

# CHAPTER FIVE - RESTRAINED IN SPEECH

*The Normal Christian Worker by Watchman Nee*

Reading: Jas. 3:11; Eccl. 5:3; 1 Tim. 3:8; Matt. 5:37; Eph. 5:4; Is. 50:4

Because of unrestrained speech the usefulness of many Christian workers is seriously curtailed. Instead of being powerful instruments in the Lord's service, their ministry makes little impact on account of the constant leakage of power through their careless talk.

In the third chapter of his epistle James asks the question: "*Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?*" (James 3:11). If a Christian worker talks inadvisedly about all sorts of things, how can he expect to be used of the Lord in the utterance of His Word?

If God has ever put His Word on our lips, then a solemn obligation is upon us to guard these lips for His service alone. We cannot offer a member of our bodies for His use one day and the next day take it back for use at our own discretion. Whatever is once presented to Him is eternally His.

In Numbers 16 we are told how Korah and his associates banded together to oppose Moses and Aaron, and each man of the two hundred and fifty took his censer filled with fire and presented it to the Lord. They all perished for their presumption, but God instructed Moses to rescue the censers. Note the reason given for their preservation: "*Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Tell Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, to pick up the censers out of the blaze, for they are holy, and scatter the fire some distance away. The censers of these men who sinned against their own souls, let them be made into hammered plates as a covering for the altar. Because they presented them before the Lord, therefore they are holy*" (Num 16:36-38). Whatever has been offered to God is set apart for Him and cannot afterwards be put to common use.

Eccl. 5:3 says that in a multitude of words we can detect the voice of a fool. We betray our folly by our talkativeness. We feel we must tell such-and-such to So-and-So, and of course we cannot but tell lots of other things to lots of other people. There seems always to be a good reason for telling something to somebody. Oh, how some of us love to talk, and love above all to relay what others have said! And all the while much spiritual energy is being dissipated.

There are several points connected with this matter of speech that we should note.

1. In the first place, let us note the kind of talk we enjoy listening to. In this way we can get to know ourselves, for the kind of talk we relish indicates the kind of people we are. Some people never confide in you because they know you are not the sort of person who would respond to what they have to say; whereas other people come straight to you and pour into

your ears all the latest information they have, because they have sized you up as being the type of person who wants to hear that type of thing. You can judge yourself by stopping to note the things people come and talk to you about.

2. In the second place, let us observe what tales we most readily credit, for what we are prone to credit reveals our own dispositions. We are more gullible in one direction than in another, and the direction of our gullibility betrays our constitutional weakness. People naturally bring supply to demand, and our temperamental tendencies sometimes trick us into crediting the incredible, especially when statements made to us are backed by the assertion that the speaker has them on good authority.
3. In the third place, let us note if, when we have listened to people's stories and accepted them at their face value, we are in the habit of passing them on to our neighbors. Have you noted the process? A certain person with a certain disposition utters certain words that are colored by his personality; and because there is an affinity between him and me, I lend my ears to him and something of his personality enters into mine; then I add the coloring of my temperament and relay the matter to a third party.
4. In the next place, let us observe the propensity in some speakers to make inaccurate statements. They tell the same tale on different occasions, but the records do not tally. In his first letter to Timothy Paul refers to this type of person as "*double-tongued*" (1 Tim. 3:8). Some people are ignorantly and weakly double-tongued, but in the case of others there is not only temperamental fickleness, there is moral corruption.

Matt. 21:23-27 records that the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the Lord as He was teaching in the temple and asked on whose authority He was acting. He replied with this question; "*The baptism of John – where was it from? From heaven or from men?*" That put them in a dilemma, so they reasoned among themselves: "*If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.*" The result of their reasoning was that they evaded the truth and said, "*We know not.*"

Their answer was a deliberate falsehood. In Matt. 5:37 we read that the Lord said: "*Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'* For whatever is more than these is from the evil one." It is not for any Christian worker to be governed by diplomacy and stop to reason about the possible effect of his words on his hearers before deciding what to say. When people sought to lay a snare for the Lord by their questions He sometimes resorted to silence, but never to diplomacy. Let us follow His example, and let us take counsel from Paul who wrote to the Corinthians: "*If any one among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise*" (1 Cor. 3:18). And writing to the Romans he said: "*I want you to be... simple concerning evil*" (16:19).

