom. 12:21: We are never to take up or to use evil words or methods or manners. To do so is temporarily to join the enemy, or to admit that his implements and methods are better than those of the Captain to whom we belong. To answer anger with anger, evil report with evil report, bitter words with bitter words, slander with slander, persecution with persecution, blow with blow, or any of these, would be to endeavor to overcome evil with evil. This, which is natural to our fallen natures, is what we are commanded to avoid, that we may the more thoroughly cultivate the new nature. To be misled by the adversary to use his methods in any of these ways is to be overcome of evil.

Next August 1st: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Prov. 18:21. The tongue’s influence exceeds that of all our other members combined; and to control it, therefore, in the Lord’s service, is the most important work of the Lord’s people in respect to their mortal bodies and the service of these rendered to the Lord. A few words of love, kindness, helpfulness—how often have such changed the entire course of a human life!—yea, how much they have had to do with molding the destiny of nations! And how often have evil words, unkind words, slanderous words, done gross injustice, assassinated reputations, etc.! or as the Apostle declares, “set on fire the course of nature”—awakening passions, strifes, enmities, at first unthought of. No wonder he declares such tongues “set on fire of Gehenna”—the Second Death!

Next August 8th: “Into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house. And if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it: if not, it shall turn to you again.” Luke 10:5, 6. Each laborer in the present harvest should note well the Lord’s instruction in these verses. Wherever the Lord’s representatives go peace should go, not strife, confusion, turmoil, quarreling. True, the Truth will prove to be a sword that will arouse opposition, yet it should be the Truth that causes the opposition and division and not any rudeness or unkindness of word or action on the part of the Lord’s representatives. There are plenty of things to aggravate mankind in this our busy day, and all who have received the Truth should receive also its spirit “speaking peace through Jesus Christ.”

Now finally Oct. 1. “I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue; I will keep my mouth with a bridle while the wicked is before me.” Psalm 39:1. Probably every person of experience will fully agree with the statement that the tongue is potent in its influence beyond any other member of the body, for either good or evil. Experience teaches also that with the vast majority it is easier to control any other organ than the tongue. So skillful a servant is it that every ambition and passion and inclination of the fallen nature seeks to use it as a servant or channel for evil. It requires, therefore, on the

part of the Christian, increased vigilance, wisdom and care so as to govern this member of his body and bring it into subjection to the new mind in Christ, that it shall be not a hindrance to himself or to others, but on the contrary a help in the narrow way.

NO MISUNDERSTANDING

The eye's a better student and
More willing than the ear;
Fine counseling is confusing,
But example's always clear;
And the best of all the preachers
Are the ones who live their creeds
For to see the good in action
Is what everybody needs.

I can soon learn how to do it
If you'll let me see it done,
I can watch your hands in action,
But your tongue too fast may run;
And the lectures you deliver
May be very wise and true,
But I'd rather get my lesson
From observing what you do.

For I may not understand you
And the high advice you give,
But there's no misunderstanding
How you act and how you live.
—Author Unknown

(Above from a letter written to me by Marguerite Rosswick.)

—But be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them; for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.
—1 Tim. 4:12 and 16.