

## **“Silence!” [The Discipline of Silence]**

*(Fourth in a series of messages on “Living a God-shaped Life: A Disciple’s Disciplines”)*

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Proverbs 21:23, Matthew 12:36-37, James 3:1-8, Ephesians 4:29 - 5:1-2

**Proverbs 21:23** He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity.<sup>1</sup>

**Matthew 12:36** But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.<sup>37</sup> For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”<sup>2</sup>

**James 3:1** Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.<sup>2</sup> We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

<sup>3</sup>When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.<sup>4</sup> Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.<sup>5</sup> Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.<sup>6</sup> The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

<sup>7</sup>All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man,<sup>8</sup> but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.<sup>3</sup>

**Ephesians 4:29** Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.<sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.<sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.<sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

**5** Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children<sup>2</sup> and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Pr 21:23). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Mt 12:36–37). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:1–8). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Eph 4:29–5:2). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Last week we talked about the importance of practicing the spiritual disciplines of solitude and silence. We spoke of the need to get away, to find a solitary place, to remove ourselves from all the noise around us – to more frequently un-tether ourselves from our televisions and cell phones and our computers and our mp3 players - so that we may truly listen to our hearts and above all, listen to God. More often than not, God speaks to us in gentle whispers in the quiet places of our lives. Feverish activity and constant noise makes it hard for even God to get a word in edgewise.

But there is another aspect of the discipline of silence that is also important for us to practice – it has to do with controlling our tongue. Many of us simply talk too much and listen to little.

Speaking of talking too much, I love the story of the monk who knocked on the door of a monastery, wanting to join the order. The Abbot of the monastery greeted the brother saying: *"Brother, this is a silent monastery. You are welcome here as long as you like, but you may not speak until I direct you to do so."*

Brother John lived in the monastery for a full year before the Abbot said to him: *"Brother John, you have been here a year now, you may speak two words."*

Brother John said, *"Hard Bed."*

*"I'm sorry to hear that"* the Abbot said. *"We will get you a better bed."*

The next year, Brother John was called by the Abbot. *"You may say another two words Brother John."* *"Cold Food."* said Brother John, and the Abbot assured him that the food would be better in the future.

On his third anniversary at the monastery, the Abbot again called Brother John into his office. *"Two words you may say today."*

*"I Quit."* said Brother John.

*"It is probably for the best."* said the Abbot. *"All you have done since you got here is complain."*

Too much talk, not enough listening . . .

Our society is awash with words. Henri Nouwen, who has written much on the spiritual life, observed back in 1980:

Over the last few decades we have been inundated by a torrent of words. Wherever we go we are surrounded by words: words softly whispered, loudly proclaimed, or angrily screamed; words spoken, recited, or sung; words on records, in books, on walls, or in the sky; words in many sounds, many colors, or many forms; words to be heard, read, seen, or glanced at; words which flash off and on, move slowly, dance, jump, or wiggle. Words, words, words! They form the floor, the walls, and the ceiling of our existence. (Nouwen, The Way of the Heart, 1981, 37)

Imagine how much more Nouwen would say about the invasiveness of words had he written the above in 2011 instead of 1981. Thirty years later we have the Internet, voice mail, email, Facebook, cell phones, text messaging, twitter, instant messaging and the like. We have gone from three or four broadcast channels on our televisions to hundreds, if not thousands, of satellite and cable channels.

The wordiness of our environment, together with the lack of silence, has led to the devaluation of words. They don't have the same power they used to have, hence the expression you often hear: "they are just words." People tune out and stop listening. It is just too much. It is yada, yada, yada – blah, blah, blah. Someone has said, "*Talk is cheap because supply exceeds demand.*"

Sorry to get personal, but we have to ask ourselves the question: Do *you and I* talk too much?

