

## The Key to Life and Good Days

*1 St. Peter iii. 8 ff. be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: 9 Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing. 10 For he that will love life, and see good days, **let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile:** 11 Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it. 12 For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil. 13 And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? 14 But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; 15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts . . .*

One phrase stood out as I was reading today's Epistle in preparation for the sermon: *For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile* (see also Ps. 34:12-13, the source of Peter's quote). I was reminded of a similar words from the Epistle of James:

*If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. (1:26)*

*3: 2 ff.: If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. 3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. 4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. 5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. 7 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: 8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. 9 Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. 11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? 12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.*

The mental picture of a tongue with reins on it, and its owner seated astride it to keep it in check, is a memorable one, indeed. But even the world has similar advice: "Bite your tongue!" or "Zip the lip!" The whole idea here is to think once, twice, or thrice before one opens one's mouth, especially in situations where the consequences of not doing so could be serious.

The wonderful Old Testament Book of Proverbs holds many similar warnings:

*18:21 Death and life [are] in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.*

*10:19 - In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips [is] wise.*

I especially like this one:

*17:28 Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise: [and] he that shutteth his lips [is esteemed] a man of understanding.*

All of these thoughts summed up yield some conclusions. There is a time to speak and a time to refrain. And the spoken word has power both to bless and to curse.

“I was at a loss for words” is a familiar expression in times of great need. Sitting with families at the bedsides of their dying relatives, I’ve pondered long and hard how to assist them. When I’ve reviewed in my mind the religious phrases that might be appropriate to the moment, I’ve often concluded that there are other ways to speak, especially when every word counts, and suffering people are looking for something—anything—to hold on to. Economy of words seems best. One must win the right to say something that’s life-giving. Otherwise it will only be holy verbiage. This is the last thing I want to hand anyone in such circumstances.

Or take another case. Suppose I know the truth about someone else, but it’s better left unsaid. Words shoot through my mind: “Look, you got yourself into this situation. You did this, you did that, so what did you expect?” But I exercise the power of restraint. God can speak to their hearts. He knows how best to do so, and to preserve their dignity at the same time. I’ll reserve my tongue for the purpose of giving life: “I’m sorry this happened. I believe in you. Let’s look instead at your successes.”

If I practice self-control and make the safe assumption that my presence may be a far greater gift than my words, I may actually begin to win the privilege of being heard. A wise heart can be cultivated by a silence and stillness that isn’t constantly disturbed by an outflow of words. As we observe, and consider, and ponder, we increase the dimensions of the wellspring of our own inner resources. The result, like pure water, when it is carefully poured forth, will bring refreshment and relief. It will be much in demand. This is not a state of things quickly or easily arrived at.

I will discipline myself to listen carefully to others, and hold highly suspect my impulse to toss in my own contribution. Such caution may be the key to making available to others those treasures God has entrusted to me for their sake. What are those treasures? They are the same ones each of us possesses . . . : life experiences, and what they have taught us. This is wisdom, and it is in desperately short supply. Were we all in a position to share equally with one another in this regard, the world’s problems would be quickly solved.

*For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile.* Notice that this promise holds as much good for the one who keeps his tongue from evil and his lips from guile as it does for those who would stand to benefit from

good and sincere words. Which of us doesn't want to *love life, and see good days*? What is *life*? Surely it is far, far more than merely being alive. It is the beauty of ordered interaction with those who are around us, where they are able enjoy the best of what we are, and we are free to partake of the goodness that God has placed within them. It is, in a very real and tangible way, a small means of recovering the awful loss that was the consequence of the Fall and the sin that followed upon it. *Life*, that yields contentment, peace, wholeness, and fulfillment. And what are *good days*? Time that has been spent in which each day builds upon the goodness of the previous one. When every occasion has been turned into an opportunity to *love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and to love our neighbor as ourself* (BCP p. 69). This is the simple key to happiness which today's Scripture is handing us.

How quick am I to speak! How often do I interrupt others in order to be heard! How difficult is the discipline of sitting in silence while others seem to be so successfully exercising influence. How much is my sense of self-worth dependent upon the recognition of my contribution.

But nothing can possibly replace the joy and glory of being a vehicle for the life-giving oracles of God. He alone speaks with purity and unassailable motives. He alone always speaks sufficiently to the need. He alone expresses Himself with an economy of words, using them only as they provide a vehicle for the healing power of which He is the originator and possessor. To the extent that we yield ourselves to such a holy task, the consequence to our lives will exceed anything that would arise from the slender and limited resources of human wisdom. A person thus engaged in God's work accepts no credit for it, nor does he desire it.

It is my desire that when God gathers up all of my words, they will be found to have value. I am thinking of Christ's promise: *But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.* (Mt. 12:36, 37). I'm wondering how many volumes of my Collected Works —my earthly words— will be found on the heavenly bookshelf. I suppose purgatory might include having to carry them about,

May our tongues and our lips be a source of God's grace everywhere He may send us, but especially within our marriages and among our families. May each word we speak be a seed that will lead to a garden of flowers blooming for God.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*