

# **Biblically Speaking**

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I was recently given a book written by one of our congregants, Jill Melton, titled "The Power of the Zip in a Heavenly Light." I was intrigued by the title because, before I flipped through the book's pages, I could not imagine what kind of "zip" Jill was talking about. Was it the "zip" we get from a strong cup of coffee? Was it the "zip" sound we hear when we zip up our sweater? It did not take me long, however, to realize that the "zip" to which Jill was referring is the "zip" of our mouths. You have heard the expression "zip it up?" meaning "stop talking?" Well, the way we speak (and refrain from speaking) is what Jill's book is about.

Once I understood what "zip" meant, I became intrigued by something else in Jill's title – the word "power." I am well acquainted with how words sometimes get us into trouble and how not speaking sometimes keeps us out of trouble. But I had not previously considered that holding our tongues can actually have power. I don't know why it hadn't occurred to me, since one of the most powerful Scriptures, Isaiah 53, gets its power partly from verse 7 that says of Yeshua:

"He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth."

The purpose of this message is not to promote Jill's book, but it did serve to remind me that it has been five years since I gave a message on biblical speech, and that it is about time that I gave another. It is particularly important because Proverbs 18:21 says:

"The tongue has power over life and death; those who indulge it must eat its fruit."

What the Scripture says is especially true within community, where the way we use our tongues can bring our communities blessings, or to the gates of destruction. It applies equally to our home communities, our work place communities, and to our religious congregations. We would like to think that there is no wrongful use of the tongue here at Ohev (and, for the most part, we do very well), but now and again some of us do transgress, so it is good to review God's teaching on the proper use of our speech.

The way I will approach this message will be to use relatively few words of my own, and rather allow God to speak to us directly through His written Word. So, this message will mostly be a catalog of Scriptures, organized this way: First, Scriptures that depict wrongful uses of the tongue; second, Scriptures that exhort us to righteous and holy uses of the tongue; third, Scriptures that call for delayed speech or silence; fourth, Scriptures that call for disciplining those who transgress in their speech; and finally, I will offer some personal guidance on the proper ways to express ourselves when we become offended, and have legitimate criticisms and accusations that ought to be heard.

When we hear what the Bible has to say about speech, it may seem to be at odds with the U.S. Constitution, and it may indeed. In the United States, we pride ourselves on our First Amendment right of free speech so, when we learn that the Bible teaches that speech should not always be free, we sometimes bristle at the notion. Let us remember, though, that the founding fathers' original understanding of the First Amendment was much narrower in scope and application than what it has evolved to today. There are other situations as well where what the Bible teaches and secular governments proclaim take different paths, and believers, throughout the ages, have had to navigate between them. When we are faced with situations such as those, it is well to remember Yeshua's words in Matthew 22:21:

"Give the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor. And give to God what belongs to God!"

So, with that introduction, let us begin with Scriptures that describe the kinds of speech that transgress. First:

### Speech that is Insincere (Flattery)

Psalms 5:9-10: "Lead me, *ADONAI*, in your righteousness because of those lying in wait for me; make your way straight before me. For in their mouths there is nothing sincere, within them are calamities, their throats are open tombs, they flatter with their tongues."

Psalms 12:3-4: "They all tell lies to each other, flattering with their lips, but speaking from divided hearts. May *ADONAI* cut off all flattering lips and the tongue that speaks so proudly.."

Proverbs 26:28b ".. a flattering mouth causes ruin."

### Speech that Slanders (Murmuring)

Slander is among the most serious of offenses. In modern usage, the word "slander" is speech communicated to one person, that infers something bad about another person, that is untrue. Biblical usage, however, is more akin to the rabbinical concept of *l'shon hara* – i.e., speaking negatively of a person, regardless of whether what is being said is true or is not. It is described in Ephesians 4:29 and James 4:11 which read:

Ephesians 4:29: "Let no harmful language come from your mouth, only good words that are helpful in meeting the need, words that will benefit those who hear them."

James 4:11: "Brothers, stop speaking against each other! Whoever speaks against a brother or judges a brother is speaking against *Torah* and judging *Torah*. And if you judge *Torah*, you are not a doer of what *Torah* says, but a judge."

You will notice that the prohibition (in these Scriptures) of using pejorative speech is absolute, and matters not whether what is said is true or untrue. Here is a sampling of Scriptures that command against slander:

Leviticus 19:16a "Do not go around spreading slander among your people.."

Psalms 101:5a "If someone slanders another in secret, I will cut him off."

Proverbs 16:28: "A deceitful person stirs up strife, and a slanderer can separate even close friends."

Romans 1:29 (speaking of godless and wicked people): "They are filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and vice; stuffed with jealousy, murder, quarrelling, dishonesty and ill-will; they are [word omitted] slanderers.."

Ephesians 4:31a "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, violent assertiveness and slander.."

