



## Sins of the Tongue

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It's interesting that the first person to whom I mentioned this series of sermons back in April when I was planning it had this response: "Oh, respectable sins – you mean like gossip." I've had more than one comment along those same lines. It's telling that that's what we think of when someone talks about the sins we tolerate in the Church. What's really interesting is that Jerry Bridges, whose book *Respectable Sins* is the basis for this sermon series, shares *exactly* the same thing in his chapter on "Sins of the Tongue." He writes:

"In the months that I have been working on this book, I have often been asked in social settings, 'What are you working on now?' When I mention the 'respectable' or 'acceptable' sins we tolerate, invariably someone will roll his or her eyes and say, 'Oh, you mean like gossip.' Apparently, this is the first of the Christian sins that comes to mind, so it must be quite prevalent among us and is something we continue to tolerate in our lives."

He's right. Gossip is something that many of us do all the time, but it's not the only "sin of the tongue" that we're guilty of. This morning we talked about oath taking and the need for the Christian to be honest in all he says and does, so in a sense you can take tonight's sermon as "Part II." We may be guilty of gossip, but were also guilty of lying (whether blatantly, by being deliberately misleading, or by stretching or embellishing the truth). We're also guilty of slander, harsh words, insults, sarcasm, ridicule, and harsh speech – which may be true, but is still spoken harshly and unlovingly. The bottom line is that any speech, whether true or false, that's spoken for the purpose of tearing someone down, is sinful speech.

The pages of Holy Scripture are filled with warnings against just these kinds of sins of the tongue. There are more than sixty warnings against these sins in the book of Proverbs alone. Jesus gives us

some sobering words in Matthew 12:36, where he says:

**I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak.**

We may speak carelessly, but we shouldn't. St. James also warns us in his epistle:

**We all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. (James 3:2-12)**

We think our sins of the tongue are acceptable – no big deal – and yet St. James tells that they're like the spark in the wilderness that sets the whole forest ablaze. He reminds us of all the wild animals in nature that man has tamed, and yet the tongue, he says, is restless, untameable, and full of poison – a wild thing that stains our entire body.

I think the most succinct passage on the subject in the New Testament is Ephesians 4:29:

**Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth, but only such as is good for**

**building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.**

Notice the contrast: "let no corrupt talk come out of your mouth, *but* only such as is good for building up..." This is St. Paul's "put off / put on" principle that he describes as part of the sanctification process – as part of the way we become holy and Christlike. He lays that out a few verses earlier:

**Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.**

Do you remember Jesus talking about casting out demons? It's not enough to cast out the demon – if that's all you do it'll just come back. You have to sweep the house, put it in order, and let God's Spirit fill it – then the demon can't come back. You see sin is like that. World and flesh are just as much – probably even more so – sources of temptation. When you deal with sin in your life – when you've recognised the sin – it isn't enough to just stop the sinful behaviour; you have to replace it with righteous behaviour. Sinful behaviour patterns always have to be replaced by righteous ones. It's not enough to just put off the old man – you have to put on the new one in his place. This is one of the most important principles we can learn when it comes to our sanctification. Don't just put off sin; you have to replace it with something righteous.

So St. Paul says, "Don't let any corrupt talk come out of your mouth." How do we define "corrupt talk." It's not just profanity or vulgar things we speak – in fact, those things are a lot less serious than what Paul really has in mind. Corrupt talk includes things like lying, slander, harsh words, insults, sarcasm, ridicule, and harsh speech. And notice that Paul gives us an absolute: *No* corrupt talk. *No* gossip. *No* sarcasm. *No* critical or harsh speech. *No* insults. Anything that has even a little bit of a tendency to tear others down is to be put off – to be removed from our speech. Think about what the Church would be like if all of that stuff was gone. We think these things are acceptable, but take some time to think about all the damage they do – even within the Body of Christ.

If we're going to look at specifics, I think we need to look at *gossip* first. What is gossip? Gossip is the spreading of bad or unfavourable information about someone else. Sometimes the information may even be true, but that doesn't stop it from being gossip. More often than not, gossip seems to be based on rumour, which makes it even more sinful – it's not significantly better than spreading lies. Why do we gossip? I think that in most cases we do it to feed our sinful egos. We gossip to cut someone else down – maybe because we see them as a rival (remember last week's sermon?). We gossip about someone else's sin, because it makes us feel more righteous by comparison. Often we gossip and spread rumours just to make ourselves seem more important. When it comes to Christians, we've become very adept at disguising our gossip, we say things like, "I want to share something with you so that you can pray about it." If you know something bad about someone else, by all means pray about it, but don't spread the word under the guise of a prayer request when you know that all it's really going to do is result in people thinking less of that individual. When we do that the subtle message is often: "Mary's a sinner – we need to pray for her; but look how righteous I am because I'm willing to pray for her."

That's one of the kinds of speech that St. Paul warns us to "put off," but he doesn't stop there. He also tells us what kind of speech to "put on." We're to put on such speech that builds others up and gives grace to those who hear it. So if you're tempted to gossip, you need to ask yourself, "Will what I'm about to say tear down or build up the person I'm about to talk about?"

