

Watch your WORDS

By Mark Ross

“Where words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent” (Prov. 10:19). Scriptural warnings about the control of our tongues are many and urgent; yet sincere and devoted Christians often disregard them.

How Christians discuss politics is a perfect example. Many portray candidates of the opposing party in the worst possible light. Did you know all Democrats are left-wing liberals bent on turning the U.S. economy into a socialist state? Did you know all Republicans are extreme right-wing conservatives with no compassion for the poor or sense of social responsibility? We reach these conclusions simply by identifying a person's party affiliation, without ever meeting or speaking with that individual about his or her views.

Our Lord teaches us that by the measure we judge, we shall be judged (Matt. 7:1-2). Such a warning should encourage us toward the most generous view of others, yet even within the church, we often adopt the patterns of the world and allow our speech toward one another to be corrupted.

We would be shocked and grieved to learn that anyone among us was contemplating murdering a fellow believer, yet we violate the sixth commandment with thoughts and words as well as actions. “You have heard that it was said to those of old,” the Lord says, “‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the fire of hell” (Matt. 5:21-22).

Hell fire for calling someone a fool? We find this hard to believe and are willing to take our chances with less-controlled speech. The Lord's brother James certainly got the point: “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless” (James 1:26). Worthless! This is a rather damning judgment against our religion. In chapter 3 of his epistle, James develops this thought further: “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” (James 3:6).

The dangers involving our tongues are part of James' warning that not many of us should become teachers, for those who teach will be judged with greater strictness (3:1). As a professor of theology, I certainly ought to heed this warning and other Biblical exhortations about controlling my tongue. How easy it is for theologians, amateur or professional, to denounce in uncharitable terms those with whom they disagree.

Doctrinal error, to be sure, must be exposed. Scripture requires it. We shouldn't reduce the essentials of the faith to the barest minimum while leaving the remainder to personal preference. Instead, we must teach the whole counsel of God and oppose deviations from it. Teachers must guard the good deposit that has been trusted to them

(1 Tim. 6:20), and we must contend for the faith that was delivered once and for all to the saints (Jude 3).


At the same time (for keeping one commandment never relieves us of the obligation to keep the others), we must be sure our speech does not contain unwholesome words, but only those that build up, as fits the occasion, that they may give grace to those who hear (Eph. 4:29).

Particularly when dealing with matters of the church, we must correct our opponents with gentleness, hoping that God may perhaps grant them repentance, leading to the knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 2:25). With outsiders, too, our speech “must always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that we may know how (we) ought to answer each person” (Col. 4:6). We must always hold fast to the truth, and how we hold fast is equally important.

I've often thought James' warning could be expanded for today's technology: “Not many of you should become bloggers, my brothers, for you know that they who blog will be judged with greater strictness.” Blogs, message boards, Twitter, and other forms of social media are quick and easy ways to share information and opinions. They are very public forums. They can also be very big pitfalls. Nothing should be posted that is not true, and far too often people

post criticisms of others that lack sufficient basis. Even when the criticisms are true, it may not be appropriate to share this information with the world. There may be personal or official forums we can approach use to address the error and sin of others. Whatever we wish that others do to us, Matthew 7:12 reminds us, we should do to them, for this is Law and the prophets.

It is “out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). Bridling our tongues will require changing our hearts as well as sifting what comes through our mouths. As ever, it is love that will prove most effective: love for our neighbor, love for our enemies, love for the household of God especially. Then our words will be fully pleasing in the sight of our great God and Savior.

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