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WHAT IS EVIL SPEAKING?

"Speak evil of no man." — [Titus 3:2](#) .

THE Apostle's injunction is very positive; we are to speak evil of none. The question then arises, What does St. Paul mean here? Does he mean that we should speak nothing of any man with an evil intention toward him? Or does he mean, Speak no evil, whatever the intention? We answer, we surely know that to speak evil with a wrong motive, a wrong intention, would be a heinous crime, especially in a child of God. But we think the Apostle meant, *No matter what your motive*, speak evil about nobody. If that be the Apostle's thought—and we believe it hardly controvertible—it places a very stringent requirement upon all of the Lord's people. If the motive for speaking evil were bad, all the worse; but *good or bad*, "Speak evil of no man."

Now another question comes up, What is evil-speaking? We answer, This subject has various sides. To speak evil is to speak that which is injurious; therefore one should say *nothing* that would injure any man. It is very easy to perceive the justice and the reasonableness of this requirement if we apply the Golden Rule. Would we wish any one to do *us* evil? Would we wish any to speak slightly of *us*, to comment on *our faults*, or on what the *speaker* considered faults, and thus lower us in the eyes of others? If the Lord's people would learn to apply the Golden Rule to every affair of life, it would surely be very helpful.

Some of the most conscientious Christians have difficulty along this line. In considering this matter of evil-speaking, some think, Is my motive right? They forget that their motive in speaking derogatively of others has *nothing to do* with the Apostle's injunction. No matter *what* the motive, we are *not to speak evil*. The question is not, Did I have a *good* intention or a *bad* one? but, Am I speaking *evil*? Am I *saying anything* contrary to the Golden Rule—something that I would not wish to have said of *me*? *We would that we could* instil this thought into the hearts and minds of every reader of this journal.

IS REPORTING VIOLATION OF RULES EVIL-SPEAKING?

Now comes another question, How should we apply the injunction of our text in the case of the home, for instance, or the office? Suppose that we are connected with an office or a home where certain rules are laid down for the government of that office or home. Would it in such a case be evil-speaking on our part to report any violation of those rules? We do not consider this evil-speaking. If we were ourselves violating those rules, the person who would report us would be doing right—not doing us evil or wrong or injury. By not reporting the misdemeanor or violation of rules, the person would be encouraging in us a continuation of the wrong course.

God's people are supposed always to have no other than good motives for any course pursued. To have any but a good motive in dealing with others would be to have a murderous motive. We are not, therefore, to take the motive into consideration. But a person who accepts a position in an office, a home or an institution accepts also the conditions and sundry rules connected with such a position. Doubtless nearly all rules and regulations in an office or home are made, not with the view of injuring any one, but for the general welfare of the business or the family or whatever it may be. Hence the observance of all these obligations should be considered a *serious* responsibility. [R5529 : page 265] One should not report an infraction of rules in an evil way, but merely as a *fact*.

It is not necessary for the one who informs to judge the heart of the one reported. It is not a question of a bad

heart. If one has a foolish brain, or is forgetful or inattentive and violates important rules, it is not judging the heart to report such a case—and especially where there is a *rule* that such cases be reported. It is merely a matter of *duty*—a thing that is *required*, and is both necessary and proper. We see this principle laid down in God's workmanship in our bodies. If something occurs in the body—for instance, if a finger is being pinched—the nerves immediately telegraph to the brain. If a foot is hurt, the fact is telegraphed to the brain at once. Suppose there were no means of communicating the injury of a member of the body to the brain. Suppose there were no nerves of sensation to convey the message. One might not know whether or not he had lost a finger or a toe. He would not know when he had lost a foot, until he stumbled and fell.

SUBJECT NOT TO BE DISCUSSED WITH THE OFFENDER

We should not be always looking to see if our own personal matters are being impinged. We know that we, as well as others, have imperfections. If others inadvertently tread upon our toes, we know that we are likely to sometimes tread on others' toes. But personal matters are different from those that belong to the family or to the office. It is not busybodying to report violations of the rules of the house or of the office. It is to the interest of every member of a family or an institution that the interests of the whole body be looked after, in a proper and reasonable way.