Colossians 3:8: "but now, put them all away- anger, exasperation, meanness, slander and obscene talk."

Titus 3:2a: "..slander no one,.."

1 Peter 2:1 (NIV) "Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind."

Speaking negatively about someone to a third person is egregious to God, and especially so if the "someone" is a leader that God Himself has set in his office. What happened to Miryam when she murmured against Moses is the quintessential example of how serious a sin it is; we read about it in Numbers 12:1-2 and 6-10:

"Miryam and Aharon began criticizing Moshe on account of the Ethiopian woman he had married, for he had in fact married an Ethiopian woman. They said, "Is it true that *ADONAI* has spoken only with Moshe? Hasn't he spoken with us too?" *ADONAI* heard them."

"He said, "Listen to what I say: when there is a prophet among you, I, *ADONAI*, make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. But it isn't that way with my servant Moshe. He is the only one who is faithful in my entire household. With him I speak face to face and clearly, not in riddles; he sees the image of *ADONAI*. So why weren't you afraid to criticize my servant Moshe?" The anger of *ADONAI* flared up against them, and he left. But when the cloud was removed from above the tent, Miryam had *tzara'at*, [leprosy] as white as snow. Aharon looked at Miryam, and she was as white as snow. "

### Speech that Gossips

Gossip (sometimes referred to as tale-bearing or spreading rumors) is similar to *l'shon hara* and slander; it is repeating to a person, something that has been heard about another person. What is repeated in gossip is often negative, but doesn't have to be, such as when one reveals a matter that was intended to remain private, or that is just plain incorrect. Repeating something that is

not private and that is joyous and correct is not gossip. Here is a sampling of Scriptures that speak against gossip:

Exodus 23:1a: "You are not to repeat false rumors;"

Proverbs 11:13: "A gossip goes around revealing secrets, but a trustworthy person keeps a confidence."

Proverbs 20:19: "A gossip goes around revealing secrets, so don't get involved with a talkative person."

Proverbs 26:20: "If there's no wood, the fire goes out; if nobody gossips, contention stops."

Romans 1:29 (speaking of godless and wicked people for the second time): "They are filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and vice; stuffed with jealousy, murder, quarrelling, dishonesty and ill-will; they are gossips.."

2 Corinthians 12:20: "For I am afraid of coming and finding you not the way I want you to be, and also of not being found the way you want me to be. I am afraid of finding quarreling and jealousy, anger and rivalry, slander and gossip, arrogance and disorder."

### Speech That Tells Lies

Several weeks ago, you heard a message that suggested that there are times when lying might be sanctioned by God; I don't know about that. We do see a few occasions in the Bible where God seems to give a pass to lying, for example when Jacob lied to his father Isaac (with Rebecca's help in fact) in order to obtain Isaac's blessing (Genesis 27:1-29). A second example is when Rahab lied to the king of Jericho in order to save two spies that were sent out by Joshua, and that she was hiding (Joshua 2:1-6). I have no explanation for these occurrences, and can only tell you that all the Scriptures in the Bible that specifically address lying, teach that lying is immoral and sinful.

Proverbs 6:16-17a: "There are six things *ADONAI* hates, seven which he detests: a haughty look, a lying tongue, .."

Exodus 20:16 (13b)

"Do not give false evidence against your neighbor."

Proverbs 12:22: "Lying lips are an abomination to *ADONAI*, but those who deal faithfully are his delight."

Proverbs 19:9: "A false witness will not go unpunished; whoever breathes out lies will perish."

Proverbs 25:18: "Like a club, a sword or a sharp arrow is a person who gives false testimony against a neighbor."

Colossians 3:9a: "Never lie to one another.."

The Bible has many other things to say about wrongful speech – prideful speech, perverse speech, cursing, and more; but what I want to address now is some of what the Bible says about the righteous and holy use of speech. The Scriptures are many, and here are but a few of them:

Psalms 34:1 (2): "I will bless *ADONAI* at all times; his praise will always be in my mouth."

Psalms 98:4: "Shout for joy to *ADONAI*, all the earth! Break forth, sing for joy, sing praises!"

Proverbs 10:11a: "The speech of the righteous is a fountain of life, .."

Proverbs 10:13a: "On the lips of the intelligent is found wisdom, .."

Proverbs 12:17a: "He who tells the truth furthers justice, .."

Matthew 6:9: "You, therefore, pray like this: 'Our Father in heaven! May your Name be kept holy. ..'"

These are a lot of Scriptures, but God's desire that we use our gift of speech for good warrants our hearing just a few more, so please bear with me:

2 Corinthians 6:6-7a: "We commend ourselves by our purity, knowledge, patience and kindness; by the *Ruach HaKodesh*; by genuineness of love and truthfulness of speech;"

Ephesians 4:29: "Let no harmful language come from your mouth, only good words that are helpful in meeting the need, words that will benefit those who hear them."

