



The New Life in Christ

Lesson 8

The Power of the Tongue

The Judgement Seat

When Jesus Christ returns to set up God's Kingdom, everyone who knows and understands the Gospel message will be called to meet him and will be judged by him. Those who have been faithful to him in their lives will be given a place in the Kingdom, those who have been unfaithful will be rejected by the Lord and will be sent away to die.

The basis of the Judgement will be how we have put the Gospel into practice in our lives (Romans 2:16) and Jesus will be particularly interested in how we have used our tongue.

"I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,
for by **your** words you will be justified, and by **your** words you will be condemned."

Matthew 12:36-37

Jesus will not listen to what other people say about us; amongst other things he will judge us on what **we** have said about **other** people, on how we have used our tongue. If our words are 'careless'; if they are thoughtless or hurtful then we shall have to answer for them to Jesus.

Words that Work!

There is another lesson in these words of Jesus that we must think about. The idea behind 'careless' words is of words that are lazy or idle. Jesus used the same word in a parable when he spoke of workers who stood idle in the market place (Matthew 20:3). We need to think carefully about what we say to each other, we should use words which help to build up our brothers and sisters; we need to put our tongue to work in his service! There are many ways that we can do this.

1. We use it to worship together with our brothers and sisters, giving praise and thanks to God. (Colossians 3:15-17).
2. We can speak words of peace and comfort, bringing calm where there was anger. (Proverbs 15:1, Matthew 5:9).
3. By words or by letter we can give help and support to those who are in distress or trouble. (2Corinthians 1:1-11).
4. We can feed those who are spiritually hungry with the Word of God. (Proverbs 10:21).

There are many examples in the Bible of men and women who changed the way they spoke when they became convinced of the Gospel. The apostle Paul wrote 'let your speech always be gracious', a lovely idea telling us that in all of our words we should be conscious of the wonderful thing God has done for us, saving us through His grace.

Perhaps the best known example is that of Peter. When Jesus was arrested he cursed and swore, denying that he had ever known Jesus. However, years later he wrote some wonderful words about how we should use our tongues (1Peter 3:8-16) and he summed up how we should speak in these words:

"Always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you;
yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame."

1Peter 3:15-16

This is the example for us to follow!

The Power of the Tongue

In the Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul wrote:

“...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”
Romans 12:1

It is clear from the letters he wrote that these words had a real, practical meaning for Paul. When he was baptised he became a ‘slave of God’ (Romans 6:22) and understood that he should obey his new Master in all things. In everything he did and said Paul tried to obey God. This is the example we try to follow in our lives when we become baptised disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, like Paul we find it very difficult; we constantly disobey God and seek His forgiveness through Jesus.

The Bible teaches us that the tongue plays a very important part in this struggle with our human nature. How we speak and what we say can show people, more than anything else we do, whether or not we are true followers of Christ.

“The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, **for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.**”
Luke 6:45

However hard we might try to disguise the fact, our words tell people what is really there in our hearts, the things we truly believe in.

James, who was probably the half brother of the Lord Jesus, wrote some very powerful words about the tongue. Please read **James 3** before proceeding further with this lesson.

We can summarise what James teaches us like this:

1. We should not be too eager to teach others – to use our tongues to tell others what to do. God will judge the words of those who do this (verse 1).
2. Although the tongue is a very small part of our bodies, it guides the whole direction of our lives (Verses 3-5).
3. What we say can cause so much trouble it is like starting a fire which then burns out of control. If we upset someone by our words, they may say something harsh back to us and more and more angry words are spoken; no-one knows how to stop it (Verses 5-6).

James says that this is so serious it is like being ‘set on fire by hell (or Gehenna)’. Jesus is the only other person in the Bible who used the word ‘Gehenna’. We know that Gehenna was the rubbish heap outside Jerusalem where the Jews put their rubbish and burned it. The fires never went out and James is telling us that the anger and disagreements we can cause by careless words are like a fire that never goes out.

4. No-one can control his/her tongue; it is full of poison (Verse 8). These are similar words to those of the Psalmist:

“The wicked are estranged from the womb;
they go astray from birth, speaking lies.
They have **venom like the venom of a serpent**, like the deaf adder that stops its ear,
so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter.”

Psalm 58:3-5

Just as a snake bite is venomous or poisonous and can kill, so the words of a wicked person can cause great spiritual harm.

5. We use our tongues both to praise and worship God and then to curse men (Verse 9)
6. Our tongues show what is in our hearts, when we boast or speak selfish and hurtful words, we are ‘false to the truth’ (Verses 14-15).
7. We should speak words which show God’s wisdom and His character in our lives and always seek to make peace. (Verses 17-18).

