

THE HEALTHY SOUL, PART 8: ASSESSMENT BY MOUTH

James 3:1-18 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

23 January 2011

All Rights Reserved

The 1982 BBC film release of Anthony Trollope's *The Barchester Chronicles* tells the story of a clergyman in the Church of England whose special assignment is the oversight of a hospital and home for infirm men. The hospital is the result of an endowment in the last will of a certain John Hiram who specified how it would be run. The clergyman, Mr. Harding, draws an annual salary and gives an allowance to each of the men who live in the hospital. Harding has a reputation for an exemplary Christian life in all of his work for the church.

His future son-in-law, Dr. John Bold, comes to him to apprise him of a legal action he is taking against the hospital. A wave of so-called "church reform" was sweeping across England, and Bold had become part of the local movement. Amongst themselves the reformers spoke openly of their accusations that the church was guilty of corruption and nepotism. To Mr. Harding himself Dr. Bold speaks with great English reserve, and yet—the meaning of his words are plain.

He is part of a crusade to attack and upend the life's work of this fine minister. While reform was much needed in many aspects of the Church of England of that time, Dr. Bold does not seem to understand that he had become part of a wrongful crusade against a godly man and a charitable institution which was doing everything right. Bold insists that none of this is personal. Harding, almost in a prophetic word, reads Dr. Bold's face and body language and quietly tears the false mask of civility off: "Personal enmity? What are you going to do? Cut my throat?" And so Dr. Bold is forced to spill out his intention to bring legal action.

This may all seem quite buried in the characteristic manner of polite English speech, but Bold has no compunction against inflicting major damage, and so this eventually comes out of his mouth. But the reply of Mr. Harding reveals precisely the opposite. Out of his mouth come peaceable words of honesty, humility, and no defensiveness, for he believes that he has done no wrong. He allows Dr. Bold to pursue what he falsely conceives to be his duty, but avers that he will continue to perform his own duties in the ministry of the church and hospital. All this is said without rancor of any kind, and then he invites his inquisitor to tea. He is refused as Dr. Bold rushes off to make war.

As we have been studying the health of the soul in this series, it is vital to ask how we can look inside the soul to see whether it is healthy or not. There is no medical device which can do this, but the Bible gives us a number of ways to assess the health of our souls. One of the clearest ones was spoken by the Lord Jesus to Pharisees with whom he was arguing: "**For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart**" (Matthew 12:34b). Since we cannot peer directly into the soul, even our own, we must use what the soul produces in our lives to gauge its health. Mr. Harding and Dr. Bold provide us with a way to assess what was in their hearts. Out of one mouth came charity, and out of the other harsh judgment.

What is in our hearts? Over the years I have heard various American presidents called "stupid" and even "a retard" in the media, that one thinks he is the messiah, that another is incompetent, yet

another is an unprosecuted murderer, and yet another had lost his mind while in office. In theological arguments I have heard and read accusations of unbelief, blockheadedness, and self aggrandizement. So what is in the souls of people who say such things? There is a desire to hurt which even blots out the truth. Those who say such things reveal through their mouths that they have contempt for others in their souls.

Christians would never talk like this, would they? Years ago I was on a home missions trip to a large urban center in America to help with a very large ministry to city kids. We had a small team from our church, and one of the things we were doing was helping to remodel an old industrial building into ministry offices. Our team was busy painting a hallway when, out of an unmarked office door, popped the head of this ministry. He was a man of almost mythical status because of the remarkable way that God was using him. He took one look at us and said: "I hope you're doing this right, because the last bunch of morons were painting and sanding at the same time." Of course, those supposed "morons" were brothers and sisters in Christ who had taken time off from work, traveled to his city at their own expense, and did menial jobs to help the gospel ministry in that place. Maybe he was just having a bad day, but at that moment this esteemed minister had contempt, not love, in his heart for some servants of Christ who were sacrificing on his behalf.

THE BATTLE OF THE TONGUE

The way we speak to others and what comes out of our mouths are genuine indicators of the health of our hidden souls. We are all at war with our tongues, whether we are Christians or not, but Christians have a calling to do better. James tells us just how fierce this battle is: **"For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way"** (James 3:7-10). Why should it not be this way for believers in Christ? Because we are supposed to have given up all confidence in the flesh and all personal evaluations of people. That should extinguish our contempt for others. The only contempt we should have is for our own pride. There should be no more "morons" in our sight, just people for whom Christ died, people our Lord commands us to love. Paul insisted that he did not even judge himself because that was God's right, not his.

That is why the media are so confusing right now. Some media people who call themselves Christians spew contempt on others in their speaking and writing. If our culture accepts the free speech of some to tear people apart with words, that does not mean that Christians should follow their example. There is something wrong in the soul of a believer who is comfortable demeaning other people--even when they seem to deserve it. What does the Biblical diagnostic tool say about the secret soul of Christians who do that? It says they have a judgmental and critical spirit, unworthy of a servant of Christ. Their souls are not well. And think how much that attitude pushes people away from the good news of Christ.

James affirmed the diagnostic tool given by Christ which we read earlier: **"For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart."** James said the same thing in a figure: **"Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh"** (James 3:11-12). We are inwardly

what we say outwardly, at least at that moment. The battle for the tongue is really a battle for the soul. If we want our mouths to be full of grace and truth, we must tend to the health of our souls.