Colossians 4:2: "Keep persisting in prayer, staying alert in it and being thankful."

Finally, Hebrews 4:12 says that "the Word of God is alive! It is at work and is sharper than any double-edged sword.." Clearly then, speaking the Word of God is one of the best uses of our speech, and has great power for good.

### Speech That Is Silent

How can speech be silent? I have already alluded to how Yeshua's silence in the final hours of His life spoke volumes and released power. Here are some other Scriptures that suggest times when there is virtue in being slow to speak or remaining silent:

Exodus 14:14 (NIV): The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Psalms 37:7a: "Be still before *ADONAI*; wait patiently till he comes.

Proverbs 11:12: "He who belittles another lacks good sense, whereas a person of discernment stays silent."

Proverbs 13:3: "He who guards his mouth preserves his life, but one who talks too much comes to ruin."

Proverbs 17:28: "Even a fool, if he stays silent, is thought wise; he who keeps his mouth shut can pass for smart."

James 1:19: "Therefore, my dear brothers, let every person be quick to listen but slow to speak, slow to get angry;"

### Scripture Calls Us to Expel, or Withdraw from Those Who Transgress with Their Tongues

The Scriptures we have just heard ought to impress us with how damaging the wrongful use of our tongue can be, and especially in communities such as Ohev. The reason is, that gossip, slander, lying, and improperly accusing leaders causes divisions among the brethren, and a spirit of disunity can break a community apart. That is not to say that leaders are immune from criticism and accusation when they do wrong, and there are processes for that, which I will discuss in a moment. Meanwhile, let's take note of several Scriptures that call for discipline and withdrawal from those who transgress in their speech and do not repent:

The first Scripture, Galatians 1:8-9, applies to a person claiming to be a believer, but who preaches heresy:

Galatians 1:8-9: "But even if we- or, for that matter, an angel from heaven!- were to announce to you some so-called "Good News" contrary to the Good News we did announce to you, let him be under a curse forever! We said it before, and I say it again: if anyone announces "Good News" contrary to what you received, let him be under a curse forever!"

The next two Scriptures (three and four), call for us to avoid and, if necessary, expel a person from our midst if he or she is divisive:

Titus 3:10-11: "Warn a divisive person once, then a second time; and after that, have nothing more to do with him. You may be sure that such a person has been perverted and is sinning: he stands self-condemned."

Romans 16:17-18: "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put snares alongside the teaching in which you have been trained- keep away from them. For men like these are not serving our Lord the Messiah but their own belly; by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the innocent."

The fifth Scripture requires that we cast out of our community, persons who scoff at the Word of God:

Proverbs 22:10: "Throw the scoffer out, and quarreling goes too; strife and insults cease."

The sixth Scripture I will present requires that we withdraw from a brother in the faith who is disorderly and unscriptural in the way he conducts his life:

2 Thessalonians 3:6: "Now, in the name of the Lord Yeshua the Messiah we command you, brothers, to stay away from any brother who is leading a life of idleness [the NKJ says "walks disorderly"], a life not in keeping with the tradition you received from us."

This last Scripture does not specifically refer to speech, but it is relevant because one of the ways we can be disorderly and unscriptural, is through the way we speak.

The manner in the way that we apply these Scriptures is a topic for another message but for now, notice that persons who do not control their tongues within a believing community need to be removed from the community. It is not a matter of First Amendment rights; it is a matter of protecting the community.

### Ways to Address Legitimate Complaints

The Scriptures do not leave us without ways to raise legitimate complaints within congregations. Offenses can be of various kinds, but there are two basic types – private offenses and public offenses. A private offense is when an individual sins against another individual, and the remedy for that is given in Matthew 18:15-17, where one first confronts the offender alone, then with one or two others, and finally the matter is brought to the congregation's elders. The other kind of offense is when a sin is of a public nature, and affects the community at large. One can attempt to correct such a sin privately, but the usual remedy is to report it to the elders, who are authorized to deal with it pursuant to whatever Scriptures apply. It is akin to reporting a theft to the police in the public arena. In all cases, making accusations public, whispering accusations to third persons, and gossiping about what one has heard that is critical of another person are strictly forbidden.

A special case exists when the one being accused or complained about is an elder. 1 Timothy 5:19 requires that we:

"Never listen to any accusation against a leader unless it is supported by two or three witnesses."

When an accusation is made against an elder, a congregation will often bring in elders from other congregations to assist. And if one is a member of a Tikkun congregation such as Ohev, members have the right to bring complaints against their elders, and to appeal decisions of their elders to Tikkun's American Apostolic Team.

Now having given this message on biblical speech, I will conclude with a prayer taken from Psalms 19:14:

"May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be acceptable in your presence, *ADONAI*, my Rock and Redeemer."