

The Power of the Tongue

*“Death and life are
in the power of
the tongue.”*
—*Proverbs 18:21*

“THE TONGUE OF THE JUST is as choice silver: . . . The lips of the righteous feed many.” “A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit.” (Prov. 10:20,21; 15:4) “If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. 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. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! 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; . . . 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. 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 so to be.”—James 3:2-10

These texts and others emphasize that the tongue has tremendous influence. One cannot overestimate the power of words, either for good or evil. Nearly all the activities of the human race are initiated and brought to fruition through words, in one form or another. Additionally, through words which have been written in the Bible, God has revealed to us his great plan of the ages.

Through words, Satan has deceived men concerning the character of God. By words those who have learned to know something of the length, breadth, height, and depth of God’s character have endeavored to demonstrate their devotion to him. Using words, Satan has taught error concerning the great fundamental truths taught in the Holy Scriptures. Through words also, those who have dedicated themselves to knowing and doing God’s will have endeavored to enlighten others concerning the glories of the coming kingdom, when God’s will shall be done as fully in earth as it is in heaven.—Matt. 6:10

According to the pages of history, the tongue has sent many persons to their death, stirring in men the most wrathful passions to which humanity is subject. Conversely, the tongue has also moved men to achieve the highest and loftiest sentiments and ideals of which they are capable. Words have been used to encourage others to consecrate themselves to God, in order to serve him, desiring ever to know and to do his will.

THE TONGUE NOT FULLY TAMEABLE

As children of God, we should constantly pray and daily determine to make our words a blessing to all, and an influence for good. Yet, as quoted in the foregoing, the Apostle James says that man will always make mistakes with his tongue, unless he is a perfect man. Since none of us is perfect, it is important for us to realize our own limitations with regard to the use of this most influential part of our being.

James also says we can put a rudder on a ship and steer it, or put a bit in a horse's mouth and control that strong animal. To illustrate this in our day, by having a steering wheel on an automobile, we may, for example, easily direct it to an ecclesia meeting or a convention. Thus, whether it be steering a ship, controlling a horse, or driving an automobile, man encounters scarcely any trouble at all. However, when it comes to controlling the tongue, that is very different. "The tongue can no man tame," James states emphatically.

This does not mean that since we cannot control the tongue there is no use in trying. Rather, James' argument is that the tongue can be a wonderful servant, but that it only gives utterance, for good or for evil, based on the thoughts of its master. Thus, we are the masters of our tongues, even though, because of imperfection, we cannot fully control and steer them toward good.

"OUT OF THE ABUNDANCE OF THE HEART"

Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." (Matt. 12:34; Luke 6:45) This does not literally apply in every instance, because there are slips of the tongue which certainly do not

come from the depths of our hearts. Nevertheless, for the most part, we talk about the things with which our hearts are filled—things that are uppermost in our thoughts. Therefore, it is proper to say that our words indicate what is in our minds, and over a period of time, our heart condition.

As children, a doctor might have said to us, “Let me see your tongue.” It seemed he could determine certain things about our general condition of health by doing so. How similar it is along spiritual lines. Our tongues give an indication as to whether our heart and overall spiritual health are good or poor. As children of the Lord we want to be spiritually healthy. The Scripture says, “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.” (Prov. 4:23) One of the important “issues of life” is the proper control and use of our tongue, and here we are admonished that we have a work to do in this regard, by diligently keeping our heart in a proper condition.

GOD’S WORD PROSPERS

According to Isaiah 55:11, God sends forth his Word to “accomplish that which” he pleases, and which “shall prosper” in us if we permit it to regulate our thoughts and lives. The Word which “goeth forth out of” his mouth is the sacred Scriptures. Paul said, “Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work. (II Tim. 3:16,17, *Revised Version*) God’s Word, however, can “prosper” and make us “complete,” only if we keep our hearts

with all diligence. Only by so doing will we be able to use this servant that the Lord has given us—his precious Word—for “every good work.”

