

Speech

"Life and death are in the power of the tongue . . . By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned."

Of the many faculties with which man has been endowed, that of *speech* entails the greatest responsibility, for with the employment of speech, ideas—produced by other powers of the mind—have their operation extended beyond a merely individual action, and that assimilation is rendered possible by which the mind or the speaker becomes part of the hearer.

Without speech, mind could not influence mind, intelligence could not be put in sympathetic relation with intelligence, concerted action would cease. Hence, speech in its power and influence is infinite, and may be regarded as the motive power of the world. By speech, Eve was incited to transgress. Confound speech, and the result we see in Babel.

It is scarcely necessary, however, to go outside the circle of personal experience to find illustrations of the influence of speech. For who has not felt this influence, for good or evil? And who has not had at some time to summon up all his moral courage to resist its subtle power?

If others by their speech can so impress us, it follows of necessity that we, being possessed of the same power, can in like manner impress them.

In the formation of *character*, speech occupies no secondary place. Let us carry our thoughts back to childhood, and recall to what extent speech contributed to the development of traits manifested by us at the present time. In our investigations, we shall find that as instructor or guide, it occupied the first place. And this holds true, not only of speech addressed to us personally, but of speech which we heard pass between others.

Again, take the position we occupy in relation to the Truth. By what means has this position been attained; has it not in the majority of cases been through the medium of speech? Circumstances may prepare the mind, experience may ripen the judgment, but the *ideas* from which we act, and form rules of conduct, are mainly conveyed to us in some form or other by speech. It may therefore very correctly be said that character, to a considerable extent, is molded by speech—those around us are molding our characters, whilst we in turn are molding theirs.

This action and reaction of speech cannot be too fully realized, for it places, within reach of all, a field of influence which cannot be gauged. As speech plays so important a part in life, the question arises: In what light do the Scriptures view the use of it?

"Life and death are in the power of the tongue, and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof."

Graver issues than these there could not be—that our *whole expectation and hope* can be forfeited by this active little member! Nevertheless so it is, for Jehovah has set a standard for the mouth of the righteous man, and it is that it shall be a "well of life."

Before this power of life can be exercised, the life-words of Jehovah must have their abode in the heart, for, as Christ has shown, it is—

" . . . out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."

Of what this abundance consists *naturally* we are all aware; the heart, as Jeremiah delineates, is—

" . . . deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."

Could the issues of *such* a fountain-head be aught but death? Hence the necessity for its renewal by the Word before the outcome of the lips can be life. God has said concerning His words—

"Keep them in the midst of thine heart, for **they are life** unto them that find them."

Christ's mouth was pre-eminently a "well of life," and it was so because of the indwelling of the Word. It is written of him—

"Thy Word have I hid in my heart."

All who have this Word of Life abiding in them, are responsible for their speech. They have been likened by Christ to servants held accountable to their lord for talents entrusted to their care. To some has been given time, to others riches, to others ability to publicly exhort and testify, but *speech* has been given to *all*; and it behoves every servant to recognise his trust, and so act that on his Master's return he may secure approval and not reprobation.

The wary trader in the use of his capital embraces every opportunity for putting it to account, knowing that so long as it lies idle, it is unremunerative. It is this principle that should actuate those who have had the "true riches" committed to their keeping. If speech be their only talent, let them not dig a hole and hide it in the earth, let them not squander in that which is profitless, but let them trade with it in turning many to righteousness, in dispersing knowledge, in sowing righteousness.

The importance of obeying these scriptural precepts will be fixed more deeply upon the mind by remembering that those to whom they are addressed, constitute the "light of the world" (See Matt. 5:14; 2 Cor. 4:6).

The only light now upon the earth, is a *reflected* one—reflected by those into whose hearts the Truth has shone. To disseminate this light by speech is one of the laws of their spirit being; where its rays penetrate, life and light are to be found—elsewhere all is darkness and death.

We could not for a moment imagine a phenomenon so at variance with the laws of the universe as a permanent eclipse of the sun, and yet that is the anomaly presented by any, who, while ranking with those who are the "light of the world," allow the ridicule of man, or any other folly, to prevent them from making known the way of salvation; and thus shutting out their light from the surface upon which they are enjoined to radiate.

It is a principle laid down in the Word, that speech shall at *all times* be characterized by a spiritual understanding and discretion. This is emphasized by Paul in his injunction to the Colossians—

"Let your speech be ALWAYS with grace, seasoned with salt."

A little consideration of the qualities of salt will discover the force of the simile, and render its application more striking. Salt permeates and preserves; and as it yields one of the constituents both of the gastric juice and the blood, is absolutely essential to health and life.

It is for those to whom the words of Paul apply, to let these qualities find counterparts in themselves; and be ready at all times to make practical use of this spiritual salt; to let wisdom permeate with their speech; to be careful for the health and life of others, by obeying such commandments as the following—

"Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them."

"Walk in wisdom toward them that are without."

There are many general instructions in the Scriptures in regard to duty, in which, though not specially named, speech is included.

"Be ye holy in all manner of conversation."

In this and kindred passages, speech is comprehended, for it is inseparably connected with the walk or conversation.

The mouth is a member of the body, and unless the fruit of the lips be holy, the body cannot be presented a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God. Sobriety, temperance, gravity—these are to prevail alike in the actions and words of those who would show themselves approved. Take the example of the Psalmist, and mark how diligently he applies himself to seek perfection of speech.

"I am purposed that my mouth shall not transgress."

And again,

"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."

And there is also the petition,

"Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips."

There remains another side of the subject to be considered—the refraining of the lips from evil. He who would use his speech aright—must know, not only when to speak, but *when to keep silent*. Unchecked volubility must not be indulged in, for—

"In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin."

Every form of evil-speaking is to be eschewed. Says Paul,

"Let **all** bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil-speaking be put away from you, with **all** malice."

"Lie not one to another."

Gossiping is forbidden; it was said to the Israelites of old,

"Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people."

Paul's condemnation of those who were tattlers and busybodies is familiar to all. It is not sufficient that no "corrupt communication" proceed out of the mouth but "foolish talking and jesting" *MUST* be laid on one side as "*not convenient*" (Eph. 5:4).

To revile again when reviled, to threaten, to be hasty in words, to flatter, are all equally unlawful.

From this glance at the scriptural standard concerning speech, we see that it is not to be sent forth for the mere gratification of the organ of language, but that each is to use his speech as *one who has a purpose in view*, and that purpose—*God's service*. This, like any object worthy of being striven for, can only be obtained by a watchful, diligent use of every opportunity, with a determined resistance to all that is unlawful and inexpedient.

There is no easy road to perfection of heart and speech—it must be—

"Precept on precept; line upon line; here a little, there a little."

A day's speech—what is it? It seems but very little. But seeing we are of few days it is a great deal. And as these days—seemingly so unimportant—swiftly pass along, heart, hands, and tongue are all engaged in gradually printing upon them a character, which will be tested at the judgment-seat of Christ, when will be fulfilled the declaration—

"By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned"
(Matt. 12:37).

—C. H. A. Taken from March 1955 Berean