EARTHLY WISDOM MAKES THE SOUL SICK

James would say, if he were here, that a lot of the negative talk surrounding a political campaign and even arguments among Christians come from selfish ambition. He wrote: **"But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing"** (James 3:14-16). Believers are explicitly commanded to avoid lying against the truth of Christ by **"cursing"** others, or speaking arrogantly. Speech like this is not based on God's wisdom, but wisdom--or teaching--from another source. The phrase **"earthly, natural, demonic"** describes the sources of speech which tear people down, namely, the world, the flesh, and the devil.

We know why those apart from Christ are stuck following false wisdom. Earthly wisdom says that what we see is all there is or all that matters, and so our personal success here on earth is the whole battle. The mouth becomes, in that scenario, just a means to an end. Truth goes out the window followed closely by decorum. Why not lie and shred other people in order to get an advantage in life? We should expect people with a godless worldview to say and do whatever achieves their purposes. They cannot do otherwise because their souls are sick until they receive a healing from the Great Physician of Souls, Jesus Christ.

WISDOM FROM ABOVE MAKES US WELL

James tells us to tend the health of our souls by absorbing the wisdom of God into our inner selves. He wrote: **"Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. ...But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace"** (James 3:15, 17-18). We are called to expel earthly, natural, and demonic wisdom from our lives. We must stubbornly refuse to follow it. But absorbing the wisdom from above makes us glow from within and revolutionizes the way we talk, changing us from contemptuous to gentle.

James wrote that God's wisdom makes our souls **"pure."** When we talk there is no unbecoming speech, no off color remarks, no coarse joking. His wisdom makes us **"peaceable."** When we become citizens of God's kingdom we no longer have a motive to win success in the kingdoms of this earth. Our political party or theological viewpoint does not have to beat the other one for us to succeed. So we can afford to be at peace with all people. This is a great treasure! Imagine going to sleep with no thoughts of conflict with other people. Some may hate us, but we expend no energy hating them back.

God's wisdom is also gentle. Think of the successful radio commentators you have heard, especially those who say they are Christians. Think of the many Christian bloggers you have read. How many of them are gentle? God's wisdom is reasonable, that is, it makes us willing to yield on matters of little importance. If someone wants our coat, we give it to them, and our hat, also. It does not mean that we become doormats, but our souls are freed from having to get our way.

James wrote that God's wisdom also makes our souls "**full of mercy.**" We look at others who used to be our competitors for success in this life and now see their unhealthy souls. We want them to move into the source of health which we have discovered in Christ. We want the best for them, and so we do not seek to see them punished to satisfy ourselves. God's wisdom makes our souls produce good fruit, it makes us steady because we are set on off-worldly goals, not earthly ones. It also makes us unhypocritical. If someone points out that we are not all we should be as Christians, we simply agree! There is no point in faking anything if our goal is to please God.

So we must tend the health of our souls using an assessment by mouth. What is coming out of our mouths? Are we experts at what is wrong with everyone else, revealing that we are still quite sick inside? Or have our mouths become the output device of a healthy soul, speaking grace to all?

Bible teacher Jack Van Impe wrote a book entitled *Heart Disease in Christ's Body* where he told the story of how he was accustomed to bashing people and groups from the pulpit. He found that it was easy to do since we are all failing at something. Many of the groups to which he spoke loved it. They seemed to applaud the loudest when he was bashing people the hardest, and he found himself doing it more and more. Then the Lord convicted him that what was coming out of his mouth revealed some unhealthy things in his soul. He repented publicly and resolved to stop berating people from the pulpit, knowing that as a teacher he bore a higher responsibility for the health of Christ's people than others (James 3:1). When he let others know about this change in his convictions, some groups stopped inviting him to speak. They were unwilling to give up the false pleasure of bashing people.

In response to the egregious attack against him, Mr. Harding from our opening story in *The Barchester Chronicles* comes to make a decision which reveals that what had been coming out of his mouth was truly indicative of the health of his soul. When the trumped-up scandal began to threaten the hospital, Harding solved the problem in a peaceable and Christ-like way. He solved the problem in a way most likely to preserve the hospital and the care given to the infirm men whose very lives depended on it. Mr. Harding resigned. And so the method of assessing the health of his soul by examining what came out of his mouth proved true. He was not only the godly man which he sounded, he was even better.

What does the output of your mouth say about the health of your soul? Does it reveal "**the gentleness of wisdom?**" Are you peacefully planting "**the seed whose fruit is righteousness?**"? Expel the false wisdom and absorb the heavenly. Do not simply confess: "Lord, I should not have said that," rather confess: "Lord, I should not be this way. Change my heart by the transforming power of your Holy Spirit." And in the rough and tumble of political campaigning, theological argument, and all of life, let us be marked not by harshness, but by the truth and love of Christ. Let the health of our souls as revealed by our words draw people to him. That's the real victory.

You may have heard all this and concluded that you have not yet seen the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in your life. Nothing seems to change. First of all, make sure that you are born again by confessing your sin and your need for the Savior. Be sure, in a very deliberate way, to invite the Holy Spirit to have control of your life and change you from the inside out. Then you will be in a position not only to speak the way you should, but to be the person deep inside who speaks love, peace, and truth.

[clip from *The Barchester Chronicles*, BBC DVD set, 1982, Disc One, Episode 1, 0:07:50-0:10:35]