

The Evil Tongue

by Thomas Watson

The evil tongue is a reflection of the heart's condition and is a source of great evil in the world.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23, Proverbs 10:20, Proverbs 26:24, Proverbs 26:26, Matthew 12:36, Matthew 15:19, Acts 2:4, 1 Corinthians 10:10, James 3:6, Revelation 20:12

Topics: "Taming The Tongue", "Heart Transformation"

Description

Thomas Watson preaches about the destructive power of the evil tongue, describing it as a fire fueled by hell that corrupts the whole person. He delves into various aspects of the evil tongue, highlighting its silent nature in matters of religion, its focus on worldly matters, its hasty and angry expressions, its tendency towards vanity, censure, slander, uncleanness, lying, flattery, boasting, swearing, railing, seduction, cruelty, murmuring, scoffing, cursing, injustice, and more. Watson emphasizes the need for a transformed heart to produce better speech, as the tongue reflects the deep wickedness within the heart, and warns of being held accountable for every word spoken on the day of judgment.

Transcript

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"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. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison!" James 3:6-8

The apostle James in this Scripture, describes the evil of the tongue, "The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity."

1. "It is a fire." It burns with intemperate heat; it causes the heat of contention; it sets others in a flame.
2. "A world of evil." It was at first made to be an organ of God's praise, but it is become an instrument of unrighteousness. All the members of the body are sinful--as there is bitterness in every branch of wormwood--but the tongue is excessively sinful, "full of deadly poison" (verse 8).

Doctrine: The tongue, though it is a little member, yet it has a world of evil in it; the tongue is an untamable evil. I shall show you some of the evils of the tongue.

1. The evil tongue is the silent tongue; it is wholly mute in matters of religion; it never speaks of God or of heaven--as if it cleaved to the roof of the mouth. Men are fluent and knowledgeable enough in other things, but in matters of religion their lips are sealed up. If we come into some people's company, we do not know what religion they are of, whether Jews or Mohammedans, for they never speak of Christ; they are like the man in the gospel, who was possessed with a dumb devil (Mark 9:17).

2. The evil tongue is the earthly tongue; men talk of nothing but the world, as if all their hopes were here, and they looked for an earthly eternity; these have earthly minds, "He who is of the earth, speaks of the earth" (John 3:31).

3. The evil tongue is the hasty or angry tongue; it has no command of passions, but is carried away with them, as a chariot with wild horses. I know there is an holy anger--when we are angry with sin. Christ had this anger when they made the temple a place of merchandise (John 2:15). That anger is without sin--which is against sin; but that is an evil tongue, which is presently blown up into exorbitant passion; this "tongue is set on fire from hell." A wrathful spirit is unsuitable to the gospel; it is a gospel of peace, and its author is the Prince of Peace, and it is sealed by the Spirit, who came in the form of a dove, a meek peaceable creature. You who are given much to passion, whose tongue is often set on fire--take heed you do not one day in hell desire a drop of water to cool your tongue!

4. The evil tongue is the vain tongue, which vents itself in idle words: "Under his tongue is vanity" (Psalm 10:7). A vain tongue shows a light heart; a godly man's words are weighty and prudent; his lips are as a tree of life to feed many and his speech is edifying, "The tongue of the just is as choice silver" (Proverbs 10:20). But, "The mouth of fools pours out foolishness" (Proverbs 15:2). How many idle away the day of grace in frivolous discourses? A wise man's words are like gold--weighty, and will sink into the hearts of others; but the words of many are light and feathery and will make no impression, "Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give an account thereof, in the day of judgment" (Matthew 12:36).

5. The evil tongue is the censorious tongue, "Who are you that judge another?" (James 4:12). Some make it a part of their religion to judge and censure others. They do not imitate their graces--but censure their failings. Such an one is a hypocrite, for this comes from pride. Were men's hearts more humble, their tongues would be more charitable. The censurer sits in the chair of pride, and passes sentence upon another, and reprobates him; this is to usurp God's prerogative, and take his work out of his hands; it is God's work to judge, not ours. He who spends his time in censuring others spends but little time in examining himself, and does not see his own faults. There is not a greater sign of hypocrisy than to be overhasty in judging and censuring persons.

