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Life And Death Are In The Tongue

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Jesus said, “. . . out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh..” (Matt. 12:34). With but casual thought we easily recognize the truthfulness of His statement. Our words are a reflection of the mainstream of our thoughts, and hence, our characters. If you associate with a person for but a short time you can soon determine the stuff with which his heart is filled, good or bad, by his speech.

One’s true character cannot be long hidden. In his casual conversations, his intense discussions, in his passionate cries, in times of provocation, in times of frustration, in times of joy, his lips and tongue declare the arena of his heart’s activity. Solomon said, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue,” (Pro. 18:21). Indeed it is true that we can buoy men to great heights of life and joy and success by our words, but we can also plunge them into abysmal depths of sin, sorrow, sadness and despair by our words.

Solomon has quite a lot to say about the proper use of the tongue in his book of Proverbs. Let’s focus on some of his statements. First the good:

- “A word fitly spoken is as apples of gold in a network of silver,” (Pro. 25:11).
- “Pleasant words are as honeycomb, sweet to the soul and health to the bones,” (Pro. 16:24).
- “A word in due season, how good it is!” (Pro. 15:23).
- “A gentle tongue is a tree of life,” (Pro. 15:4).

The person who can spread abroad these kinds of sweet verbal fragrances throughout the sphere of his influence is one who is of inestimable value to his fellows. His company will be sought, and his presence will be cherished because of the positive influence his heart, his life and his words have on others. When his associates and friends are downtrodden, he can help them to stand again. When they are sad, he can make their hearts to sing again. When they are confused, he can point them in the right direction., and when they are prospering spiritually and in every other way he will exhort them to proceed circumspectly and cautiously and humbly lest they unwittingly fall into the snare of the devil.

This sweet-tongued, much loved and respected person was not born the kind of person he is. He could be as negative as the next person, but he knows there is no joy or profit in it for himself or others. Indeed, as Solomon said, “The heart of the wise instructeth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips,” (Pro. 16:23). This person has trained himself to be of superior quality. Furthermore, “The lips of the wise disperse knowledge” (Pro. 15:7). A person is not wise because his lips are able to disperse knowledge, but his lips are able to disperse knowledge because he is wise. And he is wise because he has sought wisdom as hidden treasure (Pro. 2:4). Such a person “. . . hath joy in the answer of his mouth,” (Pro. 15:23).

Now, the bad tongue. . . It is amazing that the same mouth that is potentially capable of doing so much good can be productive of so much bad when directed by a godless heart (James 3:11)! “With his mouth the ungodly person destroyeth his neighbor,” (Pro. 11:9). When a person has a wicked heart he, like a tornado skimming across the landscape, sows havoc everywhere he/she goes. Indeed, how much damage can be done by “fervent lips and a wicked heart,” (Pro. 26:23).

This person calculates to do wickedness with his words either with profanity, obscenity, dishonesty, discouragement or backbiting gossip. He wants to hurt someone by his words or at least hinder someone’s moral, mental and spiritual progress by keeping them in bondage to sin and Satan. “The words of the wicked are lying in wait for blood,” (Pro. 12:6). “By perverseness of his tongue he breaketh the spirit” of those around him,” (Pro. 15:4).

Furthermore, Solomon speaks of the person who does a lot of meaningless talking. “In the multitude of words there wanteth not transgression; but he that refraineth his lips doeth wisely,” (Pro. 10:19). This is not just a statistical matter like saying, the more a person spends driving his car, the more likely he is to have a wreck. Anyone who talks a lot will probably make a mistake occasionally. Solomon is not talking about that. He is talking about the person whose thinking is not in proportion to his talking — the one who talks much and thinks but little. He will eventually run out of anything constructive to say and when this happens, if he pushes himself to babble on, he begins backbiting and gossiping about other people. There is always someone who is ready to hear the gossipers’ slanderous words, and to him “the words of the whisperer are as dainty morsels,” (Pro. 18:8). Such backbiting is harmful to everyone involved in it: the gossipers, the listener and the one talked about. Solomon says, “a fool’s lips enter into contention, and his mouth calleth for stripes. A fool’s mouth is his destruction, and his lips are a snare to his soul” (Pro. 18:6-7).

The Bible gives instruction to those whose experience puts them in proximity of a gossipers. “He that goeth about as a talebearer revealeth secrets; therefore company not with him that openeth wide his lips,” (Pro. 20:19). So many problems in the world and in the church could be prevented if we would learn not to gossip. “For lack of wood the fire goeth out; and where there is no whisperer, contention ceaseth,” (Pro. 26:20).

And finally, there is the problem of the person who wants to talk but does not want to listen. He wants to dominate the conversation and steam roll over anyone else who wants to speak. He is usually the person who wants to express his self-willed opinions without properly assimilating and analyzing the facts of the matter under consideration. Solomon says of this kind of person, “he that giveth answer before he heareth, it is folly and shame unto him,” (Pro. 18:13). James says “let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak...” (Jas. 1:19).

Indeed, “life and death are in the tongue.” But the tongue expresses only what is in the heart, the mind. We might say the tongue is a barometer of the mind of man. Make the mind what it ought to be: righteous, pure, holy, and clear; and the tongue will say what it ought to say. In that case, only life will be in the tongue, no death at all. What is it for you, for me?

Let us exercise ourselves unto godliness, (2 Tim. 4:7). “Speak clearly, if you speak at all; carve every word before you let it fall,” so said Oliver Wendell Holmes.