

THE ETHICAL TEACHING OF ST. PAUL.

(7) THE ETHICS OF SPEECH.

MR SPURGEON once said that if all men's sins were divided into two bundles half of them would be sins of the tongue. And if anyone had been tempted to retort that in so saying the preacher was himself guilty of one of the sins he was condemning—that, viz., of exaggeration—he might, I think, have pleaded that he had abundant Scripture warrant for his statement. We remember St. James's twofold saying, that "if any stumbleth not in word, the same is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also," but that "if any man thinketh himself to be religious, while he bridleth not his tongue but deceiveth his heart, this man's religion is vain." And though there be nothing in St. Paul's Epistles quite so downright and outspoken as this, nevertheless by the frequency of his references to the subject and the greater range of his ethical terminology that apostle plainly shows himself to be of the same mind as his brother apostle. A simple catalogue of the many and ugly varieties of the sins of the tongue which St. Paul names is in itself very instructive. Here it is, with its English equivalents as these are given in the Revised Version :—

αἰσχρολογία	shameful speaking (Col. iii. 8).
βλασφημία	railing (Eph. iv. 31; Col. iii. 8; 1 Tim. vi. 4; βλάσφημος, railer or blasphemer, occurs in 1 Tim. i. 13; 2 Tim. iii. 2; βλασφημεῖν frequently).
εἰςτραπέλια	jesting (Eph. v. 4).
καταλαλιά	backbiting (2 Cor. xii. 20; κατάλαλος, backbiter, occurs in Rom. i. 30).
κραυγή	clamour (Eph. iv. 31).
λόγος σαπρὸς	corrupt speech (Eph. iv. 29).
ματαιολογία	vain talking (1 Tim. i. 6; ματαιολόγος, vain talker occurs in Titus i. 10).
μωρολογία	foolish talking (Eph. v. 4).
πιθανολογία	persuasiveness of speech (Col. ii. 4).

πικρία	bitterness (Rom. iii. 14 ; Eph. iv. 31. <sup>1</sup> )
ψεύδος	falsehood (Eph. iv. 25 ; ψεύστης, liar, occurs in 1 Tim. i. 10 ; and ψευδολόγος, speaking lies, in 1 Tim. iv. 2).
ψιθυρισμός	whispering (2 Cor. xii. 20 ; ψιθυριστής, whisperer, occurs in Rom. i. 30). <sup>2</sup>

Such a varied terminology might lead us to anticipate a fuller treatment of the ethics of speech than, as a matter of fact, the Epistles contain. Formal discussion of the subject there is none. Certain sins are named and sharply rebuked as manifestly inconsistent with Christian faith and life, and that is all. Once again we must remind ourselves that St. Paul writes not as a philosopher of morals, but as a preacher of righteousness. His aim is immediate and practical. When he deals with a moral duty his treatment of it is determined not by the place which that duty holds in some rounded system of ethical truth which he has in his mind, but by the circumstances and necessities of the moment. And inasmuch as these papers make no pretence to anything beyond an exposition of the Apostle's own teaching, it follows of necessity that they must partake largely of the unsystematic character which belongs to their subject. In the present paper our aim will be to bring together under convenient categories St. Paul's many precepts concerning the use and misuse of speech. As we shall see, they consist for the most part of stern admonitions against its misuse.

## I.

We may take first the Apostle's warnings against idle words, or talkativeness: the disposition, as Butler calls it, to be talking, "abstracted from the consideration of what

<sup>1</sup> In the second of these passages *πικρία* refers rather to the disposition than to the speech in which it finds expression. The use of the word, however, in Rom. iii. 14 justifies its inclusion in this list.

<sup>2</sup> To these may be added (and even then I am by no means certain that the list is complete): *διδωλος*, double-tongued (1 Tim. iii. 8), *διάβολος*, slanderer (1 Tim. iii. 11 ; 2 Tim. iii. 3 ; Titus ii. 3), and *φλύαρος*, tattler (1 Tim. v. 13).

has to be said ; with very little or no regard to, or thought of doing either good or harm." To this category belong the following three passages :—

1 Tim. v. 13 : " Withal they (the younger widows) learn also to be idle, going about from house to house ; and not only idle, but tattlers (*φλύαροι*) also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not." *φλύαρος*, says Ellicott, points (as its derivation would suggest) to a babbling, *profluent* way of talking.