- Do we find ourselves quickly interrupting people while they are talking to us or finishing their sentences for them?
- When people start to share a personal experience with us, do we immediately interject with our own experience or story?
- Are we always talking about ourselves?
- Do we dominate discussions to the exclusion of others?
- Do you find people rolling their eyes and losing interest long before we finish speaking?
- Do we make rash promises that we end up never keeping?
- Has anyone ever come to us with a concern only to get a boatload of advice from us, when all they wanted really was someone who could just listen and sympathize with them?
- Have you ever passed on a bit of juicy gossip, saying "Just between me and you..."
- And of course this question which obviously implicates us all: Have you ever said anything that you regretted later, either because it escalated an already tense and stressful situation, or because it made you look like a fool, or because it deeply hurt another?

Why do we feel we have to talk so much? Is it because we so dependent upon words to constantly control, manage and manipulate other people? Is it because we have an ego that needs to be fed and a public image to maintain? Is it so other people will like us? Is it to cover up some deep insecurity?

Whatever the reason, the problem with talking too much is that it causes us to sin. And we sin in at least two ways:

You and I sin by failing to loving others enough to listen to them – after all, when we are talking all the time, we are not listening. The first duty of love is really to listen to another. Paul Tournier, the famous Swiss psychiatrist, put it this way:

*It is impossible to overemphasize the immense need humans have to be really listened to, to be taken seriously, to be understood. No one can develop freely in this world and find a full life without feeling understood by at least one other person...Listen to the conversations of our world, between nations as well as those between couples. They are for the most part dialogues of the deaf.*

Kind of sad, isn't it? It's a description of our society: people talking past each other... *dialogues of the deaf*...

Another famous psychiatrist and Presbyterian, Dr. Karl Menninger, made a memorable comment to the effect that the chief purpose of each life is to dilute the misery of the world. He believed that one of the

ways we do that is by listening with an empathetic ear to everyone with whom we visit. In his book, Love Against Hate, he wrote:

*"Listening is a magnetic and strange thing--a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward, and we want to sit in their radius. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. I discovered this a few years ago. Before that, when I went to a party I would think anxiously: 'Now try hard. Be lively.' But now I tell myself to listen with affection to anyone who talks to me."*

That's good advice! Want to be popular at a party? Be a good listener!

From the point of view of truly loving another, just being silent and listening can be the very best thing we can do.

Too much talk can lead to a failure to love – a sin of omission.

Too much talk also increases our propensity to sin against others by the words we let fly – a sin of transgression. Cutting remarks, rude putdowns, loud obscenities, slanderous lies and insinuations, malicious gossip – all can do incredible damage – and sadly, the damage can be all the greater because of social networks – evil words now travel faster than ever, and are far more public, and can lead to great social embarrassment and shame. Words can ruin reputations, marriages, friendships, and tragically, can cause people to commit suicide.

It is no wonder that James, in our scripture lesson, likes the tongue to a fire. It's so easy to start a fire -- throw a match into dry brush and a whole forest flames to total destruction. It only takes a spark. So too, one careless word tossed out of our mouth, and there is fire. One lie, one sentence of gossip with the lift of an eyebrow, one hellish insinuation, one evil story and the fire begins. And how quickly it spreads; it leaps through hearts and homes, across town and into conversations and unto Facebook. It spreads like wildfire. It goes viral. And of course, once you let the words fly, you can never get them back.

King David had the right idea when he said in Psalm 39 *"I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue. I will muzzle my mouth."*

Jesus, in one of the scariest verses in the whole Bible, says this: *"But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."* (Matthew 12:36)

You and I would do well, therefore, to recognize that often the better part of wisdom is to be silent, rather than say something that we will regret later. *"Better silent, than stupid,"* says the old proverb.

It was President Calvin Coolidge who said, *"I have noticed that nothing I never said ever did me any harm."*

There is a funny story about Coolidge. He was a man of few words and was famous for his reserved manner. A woman bet her friend that she could get Coolidge to speak to her, which was something he

was reluctant to do. She went up to him and said: *"Hello, Mr. President, I bet my friend that I could get you to say three words to me."* *"You lose,"* Coolidge replied dryly, and walked away.