6. The evil tongue is the slanderous tongue, "You sit and slander your own mother's son" (Psalm 50:20). Slandering is when we speak to the harm of another, and speak that which is not true. Worth and eminency are commonly blasted by slander; holiness itself is no shield from slander. "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" (Matthew 11:18-19). Come and let us smite him with the tongue! A slanderer wounds another's name--and no physician can heal these wounds! The sword does not make so deep a wound--as the tongue! The Greek word for slanderer, signifies devil. Some think it is no great matter to slander and defame another; but

know, this is to act the part of a devil. The slanderer's tongue is a two-edged sword, it wounds two at once; while the slanderer wounds another in his name, he wounds himself in his conscience. This is contrary to Scripture, "Speak not evil one of another" (James 4:11). God takes this evil at our hands--to speak evil of others, especially such as are eminently holy, and help to bear up the honor of religion: "Were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (Numbers 12:8). What! My servant who has wrought so many miracles--whom I have spoken with in the mount face to face--were not you afraid to speak against him? So will God say, You must take heed of this--it is a sin your nature is very prone to! Remember, it is no less sin to rob another of his good name--than to steal his goods or wares out of his shop! "Brothers, do not slander one another!" James 4:11

7. The evil tongue is the unclean tongue, which vents itself in filthy and unclean words, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth" (Ephesians 4:29). It is a sign of a great disease--when the tongue is black. It is a sign men's hearts are very evil--when such black words come from them!

8. The evil tongue is the lying tongue, "Lie not to one another" (Colossians 3:9). The Cretans were noted for liars (Titus 1:12). It becomes not Christians to be Cretans. Nothing is more contrary to God than a lie; it shows much irreligion; lying is a sin that does not go alone, it ushers in other sins. Absalom told his father a lie, that he was going to pay his vow at Hebron (2 Samuel 15:7), and this lie was a preface to his treason. Lying is such a sin, as takes away all society and converse with men; how can you have converse with him, that you cannot trust a word he says? It is a sin so sordid, that when the liar is convicted, he is ashamed. God's children have this character, they are children that will not lie" (Isaiah 63:8), the new nature in them will not allow them. The liar is near akin to the devil, and the devil will shortly claim kindred with him, "The devil is a liar, and the father of it" (John 8:44). He seduced our first parents by a lie (Genesis 3:4). How does this sin incense God? He struck Ananias dead for telling a lie (Acts 5:5). The furnace of hell is heated to throw liars into, "Outside are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoever loves and makes a lie" (Revelation 22:15).

9. The evil tongue is the flattering tongue, which will speak fair to one's face, but will defame, "A malicious man disguises himself with his lips, but in his heart he harbors deceit." (Proverbs 26:24). When he speaks fair, believe him not; pretended love is worse than hatred. Some can commend and reproach, flatter and hate--they have honey in their mouths, but a cauldron of malice in their hearts! Better are the wounds of a friend, than the kisses of such an enemy.

Many have flattering tongues, which lay snares, "A man who flatters his neighbor, spreads a net for his feet" (Proverbs 29:5). You often think you have a friend in your bosom--but he proves a viper. To pretend love is no better than to lie. Many are like Joab, "And Joab said to Amasa, 'How are you, my brother?' Then Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him. Amasa was not on his guard against the dagger in Joab's hand, and Joab plunged it into his belly, and Amasa died" (2 Samuel 20:9). For my part, I must question his truth towards God--who will flatter and lie to his friend. God will bring such an one to shame at last, "His malice may be concealed by deception, but his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly" (Proverbs 26:26).

10. The evil tongue is the tongue given to boasting, "The tongue is a small part of the body--but it makes great boasts" (James 3:5). There is a holy boasting, "In God we boast all the day" (Psalm 44:8), when we triumph in his power and mercy. But it is a sinful boasting, when men display their trophies, boast of their own worth and eminency, that others may admire and lift them up. A man's self is his idol, and he loves to have this idol worshiped, "Some time ago Theudas appeared, boasting himself to be somebody" (Acts

5:36). Sinful boasting is when men boast of their sins, "Why do you boast of evil, you mighty man? Why do you boast all day long, you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God?" (Psalm 52:1). Some boast how wicked they have been; how many people they have made drunk; how many virgins they have deflowered; as if a beggar should boast of his sores; or a thief boast of being burnt in the hand. Such as boast of their sinful exploits, will have little cause to rejoice, or hang up their trophies--when they come to hell.

11. The evil tongue is the swearing tongue, "Swear not at all" (Matthew 5:34). The Scripture allows an oath for the ending of a controversy, and to clear the truth (Hebrews 6:16); but in ordinary discourse to use an oath, and so to take God's name in vain, is sinful. Swearing may be called "the unfruitful works of darkness." There is neither pleasure nor profit in it. "Because of swearing the land mourns" (Jeremiah 23:10). Some think that swearing will make their speech witty; but, if God will reckon with men for idle words, what will he do for sinful oaths?

They justify themselves by, "But it is only a petty oath." or "But it is my custom." Is this an excuse, or an aggravation of the sin? If a malefactor should be arraigned for robbing, and lie should say to the judge, "Spare me, it is my custom to rob on the highway!" The judge would say, "You shall die for sure then!" For every oath you swear, God puts a drop of wrath into his vial!