In Eph. v. 4, " foolish talking " (*μωρολογία*) is one of the things named as not befitting saints. The word denotes the idle random talk which passes so easily into sin. " It is that talk of fools which is foolishness and sin together." <sup>1</sup>

Eph. iv. 29 : " Let no corrupt speech proceed out of your mouth." It may, perhaps, be thought that this verse belongs rather to one of the following divisions of the paper. There is, however, good reason to believe that the meaning of *σαπρός* here is not " corrupt, putrid," but rather " worthless, good-for-nothing." Corrupt speech St. Paul condemns in the following chapter (v. 4) ; here it is inane, inept, and useless talk against which he sets his face.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this is the rendering naturally suggested by the clause which immediately follows.

Talkativeness is one of those habits which few persons are disposed to treat seriously. Great talkers are apt to be great bores, and most of us probably at some time or another have suffered many things at their hands.<sup>3</sup> Yet

<sup>1</sup> Trench's *Synonyms*, p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> " The Greek adjective is the same that is used of the ' worthless fruit ' of the ' worthless [good-for-nothing] tree ' in Matt. xii. 33 ; and again of the ' bad fish ' of Matt. xiii. 48, which the fisherman throws away, not because they are corrupt or offensive, but because they are useless for food." (Findlay's *Epistle to the Ephesians*, Expositor's Bible, p. 296.)

<sup>3</sup> " I rarely remember," says Swift in his *Hints towards an Essay on Conversation*, " to have seen five persons together where some one among them has not been predominant in the folly of talking too much to the great constraint and disgust of all the rest."

our judgment concerning them rarely goes beyond an expression of personal annoyance, or even a good-natured allusion to So-and-So's "failing." Talkativeness is "bad form"; the great talker is a social pest. Undoubtedly; but at how infinite a remove is all this from the tremendous saying of Jesus, "I say unto you that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment." Wherein, then, consists the evil of mere talkativeness? For answer we turn to Bishop Butler and his great sermon "Upon the Government of the Tongue." Butler readily allows that the faculty of speech was given not only to minister to man's need, but also to his enjoyment, and that this its secondary use is in every respect allowable and right. Let men avoid forbidden paths and their conversation may be as free and easy and unreserved as they can desire. But great talkers, people who delight in talking for talking's sake, are always on the edge of saying more than they know, and, as St. Paul says about tattlers and busybodies, of speaking things which they ought not. "And this unrestrained volubility and wantonness of speech is the occasion of numberless evils and vexations in life. It begets resentment in him who is the subject of it; sows the seeds of strife and dissension amongst others; and inflames little disgusts and offences, which if let alone would wear away of themselves: it is often of as bad effect upon the good name of others as deep envy or malice; and, to say the least of it in this respect, it destroys and perverts a certain equity of the utmost importance to society to be observed; viz., that praise and dispraise, a good or bad character, should always be bestowed according to desert. The tongue used in such a licentious manner is like a sword in the hand of a madman; it is employed at random, it can scarce possibly do any good, and for the most part does a world of mischief; and implies not only great folly and a trifling spirit, but

great viciousness of mind, great indifference to truth and falsity, and to the reputation, welfare, and good of others." Wherefore, "let no worthless, good-for-nothing speech proceed out of your mouth."

## II.

From much speaking to evil speaking is but a short step down; and on this subject also a little cluster of precepts may be gathered from St. Paul's writings. Twice in the Pastoral Epistles he commands women that they be not "slanderers" (*διαβόλοι*).<sup>1</sup> The word which he uses means literally "devils"; it is the word which has given us our adjective "diabolical"; and verily, there is no temper so wholly unchristian and anti-christian, none that so well deserves the ugly name of "devilish" as the temper of the slanderer and the backbiter.<sup>2</sup> Again, the Apostle writes: "Put them in mind . . . to speak evil of no man"<sup>3</sup>; "let all railing (*βλασφημία*) be put away from you,"<sup>4</sup> and all "shameful speaking (*αἰσχρολογία*) out of your mouth."<sup>5</sup> *βλασφημία* may be either against God or man, either "blasphemy" or "evil-speaking"; in the passage just quoted it is evidently used in the latter sense. *Αἰσχρολογία* has likewise a twofold meaning: "filthy communication," such as ministers to wantonness, or, more generally, "foul-mouthed abusiveness"; here the wider signification is to be preferred, the term including "every license of the ungoverned tongue employing itself in the abuse of others."<sup>6</sup>

The evils of evil-speaking have been a subject of com-

<sup>1</sup> 1 Tim. iii. 11.; Tit. ii. 3. The word occurs again in 2 Tim. iii. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. Tennyson's lines—

"Slander, meanest spawn of Hell—  
And women's slander is the worst."

