

The Power of the Tongue

Proverbs 18:21

Introduction

How easy is it to point out the sins of the world? While it is right and proper for the church to identify and preach against the sins “out there,” the church must also preach against the sins in its own ranks. Judgment begins with the household of God (1 Pet. 4:17). One area that we need regular reminders about is the use of our tongue. As with many other things, God is not just interested in getting people to stop sinning with their tongue. That is just the first step. God desires that we use our words to do good. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Prov. 18:21). To those who love to speak rightly, the tongue is a blessing. To those who love to speak wrongly, it is a curse.

The Power of the Tongue

There are many exhortations about the tongue or our words throughout Scripture (over one hundred verses in Proverbs alone). Why does God care about our words so much? First, words are central to God’s person and work. God created the heavens and the earth, “framed the worlds,” by means of His spoken word (Gen. 1, Heb. 11:3). We are also told that the Father made all things by means of His Son, who is also the Word (John 1:1-3, Heb. 1:1-2), and continues to hold all things together by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3, cf. Col. 1:17). And by His words, in the end, He will pass judgment over each person to welcome him into heavenly rest or cast him into outer darkness (Matt. 25:31-46). The principle of word or language is part of the Triune nature of God and a central part of His creating and sustaining all things. God cares about words because they are a reflection of who He is and what He does.

Second, God has chosen words as the primary medium to reveal Himself and His work. God saw fit to communicate the truth about Himself most clearly through the spoken and then written words that comprise the Bible. And He has made the world such that the way in which the gospel message primarily spreads is through the medium of words (Ps. 68:11, Is. 52:7, Matt. 28:18-20, Rom. 10:14-18). God created and has redeemed the world by means of His Word, and now He sends His church out to imitate Him by pressing out that redemption by means of words.

Third, man uses words in imitation of God. When God created Adam, one of the first things he did was to begin naming the animals (Gen. 2:19). From this we see that man’s speech is a part of the way in which he takes dominion as God’s vicegerent over creation. Shortly after this, Adam speaks in poetry, describing and marveling at the glory of the woman (Gen. 2:23; cf. Prov. 31:28-29). Man’s words are intended to be used in imitation of God, ruling over creation and glorifying the things God has done.

Because of sin, our words often are not faithful imitations of God. A fourth reason God gives so much attention to our words in His Word is because our words reveal our heart. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34, cf. Prov. 10:20). In fact, Jesus goes so far as to say that at the day of judgment, we will give an account for every idle word. “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned”

(12:36-37). Every time you open your mouth, you are expending power. The work of your tongue is always either for good or for evil. The one thing it is not is meaningless. Because the tongue wields such power, we should take great care with our words (cf. James 3:1-12). “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (Prov. 10:19, cf. Eccl. 5:2). “There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health” (Prov. 12:18).

Death or Life on Your Tongue

Here are some examples of death and life on the tongue. God hates a lying tongue (Prov. 6:16-17, Ps. 34:13) because Jesus is the truth (John 14:6) and lying is contrary to His nature (Titus 1:2). Lying undermines the unity of Christ’s body (“for we are members of one another” – Eph. 4:25). Paul tells us to get rid of corrupt (“rotten”) words (Eph. 4:29, 5:4) – “all those expressions which are wont to be employed for the purpose of inflaming lust” (Calvin). Filthiness and coarse jesting is often the product of sin, or an enticement to sin. As such, it is death-talk. Christians have been made alive in Christ, and so we should not breathe out death (cf. Rom. 6:11). Gossip and slander are similar tongue-sins. Gossip is idle talk or rumors usually about personal or private affairs (Prov. 11:13, 1 Tim. 5:13). Slander is similar, but with malicious intent (Prov. 16:27, 1 Tim. 3:11). In fact, one of the Greek words for this is *diabolos*. Gossip and slander are devil-talk. Grumbling and complaining (Phil. 2:14, 1 Pet. 4:9) is often thought of as an “acceptable sin.” You might justify your complaining because of the good things you are doing or how hard your circumstances are. But complaining is rooted in self-centeredness, focused on your particular circumstances and how you feel about them.

Instead of lying, we are to speak truth to one another as part of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:25). Instead of rotten and filthy speech, our words should be good for building up the household of God and full of thanksgiving (Eph. 4:29, 5:4, cf. 1 Thess. 5:11). Our speech should be seasoned with the salt of God’s grace (Col. 4:6, cf. Lev. 2:3). Instead of devil-talk, God-fearers should “continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name” (Heb. 13:15), covering with love instead of exposing our neighbor’s faults or sins. Instead of grumbling, we should do everything with our eyes fixed on Christ, rejoicing and giving thanks in all things (1 Thess. 5:16-18, Prov. 12:25). There is life in the power of your tongue if it is subject to Christ.

Conclusion

Out of the heart the mouth speaks. How you speak is a measure of your heart. “If anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless” (James 1:26). How you talk is a reflection of your attitude toward Christ. If you believe in Christ and in the grace that He poured out upon you by giving His life for you on the cross and raising you out of your sins—if that knowledge of Him is in your heart, then it should be evident in your speech. And so we pray with the psalmist, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer” (Ps. 19:14). We have been raised from death to life. Let us talk like it.