Keeping silent rather than opening our mouths can keep us from sinning – either by failing to listen to others, or by inflicting harm. It is to acknowledge the truth of the proverb: *"He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity."* Proverbs 21:23

More positively, practicing the discipline of silence will give power to the words we *do* speak. We have all been in a meeting where two or three individuals dominated much of the discussion. Sometimes at the end of a meeting like this, someone who hadn't spoken will clear his or her throat indicating a desire to speak. When they do speak, people turn to them and listen attentively to what they have to say. Their words often have more power, than those of their verbose counterparts, because they were borne out of silence and contemplation. They haven't been simply spouting off and filling the air with words. They come out of silence – out of due deliberation and thoughtfulness.

Practicing the spiritual discipline of silence will not only mean talking less than we do, but when we do speak, our words will have more meaning and carry more weight. That is especially important in our social environment, as I have said, where words have been so devalued.

What is the old saying? *"Speak clearly if you speak at all; carve every word before you let it fall."* [Oliver Wendell Holmes] The discipline of silence gives us time to think and to measure our words before we let them go.

And from a place of inner silence, we will also be more in touch with the Holy Spirit, who promises to give us wisdom to know when to keep silent and when to speak.

There is a time to be silent and a time to speak, as Ecclesiastes reminds us. Most of us speak too much and, as I have been saying, would be far better to say nothing in certain situations when we might be tempted to sin with our mouth. On the other hand, there are times when it would be a sin to say nothing. There are times when you and I are called upon to speak. We may be called upon to speak up for truth, to speak out against evil, or to share a word of encouragement. Words have great power to do good as well as to do evil. Therefore we must choose them well.

The movie *"The King's Speech,"* which will no doubt win the Oscar for best picture tonight is all about the power of words - speaking at the right moment with the right words in the right way.

There is a time to be silent and a time to speak - but it is out of an attitude of inner silence that we learn to know what is best to do in any given situation. The Holy Spirit instructs us within – if we are listening.

If you and I find ourselves among those who talk too much, we would do well to practice the spiritual discipline of silence. How should we begin? George Bernard Shaw said *"I believe in the discipline of silence and could talk for hours about it."* With all due respect to Shaw, merely talking about not talking too much isn't going to get us anywhere!

Some folks who would like to practice this discipline may choose to visit a retreat center at a monastery for awhile. There is a Trappist monastery of the Cistercian Order in Lafayette, Oregon, for instance, where times of strict silence are kept. At meal time, the monks and their visitors all eat in silence – while a leader reads devotional material of some kind. The abbey is also famous for making fruitcake.

Though I have not spent time at a monastery, I have been on silent retreats for a day and have found it spiritually renewing. It was certainly a revelation to me to learn just how dependent I am upon talking.

Apart from monasteries and retreats, most of us will practice the discipline of silence by more closely monitoring our speech as we go through our day. Though indeed the tongue is hard to tame, I do believe the Holy Spirit – the presence of God within us – is able to help us exercise self-control. You and I can intentionally monitor our words – we can guard them, speaking less, and, when we do choose to speak, speaking more meaningfully. It has a lot to do with intentionality – thinking about what we say before we say it – “carving our words” - being more mindful of what comes out of our mouth...

We can begin our day resolved to monitor our speech ... and we can end our day in review. How did we do? Were our words fewer, but therefore more meaningful? Did I fully listen to others? Did I back off and let others have their say? Were my words up-building and encouraging and healing?

Listen again to the words of the Apostle Paul, as he writes to the Ephesians:

<sup>29</sup> Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

**5** Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children <sup>2</sup> and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Practicing the discipline of silence means we will refuse to speak evil of others, but speak only what is helpful, after the example of Christ.

In fact, you and I can ask ourselves three questions as we carve our words throughout the day:

1) Is it true? What proof do we have of it? Is it accurate? Is there another side of the story to consider? May it never be said of us that we have a "keen sense of rumor."

2) Is it necessary? Do we have to say it? Why? Is it the best thing we can say? Or do we want to tell it because of some bitterness or desire for revenge in our heart?

3) Is it kind? Does it build people up or cut people down? Will it help or hinder in the service of God? Is it something a disciple of Jesus Christ would say?

There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. May we be silent when we are tempted to sin with our mouth. And when we speak, may it be appropriate to the moment, with a view to being helpful and

encouraging to others. Whether we are silent, or whether we speak, let us do it in love . . . in the name of Christ....