

THE CURE OF EVIL-SPEAKING*

By John Wesley (1703 – 1791 a.d.)

*“If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: If he will hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.
“But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.
“And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church. But if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” Matthew 18:15-17.*

1. “SPEAK evil of no man,” says the great Apostle: — As plain a command as, “Thou shalt do no murder.” But who, even among Christians regards this command? Yea, how few are there that so much as understand it! What is evil-speaking? It is not, as some suppose, the same with lying or slandering. All a man says may be as true as the Bible; and yet the saying of it is evil-speaking. For evil-speaking is neither more nor less than speaking evil of an absent person; relating something evil, which was really done or said by one that is not pleasant when it is related.

Suppose, having seen a man drunk, or heard him curse or swear, I tell this when he is absent; it is evil-speaking. In our language this is also, by an extremely proper name, termed backbiting. Nor is there any material difference between this and what we usually style tale-bearing. If the tale be delivered in a soft and quiet manner, (perhaps with expressions of goodwill to the person, and of hope that things may not be quite so bad,) then we call it whispering. But in whatever manner it be done, the thing is the same; — the same in substance if not in circumstance. Still it is evilspeaking; still this command, “Speak evil of no man,” is trampled underfoot; if we relate to another the fault of a third person, when he is not present to answer for himself.

2. And how extremely common is this sin, among all orders and degrees of men! How do high and low, rich and poor, wise and foolish, learned and unlearned, run into it continually! Persons who differ from each other in all things else, nevertheless agree in this. How few are there that can testify before God, “I am clear in this matter; I have always set a watch before my mouth, and kept the door of my lips!” What conversation do you hear,

of any considerable length, whereof evil speaking is not one ingredient? and that even among persons who, in the general, have the fear of God before their eyes, and do really desire to have a conscience void of offense toward God and toward man.

3. And the very commonness of this sin makes it difficult to be avoided. As we are encompassed with it on every side, so, if we are not deeply sensible of the danger, and continually guarding against it, we are liable to be carried away by the torrent. In this instance, almost the whole of mankind is, as it were, in a conspiracy against us. And their example steals upon us, we know not how; so that we insensibly slide into the imitation of it.

Besides, it is recommended from within, as well as from without. There is scarce any wrong temper in the mind of man, which may not be occasionally gratified by it, and consequently incline us to it. It gratifies our pride, to relate those faults of others whereof we think ourselves not to be guilty. Anger, resentment, and all unkind tempers, are indulged by speaking against those with whom we are displeased; and, in many cases, by reciting the sins of their neighbors, men indulge their own foolish and hurtful desires.

4. Evil-speaking is the more difficult to be avoided, because it frequently attacks us in disguise. We speak thus out of a noble, generous, (it is well if we do not say,) holy indignation, against these vile creatures! We commit sin from mere hatred of sin! We serve the devil out of pure zeal for God! It is merely in order to punish the wicked that we run into this wickedness. “So do the passions” (as one speaks) “all justify themselves,” and palm sin upon us under the veil of holiness!

5. But is there no way to avoid the snare? Unquestionably there is. Our blessed Lord has marked out a plain way for his followers, in the words above recited (Matthew 18:15-17). None, who warily and steadily walk in this path, will ever fall into evil-speaking. This rule is either an infallible preventive, or a certain cure, of it.

In the preceding verses, our Lord had said, “Woe to the world, because of offenses;” — unspeakable misery will arise in the world from this baleful fountain: (*Offenses* are all things whereby any one is turned out of, or hindered in, the ways of God:) “For it must be that offenses come:” — Such

is the nature of things; such the wickedness, folly, and weakness of mankind: “But woe to that man,” — miserable is that man, “by whom the offense cometh.” “Wherefore, if thy hand, thy foot, thine eye, cause thee to offend;” — if the most dear enjoyment, the most beloved and useful person, turn thee out of or hinder thee in the way, “pluck it out,” — cut them off, and cast them from thee.

But how can we avoid giving offense to some, and being offended at others? especially, suppose they are quite in the wrong, and we see it with our own eyes? Our Lord here teaches us how: He lays down a sure method of avoiding offenses and evil speaking together. “If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him of his fault between thee and him alone: If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church: But if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as all heathen man and a publican.”

I.

1. First, “If thy brother shall sin against thee, go and tell him of his fault between thee and him alone.” The most literal way of following this first rule, where it is practicable, is the best: Therefore, if thou sees with thine own eyes a brother, a fellow-Christian, commit undeniable sin, or hearest it with thine own ears, so that it is impossible for thee to doubt the fact, then thy part is plain: Take the very first opportunity of going to him; and, if thou canst have access, “tell him of his fault between thee and him alone.”