<sup>3</sup> Tit. iii. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Eph. iv. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Col. iii. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Trench's *Synonyms*, p. 121. See also Ellicott and Lightfoot *in loc.*

ment with moralists of every age. "A backbiting tongue," says the Son of Sirach, "hath disquieted many; strong cities hath it pulled down and overturned the houses of great men." And alas! it is still true that almost wherever two or three are gathered together there is slander in the midst of them, and some absent man's reputation is not safe. There may be no murderous intent in our hearts; we may have as little thought of taking away a man's good name as of taking away his life. But the tide of talk flows on; all listen to it, most join in it, nobody checks it, and in the end the mischief is done as surely as when the garrotter lies in wait for his unsuspecting victim by the wayside. Three things are needed to stay this plague of evil-speaking. First, we must keep in mind Butler's warning against mere talkativeness; for since people cannot go on for ever talking of nothing, when common matters are exhausted, they not unnaturally fly to defamation and scandal and the saying of things which they have no other end in saying except to afford employment to their tongues. Further, as the same wise teacher says, we must learn to get over that strong inclination which most of us have to be talking of the concerns and behaviour of our neighbour. This does not mean that all talk about persons ought to be banished from our tables and firesides; for men and women other men and women must always constitute the main interest of life.<sup>1</sup> The pity of it is that from speech about others which is innocent and edifying we pass so readily to envy and evil-speaking, to slander and miserable, death-dealing detraction. What a continual witness is the bad sense which

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Herbert Spencer does not seem sufficiently to recognize this fact when he declares that "If you want roughly to estimate any one's mental calibre, you cannot do it better than by observing the ratio of generalities to personalities in his talk—how far simple truths about individuals are replaced by truths abstracted from numerous experiences of men and things" (*Study of Sociology*, p. 32).

the word "personalities" now almost always bears to the kind of speech in which we are all apt to indulge once our talk becomes "personal"! For all of us, therefore, Wordsworth's is the safest rule—

"I am not one who oft or much delight  
To season my fireside with personal talk.  
\* \* \* \*

Nor can I not believe but that hereby  
Great gains are mine; for thus I live remote  
From evil-speaking; rancour never sought  
Comes to me not; malignant truth, or lie."<sup>1</sup>

And as we speak no slander, so neither must we listen to it. The dealer in scandal gets his license from his hearers; let them withdraw it by refusing to receive his unsavoury wares, and his wretched business will speedily be at an end. We may speak no slander ourselves, but if we give ear to it and credit it, half the sin is ours. No man cares to talk without an audience, and on the day when our ears are shut against the gossip and the tale-bearer, the mouth of them that speak slander will be stopped.

### III.

"Corrupt speech" may or may not be the correct translation of the *λόγος σαπρὸς* which St. Paul forbids in Ephesians iv. 29, but in any case we may accept the phrase as correctly describing another of the varieties of evil speech which he condemns. If the rendering of the Revisers be the right one, we have an interesting parallel in Colossians iv. 6: "Let your speech be always with grace, *seasoned with salt.*" The talk of some men has a taint in it like that of meat which has begun to go bad, and part at least of the Apostle's meaning may be: Put that into your speech that will keep it wholesome and

<sup>1</sup> "Let silence be your general rule, or say only that which is necessary and in a few words. . . . Above all avoid speaking of *persons*, either in the way of praise or blame or comparison." (Epictetus.)