The Word of God that will prosper in us, if we permit it to control us, has both a letter and a spirit. It is true that some know the letter of the Scriptures, and let us thank the Lord that we know some of the letter of the Word. However, it is far more important that we know both the spirit and the letter of God’s Word. We are to serve God “in newness of the spirit,” and not merely “in oldness of the letter.”—Rom. 7:6

FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

Paul also admonishes us, “Be filled with the Spirit.” (Eph. 5:18) It is by the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit that we let his thoughts fill our hearts so that we can keep them with all diligence. By so doing, the fountain from whence come our words will be sweet. Continuing his discussion of the tongue, James writes further, “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. Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.”—James 3:11-13

If our hearts are filled with the Spirit; if they are overflowing with the love of God; if they prize the fact that the Lord has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light; if they are filled with an appreciation of the heavenly calling; and if they are filled with thanksgiving for God’s tender love and

care as manifested in the providences of our lives—then we will give utterance to such heart motivations, because “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.”

On the other hand, if we do not do this, our hearts might soon become corrupt and selfish. If they are not filled with the Spirit, they will be filled with something else. They may even be filled with those things which are not lovely—which emanate from the spirit of our fallen flesh or from the world. If our heart is filled with these other things, the tongue will, likewise, give evidence of such thoughts.

A SERVANT

The tongue is a servant. The question is, whom is it serving? It is possible that at times, if we permit it, if we are slack, and if we do not keep our heart with all diligence, it might serve the world, the flesh, or even our great Adversary, the Devil. The tongue can also serve the New Creature. (II Cor. 5:17) The New Creature desires to please God, and to know his will so that it can more properly serve him. How important it is, then, that our tongue be a servant of the New Creature.

The Scriptures also admonish us, “Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips.” (Ps. 141:3) The psalmist here suggests a watchfulness before one speaks. If we set the watch before the words reach our lips, it will most assuredly help us in our endeavor to use the tongue as a proper servant.

A LIFELONG BATTLE

The tongue will often demonstrate that we are imperfect. Indeed, the mind, which in many ways

influences our words, is a continual battleground. Due to our fallen condition, we will lose battles in the mind from time to time. Such losses will, no doubt, manifest themselves in less than wholesome and uplifting words or actions. In one extreme example from the Scriptures, we recall the instance when “the devil . . . put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray” Jesus. (John 13:2) Satan planted a thought into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus. Judas’ mind and heart failed to fight against it, and as a result he suffered great loss. The important thing for us to keep in mind is that if Satan could put it into the heart of Judas to commit such an act, he can also put evil thoughts into our hearts. That is why we must fight, using the entire armor of God, against this wily and dangerous foe.—Eph. 6:11-18

Satan has various methods, and the Bible says “we are not ignorant of his devices.” (II Cor. 2:11) The Devil can put it into the hearts of the brethren to desire to judge one another. At first this seems strange. We know that the world does not like us, and that, similarly, the Devil is our greatest enemy. On the other hand, we know our brethren are those who have been called out of darkness into the light. (I Pet. 2:9) We understand that our brethren have the same desire to serve the Lord as we do. They may not all serve in exactly the same way, nor be of the same temperament. Nevertheless, they are fully consecrated and devoted to serving God, and doubtless the most blessed hours we have ever spent have been in fellowship with those who enjoy “like precious faith.” (II Pet. 1:1) Even so, how often Satan has successfully tempted us to use our tongues as instruments of criticism of our brethren.

We know that Satan tried to win the battle with our Lord Jesus when he tempted him in the wilderness. (Matt. 4:1-11) Victory on the part of the Lord was gained simply by saying, “It is written”—quickly, tersely, to the point. Thus, when such thoughts come into our minds, particularly as we may harbor criticism toward our brethren, let us reject them, as Jesus did, with “It is written.” “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.”—Matt. 7:1,2

LOOK FOR THE GOOD

It is interesting to think of some of the things that man finds very difficult to achieve. If you look through a magnifying glass at a pencil that has just been sharpened, it still looks blunt. A needle appears to the naked eye to be extremely sharp, but here again, through a magnifying glass it, too, may be blunt and rough-edged. By contrast, think of the thorns of a rose bush. Even under magnification, it is remarkable how sharp and how precise they are in their formation. The difference, of course, is in the maker. While God can form and create all things perfectly, we cannot even put a perfect point on a needle.