Indeed, great care is to be taken that this is done in a right spirit, and in a right manner. The success of a reproof greatly depends on the spirit wherein it is given. Be not, therefore, wanting in earnest prayer to God, that it may be given in a lowly spirit; with a deep, piercing conviction, that it is God alone who maketh thee to differ; and that if any good be done by what is now spoken, God doeth it himself. Pray that he would guard thy heart, enlighten thy mind, and direct thy tongue to such words as he may please to bless. See that thou speak in a meek as well as a lowly spirit; for the “wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” If he be “overtaken in a fault,” he can no otherwise be restored, than “in the spirit of meekness.” If he opposes

the truth, yet he cannot be brought to the knowledge thereof, but by gentleness.

Still, speak in a spirit of tender love, “which many waters cannot quench.” If love is not conquered, it conquers all things. Who can tell the force of love?

Love can bow down the stubborn neck,
The stone to flesh convert;
Soften, and melt, and pierce, and break
An adamant heart.

Confirm, then, your love toward him, and you will thereby “heap coals of fire upon his head.”

2. But see that the manner also wherein you speak be according to the Gospel of Christ. Avoid every thing in look, gesture, word, and tone of voice, that savors of pride or self-sufficiency. Studiously avoid everything magisterial or dogmatically, everything that looks like arrogance or assuming. Beware of the most distant approach to disdain, overbearing, or contempt.

With equal care avoid all appearance of anger; and though you use great plainness of speech, yet let there be no reproach, no railing accusation, no token of any warmth, but that of love. Above all, let there be no shadow of hate or ill-will, no bitterness or sourness of expression; but use the air and language of sweetness as well as gentleness, that all may appear to flow from love in the heart.

And yet this sweetness need not hinder your speaking in the most serious and solemn manner; as far as may be, in the very words of the oracles of God, (for there are none like them,) and as under the eye of Him who is coming to judge the quick and dead.

3. If you have not an opportunity of speaking to him in person, or cannot have access, you may do it by a messenger; by a common friend, in whose prudence, as well as uprightness, you can thoroughly confide. Such a person, speaking in your name, and in the spirit and manner above described, may answer the same end, and, in a good degree, supply your

lack of service. Only beware you do not feign the want of opportunity, in order to shun the cross; neither take it for granted that you cannot have access, without ever making the trial. Whenever you can speak in your own person, it is far better. But you should rather do it by another, than not at all: This way is better than none.

4. But what, if you can neither speak yourself, nor find such a messenger as you can confide in? It this be really the case, it then only remains, to write. And there may be some circumstances which make this the most advisable way of speaking. One of these circumstances is, when the person with whom we have to do is of so warm and impetuous a temper as does not easily bear reproof, especially from an equal or inferior. But it may be so introduced and softened in writing as to make it far more tolerable.

Besides, many will read the very same words, which they could not bear to hear. It does not give so violent a shock to their pride, nor so sensibly touch their honor. And suppose it makes little impression at first, they will, perhaps, give it a second reading, and, upon farther consideration, lay to heart what before they disregarded. If you add your name, this is nearly the same thing as going to him, and speaking in person. And this should always be done, unless it be rendered improper by some very particular reason.

5. It should be well observed, not only that this is a step which our Lord absolutely commands us to take, but that he commands us to take this step first, before we attempt any other. No alternative is allowed, no choice of anything else: This is the way; walk thou in it. It is true, he enjoins us, if need require, to take two other steps; but they are to be taken successively after this step, and neither of them before it: Much less are we to take any other step, either before or beside this. To do anything else, or not to do this, is, therefore, equally inexcusable.

6. Do not think to excuse yourself for taking an entirely different step, by saying, "Why, I did not speak to any one, till I was so burdened, that I could not refrain." You was burdened! It was no wonder you should, unless your conscience was seared; for you was under the guilt of sin, of disobeying a plain commandment of God! You ought immediately to have gone, and told "your brother of his fault between you and him alone." If you did not, how should you be other than burdened, (unless your heart was utterly hardened!) while you was trampling the command of God

under foot, and “hating your brother in your heart?” And what a way you have found to unburden yourself! God reproves you for a sin of omission, for not telling your brother of his fault; and you comfort yourself under his reproof by a sin of commission, by telling your brother’s fault to another person! Ease bought by sin is a dear purchase! I trust in God, you will have no ease, but will be burdened so much the more, till you “go to your brother and tell him,” and no one else!

