



Spiritual Disciplines: Speech

*"Wise men talk because they have something to say;
fools, because they have to say something."*

Plato

*"Better to remain silent and be thought a fool
than to speak out and remove all doubt."*

Abraham Lincoln

So wrote two wise men from the past. What does our speech say about us, about our walk with God? Think about the past week; have you said anything that you regret? What was it and why do you regret it? Did you hear anything that you wish you had not heard?

Genesis

The first speech we read of in Scripture is in Genesis 1 as God calls creation into being. Genesis also records that man is made in the image of God and surely our ability to use speech is one aspect of that image. Yet, instead of creative good, our speech is rather more destructive – "Verbal cyanide", as Kent Hughes describes it in his *Disciplines of a Godly Man*. He lists gossip, innuendo, flattery, criticism, and diminishment of others as common patterns.

Isaiah

Isaiah realised the sinfulness of his speech before God. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5).

James

James is just as blunt: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." (James 1:26). Worthless religion that is the state of our faith if we cannot discipline our tongues. James gives further advice;

"Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger ... We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check ... All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison ... With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers this should not be. Can both fresh and salt water flow from the same spring?"

Jesus

Jesus cuts to the heart of the matter: "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give an account on the day of judgement for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and

by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:34-37). Our speech reflects our hearts and so often it condemns us.

So what are we to do? How can we discipline our speech?

Effect of Speech on Others – Advice from Proverbs

The book of Proverbs offers much practical advice. In his *Disciplines of a Godly Man* Kent Hughes provides an appendix citing many proverbs regarding the tongue. Some tell us when we should be silent, for example: "*Where words are many sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise*". (Prov 9:10); "*Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; and when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.*" (Prov 17:27-28); "*Do not slander a servant to his master*" (Prov 30:10). Others tell us when it is time to speak up: "*A truthful witness saves lives*", (Prov 14:25); "*A soft answer turns away wrath.*" (Prov 15:1); "*Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy*" (Prov 31:26). It is a useful exercise to read through the book of Proverbs to see the many other verses regarding the tongue.

And Advice from Paul

Paul also gives good advice: "*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor ... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen*" (Eph 4:25, 29). "*Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving*" (Eph 5:4). "*Do everything without complaining or arguing*" (Phil 2:14). "*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone*" (Col 4:6).

Effects of Speech on Ourselves

As well as their effects on others our words can have a direct effect on our own thoughts – reinforcing positive or negative beliefs and attitudes (see Don Colbert's, *Stress Less – The Impact of Words on Your Own Stress Level*, a Christian physician's reflection on coping with stress). In his book *The Discipline of Grace* Jerry Bridges urges believers to "*Preach the Gospel to yourself*".

What steps can you take to take to be more disciplined in your speech? From the advice in Proverbs we could begin with considering if we should simply speak less. A helpful suggestion from our adult Bible Class when considering this topic was to pause and think TNK: Is what we are about to say True, Necessary and Kind. If it does not meet these three tests don't say it! Finally, as our speech is the overflow of our hearts, how are our hearts?

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