

Sins of the Tongue

Introduction

Some events of the last few weeks have convicted me to speak about sins of the tongue today. I want to make clear that this sermon is aimed at no person in particular and everyone in general. If there is any particular person that needs to listen to what the Scriptures say about sins of the tongue, it is I!

1. Seriousness
2. Extensiveness
3. Remedies for

Seriousness of Sins of the Tongue

Turn to Romans 1 with me. Paul just informed the Roman Christians of two things:

1. that “the power of God for salvation” has been revealed to all in Christ Jesus,¹ and,
2. that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men”, because “they are without excuse”.²

How is this wrath of God revealed? In that he permits an increasingly hard heart. He says that there are 4 degrees of hardness of heart.

Destruction of Identity through Idolatry

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.³

This was the first sin of the garden and the first sin in all of our hearts. Just as the evil one posited the question, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”,⁴ that’s the first question in all of our hearts, when we ponder to sin. Like Eve and Adam, we arrogate to ourselves the “wisdom” to stand in judgment over God.

¹ Romans 1:16.

² Romans 1:18, 20.

³ Romans 1:21–23.

⁴ Genesis 3:1.

The first degree of hardness of heart is idolatry of self.

Destruction of Self through Impurity

The consequence of that kind of unrighteousness: “Therefore God gave them up ...”.⁵ God uses Burger King punishment, he says, “have it your way!” Verses 24–25 outline this consequence. In order to make Paul’s thinking a little clearer, I’m reading these verses in reverse order.

*Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator ... therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.*⁶

A god can do anything it wants, right? In idolizing ourselves, we then pursue what pleases us in the moment. The word “impurity” refers to any sort of moral uncleanness that is attractive to the senses.⁷ Connected with covetousness,⁸ it’s the sin of “I want; I want. I need; I need.” And ultimately, acting like little gods always brings shame.

Destruction of Others through Confusion of Nature

What happens to such as harden their hearts this way? Burger King judgment again! God “[gives] them up to dishonorable passions”, giving free rein to the dishonorable things!⁹

*For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.*¹⁰

The meaning of this portion is pretty obvious and doesn’t require much commentary. Note the progression: from considering one’s self god, to pursuing things that please that little god, to things that fundamentally challenge the natures of our being.

Destruction of Community through Rampant Lawlessness

What’s particularly telling is that In Paul’s hierarchy of hardness of heart, this is not the end. I think in part, one could claim that the sins done could be considered harmless, or

⁵ Romans 1:24.

⁶ Romans 1:24–25.

⁷ Matthew 23:27, Romans 6:19, Galatians 5:19

⁸ Colossians 3:5.

⁹ Romans 1:26.

¹⁰ Romans 1:26–27.

at least not be hurtful to others. But this worst temperature of hard-heartedness abandons any pretensions of harmlessness. God gives such people over to rampant hatred of God and man.

Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.¹¹

The hardened mind knowingly, purposely, and presumptuously engages in these things and even encourages and supports others in their commission of heinous acts against God and man. This hard-hearted lawlessness destroys community and prohibits accountability and correction.

This leads to the second point.

Extensiveness of Sins of the Tongue

Notice how many are sins of the tongue! At least these following are largely sins of the tongue.

- Strife
- Deceit
- Gossip
- Slander
- Insolence
- Haughtiness
- Boastfulness

Paul considers sins of the tongue to be the product of the most hardened and cold of hearts. These verses show the seriousness of gossip, slander, and so on. Sins of the tongue are a breach of the 8th commandment, a stench in the nostrils of God, and one of the most destructive forces in any group and perhaps especially the body of Christ.

James says this.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.¹²

¹¹ Romans 1:28–32.

¹² James 1:26.

Notice: true religion and an unbridled tongue cannot go together! In fact, an unbridled tongue belongs to one who is self-deceived and has worthless religion! The tongue is a thermometer of one's soul.

James isn't finished. He waxes fully poetic on this topic in chapter 3.

(1–2) Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For 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.

(5–12) 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 is echoing Jesus' words to the Pharisees.

But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.¹³

Remedies for Sins of the Tongue

The tongue is one of the most reliable thermometers of what's in our souls! If we are disciples of Jesus, a follower and servant of him, we are supposed to reflect his character. Yet, James is right, of course. We all stumble. What can we do?

Paul has helped to define the problem. He also helps to define the solution. And the solution is the classic method of "put off, put on". Put off deceit, gossip, and slander. Put on ...

¹³ Matthew 15:18–20.

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.¹⁴

Speaking truth: that's important of course. Lying and deceit are wrong. Truth is right. Truth is hard enough. We all want to build ourselves up, which we often do by tearing others down and puffing up our own self-worth. Remember that among the sins of the tongue are boastfulness and haughtiness.

But note that there is a right way to say right things: in love! Love, being commitment to the well-being of another, means choosing to speak truth — which is already a challenge — in a way that shows that commitment.

Here's an example. Let's say that we're becoming concerned about weight gain in our spouse. We could just say: "you're getting fat!" That could be the truth! But in love ...?

What if we show our love by saying: "I'm concerned about a healthy diet. Why don't we cut back on ice cream for a while?" That's speaking the truth in love and demonstrating self-sacrifice at the same time.

What if the products of our mouth were intended to build up, rather than tear down? This is so important that Paul twice gives roughly the same instruction.

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.¹⁵

Be filled up to overflowing with psalms and godly music. Let the words of our mouth be melodious reflections of the thankful thoughts of our hearts.

This doesn't preclude godly correction or rebuke. We can also help each other by holding each other accountable. I know that I can speak impetuously. I'm aware of my tendency to quickly become defensive. I need help with these things. So do you.

¹⁴ Ephesians 4:15–16.

¹⁵ Ephesians 5:18–21.

*[So] let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, **teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom**, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.¹⁶*

How many of us are interested in growing up the body of Christ? Do you want to guess a great way to do that?

*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to **grow up** in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it **builds itself up** in love.¹⁷*

We should always try to speak with building each other up in mind. Paul uses the specific phrase “building up” each other 13 times in 6 of his letters.¹⁸ The only way for us to *grow up* is when we *build up* each other!

So I will be thankful when you correct me for harsh speech, or unkind speech, for speech that tears down, instead of builds up. I’ll be thankful when you correct me in love. Will you?

Conclusion

What would it be like if — instead of the tongue being James’ instrument that “stain[s] the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell” — it becomes an instrument that encourages, builds up, and corrects in love? Instead of being a source of strife, deceit, gossip, slander, insolence, haughtiness, and boastfulness, what if our mouths reflected the thankfulness of our hearts and were sources of blessing and help?

To quote an old song: “But I do know that I love you, and I know that if you love me, too, what a wonderful world this would be!”¹⁹

¹⁶ Colossians 3:16.

¹⁷ Ephesians 4:15–16.

¹⁸ Romans 15:2; 1 Corinthians 8:1; 10:23; 14:4–5, 12, 17, 26; 2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10; Ephesians 4:11–16, 29; Colossians 2:6–7; 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

¹⁹ “Wonderful World”, Sam Cooke, 1960, Keen Records.