

Sermon – 16/11/2008 am

New Man, Cut Cursing

Study Text: Ephesians 4:29

What faculties do we begin to lose as we grow old? Our eyes may grow weak so that we need glasses. Our ears begin to fail so that we need hearing aids. But have you seen anyone whose tongue has failed? Have you seen anyone wearing an aid for their tongue? We have eye doctors, and ear, nose and throat specialists but no tongue specialists. In India some beggars have no tongue. Someone has cut out their tongue so that they could get money through begging. Apparently no one is born without a tongue.

But is it not our tongue that brings us and others most trouble and grief? Jesus says that if a member of our body causes us to sin we should cut it off and throw it away (Matthew 5). Imagine if we took him literally! Think of all the times your tongue has caused you to sin, all the words you wish you had not spoken. Paul has already told us as new people in Christ Jesus to put away lying. He next spoke of anger, an emotion which usually expresses itself with the tongue. He comes back to the tongue in this verse presumably because it leads us to sin so often.

Words of Corruption

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth (4:29). What is a corrupt word? The word translated corrupt is 'sapos'. You may be familiar with the word saprophytic. It is used of fungi and bacteria that live on decaying matter – they are called saprophytes. Their main task is to make food and other organic matter rot or breakdown. We put food into the fridge to stop these saprophytes from doing their work.

Corrupt words coming from your mouth have the same effect as these fungi and bacteria. They lead to rotten feelings in the hearts of others and even in your own heart. They lead to rot and breakdown in your relationships. It is amazing what things come out of the mouth of human beings. That is why some prefer dumb animals for companions – but of course pets are no substitute for human relationships.

I once worked in a factory where almost every second word was a swear word. I thought these men had such a limited vocabulary they had to fill out their conversation with the repetition of these crude words. Nowadays you can hear such language in many homes, and on the street, and even in the media. Some feel a sense of power when they let fly with filthy language but the truth is they impress no one but themselves. Moreover they forget that one day they will have to give account to God for every idle word spoken (Matthew 12:36).

The new person in Christ is just that; he is renewed, he is changed in the very depths of his being. His heart and mind have been changed. He is no longer under the control of the flesh and the devil but his heart is in the hand of the Spirit of God. This new heart will be reflected in new behaviour, not the least of which will be in your manner of speech. A new believer once told me how the Lord convicted him of his angry ways and foul language. He no longer swore at bad drivers on the road, at his workers, or at his family.

No more obscenities or filthy language, no more swearing, no more coarse joking. Do not use such language and do not condone its use by others. If you refuse to laugh at filthy jokes people will soon stop telling them to you. Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’, ‘no’ – lest you fall into judgment (James 5:12).

David asked the Lord to keep a guard over his mouth and to keep watch over the door of his lips (Psalm 141:3). Should we not do the same? He did not want any corrupt or corrupting word coming from his mouth. He wanted every word he spoke to be pleasing to the Lord. To do this he had to walk close to the Lord and keep well clear of the wicked. He had to pray for his heart to be kept pure and for continuing renewal by the Spirit of God.

Language is like a litmus test of how closely a person is walking with the Lord. A sinful heart can bring forth sweet words of course, but wait for the time of testing. It is amazing how some with dementia start to talk. Besides, Paul does not just stop at the negative, at corrupt words we should not say, but goes on to the positive, to words that we should say.

Words of Edification

Paul now adds the positive side of this command – notice the ‘but’ – *but what is good for necessary edification* (4:29). This literally reads ‘if any (word) is good to build up the need’. ESV translates ‘only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion’. In Proverbs 15:23 we read – *a word spoken in due season, how good it is!*

Paul tells us not only to stop swearing and using filthy words, but to use language that actually builds up rather than tears down. Swearing is never edifying. To use no words is not usually edifying either – have you tried communicating with someone who does not want to talk. Some language we might consider neutral (like talking about the weather) but in fact all that we say has some effect on those who hear. That is why we need to think before we speak, we need to consider carefully what we say – or don’t say – for its effect on the person or persons listening. Remember the maxim – ‘is it true, is it necessary, is it kind?’ That is basically what Paul is telling us in this verse.

Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34). If our heart is pure and right before the Lord, if we are obeying his command to love one another as Christ has loved us, we will speak edifying words to one another. If we need to correct a brother and sister in Christ we will do so gently, not with malice or bitterness. Words of encouragement should readily flow from our tongue.

Jesus not only spoke the truth but also spoke comforting and encouraging words to those who were in need. All the words he spoke were perfect for the occasion. Think about that. Think of the words he spoke to the woman at the well, and to the woman caught in adultery. Think of the words he spoke to Peter who had denied him. We cannot speak words that are perfect for every occasion because of sin, but with the help of the Holy Spirit we must try. Put on the new man created according to God is true righteousness and holiness (4:24).

Words of Grace

What about words of grace? Here is a third point Paul adds to this practical instruction. First was the negative and then the positive; now comes the purpose. We want our hearers to sense grace in their hearts. The word ‘hearers’ come at the end of this verse not as an after thought

but as the climax. We do not speak to listen to ourselves but to edify others and see them grow in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Martin Lloyd-Jones makes the interesting comment that ‘Christian people do not talk as much as non Christians’. It was his observation but also his desire. Many people talk not to edify others or to impart grace but to simply to ‘blow their own trumpet’ as we say. If pride and ‘the old self’ still rule in the heart then this will be the outcome. Such people love to listen to themselves, with no thought for the other person. All they want to talk about is themselves; what I did, where I went, what I like. They hardly ever ask the other person about their life.

People who have no relationship with Jesus and no standing in the kingdom of heaven have to establish a place for themselves in this world. That is why you hear such a din at worldly parties. Everyone is talking at the same time, all telling stories about themselves. No one is really listening. They are just looking for a chance to get control of the ‘talk’ – I refrain from using the word conversation because it implies at least two people.

The first thing a counsellor is told is that they must learn to listen to their clients. Marriage counsellors teach about active listening, about making the effort to listen – even to the extent of repeating what the other person just said. It is not easy, but if we are to communicate, if we are to help and impart grace to the hearer we must first listen to find out their need. Too often we jump in and start to sermonise. To be sure, words of Scripture will impart grace but only according to the need. Do not cast your pearls before swine.

The vet says of the medical doctor that his task is easy because his patients can talk. The doctor’s task of diagnosing your illness is very difficult if you do not talk. **S** it is with the counsellor or with anyone seeking to edify a brother or sister in Christ. You must listen, you must show love and concern for the person, if grace is to be imparted to them. You must speak words appropriate to their need, not your need.

As the Pharisees stood railing self-righteously against the woman they had caught in adultery, Jesus was silent. He stooped down to draw in the dirt with his finger. When they finally let up he looked up and calmly spoke just one sentence – just a dozen words – and stooped down again. What was the effect of his few words? Those who heard him were convicted of their sin. Grace flowed from those few words of Jesus.

Lord, keep a watch over my tongue. Let no corrupt word escape my mouth. Let my words be few. Let my words be helpful and encouraging to those who hear. May those who hear my words know more of the grace of God. May they leave me saying ‘that was a blessed conversation’. Is this your prayer?

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