7. I know but of one exception to this rule: There may be a peculiar case, wherein it is necessary to accuse the guilty, though absent, in order to preserve the innocent. For instance: You are acquainted with the design which a man has against the property or life of his neighbor. Now, the case may be so circumstanced, that there is no other way of hindering that design from taking effect, but the making it known, without delay, to him against whom it is laid. In this case, therefore, this rule is set aside, as is that of the Apostle, “Speak evil of no man:” And it is lawful, yea, it is our bounden duty, to speak evil of an absent person, in order to prevent his doing evil to others and himself at the same time.

But remember, meanwhile, that all evil-speaking is, in its own nature, deadly poison. Therefore if you are sometimes constrained to use it as a medicine, yet use it with fear and trembling; seeing it is so dangerous a medicine, that nothing but absolute necessity can excuse your using it at all. Accordingly, use it as seldom as possible; never but when there is such a necessity: And even then use as little of it as is possible; only so much as is necessary for the end proposed. At all other times, “go and tell him of his fault between thee and him alone.”

II.

1. But what, “if he will not hear?” if he repay evil for good? if he be enraged, rather than convinced? What, if he hear to no purpose, and go on still in the evil of his way? We must expect this will frequently be the case; the mildest and tenderest reproof will have no effect; but the blessing we wished for another will return into our own bosom. And what are we to do then?

Our Lord has given us a clear and full direction. Then “take with thee one or two more:” This is the second step. Take one or two whom you know to be of a loving spirit, lovers of God and of their neighbor. See, likewise, that

they be of a lowly spirit, and “clothed with humility.” Let them also be such as are meek and gentle, patient and longsuffering; not apt to “return evil for evil, or railing for railing, but contrariwise blessing.” Let them be men of understanding, such as are endued with wisdom from above; and men unbiased, free from partiality, free from prejudice of any kind. Care should likewise be taken, that both the persons and their characters be well known to him: And let those that are acceptable to him be chosen preferable to any others.

2. Love will dictate the manner wherein they should proceed, according to the nature of the case. Nor can any one particular manner be prescribed for all cases. But perhaps, in general, one might advise, before they enter upon the thing itself, let them mildly and affectionately declare that they have no anger or prejudice toward him, and that it is merely from a principle of goodwill that they now come, or at all concern themselves with his affairs.

To make this the more apparent, they might then calmly attend to your repetition of your former conversation with him, and to what he said in his own defense, before they attempted to determine anything. After this they would be better able to judge in what manner to proceed, “that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word might be established;” that whatever you have said may have its full force by the additional weight of their authority.

3. In order to this, may they not,

1. Briefly repeat what you spoke, and what he answered?

2. Enlarge upon, open, and confirm the reasons which you had given?

3. Give weight to your reproof showing how just, how kind, and how seasonable it was? And,

Lastly, enforce the advices and persuasions which you had annexed to it? And these may likewise here after, if need should require, bear witness of what was spoken.

4. With regard to this, as well as the preceding rule, we may observe, that our Lord gives us no choice, leaves us no alternative, but expressly commands us to do this, and nothing else in the place of it. He likewise

directs us when to do this; neither sooner nor later; namely, *after* we have taken the first, and *before* we have taken the third step. It is then only that we are authorized to relate the evil another has done, to those whom we desire to bear a part with us in this great instance of brotherly love.

But let us have a care how we relate it to any other person, till both these steps have been taken. If we neglect to take these, or if we take any others, what wonder if we are burdened still? For we are sinners against God, and against our neighbor; and how fairly soever we may color it, yet, if we have any conscience, our sin will find us out, and bring a burden upon our soul.

III.

1. That we may be thoroughly instructed in this weighty affair, our Lord has given us a still farther direction. "If he will not hear them," then, and not till then, "tell it to the Church." This is the third step. All the question is, how this word, "the Church," is here to be understood. But the very nature of the thing will determine this beyond all reasonable doubt. You cannot tell it to the national Church, the whole body of men termed "the Church of England." Neither would it answer any Christian end if you could; this, therefore, is not the meaning of the word. Neither can you tell it to that whole body of people in England with whom you have a more immediate connection. Nor, indeed, would this answer any good end: The word, therefore, is not to be understood thus. It would not answer any valuable end to tell the faults of every particular member to the Church, (if you would so term it,) the congregation or society united together in London.

It remains that you tell it to the elder or elders of the Church, to those who are overseers of that flock of Christ to which you both belong, who watch over yours and his soul, "as they that must give account." And this should be done, if it conveniently can, in the presence of the person concerned, and, though plainly, yet with all the tenderness and love which the nature of the thing will admit. It properly belongs to their office to deter mine concerning the behavior of those under their care, and to rebuke, according to the demerit of the offense, "with all authority." When, therefore, you have done this, you have done all which the word of God, or the law of love, requireth of you: You are not now partaker of his sin, but if he perish, his blood is on his own head.