It would not be proper for any one in an office to attempt to set straight every one else in the office. It is not for any one to go around and correct others; this is not his business. But if another is breaking rules, it is his business to report the facts—the *facts*, without any coloring whatever. If we would do otherwise, if each one who notes an infraction would go to the one who violated the rules, and thus attempt to settle all the affairs of the office or the family, there would be continual confusion. The one who broke the rule would be disposed to defend himself and to say, "My course was all right, and it is none of your affair whether that gate was left open or shut," etc. But if that gate is left open, it is your *duty* to report the matter to the proper authority, and thus you are relieved of the responsibility of the affair. This is not a personal matter, such as to be dealt with according to [Matthew 18:15-18](#). It would not be our duty to tell Tom, Dick, Harry, Mary or Jane about the matter. There is just one person to whom we should tell it; and the report should be made with all kindly feeling.

One would soon get himself into trouble if he were to try to run an entire house or office by going to various ones to endeavor to set them right. But if there were a new-comer, and he were unintentionally violating a rule, it might be well to say; It is a rule of the house to do thus and so. But it would not be proper to mention this fact to him more than once. A second violation should be reported, though in a loving spirit.

MISCELLANEOUS CASES

Applying the question to our proper course in the Church, in matters relating to ourselves personally, we see where our *individual* responsibility lies. "If thy brother trespass against *thee*, go and tell him his fault *between thee and him alone*." Our Lord does not refer to what he does against some one else, but against "*thee*." "Well," some one may object, "I think he was doing something against so-and-so." We have heard some one say: "I think Brother So-and-so does not treat his wife right." We reply, "That is *his business and his wife's business*; it is *not your business*. Your business is to look after your *own* wife or husband, your *own* parents, your *own* children, and let *other* people alone. We advise that you practise on *yourself*. Do your duty in respect to your *own* affairs, and refrain from comments on those of *others*."

But suppose we saw something radically wrong, suppose we were going along the street and saw a man cruelly beating a horse, should we say nothing? In such a case, if we saw a policeman, we might say, "Will you take notice of how that man is abusing that horse?" Or it might be reported to the humane society, if there were one in the locality. If a parent were brutally beating a child, or something of that kind, it would be proper to report the matter to the authorities. But it is not the business of every one to go about attempting to

straighten out matters in general. The world is full of evil, and will be until the Kingdom shall take control.

We think that as far as the Church is concerned the number of difficulties we see in the world would better be let alone as a rule; for if we should start out to right everything that is wrong, we would not have any time left for serving the King of kings and Lord of lords. Our time is limited enough, at best. People already misjudge us; therefore we do well not to add unnecessarily to the opposition. If the time ever came when we were through with all our duties to the Church and to our families, then we might see to some of these outside matters. But we have very little time, and it leaves us very small opportunity to attend to any other matters except our necessary duties and our service for the Lord and the brethren. And for this we should be very thankful; for then if there is opposition against us, it will be only because we have been faithful to our Heavenly King.

Our King has not given us authority as yet to set the matters of the world straight. But we are instructed that we should, as we have opportunity, make known the principles of righteousness, without getting into any dispute. When our King comes in and begins His Reign, and we are exalted with Him, we will show the world what a government should be! But, indeed, it seems surprising how good the laws are even now. We are simply amazed as we think of the good laws of the State of New York, for instance. It is wonderful how the State tries to take care of the interests of the majority, and how much is done for the people; we are glad that the poor world has been able to do so well. We admire what they have done under such adverse conditions. What a grand time it will be, and what a grand world it will be, when everything is under the Law of Righteousness!

ANOTHER PHASE OF THE QUESTION

But coming back to this matter of evil-speaking in the Church; suppose that a brother has been nominated for the position of Elder or Deacon, and suppose that in our judgment he is unfit for such an office, for certain reasons known to us, but not known to the rest of the Ecclesia. What should be our course in the matter? We are admonished to speak evil of no man. Should we then get up and say, "Brethren, I consider Brother A. wholly unfit to be an Elder; I know that he did thus-and-so; that he cheated a woman out of a sum of money"—or whatever the charge might be. Shall we say this? No, indeed! Is it our duty to speak *evil* in the interests of the Church, to do *evil* that *good* may come? Certainly not! But the old creature always wants a chance to speak evil; give him half a chance and he will soon tell all that he knows!