fresh. *Αἰσχρολογία* (Col. iii. 8), as we have already seen, denotes speech that is both abusive and foul. *Αἰσχροτόης* (Eph. v. 4) is "filthiness" whether of word, gesture, or deed; it includes, though it is not limited to, all indecent talk. But what is the "jesting" which St. Paul joins with this evil company, and condemns as "not befitting"? The word which he uses (*εὐτραπελία*) occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, and scarcely admits of exact translation. Let it be said at once, however, that it has nothing to do with the play of pure and wholesome mirth. "The bright flashes of wit and the pleasant gleams of a kindly humour may be as beautiful and as harmless as the play of the sunlight among the trees or on the ripples of a mountain stream." *Εὐτραπελία* means literally, that which easily turns, versatility, nimble-wittedness. Gradually, however, as the faculty was abused, the word took on a darker ethical significance, until it came to denote the low jesting of a clever man, "the wit whose zest lies in its flavour of impurity," "the pleasantry of unclean badinage, of epigrammatic allusion to vice, of half-meanings wholly foul, which defile not only common talk but many a brilliant page of literature." "The jesting which St. Paul describes as 'not befitting,' is, says Dr. Dale, "the kind of conversation that reaches its perfection in a civilized, luxurious, and brilliant society which has no faith in God, no reverence for moral law, no sense of the grandeur of human life, no awe in the presence of the mystery of death. In such a society, to which the world is the scene of a pleasant comedy in which all men are actors, a polished insincerity and a versatility which is never arrested by strong and immovable convictions are the objects of universal admiration. The foulest indecencies are applauded, if they are conveyed under the thin disguise of a graceful phrase, a remote allusion, an ingenious ambiguity. There is a refinement to which, not vice

itself, but the coarseness of vice is distasteful, and which regards with equal resentment the ruggedness of virtue. This is the kind of jesting that St. Paul so sternly condemns.”<sup>1</sup>

## IV

There still remain to be dealt with the Apostle's warnings against untruthfulness. “Lie not one to another.”<sup>2</sup> “Putting away falsehood, speak ye truth each one with his neighbour.”<sup>3</sup> “Persuasiveness of speech” (*πιθανολογία*) meant only to “delude” is a device of the Evil One.<sup>4</sup> Deacons must not be “double tongued.”<sup>5</sup> The Apostle himself had a wholesome horror of any suspicion of double-dealing in his own conduct<sup>6</sup>; and in still more emphatic fashion he passes judgment on lying when he places liars side by side with men who are guilty of the foulest and most violent forms of crime: “Law is made for the lawless and unruly, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for abusers of themselves with men, for men-stealers, for *liars*, for false swearers.”<sup>7</sup>

St. Paul does not refer to any of those questions of casuistry which are so often discussed in connexion with this subject, nor is it necessary to refer to them here. They are probably more in evidence in text-books of morals than in real life. From the solemn gravity with which one writer after another discusses what we ought to do if we were questioned by a would-be assassin in search of some one whose whereabouts is known to us, one might think that would-be assassins were lying in wait at every street corner. Neither is it necessary to speak here of the

<sup>1</sup> *Lectures on Ephesians*, p. 331. See on this interesting word Trench's *Synonyms*, p. 121, and Matthew Arnold's *Irish Essays*, etc., p. 135, pop. ed.

<sup>2</sup> Col. iii. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Eph. iv. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Col. ii. 4.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Tim. iii. 8.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Cor. i. 17.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Tim. i. 9-10.

grosser forms of lying which call forth all but universal condemnation. Mr. P. G. Hamerton's delightful book *Human Intercourse* has a chapter "On an Unrecognised Form of Untruth"; and perhaps the best application for ourselves of St. Paul's exhortation to put away falsehood is in relation to some of those forms of untruthfulness which our conscience is not so quick to recognize and condemn.

To begin with, there is untruthfulness with ourselves. As Butler says, there really is such a thing as plain falsehood and insincerity in men with regard to themselves. We wish naturally enough to stand well with ourselves, and this eager self-interest often blinds us to the truth; we tell lies to ourselves in order to keep up our own good opinion of ourselves. There is indeed no more wily or stubborn foe with which most men have to contend than self-deceit. We manage somehow to go on deceiving ourselves long after others have ceased to be deceived by us. "Who can discern his errors?" Therefore have we need to pray, "Clear and cleanse Thou me from hidden faults," from the faults which are hidden not only from the eyes of men but from my own eyes. For without "truth in the inward parts" it is impossible to please God. Truthfulness with ourselves, it has been well said, is the foundation of all reality in character, as well as the condition of our attaining any other kind of truth.<sup>1</sup>

How St. Paul would have judged those easy falsehoods in which, from motives of social convenience, we so often allow ourselves to-day scarcely needs to be pointed out. What short work would he have made of our polite insincerities and the poor pleas with which we strive to defend them! It may be said—it often is said—that these things do no harm, since nobody is deceived by them, and that to speak of them as lies is an offence against that very truth in whose supposed interests they are condemned.