2. Here, also, let it be observed, that this, and no other, is the third step which we are to take; and that we are to take it in its order after the other two; not before the second, much less the first, unless in some very particular circumstance. Indeed, in one case, the second step may coincide with this: They may be, in a manner, one and the same. The elder or elders of the Church may be so connected with the offending brother, that they may set aside the necessity, and supply the place, of the one or two witnesses; so that it may suffice to tell it to them, after you have told it to your brother, “between you and him alone.”

3. When you have done this, you have delivered your own soul. “If he will not hear the Church,” if he persist in his sin, “let him be to thee as an heathen man and a publican.” You are under no obligation to think of him any more; only when you commend him to God in prayer. You need not speak of him anymore, but leave him to his own Master. Indeed, you still owe to him, as to all other Heathens, earnest, tender goodwill. You owe him courtesy, and, as occasion offers, all the offices of humanity. But have no friendship, no familiarity with him; no other intercourse than with an open Heathen.

4. But if this be the rule by which Christians walk, which is the land where the Christians live? A few you may possibly find scattered up and down, who make a conscience of observing it. But how very few! How thinly scattered upon the face of the earth! And where is there any body of men that universally walk thereby? Can we find them in Europe? or, to go no farther, in Great Britain or Ireland? I fear not: I fear we may search these kingdoms throughout, and yet search in vain. Alas for the Christian world! Alas for Protestants, for Reformed Christians! O, “who will rise up with me against the wicked?” “Who will take God’s part” against the evilspeakers?

Art thou the man? By the grace of God, wilt thou be one who art not carried away by the torrent? Art thou fully determined, God being thy helper, from this very hour to set a watch, a continual “watch, before thy mouth, and keep the door of thy lips?” From this hour wilt thou walk by this rule, “Speaking evil of no man?” If thou seest thy brother do evil, wilt thou “tell him of his fault between thee and him alone?” afterwards, “take one or two” witnesses, and then only “tell it to the Church?”

If this be the full purpose of thy heart, then learn one lesson well, “Hear evil of no man.” If there were no hearers, there would be no speakers of evil. And is not (according to the vulgar proverb) the receiver as bad as the thief? If, then, any begin to speak evil in thy hearing, check him immediately. Refuse to hear the voice of the charmer, charm he never so sweetly; let him use ever so soft a manner, so mild an accent, ever so many professions of goodwill for him whom he is stabbing in the dark, whom he smiteth under the fifth rib! Resolutely refuse to hear, though the whisperer complain of being “burdened till he speak.” *Burdened!* thou fool! dost thou travail with thy cursed secret, as a woman travaileth with child?

Go, then, and be delivered of thy burden in the way the Lord hath ordained! First, “go and tell thy brother of his fault between thee and him alone:” Next, “take with thee one or two” common friends, and tell him in their presence: If neither of these steps take effect, then “tell it to the Church.” But, at the peril of thy soul, tell it to no one else, either before or after, unless in that one exempt case, when it is absolutely needful to preserve the innocent! Why shouldst thou burden another as well as thyself, by making him partaker of thy sin?

5. O that all you who bear the reproach of Christ, who are a derision called Methodists, would set an example to the Christian world, so called, at least in this one instance! Put ye away ye ill-speaking, tale-bearing, whispering: Let none of them proceed out of your mouth! See that you “speak evil of no man;” of the absent, nothing but good. If ye must be distinguished, whether ye will or no, let this be the distinguishing mark of a Methodist: “He censures no man behind his back: By this fruit ye may know him.”

What a blessed effect of this self-denial should we quickly feel in our hearts! How would our “peace flow as a river,” when we thus “followed peace with all men!” How would the love of God abound in our own souls, while we thus confirmed our love to our brethren! And what an effect would it have on all that were united together in the name of the Lord Jesus! How would brotherly love continually increase, when this grand hindrance of it was removed! All the members of Christ’s mystical body would then naturally care for each other. “It one member suffered, all would suffer with it;” “if one was honored, all would rejoice with it;” and every one would love his brother “with a pure heart fervently.”

Nor is this all: But what an effect might this have, even on the wild, unthinking world! How soon would they descry in us, what they could not and among all the thousands of their brethren, and cry, (as Julian the apostate to his heathen courtiers,) “See how these Christians love one another!” By this chiefly would God convince the world, and prepare them also for his kingdom; as we may easily learn from those remarkable words in our Lord’s last solemn prayer: “I pray for them who shall believe in me, that they may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, — that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.” The Lord; hasten the time! The Lord enable us thus to love one another, not only “in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth,” even as Christ hath loved us!

* Taken from The Works of John Wesley, Sermon 49, First Series, (public domain)