

WORDS THAT SPREAD DEATH AND HOW TO STOP THEM

In the Bible the words of three parties—God, Satan, and man—are very significant. As the Word of God, the Bible speaks forth God's person, intent, and work. By His word He framed the universe (Heb. 11:3). When God came in the person of the Lord Jesus, His words were spirit and life (John 6:63). The gospel of God's salvation is "the word of the truth" (Eph. 1:13). Conversely, all of Satan's words are lies (Gen. 3:1-6; John 8:44). He is deceit personified (Eph. 4:22). On the one hand, he deceives men and blinds their thoughts (1 Tim. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:4; Rev. 12:9); on the other hand, he is the accuser of the brothers (v. 10). As men, we can choose what kind of words we speak. Proverbs 18:21a tells us, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." The Lord Jesus told a crowd of followers, "It is not that which enters into the mouth that defiles the man; but that which proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man" (Matt. 15:11). As believers, we can speak words of death, that is, words that belong to him who has the might of death, the devil (Heb. 2:14), or we can hold forth the word of life (Phil. 2:15), which life is God Himself.

In Volume 3 of his *Messages for Building Up New Believers* (henceforth, *Messages (3)*), Watchman Nee devotes an entire chapter to the subject of "words." He first points out that the words a person speaks reveal his heart—"out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34b). He then speaks extensively about three categories of words that a believer should exercise to avoid—lies (John 8:44), idle words (Matt. 12:36-37), and evil words (1 Pet. 3:9-12). Finally, he addresses the need of believers to be restricted in their words (1 Pet. 3:10; Prov. 17:27; 21:23) and to pay attention to their listening. Of course, these principles apply to written words as well.

Any kind of negative words—murmuring, reasoning, gossip, rumors, contentions, questionings, or reviling—is a form of death. However, such vain words, if unbridled, lead to more serious problems. Paul warned Timothy to "avoid profane, vain babblings" (which in themselves are deadening) because "they will advance to more ungodliness" (2 Tim. 2:16). Immediately before Paul's charge to the Philippians to "do all things without murmurings and reasonings" (Phil. 2:14), he spoke about obedience (v. 12). This shows that murmuring and reasoning, things that we might not consider to be severe, are manifestations of rebellion. In Numbers 14 the murmuring of the children of Israel constituted a rebellion against Jehovah and escalated to the point that they decided to stone Moses and Aaron (vv. 2, 9-10).

Gossip and rumors also spread death (1 Tim. 5:13). Concerning gossip Brother Lee counseled us, "Any kind of gossip only spreads death in the Body. Gossip is a spreading of germs to kill the Body. We must treasure the fact that we are in the Body life. The Body life should be so precious to us that we would not do anything to damage it" (*The Enjoyment of Christ for the Body in 1 Corinthians*, 44). Concerning rumors he pointed out:

If you read the Gospels again, you will see that no other person has been subject to so many troubles, attacks, misunderstandings, and rumors as the Lord Jesus. So many religionists are good rumor makers. There are as many rumors in the sphere of religion as in any other place. These rumor makers are accustomed to twisting your words. They isolate a few words that you say and add something else to it. Sometimes the Lord Jesus spoke a word and the religionists picked on it and twisted it, trying to make a case out of it against the Lord. (*Life-study of Hebrews*, 13/2)

We should not be deluded by those who use persuasive words to stir up questionings, contentions of words, and suspicions (Col. 2:4). The first example of a deception in the Bible is Satan's persuasion of Eve to take of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil by questioning God's words (Gen. 3:1-6). Such questionings are not aimed at learning the truth but at causing others to doubt God's word and His heart. The New Testament speaks of questionings that undermine the believers' apprehension of God's economy (1 Tim. 1:3-4). Brother Lee commented, "Once questionings come in, confusion and division will quickly follow" (*Crucial Principles for the Proper Church Life*, 69). Questionings beget contentions (2 Tim. 2:23), and out of questionings and contentions come evil suspicions (1 Tim. 6:4). Those who are consumed by such things become revilers of the truth and as such are malignantly contagious.

The Bible uses at least three figures—leprosy, leaven, and gangrene—to show how death is spread. In the Old Testament leprosy is a sign of sin as a result of rebellion (Num. 12: 2 Kings 5:20-27; 2 Chron. 26:16-21). Leprosy is highly contagious, so a leper was considered unclean and removed from the congregation until he was healed (Lev. 13—15). In the New Testament some Judaizers persuaded the believers in Galatia to turn from the supply of the Spirit to keeping the law (Gal. 3:1-5). Of this, Paul said, “Who hindered you that you would not believe and obey the truth? This persuasion is not of Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (5:7-9). Here the persuasive words of the Judaizers were likened to leaven that leavened the churches in Galatia. Finally, after warning Timothy to “avoid profane, vain babblings,” Paul said of the babblers, “Their word will spread like gangrene” (2 Tim. 2:17a). *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* describes the word used for *gangrene* as “a disease by which any part of the body suffering from inflammation becomes so corrupted that, unless a remedy is seasonably applied, the evil continually spreads, attacks other parts, and at last eats away the bones.” Such is the destruction that spreads by words.

As believers we should hold to “the faithful word, which is according to the teaching of the apostles” (Titus 1:9) and “speak the things which are fitting to the healthy teaching” (2:1). We should heed Paul’s word to “let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but only that which is good for building up, according to the need, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29; cf. Col. 4:6; Rom. 14:19).

Responding to Unhealthy Words

Immediately after warning Timothy against vain babblers and the spreading of their word like gangrene, Paul speaks of cleansing oneself from vessels unto dishonor. In that context Paul told Timothy to “flee youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22) and to refuse foolish questionings (v. 23). In his fellowship on “Words” for new believers, Brother Nee said, “There is a lust among us for unhealthy words. This is why these words multiply. People find these words tasteful” (*Messages* (3), 599). Brother Nee’s word matches Proverbs 18:8 and 26:22, both of which say, “The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of one’s being.” This means that our fallen being eagerly swallows, digests, and assimilates rumors and stores them up in our heart.

How then should we respond to unhealthy words? The solution Brother Nee gives is simple—to refuse to listen by walking away or by telling the speaker to stop. His explanation is striking:

Those who take in reviling words bear the same responsibility as those who speak reviling words. It is one thing for a person to dump trash on others. It is another thing for a person to receive trash from others... In order for the church to maintain the oneness, the brothers and sisters have to withstand reviling words. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Volume 57: The Resumption of Watchman Nee’s Ministry*, 239-240)

This matches the fellowship Brother Mark Raabe gave in a message on “The Water for Impurity” at the July 2019 semiannual training on Numbers. After the rebellions in Numbers 14 and 18, chapter 19 speaks of the uncleanness of death. Verse 15 of that chapter says that if someone dies in a tent, “every open vessel, which has no covering tied down on it, is unclean.” This indicates that we, as the vessels for the Lord (2 Cor. 4:7; 2 Tim. 2:21), should not give the slightest opening to words that spread death. Brother Mark explained:

When we encounter speaking or writing that has the element of death or the element of rebellion, we need to close the cover of our vessel by not listening. There may be some element of truth in what is being said, but there is also an element of death and rebellion... We must be wide open to the Lord and to the water for impurity but closed to anything of death. This is the way to remain in life. (*Ministry of the Word* 23:7 (July 2019), “Crystallization-study of Numbers,” 157-158)

If we withstand words of death and speak words of grace, we will help to deter the enemy’s efforts to bring the church into death and will find ourselves under the blessing of the Triune God (Num. 6:23-27; Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Cor. 13:14).