

Romans 3:10-20

The sin of evil speech

Paul concludes in Romans 3:20 that no-one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law (cf. Psalm 143:2). We often think that 'observing the law' has to do with outward aspects such as keeping kosher laws and Sabbaths. But it is possible to keep for example the dietary laws, just like it is possible to be a vegetarian. There are also moral aspects of the law such as adultery and theft. If we try to be a good person, we may think we have kept our lives free from these things, at least outwardly (Mark 10:20). But to show conclusively that *all alike are under sin*, Paul focuses in on an aspect of the law in which none of us can claim to be perfect: the sin of evil speech.

Romans 3:13-14 *Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.*

Words are powerful and can have an incredible impact on us for good or for evil (Proverbs 18:21). A student who told malicious lies about his wise teacher was sorry, and asked his teacher how to make amends. The teacher told him to cut open a feather pillow and scatter the feathers to the wind. After doing so, the teacher asked his student to now gather the feathers, "because you can no more make amends for the damage your words have done than you can recollect feathers."

Our words cannot be undone. Evil words are like arrows (Psalm 64:3): once released they cannot be stopped. Just as arrows go astray, the harm they will do cannot be predicted.

James 3:6 *the tongue is also 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.*

Our Judeo-Christian faith acknowledges the power of the word for good or for evil. In the beginning God created the world through speech (Genesis 1). God breathed the breath of life into Adam (Genesis 2:7). An ancient paraphrase (Targum Genesis) says that Adam became "*a speaking spirit*." Speech, like nothing else, sets us apart from the animals and is part of what it means to be created in God's image. Like God we can use our speech creatively.

But the first instance of evil speech in the Bible was from the mouth of the serpent in the garden (Genesis 3:1). Eve first, and also Adam were corrupted by this lying and perverse speech. When we practice deceit, and slander, and lie, we follow the trait of the serpent (John 8:44).

The foundational commandment in the Bible concerning evil speech is found in Leviticus,

Leviticus 19:16 *Thou shall not go up and down as a talebearer among your people; you shall not stand aside while your fellow's blood is shed.*

God's commandments are commands, but they are also a revelation of the character of God. The reason God commands us against evil speech such as slander is because of God's nature to respect the dignity of persons in love. If we love God and desire to be like Him his commands are not burdensome (1John 5:3).

The verse means that we should not spread slander or gossip or rumours or lies about other people. The same command is found in the New Testament (Colossians 3:8). We should not say negative things about people, even if they are true. In 1Samuel 22:9 Doeg the Edomite reported the true story that Ahimelech had helped David. Ahimelech just intended to help David as a member of Saul's court. However Saul misinterpreted it to mean that Ahimelech was aiding David in a rebellion. As a result the priests of Nob were slaughtered. Doeg's words were true, but he had allowed his words to be misconstrued. The poison of vipers was on his lips, and his words resulted in bloodshed.

The sages of Israel regarded evil speech to be worse than murder. Where have we heard that before? In the Sermon on the Mount!

Mat 5:21-22 *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.*

The meaning of this passage has always evaded me! But could it be that by saying "You fool" Jesus is referring to evil speech, such as slander? I would prefer to be slandered than murdered, but Jesus is simply emphasising the seriousness of evil speech in God's sight which can lead to murder.

There are three people harmed by evil speech: 1. the one who is spoken about, because his reputation is ruined; 2. the one who speaks, because he has sinned against the person and against God; 3. the one who listens to the evil tongue, because he is providing the speaker with the opportunity to sin, and also his opinion of the one who was spoken about is ruined. I can identify with Isaiah who cried out that he was a man of unclean lips and he dwelt in the midst of a people of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5). When we are convicted of the sins of the tongue, we realise we cannot be justified by the works of the law. Rather we need forgiveness and cleansing from God.

We are people of unclean lips and we live among a people of unclean lips. The destructive power of words has entered our culture in a new high tech way. It is called cyber bullying. It is abusive, threatening, intimidating and causes young people especially to become anxious, depressed or even suicidal. It is wide spread, and seems to be on the increase.

Evil speech isn't limited to the young. USA is in a Presidential election and we are voting on the EU. Slander, lies, half-truths, lies and verbal attacks in speeches, on-line and in newspapers is the name of the game. Paul was not exaggerating when he said,

Romans 3:13 *Their throats are open graves, their tongues practice deceit.*

The Jews believe the reason why their Temple was destroyed was because of the sin of evil speech. Where does that leave us?

Gal 5:15 *If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

It has been said that the tongue is so dangerous it must be kept hidden from view, behind two protective walls of the teeth and the lips, to prevent misuse.

What about in the family? Rage, arguing and spite will destroy relationships in the home. But 'sharing' the problems of our partner, or your children with others can do more harm, even if it's true. Others may misunderstand what you say, and believe a lie about your husband, wife or child, and before you know it everyone knows about your husband, wife or child's problem! This does not promote harmony in the home.

What about in the church? Do we spread negative reports about one another; or about other churches, even if it's true? Was there a problem with evil speech at Rome? It seems so, Gentiles and Jews were judging (Romans 2:1) and boasting (Romans 3:27). Such boasting may make us feel great, but it can be a way of belittling or slandering others.

We should confess our sins to one another (James 5:16). But this does not mean we should confess the sins of others to one another. In most situations (except e.g. where crime is involved, certain counselling situations, or to warn others,) we should zip the lip and flush the lash. This however does not exclude healthy debate, even vigorous debate and strong disagreement.

Who can honestly say they have never sinned with their tongue? (James 1:26) We have all listened to the snake; all have sinned and all need the forgiveness to be found in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:21-26).