We mention the above examples to show that, if we are looking for flaws and imperfections in one another, we will most certainly find them, just as a magnifying glass will show the bluntness and jagged edges of a pencil point or a needle. The Scripture says, “He that hath a froward heart findeth no good.” (Prov. 17:20) Although not a Scripture, someone has also wisely said, “You can never find the straight if

you are looking for the crooked.” If our hearts are hindered from seeing the good, pure and beautiful character qualities of our consecrated brethren, we will be constantly vulnerable to the evil suggestions of the Adversary. Most importantly, we will lose the battle if we do not root out of our heart those things which we should not permit to reside therein.

The Scriptures tell us that “the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.” (Prov. 4:18) We should rejoice in the privilege we have of discussing with one another the light of present truth, and thereby grow in grace and in knowledge. In doing so, however, we should always look at each other as New Creatures. If we view each other in this manner, as the Lord does, we will not see the flawed, stumbling, imperfect human ways with which each one of us is born.

DEEDS VERSUS WORDS

If Satan put it into our minds to steal from our brother and we succumbed, it would not seriously harm him, because no matter what we stole, it could be replaced. If the Devil should induce us to burn down someone’s home, it could be repaired or rebuilt. However, when it comes to hearsay, rumors, hints, suggestions, gossip—which are all words—evil results from these are very difficult to rectify, or erase from the mind. If we do these things it is an alarming indication that we are losing the battle which takes place in the mind. “He that soweth discord among brethren,” the Bible states, “doth the LORD hate.”—Prov. 6:16,19

Although it might appear that more damage could be done by evil deeds than by evil words, it is not

so. A blow might break or bruise the flesh, while a word might break or bruise the heart. The way we are constituted, flesh wounds heal easily, while heart wounds sometimes bleed a long time, and often leave a scar. Let us think soberly concerning these things.

A BLESSING

It is a blessing that we have the ability to talk with others, especially our brethren. The Lord is wise, however, in telling us about what we should not talk, and also about what we can talk. “Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour: I am the LORD.” “A froward man soweth strife: and a whisperer separateth chief friends.”—Lev. 19:16; Prov. 16:28

By contrast, we read: “My tongue also shall talk of thy righteousness all the day long: for they are confounded, for they are brought unto shame, that seek my hurt.” “Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk ye of all his wondrous works.” “All thy works shall praise thee, O LORD; and thy saints shall bless thee. They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and talk of thy power; To make known to the sons of men his mighty acts, and the glorious majesty of his kingdom. Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations.”—Ps. 71:24; 105:2; 145:10-13

This is the use to which our tongues are to be employed. This is to what they have been dedicated, and this is the way in which we have the privilege of exercising them. The Lord has endowed us with the faculty of speech. It is a wonderful privilege to use that faculty in harmony with his will.

“THE USE OF EDIFYING”

The Heavenly Father has saved us by grace through faith, and has given us of his Holy Spirit. (Eph. 2:8,13,18) He has kept us from falling, and asked us to love one another and manifest that love in our attitudes toward one another. (Jude 24; John 13:34,35) Therefore, let us keep in mind what James was endeavoring to tell us—that the only sure way of controlling the tongue is by keeping our hearts pure and filled with the desire to talk about the mighty acts of God.

Our conversation will thus “be good to the use of edifying.” Our words will “minister grace unto the hearers.” (Eph. 4:29) Let us each, therefore, keep our heart with all diligence, knowing that out of it will flow the words of our mouth. Citing again the words of our opening text, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” May God give us the tongue of a consecrated person, that we may know how to speak words of encouragement and comfort. “A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!” “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.”—Prov. 15:23; 25:11 ■