

PERILS OF SLANDER AND EVIL REPORT

Emanuel Udegbunam

The Lord began to speak to us regarding the perils of slander and evil report of other persons during a Bible study on the book of James.

“But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work” (James 3:14-16).

Evil thinking or speaking is unacceptable to the Lord and cannot be in love, for love:

“Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil” (1 Corinthians 13:5).

Evil speaking, as the above passage from James shows, can be borne out of *strife* and *envy*. There are scriptural passages and stories that address this problem:

PHILIPPIANS 1:12-18

Paul was in prison in Rome. His imprisonment, which was because of the Gospel, encouraged some brethren and they were bold to speak the word without fear. However, there were others mentioned in this passage in Philippians who preached out of *“envy and strife”* in order to increase Paul’s punishment in prison. What a mean motive! It is very surprising and almost unbelievable to our simple minds that a preacher could preach out of envy and strife, but as it was in those days, so it is today. Quite often hearers may not discern a speaker’s motive(s), but God does. God is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the hearts. No creature or motive is hidden in God’s sight, but all things (including the mental traffic) are exposed to God to Whom we must give account:

“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Hebrews 4:12-13).

It is imperative for those that preach, teach, or prophesy to keep their vessels clean. According to James 3:1, those that *teach* (those that speak to the congregation; elders; church workers) have greater accountability to God.

ROMANS 16:17-18:

“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.”

Is it possible that today's churches have those who “...cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine”? Yes! To buttress that answer, let us first consider what “*the doctrine*” is. The cornerstone of Christ's doctrine is to:

“...love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength...” and to “love thy neighbour (including thy brethren) as thyself” (Mark 12:30-31).

Jesus commanded us that we love one another even as He has loved us (John 15:12,17). To the Corinthians, Paul wrote that “...charity (love) envieth not... thinketh no evil” (1 Corinthians 13:4-5).

There is a lot of evil speaking among us, and that is “*contrary to the doctrine*.” Evil reports always generate divisions, offenses, mistrust, animosity, and uncharitable behavior towards ourselves. It biases a Christian's mind against another. Divisions and offenses only serve our carnal appetite for recognition or self-aggrandizement, being right, being important, and being in control.

GOOD WORDS AND FAIR SPEECHES

In Matthew 24:4, Jesus said, “...*Take heed that no man deceive you.*” The onus is on each one of us not to be deceived by another man or ourselves. Evil speaking and slander do not always come in harsh and bitter words, sometimes they are sugar-coated in good words and fair speeches.

We should be very wary of spiritual people who are very wordy or sweet-tongued. Watch out for deception! Such speechmakers may want a following and to be considered important. We should only follow Jesus Christ. Jesus commanded, “*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*” (Matthew 4:19).

EVIL THOUGHTS AND EVIL WORDS ARE JUDGMENTAL

“*Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is one laugiver, who is able to save and destroy: who art thou that judgest another?*” (James 4:11-12).

“*But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought (look down on) thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. ...Let us NOT therefore judge one another ANY MORE: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way*” (Romans 14:10,13).

It is clear. If I speak evil of my brother, I have judged him. But there is only one judge and it is not me. It is the Lord Jesus Christ. It is also clear that evil thoughts lead to evil words. “*For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks*” (Matthew 12:34b, Luke 6:45b).

The law of the kingdom says that if I think evil in my heart, it is as good as doing it (Matthew 5:28). This is why we should always confess evil thoughts to God because they defile our members. Furthermore, we may pretend but we cannot be unreservedly charitable towards anyone whom we think evil of.

There is another thought. Evil speaking puts a stumblingblock in someone's way. Our words can have devastating and weakening effects on all our hearers, especially those that they concern. Jesus warned, “*But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of*

the sea" (Matthew 18:6). Nothing hurts or offends like "a stab in the back" (evil speaking), whether casually or seriously. It gets to the heart! I believe that this one scripture was repeated in three gospels for emphasis. (See also Mark 9:42 and Luke 17:2)

WHY IS THERE EVIL SPEAKING?

