

A Muzzled Mouth

I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me. I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred. (Psalm 39:1-2)

Having been reminded that not nearly all speech is profitable, let us not rush into the error that all silence is necessarily virtuous. There are a number of reasons why men's mouths become muzzled; some good, others not. It would do us good to ask ourselves why we are silent . . . if we ever are.

There is a stoical silence. Stoicism is a religion of passive submission. It supposes silence itself to be a virtue, no matter what the cause. That is the very thing we deny.

With all due respect to the proverb, silence is not always golden: sometimes it is yellow. There is a cowardly silence. We fail to speak because we fear the pain of truth. We do not want to "hurt" others. We shirk our duty to cry out against evil because we fear the reprisals of men stung by the rebuke and exposure of their wickedness. We recoil from public disapproval, choosing rather to remain respectably silent than swim against the tide of Jezebel's 800 false prophets. Then there is the risk of being wrong, of taking a stand where the Bible speaks clearly, because "it may not work out". In a climate where truth is judged by the quick results it gets, we may be burned at the stake before God vindicates us. This is nothing less than wicked unbelief in the God Who commands us to speak.

Also there is a foolish silence. There is nothing wise about letting things go by that need attention. We give assent to lies sometimes, and leave people in a delusion when we ignore them and say nothing. We must gird our loins with truth boldly spoken when deception is being practiced.

Then there is a sullen silence. We have been offended. We are angry. We will engage a childish pout and give everyone the silent treatment, hoping thereby to get revenge by causing anxiety in others. Such silence, so far from being virtuous, is the worst kind of selfish flesh crying out to be noticed and pampered.

Few of us have not been given over to a despairing silence. We have just given up. We are defeated and discouraged. Our words have not been heeded. Those we would have helped have turned against us. Like Jeremiah, we have decided we would just be quiet, since further speech seems to be futile. If God has indeed put His words in our mouths, they will also be like fire shut up in our bones. We must not discount the power of God to make His truth effectual. Whether people hear or not, we are yet bound to continue to say what He bids us say.

There is a valid forced silence. We are bound to observe authority in the civil realm. While religious leaders may not tell us what we may preach, civil authorities may forbid us to speak in certain places. We do no adornment to the gospel when we present ourselves as lawless rebels. There are also times when we are restrained by the Holy Spirit from speaking, even though we would like to shout out.

The example given in the above scripture, however, is a wise and holy silence. It is an act of will on the part of the psalmist. He has taken earnest heed to his ways and determined to bridle his tongue. This is something that every child of God must learn. The sins of the tongue are easiest to commit and most subtle of all. How often they are engaged ignorantly! And we know it not until we begin to reap their bitter fruits. Especially are we to use caution when the wicked are before us. There are a number of reasons:

We are most likely to speak unwisely when we are exercised in our emotions. It is a rare person (if he indeed exists at all) who can hold his tongue and contain behind a closed mouth the hot seething emotions of the heart. Especially is this true when we feel we have been mistreated, neglected, hurt, outraged, left out, misunderstood or misinterpreted. How loudly our wounded ego cries to be heard, justified, pampered and restored!

In such a time, if we, as Christians, must speak, let us be very careful in whose presence we do so. If we must get the poison out of our systems, then let us flush it out where it will pollute no more than it already has. Let us not infect someone else with our bitterness. Here are some who must never hear such unseemly speech from us:

Soreheads and chronic grouches. These are the very ones to whom we are most likely to spill our woes, since they feed on such swill, and are constantly browsing for it.

Talebearers. If you are going to tell one of these, you may as well write a letter to the local editor. It will be a public broadcast in no time; and you will hurt and offend many whom you will deeply regret.

Two-faced sympathizers. These human lizards always adapt to the color of their company. They will give you exactly what you want, telling you how right you are and how wicked the other parties are. You will leave them more bitter than when you came.

Then to whom must we tell our woes? As the song title goes, "Tell It To Jesus". Tell it first to God and wait on His answer and His healing. If you must then tell it to men, seek out the holiest, most godly and honest person you know and tell him. If he is a faithful friend, he will hold your confidence. Your story will go no further. And he will rebuke and correct you where you are wrong, even while sympathizing with your suffering. And he will help you to find the scriptural principles needed to recover yourself from the snare in which the enemy has entangled your soul.

- C.M.