Anger

It is when we are angry with someone that we tend to say hurtful words. Perhaps we have been hurt by what has been said to us and we want to hurt someone back. King David was a man who understood this. He had been hurt many times in his life by what wicked men said about him. When he was an old man he wrote:

“Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers!
For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb.
Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.
Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act.
He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.
Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!
Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.
For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.
In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.
But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.”
Psalm 37:1-11

What good advice there is in these words! We should trust in God and not worry about what other people say. Those who are gentle and peaceful will inherit the earth but wicked people will perish for ever. We should leave judgement of others to God who knows all things and not condemn others by what we say about them.

The Apostle Paul adds something more to this advice.

“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...
Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.
And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.
Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.
Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”
Ephesians 4:26, 29-32

Just as we daily pray to God that He will forgive us our sins, that He will not remain angry with us for what we have done, so should forgive others every day for what they may have said or done to us. Each night, before we fall asleep, we need to clear our hearts of any anger we feel against other people. We must also learn to apologise to those we may have hurt.

Gossip

Gossip is when we tell idle, malicious stories about people behind their backs. It may be something that is true or it may be a lie, it makes no difference, gossip is sinful and we should avoid it totally. We should not gossip with our own tongues and we should not listen to the gossip of others.

The Bible is clear in its message about this.

“A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a **gossip** separates close friends.”
Proverbs 16:28 (NIV)

“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 decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practise them.” Romans 1:29-32

“But refuse to enrol younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also **gossips** and busybodies, saying what they should not. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.” 1Timothy 5:11-14

We find stories about other people interesting, especially if they contain information which is ‘spicy’ or concerns bad behaviour. Whenever we are told gossip we should stop the teller and say that we are not interested. There are two key questions we should ask ourselves about gossip.

1. Would we say this if the Lord Jesus Christ was present?
2. Would we tell this story if the person we are talking about was present and listening?

Blasphemy

The most serious misuse of our tongue is when we say things against the Lord God Himself or against His Son. In the Ten Commandments God said:

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” Deuteronomy 5:11

The New Testament is equally clear in its teaching.

“But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth.” Colossians 3:8 (KJV)

We should treat the names of the Lord God and His Son with great respect in our lives. We should not use them in a careless or casual way. We should not use them as part of ‘bad language’ or swearing. The word blasphemy means ‘treating with contempt’. When we misuse the name of God, it is as if we despise Him or treat Him with contempt.

Jesus takes it further than this. He said that we should not make an oath at all. We should not ‘swear that something is true’ (Matthew 5:33-37). Today, if people want to impress that they are really telling the truth, they may ‘swear an oath before God’ but we should not do this. This is particularly true if we are ever called upon to give evidence in a court of law. As a witness we may be asked to swear on the Bible that what we say is totally true. Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ will not take such an oath but will merely ask to affirm that they will tell the truth.

“But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.” James 5:12

Foolish Talk

It is very easy to use our tongue in a foolish way. We might be tempted to tell a ‘dirty story’ – one with element of sex in it. We might tell a joke which makes people laugh but which does so by mocking other people. We might get involved in a pointless argument about something which really is not important. All of these things are foolish talk, they do not help us to become stronger disciples of the Lord Jesus and they do not set a good example to others.

“Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.” Ephesians 5:4

“...To speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people...

But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.

As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.” Titus 3:2, 9-11

The Example of Jesus

When we really want to know how we should speak to each other, then we turn to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was perfect in every way; every word he spoke was godly and right.

“He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;
a bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not quench, until he
brings justice to victory.”
Matthew 12:19-20

Jesus did not shout or quarrel. The idea of the bruised reed and smouldering wick is poetic language for those who are weak in their faith. Jesus did not extinguish or break their faith by hard words; he did his best to keep their faith alive by his compassion.

People mocked and jeered at Jesus. The drunks made nasty songs about him (Psalm 69:12). People laughed at him and ridiculed him as he hung on the cross dying yet he behaved in this way;

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth...
And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.”
Isaiah 53:7, 9

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.
He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.
When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.
He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.
For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”
1Peter 2:21-25

This is how we should use the power of our tongue. We are not given the power of speech by God to defend ourselves or to cause raging arguments. We are given it to speak the words of God, to follow the example of Jesus in our every day lives so that our speech is always gracious and pleasing to God.

Questions

1. Give three positive ways of using our tongues to speak helpful words.
2. Why are our words important? What do they reveal about us?
3. What should we say and do when people are angry with us and say harsh things?
4. What is blasphemy? Why is it wrong?
5. Give three examples of the ways in which Jesus spoke to people.
6. What do the following passages from Proverbs teach us:
a) 10:21 b) 16:32 c) 18:21 d) 21:23