<sup>1</sup> Illingworth's *Christian Character*, p. 111.

But though it be true that our polite fictions deceive nobody, they are not therefore harmless; they harm those who habitually use them. "Their inward reaction is evil. Almost without our being aware of it they may eat into the inward soundness of character. No one can wear repeatedly the habit of affectation before others except at the cost of his own integrity. . . . Let this habit of untruthfulness in little social things and daily affectations of manners, continue, and a wholly unnatural type of character, eaten out with insincerities, may be the result."<sup>1</sup>

One of the commonest of these unregarded and unchastised forms of untruth springs from simple inattention and carelessness. A man relates an incident of which he was an eye-witness; but through the inexactness either of his observation or his language his report turns out to be wholly false and misleading. There are persons who possess what has been called "an unveracious mind"; they can never be trusted to see things as they are, or to describe them as they see them. That they have no intent to deceive is true; but this is no sufficient excuse. If we discover that, without our meaning it, words of ours are continually conveying false impressions, we ought to hold ourselves guilty of moral fault and earnestly set ourselves to correct it. The fact is—and it is a fact of which multitudes of people wholly fail to take note—it takes trouble to be truthful. "Speaking truth," says Ruskin, "is like writing fair and comes only by practice; it is less a matter of will than of habit." Our words have to be trained to correspond with our thoughts and our thoughts with facts;

<sup>1</sup> Newman Smyth's *Christian Ethics*, p. 337. Ruskin's vigorous little homily is very much to the point here: "Do not let us lie at all. Do not think of one falsity as harmless, and another as slight, and another as unintended. Cast them all aside: they may be light and accidental; but they are an ugly soot from the smoke of the pit, for all that; and it is better that our hearts should be swept clean of them, without over care as to which is largest or blackest." (*Seven Lamps of Architecture*, ch. ii.)

and this cannot be without long and careful self-discipline. What is needed above all is that we "make conscience" of the whole matter, and think of it with the high seriousness of Jesus: "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned."

Closely akin to the fault just noted is the habit of exaggeration. Once more it may be thought that the evil is a very trifling one, and once more the plea may be urged that it does no harm to others; our "tall talk" may indeed mislead some who do not know us, but by and by our friends come to understand us and themselves to deduct a liberal discount from what we say, and so—what does it matter? But again the question must be asked: Does it matter nothing to ourselves? Is not a regard for the sacredness of truth the chief corner-stone of every true and worthy life; and can any man go on habitually slighting its claims, even in what he thinks a trivial matter, without grave and, it may be, irreparable injury to himself? Even if we leave out of reckoning the loss of influence which every man justly suffers who puts no restraint upon his speech, are there not more inward interests for the sake of which we should watch with a jealous eye every infraction of the great law that word and fact ought always to correspond? To heighten the effectiveness of a story, or to increase the force of an argument, by the addition of some detail furnished not by what we know but only by what we imagine, may seem a very small thing. Perhaps "if we could only see what comes of the difference between exaggeration and truthful self-restraint in the long run," we should judge otherwise.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cp. the noble saying of John Davison about some case of prosaic exactness: "It is rather minute accuracy. But I have a respect for all accuracy; for all accuracy is of the noble family of truth, and is to be respected accordingly, even to her most menial servant." (Quoted in Dean Church's *Pascal and other Sermons*, p. 259.)

<sup>2</sup> See Dean Church's sermon on "Strong Words" in the volume quoted

*Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God*: it is a very tender and solemn entreaty, and should move us the more when we note the connexion in which it stands. St. Paul has just been warning the Ephesian Christians against idle and good-for-nothing speech, and then he passes straightway to this word of exhortation.<sup>1</sup> When we offend with our tongues we do hurt not only to our brethren and ourselves, we grieve the Holy Spirit of God. It is said that after the deification of the Roman Emperors it was considered impious so much as to use any coarse expression in the presence of their images<sup>2</sup>; and ought not we Christian men and women so to remember God, and so to keep the door of our lips, that we shall speak no word unworthy of that Presence from which we can never pass?

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above. For some interesting remarks on the opposite error—that, viz., of habitual *under*-statement—see Mr. Hamerton's chapter already referred to.

<sup>1</sup> Eph iv. 29, 30.

<sup>2</sup> Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, vol. i. p. 17.