

HOW WE SPEAK

A word seems such a small thing, but it can make or break a man as well as the community. Here are some words and wisdom on how we speak to our fellow-men.

For indeed, how often do we stumble in this.

Nevertheless, for the Orthodox Christian ‘to be perfect’ is not a vain ideal, not a futile dream, but a commandment of our Lord! Which we are invited to fulfill by growing to the measure of Christ: filled to the brim with God’s grace.

*If anyone offend not in word,
the same is a perfect man. (James 3:2)*

*... and a word in due season
how good is it! (Prov.15:23 KJV)*



A careless word ...

The poem below, written by an anonymous author, comes from an unknown source, but how strikingly does it show the power of the word we speak. As the apostle James wrote: ‘If anyone offend not in word, the same is a perfect man.’ But it is obvious, that this perfection is beyond us - earthly, fallen human beings as we are. For where would we find the insight to speak exactly the right word at all times (without exception!), nothing more and nothing less? Only God knows the ‘heart and reins’, and so it is only ‘in the Holy Spirit’, filled with His grace, that we may receive such wisdom.

‘A word in due season, how good is it!’ says one of the Proverbs, according to our translations from the Hebrew. But the Septuagint stresses here rather the negative side of the matter: (Prov.15:22) ‘Those that do not honour the counsels, place thoughts (*logismoi*) higher, but counsel remains in the hearts of those that take counsel. (23) A bad man will not obey it, nor will he say anything at the proper time, or anything good in general [*or: for the common weal*].’ In other words, our words are rooted in our thoughts - for better, or for worse.

Not for nothing, therefore, do the Holy Fathers teach us, first of all to master our thoughts, and to direct ourselves to the divine perfection of the Lord.

On the reverse two words which, in very different ways, show something of the way in which the Saints are attentive to the word they speak - for us to follow their example!

*A careless word may kindle strife;
A cruel word may wreck a life;
A bitter word may hate instill;
A brutal word may smite and kill;
A gracious word may smooth the way;
A joyous word may light the day;
A timely word may lessen stress;
A loving word may heal and bless.*

+ Author Unknown

Think on these things

In his letter to the Philippians the Apostle Paul teaches us where to direct our thoughts. And this, therefore, is the kind of thoughts that should also inspire our words:

... whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honourable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if something is a virtue, and if something is praise, think on these things. (Fil.4:8)

Now abba Isaac the Syrian says somewhere, that if a man would first ask himself if it would be profitable to open his mouth, in many cases he would choose to keep silent.

But say, that the word remains burning in us, can it then pass the test of Saint Paul's word?

- 1) Most likely we are convinced, that what we wish to say or write is *true*, but is it also *honourable* to say it - and in this way?
- 2) And, if so, though we may also consider our thought *righteous*, is it truly *pure*? that is, in no way mingled with our own passions?
- 3) If this is indeed the case, our word should also be *lovely* [that is, lovable] and *of good report* [*or*: fair-sounding] - not so much in an earthly sense (just diplomatic or polished), but especially in what touches the heart.
- 4) And then, if our word does indeed have the character of Christ's own word, it may indeed be able to give our fellow-men a taste of *virtue* and divine *praise* - or even inspire others towards that ...

How do the perfect speak ?

All the teaching of the Scriptures and the Holy Fathers raises the question, how we ourselves could attain to such perfection. In this, especially the ascetic Fathers can teach us much (see, for example, the text by Archim. Zacharias, *'Living by a single thought'*, in the book *'Remember Thy First Love'*).

Moreover, they also show us that, ultimately, the perfect do not break their heads about what they should say, but they give themselves entirely to 'acquiring the Holy Spirit', as Saint Serafim of Sarov puts it.

In the same spirit Saint Silouan asked the above mentioned question to Father Stratonikos, who was a venerable and experienced monk. After some pondering that Father answered that he did not know this mystery, and he asked the Saint to answer the question himself. Upon which Saint Silouan said:

***The perfect never say anything of themselves ...
They only say what the Spirit inspires them to say.***

+ cf. 'Saint Silouan the Athonite' (GK, p.70; EN p.57; NL p.69).

But as long as we have not reached such a measure, and neither can be fully sure of our spiritual discernment, we will need the touchstone of Saint Paul. To prevent that we ourselves, limited as we are, would ascribe to the holy fire of the Spirit, that which in reality only springs from our own human fieriness - be it fed by the passions, or by the earthly insights of the world around us.