But--some may think--what if now and then I swear an oath? Words are but wind. But they are such a wind as will blow you into hell--without repentance.

12. The railing tongue is an evil tongue: this is a plague-sore breaking out at the tongue, when we give scornful language. When the dispute was between the archangel and the devil about the body of Moses, "The archangel did not bring a railing accusation against him, but said--the Lord rebuke you" (Jude 9). The archangel did not rail against the devil. Railing often ends in reviling, and so men are "in danger of hell fire" (Matthew 5:22).

13. The seducing tongue is an evil tongue. The tongue that by fine rhetoric decoys men into error, "By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people." (Romans 16:18). A smooth tongue can put off bad wares; error is bad ware, which a seducing tongue can put off. The deceit lies in this; a smooth tongue can make error look so like truth, that you can hardly know them asunder; as thus--in justification, Christ bears infinite love to justified persons; this is a glorious truth, but under this notion, the Antinomian preaches libertinism; that is, that believers may take more liberty to sin, and God sees no sin in them. Thus, by crying up justification, they destroy sanctification! Here is the seducing tongue; and error is as dangerous as vice! One may die by poison--as well as by a pistol!

14. The evil tongue is the cruel tongue, which speaks to the wounding of the hearts of others. The tongue is made almost in the shape of a sword; and the tongue is as sharp as a sword, "Whose tongues are sharp swords" (Psalm 57:4). Kind, loving words should be spoken to such as are of a heavy heart, "To him that is afflicted pity should be shown" (Job 6:14). Healing words are fit for a broken heart: but that is a cruel, unmerciful tongue, which speaks such words to the afflicted, as to cut them to the heart, "They talk to the grief of those whom you have wounded" (Psalm 69:26). Hannah was a woman of a troubled spirit, "In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:10). And now Eli, in verse 14, said unto her, "how long will you be drunk? Put away your wine from you." This word was like pouring vinegar into the wound. When Job was afflicted with God's hand, his friends, instead of comforting him, told him he was a hypocrite (Job 11:2). These were cutting words, which went to his heart! Instead of giving him cordials--they used corrosives. This is to lay more weight upon a dying man.

15. The evil tongue is the murmuring tongue, "These are murmurers" (Jude 16). Murmuring is discontent breaking out at the lips; men quarrel with God, and blame his dealings with them--as if he had not dealt well with them. Why should any murmur or be discontented at their condition? Does God owe them anything? Or, can they deserve anything at his hands? O, how unfitting is it to murmur at providence! It is fit for a Cain to be upset with God? (Genesis 4:6).

(1) Murmuring proceeds from unbelief. When men distrust God's promise, then they murmur at his providence, "They believed not his word, but murmured" (Psalm 106:24,25). When faith grows low, then passion grows high.

(2) Murmuring proceeds from pride. Men think they have deserved better; and, because they are crossed, therefore they utter discontented expressions against God. He who is humble bears anything from God; he knows his punishment is less than his sin, therefore says, "I will bear the indignation of the Lord" (Micah 7:9). But pride raises discontent; and hence comes murmurings. Murmuring is a sin that God cannot bear, "How long shall I bear with this evil congregation that murmur against me?" (Numbers 14:27). The murmurer discovers much ingratitude; a murmuring tongue is always an unthankful tongue; he considers not how much he is a debtor to free grace, and whatever he has is more than God owes him; he does not consider that his mercies outweigh his afflictions; there's more honey than wormwood in his cup; he does not consider what God has done for him, more than such as are better than he; he has the finest of wheat, when others feed, as Daniel, on pulse. The murmurer, I say, does not consider this; but, because he is crossed in some small matter, he repines against God. O ingratitude!

Israel, though they had manna from heaven, to satisfy their hunger, angel's food, yet murmured for lack of quail; not content that God should supply their needs, but must satisfy their lust too! O unthankful Israel's murmuring cost many of them their lives, "Do not grumble, as some of them did--and were killed by the destroying angel." (1 Corinthians 10:10). Their speeches were venomous, and God punished them with venomous serpents!

16. The evil tongue is the scoffing tongue. The scoffer sits in the chair of scorn, and derides religion. Surely the devil has taken great possession of men, when they have arrived at such a degree of sin, as to scoff at holiness. It was foretold as a sin of the last times, "There shall come in the last days scoffers" (2 Peter 3:3). Some scoff at the authority of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the immortality of the soul; this is the worst sort of tongues. When men have laid aside the veil of modesty, and their consciences are seared, then they fall a scoffing at religion; and when once they are come to this, their case is desperate! No reproofs will reclaim them; tell them of their sin, and they will hate you the more, "Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate you" (Proverbs 9:8). Such a man is on the threshold of damnation!

