

## Four Commandments for Godly Speech

### Introduction

Can you supply the answer to this riddle?

With the bridle you can guide  
The gallant horse where he will stride.  
But if you succeed to halt this “steed,”  
You will have done a mighty deed.

The answer is found in James 3:2, *“We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body”* (Jam. 3:2.)

In our next topical study from the Book of Proverbs we consider the subject: Four Commandments for Godly Speech.

### **I. Commandment #1: Stop Before You Speak (Proverbs 18:13; Proverbs 12:18; Proverbs 25:11)**

*He who gives an answer before he has listened—it will be folly and bring shame to him.* (Prov. 18:13)

By way of Illustration: You are playing tennis. You anticipate that your opponent will serve the ball to the far left side of the court. You rush over there, but he serves it to the right side instead. This kind of anticipation is not only embarrassing, it doesn't make for a very interesting game.

Proverbs 18:13 is warning us against the folly of rashly uttering speech without knowledge; in particular, responding to a person before you have fully listened to him.

How frustrating to have someone interrupt you, thinking he knows what you're about to say and then jumping to a conclusion! We've all done that. We've jumped to “illusions” about what the person was actually saying. We've heard the words that were spoken, but we didn't really listen to what was being said. And what misunderstanding has resulted!

Recently I “sat on the sidelines” as a husband and wife argued, firing volley after volley of accusations at each other, both talking at the same time, constantly interrupting each other. Each word drove the wedge of misunderstanding deeper and deeper into their relationship. I could hardly call for a ceasefire above the din of their verbal warfare.

James, in his letter to the early church, wrote, *“Be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath”* (*Our Daily Bread*, 11/15/94.)

Can you remember an occasion when you “jumped to an illusion?” What motivated you to speak before hearing out the other person? Was it pride—the desire to show how clever or intuitive you are? Was it inattentiveness? Are you really too pre-occupied with yourself and the “more important things” to hear the full account of what the speaker has to say? Was it lack of courtesy and consideration? Do you not have enough respect for the other person to hear him out, or do you just not care what he has to say? Was it impatience? You just don’t have the time to listen to the “feature length version;” if he can’t give you the condensed version you are unwilling to listen any further. Is it not a part of true Christ-like love and humility to hear someone out, to let him give you the full account of what he has to say before you respond to him with an answer? Wouldn’t you want to be treated in that way?

***There is one who speaks rashly, like the piercing of a sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*** (Prov. 12:18)

Again, by way of illustration: your friend invites you to go to the local swimming pool with him. In the locker room you quietly mention to him that you are going to stay in the shallow end of the pool because you don’t know how to swim. As soon as you get out to the pool, your friend announces to everyone in a loud voice that you can’t swim. You turn red with embarrassment; later, when you mention this to your friend, he remarks, “What’s the matter, it’s the truth, isn’t it?” If your friend had been thinking, he would not have uttered such a rash word to your embarrassment, even though it was the truth. The loving thing would have been to quietly inform the lifeguard of your inability to swim, for your own safety, but not to have announced it to everyone present at the pool.

The point of this proverb is that you may be speaking the truth in what you say, but if you do so in a thoughtless or malicious manner, you are not speaking the truth in love. Let us bear in mind the admonition of the Apostle Paul: ***“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification”*** (Rom. 14:19.)

***A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.*** (Prov. 25:11)

The point of this proverb is that ***“a word aptly spoken”*** (i.e., a word spoken at the proper time and in the proper way) is exceedingly precious, it is beautiful and valuable, it is a thing to be cherished. Consider Proverbs 16:23; ***“The heart of the wise instructs his mouth, and adds learning to his speech.”*** A wise man is not hasty or impulsive in his speech; his heart carefully meditates on a subject because he wants to know and say what is right and beneficial. Consequently, he has something valuable to say, something that will be profitable and add to our understanding and contribute to our growth in grace. Note, too, Proverbs 29:20; ***“Do you see a man who is hasty with his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”*** The man who is hasty and impulsive in his speech is put into a category that is lower and more despised than that of a fool. Isaiah 50:4 should be our

prayer: *“The Lord Jehovah has given me the speech of one who has been taught, so that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He wakens me every morning; he wakens my ear to listen like a disciple”* (Isa. 50:4.)

## **II. Commandment #2: When You Must Speak, Do So Graciously (Proverbs 25:12; Proverbs 25:9-10; Proverbs 15:1)**

***As an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold, so is a wise rebuker to an obedient ear.*** (Prov. 25:12)

Do you want to see something that is truly precious? Do you want to see something that is far more stunning than the most costly jewel? This is it: *“A wise rebuker”* speaking to *“an obedient ear.”* *“A wise rebuker”* is not only someone who is willing to speak a word of rebuke or warning when such a word is required, but someone who speaks that word with grace; he speaks the truth in love. *“An obedient ear”* is an ear that receives the word being spoken to it, rather than ignoring it or taking offense at it because of wounded pride or shame. A writer of a daily devotional suggests:

Before we try to rebuke, comfort, or counsel someone, we must carefully prepare our hearts so that we do not do more harm than good. Our words will cause resentment unless we convey the authority of God’s truth and the sensitivity of one who understands ... If we are led to rebuke, comfort, or counsel people in need, we must first feed on God’s Word and empathize with their situation. Only then will we be spiritually prepared to minister to them. (*Our Daily Bread*, 8/26/90)

Consider the example of Apollos, a man who was willing to be taught:

*... a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. <sup>25</sup>He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. <sup>26</sup>He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.* (Acts 18:24-26)

A wise rebuker speaking to an obedient ear—not only is truth and righteousness being promoted, but the very process itself is a thing of beauty and bears the mark of being a work of God.