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Then what shall we do? Well, if we were ourself a member of that congregation, we think we would go over and speak to the brother thus nominated, and say, "Brother A., there are certain matters which I have learned about you which I do not wish to mention to anybody. I would not wish to speak evil of you at all, dear brother. But I believe that this feature of your life is wrong, and that it would not be right for this Congregation to elect you. I do not wish to tell them about this matter. I wish to ask you if you will refuse to serve. If you promise that you will decline to be elected, that is all that is necessary. Or if you think that my point is not well taken, just state the matter publicly to them. If you do not do this, and do not refuse to be elected, then I must state the matter publicly—I will have to tell what I know; for you know it is as I state it. I have come to you in kindness and have no desire to injure you."

If the brother answers, "Well, Brother _____, I will decline the nomination; and as regards the matter you mention, I am trying to get the better of it"—then we would tell him we are very glad. We believe that we would in this way do that brother good. We would also be preserving the Class from what would be hurtful or contentious, and would be keeping the peace. If, on the other hand, the brother should be disputatious, we would say to him, "You may be sure that I will explain this matter to the Church, if you do not decline the nomination; for thereby you are saying that you approve your course in life and are standing by it."

But if the matter were something that occurred in the brother's life long ago, he might be entirely changed by now—in the matter of a year, or two years, or five years, or whatever. We would be glad if he were changed from the old course. Then we might go to the brother and say, "Brother, I notice that you stood for election. Is your life entirely changed?" If he replied, "Yes, Brother; it is changed entirely," then we would be glad. But if he got angry and told us it was none of our business, we would say, "Now, Brother, I must make a report of this to the Church. You are indicating by your manner that you are advocating the same course that you took before. If *I* had done such a wrong, and continued to do wrong, I would wish to have my course checked. So I shall report this matter, that the Class may consider again whether they will have you for an Elder (or a Deacon)." But suppose that the Brother should not be nominated for office in the Church? Then we would consider that his past was none of our affair.

A CONCLUDING WORD OF EXHORTATION

Anything injurious to the real interests of another should never be spoken. We cannot be too careful of our words concerning others. There seems to be a tendency with some of the Lord's children to indulge in confidences with others of the brethren and to relate incidents that *reflect* upon another brother or sister, that *show up* certain manifestations of weakness in that one. The disposition that thus exposes the imperfections of the brethren is *surely not* the love that *covers*. ([1 Peter 4:8](#).) We know some who have been long in the narrow way, who do not seem even yet to have overcome this disposition. Do they forget that they *themselves* have weaknesses perhaps as pronounced as the brother or sister whom they criticize? The very fact that they ignore the Master's injunction along the line of our text proves their *own lack* of development. Yet these would probably resent the implication that they are guilty of evil-speaking.

The *sooner* every follower of Christ comes to see that all this is *slander*, that it is *besmirching* the good name of a brother or sister, that it is a *direct violation* of the repeated injunction of the Word of God, and that defamation is theft of another's reputation, the sooner they will see this subject as it really is, *in all its hideousness*—as it *must appear in the sight of the Lord*. Once seeing the matter from the Divine standpoint, the only true standpoint, the child of God must surely awaken to the greatest possible energy in overcoming *such works of the flesh and of the Devil*. Let *each one* who reads these words search his or her own heart and think over his or her own conduct, and then ask the question, "*Is it I?*"

Let every one who hopes to be accounted worthy of a place in the Kingdom, so soon to come, *purge out the old leaven of malice, envy, backbiting and strife*, if any yet remain, that he or she may become indeed a *copy* of God's dear Son. The flesh is very seductive, and is inclined to make all manner of excuses for itself. Let each one make this a matter of personal heart-searching. There is, we believe, only a *very little while remaining* in which to perfect our characters. Let us pray more earnestly than ever, "Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth! Keep *Thou* the door of my lips!"