17. The evil tongue is the tongue given to cursing, "His mouth is full of cursing" (Psalm 10:7). Cursing is a wishing some great evil to befall another. Cursing is the scum which boils off from a wicked heart! Though it is true, the curse without cause shall not come--it is not in man's power to make another cursed--yet to wish a curse is a fearful sin. If to hate our brother is murder (1 John 3:15), then to curse him, which is the highest degree of hatred, must needs be murder. To use a curse, is for a man to do what in him lies--to damn another. Some wish a curse upon themselves: so the Jews, "his blood be upon us!" And so do your "God damn's!" as if damnation did not come fast enough! "As he loved cursing so let it come to him" (Psalm 109:17).

18. The evil tongue is the unjust tongue; that will for a piece of money open its mouth in a bad cause. The lawyer has a tongue that will be sold for money, "How long will you judge unjustly?" (Psalm 82:2). Some will plead any cause, though ever so bad: though they know that the facts are forged, the witnesses bribed, there's perjury in the cause--yet they will plead it! When a man pleads a bad cause he is the devil's attorney! As God hates false weights--just so, he hates a false cause. Better to be born dumb, than open one's mouth in a bad cause. O, what times are we in! Many pervert justice, and, for enriching themselves, overthrow a righteous cause; these are worse than they that rob, for they fleece men's estates under a pretense of law, and ruin them under a pretense of doing justice.

APPLICATION

See what a blow we have sustained by the fall! Sin has put out of frame, the whole course of nature. Original sin has diffused itself as a poison into all the members of the body; it has made the eye unchaste--the hands full of bribes--among the rest it has defiled the tongue, "it is a world of iniquity." That which was made to be the organ of God's praise, has become a weapon of unrighteousness.

If there is so much evil in the tongue, what is the heart? If the stream is so full of water, how full of water is the fountain? If there is a world of iniquity in the tongue--how many worlds of sin are there in the heart, "Their inward part is very wickedness" (Psalm 5:9). If the tongue, which is the outward part, is so wicked, the inward part is very wickedness, "The heart is deep" (Psalm 64:6); it is such a deep as cannot be fathomed; deep pride, hypocrisy, atheism. The heart is like the sea, where is the leviathan, and creeping things innumerable (Psalm 104:25,26). If the skin has boils of leprosy in it, how much corruption is in the blood? If the tongue is so bad, how diabolical is the heart? It is the heart which sets the tongue a-working, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks!" In the heart, are the seeds of all atheism and blasphemy, "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries; these defile a man" (Matthew 15:19,20). If a branch of wormwood is so bitter, then how bitter is the root? O, what a root of bitterness grows in a man's heart!

Some say they have good hearts; but if the tongue is so bad, what is the heart? If I see a smoke come pouring out of the top of a chimney, what a fire burns within. "A wicked man walks with a corrupt mouth." (Proverbs 6:12, 14). Solomon shows the reason why the mouth is so corrupt, "corruption is in his heart." The heart is a storehouse of wickedness, "the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him" (Matthew 12:35). Original righteousness was a good treasure, but we were robbed of that; and now there is an evil treasury of sin. The word treasury, denotes plenty; to show the fullness and abundance of sin that is in the heart. The heart is a lesser hell, which is a matter of deep humiliation; the heart is like the Egyptian temples--full of spiders and serpents.

If you would have better tongues--labor for better hearts. It is the heart which has influence upon the tongue. If the heart is vain and earthly--the tongue will be so. If the heart is holy--the tongue will be so. Look to your heart, get a better heart, and a better tongue.

How shall I get my heart bettered? Get a principle of grace infused. Grace is like the salt cast into the spring; grace changes the heart, and sanctifies all the members of the body--it sanctifies the eyes and makes them chaste--it sanctifies the tongue, and makes it holy and calm. When the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles, "they began to speak with other tongues" (Acts 2:4): when God's Spirit comes on a man with a sanctifying work--he speaks with another tongue; the speech is heavenly. Grace makes the heart serious, and that cures the levity of the tongue; when the heart is serious, the words are savory.

Remember, you must give an account to God, as well of your speeches, as your actions, "Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give an account thereof in the day of judgment" (Matthew 12:36). Idle words of no account--will have a heavy account! And, if God will reckon with men for every idle, angry word, then, what will he do for sinful oaths? "Oh that my words were now written!" (Job 19:23). Truly, if many people's words were written, they would be ashamed of them. And, let me tell you--your words are written! "The books were opened" (Revelation 20:12). In the book of God's remembrance all your words are written! You had need then be careful not to sin with your tongue! God writes down all you speak--and you must give an account to him! When the books are opened, God will proceed with you in judgment, according to your words--"For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:37).

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