***Debate your case with your neighbor privately, but do not reveal another man’s secret, <sup>10</sup>or he may hear about it and curse you, and you will never lose your bad reputation.*** (Prov. 25:9-10)

The point of this proverb: If you have a problem with someone, go and speak to that person personally and directly, rather than sharing your grievance with everyone other than that person. We would do well to bear in mind the sign prominently displayed by one business owner and apply his exhortation to our dealings with others: “If you like our product, tell the world; if you have a complaint, tell us.”

The consequence of reporting your grievance indiscriminately to someone other than the offending person: *“you will never lose your bad reputation.”* You will gain for yourself the reputation of being someone who does not deal honestly and forthrightly with his complaints, but chooses to vent his grievances in a dishonorable and repugnant manner. Consider the directive issued by our Lord Jesus Christ recorded in Matthew 18:15-17;

*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. <sup>16</sup>But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” <sup>17</sup>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. (Matt. 18:15-17)*

***A contrite answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*** (Prov. 15:1)

*“A contrite answer”* is so strong that it has the power to repel wrath and turn it away, making room for more peaceful and conciliatory feelings. *“A contrite (רָכַב) answer”* shows remorse and admits wrong doing, it seeks forgiveness and is willing to accept blame for one’s faults.

When wrath is stirred up against us, our first reaction is to become defensive and justify ourselves; but if we restrain this impulse and reflect on the situation, we will often times discover that there is just cause—or at least some cause—for the wrath we encounter. If we make such a discovery, namely, that there is some just cause for the wrath being expressed against us, and respond with a contrite answer—honestly confessing our fault, expressing regret, and asking forgiveness—it will go a long way toward alleviating the hostility and opening the door for reconciliation.

### **III. Commandment #3: When You Need Not Speak, Don’t Speak (Proverbs 11:13)**

***He who goes around as a gossip reveals secrets, but he who has a faithful spirit keeps a matter confidential.*** (Prov. 11:13)

The situation described in Proverbs 11:13a may be illustrated as follows: Mr. Smith has confided in Mr. Jones; he has shared with Mr. Jones a very intimate personal matter (perhaps for counsel, or for prayer, or for support, or for relief.) But Mr. Jones has betrayed that trust; he has revealed the matter to everyone with whom he has come into contact. Why has Mr. Jones done so? Probably because Mr. Jones has yielded to the lust to reveal something that is new or shocking and something that should be kept personal and private.

The situation described in Proverbs 11:13b may be illustrated as follows: Mr. Smith has confided in you; he has shared the secret burden of his heart with you; and you have spoken to no one except God about this matter. Why have you done so? Because you have a faithful spirit; you have integrity, honor, commitment, loyalty to your friend, your neighbor, your Christian brother. You also appreciate the truth expressed in Proverbs 16:28, *"a whisperer alienates best friends."* If you fail to honor a confidence, you will not only lose a friend, you will gain animosity and resentment in place of friendship. Note Proverbs 25:23; *"The north wind brings rain, so does a backbiting tongue bring an angry look."*

#### **IV. Commandment #4: Speak Like Christ (Proverbs 18:4)**

*The words of a man's mouth are like deep waters—a flowing brook, a fountain of wisdom.* (Prov. 18:4)

Words that are like *"deep waters"* are words that are profound: communicating depths of truth and wisdom. Words that are like *"a flowing brook"* are words that are refreshing: communicating encouragement and assurance. The only man who is able to speak such words, the man of whom this proverb is prophetically speaking, is our Lord Jesus Christ: *"in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"* (Col. 2:3.) Note, again, Isaiah 50:4, *"The Lord Jehovah has given me the speech of one who has been taught, so that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He wakens me every morning; he wakens my ear to listen like a disciple."* This passage is prophetically referring to Jesus Christ the Messiah.

As Christian men and women we must consider our calling: *"Do not let any unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but only what is good for edification as there is need, so that your speech may give grace to those who listen"* (Eph. 4:29.) We are called to dispense the grace of God, and to do so by means of our speech.

Let us also consider the means by which we may fulfill this divine calling: *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God"* (Col. 3:16.)

## Conclusion

One final riddle: What is the origin of the saying, "You will eat your words?"

That saying is derived from Proverbs 18:20, *"A man's stomach shall be filled with the fruit of his mouth; with the harvest of his lips he shall be satisfied."*

This proverb is comparing the words of our mouths to seed that is planted; that "seed" produces a "harvest;" and that "harvest" becomes the "bread" that we will eventually eat. The words we speak will inevitably produce results, results that will affect our lives for good or for bad. Note the warning issued by our Lord Jesus Christ: *"But I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken"* (Matt. 12:36.)

By the grace of God, may our speech be governed by these four commandments for Godly Speech found in the Book of Proverbs: #1. Stop (to listen and think) before you speak. #2. When you must speak, speak graciously. #3. When you need not speak, don't speak. #4. Speak like Christ.