The tendency is to believe that evil speaking is caused by the other person. "If Brother so and so were not doing so and so, I would not be giving an evil report." It is just like saying that the spies sent by Moses (Numbers 13:25-33) would not have given an evil report if there were no giants in the land! We may not have any control over the existence of the giants in the land, but surely we have control over our reaction to their existence. In other words, it is not their existence that constitutes an evil report, but it is our reaction to their existence that determines whether we are spreading a good report or an evil report.

According to James 4:1-4, carnality is the reason for infightings, bad mouthings, evil thinking, and such actions. Galatians 5:13 admonishes us,

"For, brethren, ye have been called to liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another."

EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES

It is evident from the account in Numbers 13:25-33, concerning the ten spies who brought back the evil report, that God can use external circumstances to help us to understand our spiritual state from our reactions to the circumstances. And since we are not God, we may not choose the external circumstances. God does.

I would like us to examine another story in the Bible to prove that there should be no evil speaking irrespective of the external circumstance.

1 SAMUEL 24:

Saul had been seeking to take David's life since the day he heard the women singing and ascribing more exploits to David than to himself. He was

envious. It is possible that he knows here that the Lord anointed David in his place after he displeased God by his incomplete obedience.

In this story, David (who has been hiding in a cave from Saul and his men) caught Saul napping unguarded at the mouth of the cave. God actually gave David this opportunity in order to know what was in his heart. David's men tried to persuade him to kill Saul and end their misery. David would not do that, but chose instead to rip Saul's garment with his sword.

This action exposed Saul's nakedness, a minor exposure by our human standards when we consider that Saul wanted David dead. But God was displeased with David.

Verse 5, *"And it came to pass afterward, that David's heart smote him, because he had cut off Saul's skirt."*

He had no authority from God to expose God's elect or anointed. God said, *"Touch not my anointed and do my prophets not harm"* (Psalm 105:15).

The questions before us are: What are we to do if we catch an anointed man of God (a minister, one of the brethren, etc.) supposedly napping? What are we to do if we discover some weakness in a brother or sister? What are we supposed to do if we have a dream that portrays another in negative light?

Each of these situations involves an external circumstance. Our reaction must be scriptural and in love to glorify God.

JUDGING ANOTHER'S MINISTRY

We are affected in a great measure by the ministry (service) of others, their devotion to God and their commitment to the building of Christ's body. Even though God has blessed us with devoted ministers (servants) of Christ, they do not always do things the way we expect them to. But their judgment is not our responsibility. It is God's.

"So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court: indeed, I do not judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time: wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God" (1 Corinthians 4:1-5 NIV)

Suppose the minister (or servant) is indulging in some sin? Well, this book in the Scriptures has an answer for that:

1 Corinthians 5:9-11, "*I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company (associate) with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters: for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man (or woman) that is called a brother (or sister) be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner: with such an one no not to eat.*"

"*No not to eat...*" means not just physical food, but more so spiritual food:

"*For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread*" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

WHAT TO DO WITH EXPOSED WEAKNESSES IN OTHERS

There are various levels of maturity within the Body of Christ. Some brethren are more mature than others are—but not superior. Some have overcome things that others are yet to overcome. The Scriptures show us how to respond when someone's weakness is exposed to us.

"*Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations...Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not: and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand*" (Romans 14:1-4).

"*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness: considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted*" (Galatians 6:1).

DREAMS THAT REVEAL SOME WEAKNESS IN OTHERS

We should always bear in mind that a dream or aspects of it can be false. Even in prophesying or visions, the Scripture commands that there be confirmations, and that they be judged (1 Corinthians 14:29). How? Through the Scriptures. I have limited experience in this area, but I discern that wrong

handling of dreams and visions has a potential of destroying our unity because of the premium that most persons in our fellowship place on dreams, visions, and prophecy. I would rather not dream one more dream or see one more vision, or ever prophesy, if that which is supposed to bring life and encouragement brings division and offense in the body.