Gossip's closest cousin is *slander*. Slander is making untrue statements about someone else that defame or damage their reputation. When someone says "slander" the first thing most of us probably think of is political campaigns, where candidates sling mud back and forth at each other. One candidate makes accusations against the other, usually based on comments taken out of context or based on only half the information available. The whole point is to create a negative false impression so that people will think less of that person.

So do Christians slander? Yes, we do – we're probably just more subtle about it or we've learned to disguise it as something that sounds righteous. We slander when we attribute wrong motives to people, even though we have no way to see into their hearts or discern what their motives really are. We may be guilty of slander when we accuse another believer of being "uncommitted" when he or she doesn't practice the same spiritual disciplines we do or engage in the same kinds of Christian activities as us. We slander when we misrepresent another person's position on a subject without first finding out for ourselves what that person's position actually is. We slander when we blow another person's sin out of proportion and make them out to be more sinful than they really are.

Why do we do it? Well, typically for the Christian it's to justify our own lack of righteousness, our own lack of holiness. We want to look good to everyone else, so we either compare ourselves to others who may be struggling in their Christian walk or we tear down those whom we think are standing a few rungs above us and showing us up. That's just it. In the business world they call it "climbing the ladder" and if you have to step on a few fingers or toes or grab the foot of the guy above you and drag him down, that's what's often expected. I think most Christians think of that sort of thing as being unacceptable in the business world, but we yet we somehow find it acceptable in the Church. We want people to think better of us or we want to be in a higher position or a place with greater authority, and so we disparage someone else in the hopes that we'll win everyone over to our side.

As I talked about this morning, Christians need to be committed to Truth. Slander is ultimately lying – it's deception, it's dishonest. But even if you tend to guard against outright lies in your speech, most of us are often guilty of dishonesty as a result of exaggeration or a failure to tell the whole truth – sometimes we lie, but we justify it saying, "It was just a little white lie" – a lie, but a lie we can justify as having little or no consequences. But whatever form it takes, the lie expresses an intent to deceive. So in stamping out corrupt talk from our speech, another

thing we ought to ask ourselves is, "Is what I'm about to say true?"

Critical speech is simply negative comments we make about others. Sometimes they may even be true, but we need to ask ourselves: "Do they need to be said?" Things like, "So-and-so is a bad cook." "So-and-so picks his nose." "So-and-so watches too much TV." Before we make these kinds of comments we need to ask things like, "Is it any of my business if So-and-so watches TV a lot or picks his nose?" "What's my purpose in telling someone else about So-and-so? If it really isn't my business and if it really doesn't matter, why am I 'sharing' this about them?" "Is what I'm sharing kind?" You see, more often than not, we're sharing these kinds of things so that others will come to think more highly of us because we're leading them to think more lowly of another.

But we sin in our speech not only when we talk *about* other people – we also sin when we talk *to* others. Things like harsh words, sarcasm, insults, and ridicule are also forms of sinful speech. In every case their intent is to put someone down, to humiliate them, or to hurt them. Sometimes other sins are what lead to this kind of sinful speech – often we're already guilty of being angry or impatient and sinful speech just follows naturally. Jesus says, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). What does that mean? It means that even though we may be talking about "sins of the tongue" what lies behind it is a sinful heart. Behind our gossip, our slander, our critical speech, our insults, and our sarcasm is a sinful heart. The tongue only says what the heart directs it to.

And that ties into what we've been studying on Sunday mornings in the Sermon on the Mount. We need to apply Ephesians 4:29 – St. Paul's warning about corrupt talk – we need to apply this verse to our lives. We need to memorise it so that it will pop to the front of our minds when we're about to say something unkind about or to someone else. But we need to deal with our hearts too. There have been times when St. Paul's warning pulled me up short before I said something about someone else, but later I found the Spirit convicting me. I may not have said it, but I thought it in my heart – I *wanted* to say it, even if I didn't. We need to not

only guard our tongues – we need to guard our hearts. We need to worry not only about the keeping the letter of the Law – we need to make sure we obey the spirit when it comes to our motives.

David prayed, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer” (Psalm 19:14). David was concerned with not only the words he spoke, but more importantly with the thoughts that were in his heart. Even if a verse like Ephesians 4:29 keeps me from speaking sinfully, I still need to make David’s prayer my own – I need to apply Paul’s warning to both my tongue *and my heart*. I need to desire that what both do be acceptable to God. What exists in our hearts ought to build others up as well. That’s the real key. If your heart is full of corrupt thoughts, it’s hard to keep them from being spoken by your tongue. The same is true if your heart is full of loving and righteous thoughts. Each of us needs to be close to God. The closer we get to him, the more time we spend in his Word and the more time we spend with him in prayer – and the more time we spend conforming to the image of Christ – the more not only our actions will be like Jesus’, but the more our hearts will be like his.

Please pray with me: Our Father, we confess to you that our speech is often corrupt. Tame our tongues, we ask you, by filling our hearts with your grace. You have loved us, even when we were unlovely. Let that love fill our hearts, that our tongues will be moved to speak only that which builds up. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

*(This series of sermons is adapted from Jerry Bridges book, “Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate”, NavPress, 2007.)*