In the spiritual realm worldly wisdom is of no avail. The trouble with many people is that they have never learned in simplicity to say "Yes" when the facts of the case demand a Yes, and to say "No" when they know that the truth is No. Their speech is never simple and straightforward, but is carefully studied, and their statements are always suited to their own interests.

## GOSSIP

As the Lord's servants we come into constant contact with people and have therefore many opportunities of talking and of hearing others talk, so it is essential that we exercise strict control over ourselves lest we become in turn preachers of the Word and relayers of gossip. This tragic state of affairs is more than a possibility. If we are to avoid this snare into which not a few have already fallen, we must not only take heed to our mouths, but also to our ears.

- In our work we cannot avoid listening to what many people have to tell us about their own affairs, and to be efficient workers we have to cultivate the art of listening that we may be able to help them; but we must discourage them from going into further details once we have inward clarity regarding their need.
- We have to be watchful lest our natural curiosity betray us into hearing more than is good for us to know. There is such a thing as lust for knowledge, lust for information about other people's business, and we must beware of it.
- We need to be restrained in speech; but if we are to exercise restraint in what we say, then we must first exercise restraint in what we hear.

## RETAINING PEOPLE'S CONFIDENCE

At this point the question arises of gaining and retaining people's confidence. If anyone shares his spiritual problems with us, that is a trust we must respect. We must not speak of these confidences unless the interests of the work make it necessary. How can you serve the Lord if you betray confidence that has been placed in you? But how can you do other than betray confidence if you have not learned to bridle your tongue?

We need to treat such confidences as a sacred trust and guard them faithfully. Those who in their need have shared their secret history with us have not done so to add to our personal store of knowledge. They have approached us, not by virtue of what we are in our person, but by virtue of the ministry we exercise, so we cannot regard this as personal knowledge to be shared with all and sundry. We must learn to safeguard every confidence placed in us by others. People who cannot bridle their tongues cannot be entrusted with the Lord's work.

## DECEPTIVE SPEECH

In considering the matter of speech we cannot but touch on the evil habit of telling lies. The double-tongued character to whom we have referred is a close kinsman of the liar. All utterances that are made with intent to deceive come into the category of lying, and the intent to deceive is a heart matter. If you are asked a question you do not wish to answer, or are unable to answer, you can politely refuse to reply, but you dare not deceive the questioner. We want people to believe the truth, not the lie; we dare not therefore use what are in themselves true words in order to convey a false impression.

If the fact is Yes then we must learn to say, Yes; if it is No we must learn to say, No. What is more than that is of the evil one. The Lord once spoke very strongly to some of those who followed Him: *"You are of your father the devil... When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar, and the father of it"* (Jn. 8:44). The devil is the author of lies, and since all lies

originate with him, how can anyone who is professedly devoted to the Lord lend his lips to utter words that are instigated by His enemy? Wherever this state of affairs exists it indicates fundamental trouble in the life of the individual. This trouble is of the gravest possible nature. None of us dare lay claim to utter accuracy of speech (in fact, the more careful we seek to be the more we realize the difficulty of being exact in all we say), but we must cultivate the habit of being true and avoiding all careless utterance.

#### ABOUT WRANGLING (BICKERING/SQUABBLING/QUARRELING)

Let us also avoid everything that savors of wrangling. It was prophesied of the Lord: “*He will not quarrel, nor cry out, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets*” (Matt. 12:19). And Paul wrote to Timothy “*A servant of the Lord must not quarrel*” (2 Tim. 2:24). The Lord’s servant should have himself under such control that he does not give way to noisy conversation or anything that borders on quarreling. Loud talking usually indicates lack of power, and it always indicates lack of self-discipline. We may be perfectly right in what we say, but there is no need for loud affirmations of the truth; we can get the truth across without any noisy insistence on our convictions about it. Let us walk before the Lord in the quiet dignity that befits His servants. Of course, we do not want to assume a sobriety or a refinement that is artificial, for the Christian life is spontaneous and unaffected; but self-control has to be practiced until it becomes second nature.

#### ABOUT LIGHT TALK AND JESTING

Self-control in the matter of speech will rule out much light talking and jesting, to which Paul refers in his Ephesian letter as “not fitting” (5:4);

- it will rule out scoffing too and much else that is unseemly in a servant of Christ.
- If we can entertain an audience with our interesting tales and witty remarks and clever criticisms
  - o we shall fail to command their respect when we speak for the Lord; our words will have no weight with them.
  - o When we stand on the platform to proclaim the Word of God they will assess our preaching at the same rate as the words we spoke so lightly when we were off the platform.