Dreams, visions and prophecies (the revelational gifts)—if they are from God, they adhere to the following scriptural standards:

“But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation and comfort ...Let all things be done unto edifying” (1 Corinthians 14:3, 26b).

I wonder how our dreams, visions and prophecies will *edify* if they have an unhappy ending. Jesus gave an example of a word of knowledge that had a negative aspect but a happy ending when He said to Peter,

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Luke 22:31-32).

I see edification, comfort and exhortation in this scripture, don't you?

I see another thing. Because God does not gossip, He will never tell anyone something negative against the other if the receiver has nothing to do with it. In the above scripture, Jesus prayed for Peter until Peter's victory was assured, and He encouraged Peter to strengthen others with the same strength that he would receive. In Zechariah 3:1-5, God gave the prophet a vision about another minister, *Joshua* the high priest. *Zechariah* saw *Joshua* in filthy garments and standing before the angel of the Lord. God wanted *Zechariah* to be part of *Joshua*'s cleansing and consecration. *Zechariah* knew that God did not show him the vision (a special privilege) so that he might go to town with the juicy story! To simple minds, such action may make some look big as great seers, dreamers, or prophets—but not to God.

But *Zechariah* prayed!

Verse 5, “*Let them put a fair mitre upon his (Joshua's) head. So they set a fair mitre upon his head.*”

Our fellowship puts a very low premium on intercessory prayer but a high one on talking. God and the prophets of old put a very high premium on prayer.

There are many other examples in the Scriptures. All of them point to the fact that the one receiving revelation about another should pray until there is a solution—not tell others. God tells us of a problem so that we may be one with it. There is nothing positive spiritually about talking about others even if we pretend that there is.

“And if thou say in thine heart. How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shall not be afraid of him” (Deuteronomy 18:21-22).

Question: Does the fulfillment of a dream, vision, or prophecy make it the word of God? No! Read on...

“If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder. And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them. Thou shall not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 13:1-3).

We understand from here that the words of the dreamer or the prophet may come to pass, but may not be God's words. They are only from God IF they motivate the hearers towards God. Every dream, prophecy, or vision should motivate and encourage the hearers towards God—not away from God.

“What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? ...Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth” (Romans 8:31,33).

Mark it, God cannot accuse His elect! He is not the accuser of the brethren.

THE HIDDEN ESSENCE OF A REVELATION

God speaks in a “*still small voice*.” But the still small voice is not the first thing that Elijah heard. The first pass was a strong *wind*, but God was not in the strong *wind* even though it was “*before the LORD*” (1 Kings 19:11). The second pass was the *earthquake*, and the third was *fire*, but God was in neither of them. None of the above could communicate God's message to His servant. They were not acceptable media for divine communication even though they came first. This impresses on us, that all things that happen “*before God*” are not necessarily of God. However, the “*still small voice*” is of God. The lessons are obvious:

(1) That which is mentally obvious may not explain the purpose of a God-given vision to us. The carnal mind is “*enmity against God*” and cannot be subject to God's law (Romans 8:7).

(2) The meaning of a God-given dream or vision can be known if we seek Him for it. *"I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them"* (Ezekiel 36:37). Even though small, God's voice can be loud and strong in the secret place.

PERSONAL OPINION

There has been carelessness and immaturity in our fellowship with respect to the handling of dreams, visions and prophecies. Prophecies are never judged and many take it as it is. I think that this situation should be handled by teaching and prayer. I see possibilities of offense and stumblingblocks if this matter is not corrected.

FINAL WORD

"Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him. If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me" (John 21:21-22).

"Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (Ephesians 4:29).

"Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Romans 14:13).

"For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: Thou shall love thy neighbour as thyself" (Galatians 5:14).