Let us remember that pointed question in God’s Word: “*Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?*” (Jas.3:11) There is no need for laborious preparations before we go onto the platform to preach; but there is need for constant precaution in our ordinary, everyday conversation lest our careless talk cause leakage of power so that when we speak from the platform our words become ineffective.

#### CARELESS SPEECH = CARELESS BIBLE READING

If you acquire the habit of carelessness in speech you will be a careless Bible reader. The words of this Book are the only utterly reliable words, but if you do not appreciate accuracy of speech you will not treat these words seriously; consequently, your preaching will carry little weight. For the effective preaching of the Word a certain disposition is required in the preacher, and a reading of the Word demands the same disposition. Careless characters approach God’s Word lightly and cannot hope to arrive at any true understanding of it. Let us illustrate from the Word itself.

From Matthew 22 we learn that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. One day they came to the Lord and posed this problem: *“Teacher, Moses said that if a man dies, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were with us seven brothers. The first died after he had married, and having no offspring, left his wife to his brother. Likewise, the second also, and the third, even to the seventh. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had her.”* Jesus answered and said to them, *‘You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living’*” (vv. 24-32).

The Sadducees certainly read the Scriptures, but they did not know the Scriptures. Their own words were uttered lightly, so they had no appreciation of the absolute accuracy of God’s utterances.

Our Lord only quoted one short passage from God’s Word to answer their question: Ex. 3.15 where God calls Himself the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. From these few words the Lord reasoned thus: You Sadducees admit that Abraham is dead, Isaac is dead and Jacob is dead; but God declares that He is their God, and He also affirms that He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, so nothing short of resurrection can enable the living God to be their God. The Sadducees were silenced.

#### DEADLY EFFECT ON OTHERS

When we stand before the judgment-seat we may discover that the damage done by light, loose talk exceeds that done in many other ways, for it works great havoc in other lives as well as in our own. Words that have once escaped our lips cannot be recovered; they may go on and on from mouth to ear and ear to mouth, spreading damage as they go. We can repent our folly and we can be forgiven, but we cannot retrieve what we have released.

We have spoken of various defects of character that mar the life and ministry of many Christians, but if our trouble is an unbridled tongue it is more serious than all the others we have mentioned, for the careless words the tongue utters release a deadly stream that flows on and on spreading death wherever it goes.

#### REPENTANCE AND SANCTIFICATION

Brothers and sisters, in the face of such solemn facts we need to repent. Many words we have uttered in the past were “idle words”, but they are no longer “idle”; they are very busy now and are working great havoc. We seek God’s cleansing for the past, and for the present we trust Him to deal radically with this thing that threatens to wreck our usefulness to Him. If in His mercy He does so we shall be spared many regrets in the future. Abraham could repent of begetting an Ishmael, and even after that regrettable release of the natural life could still beget an Isaac for God’s purpose, but he had already produced an enemy for God’s chosen seed; and though he sent Hagar and her son away from his son Isaac, that did not deal with the enmity, and it still exists after the lapse of centuries.

It is written of the Lord Jesus: *“The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak”* (Is. 50:4). “The tongue of the learned” can be rendered “the tongue of a

disciple”, i.e., one who has been disciplined. We need to seek Him earnestly to enable us to bridle our tongues, so that this “unruly member” may become a disciplined member. When this mouth is under strict control and ceases to release that which does damage to His interests, we may then expect Him to use it as His mouthpiece. As He for our sakes sanctified Himself, may we for the sake of those to whom He has sent us sanctify ourselves. Let us be ever on the watch and separate ourselves from all associations that would involve us in unedifying talk lest we jeopardize our God-given ministry.

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### **FOR THE DISCUSSION FORUM**

In Chapter 5, Watchman Nee highlights the importance of restraint in our speech, where we need to have a disciplined and controlled tongue. Because we are all familiar with our community teaching on speech and wrongdoing, much of what he talks about is already covered in our basic teachings and way of life. Here are two simple guides to tie all things together:

1. It is important indeed to have a disciplined and restrained tongue. But why would that be particularly more important for a pastoral or senior leader than for a regular member of the Community?
2. Of all the forms of careless talk, what – according to Watchman Nee – is the most grievous? Do you agree with him?

- GOD BLESS US ALL -