

WATCH THAT BIG MOUTH!

“Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth; a stranger, and not thine own lips” [Prov. 27:2]

Brother R. W. Schambach is a popular American faith-preacher who is now in his eighties. He has told the story of a man who once sat beside him during an Amtrak train travel between New York City and Philadelphia, a journey of a few hours. Right from the time that the young man took his seat, he started (without anybody’s prompting) to brag about his “achievements.” He was a “self-made” man who had by “dint of hard labor” come to the “pinnacle” of his career as a Wall Street stock broker. He had enough investments for himself and his family even if he didn’t “lift a finger” for the rest of his life. He kept chattering away without as much as giving his captive listener the “privilege” to at least congratulate him! Finally, Schambach got irritated. He turned to the young man and said, “I need not speak about myself. Rather, I want to talk about my father. He owns all the railroads in America. In fact, he owns the whole land.” The young man staggered. “Sir, can you introduce me to your father?” “Yes, of course,” and Schambach used that opportunity to introduce Mr. Big Mouth to God the Father Who owns the earth and the fullness thereof [Ps. 24:1]!

If we were to listen to ourselves, we would be amazed how much big mouth we had! You have a big mouth when (1) you enjoy recounting success stories about yourself and your family, most often without any prompting (some parents carry family pictures on them for effect!), (2) when you inflate or lie about your achievements or self-importance (look at your CV or résumé or business card!), (3) when you speak boldly on issues on which you have little or no knowledge, and (4) when you monopolize every discussion without giving others the chance to also speak. There are many more examples!

A big mouth can be dangerous. For example, David executed the young Amalekite who claimed to have killed King Saul in battle whereas the king had killed himself [2 Sam. 1:1-10]. After boasting to stand by Jesus, no matter what, Peter denied Him thrice at a crucial moment [Matt. 26:33-35].

In today’s lesson, we shall examine this very important subject. Why do we blow our trumpets so loud? How can we deal with this spiritually dangerous infection so that we can bless the Lord at all times and praise Him continually with our mouths? [Ps. 34:1]

1. Two Bible stories on the subject

(a) Sennacherib's Generals [2 Kgs 18: 13-37]

You will recall that towards the end of Solomon's reign, Israel began to sink into moral decadence [1 Kgs 11: 1-13]. Soon after his death, the nation was split into two: the ten Northern tribes broke away and anointed Solomon's servant, Jeroboam, as their king [1 Kgs 12:16-20], while the houses of Judah and Benjamin remained with Solomon's son, Rehoboam, as the Kingdom of Judah [1 Kgs 12:20-21]. Over time, the fear of God diminished as the basis for state and civil conduct. Consequently, God allowed invaders from Assyria to inflict several defeats on both kingdoms.

Our story today comes from the days of King Hezekiah, one of the very few kings of Judah who feared God. Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, had sent troops from Babylon that took Judah's fortified cities and exerted enormous ransoms from the nation, running, in today's terms, into millions of dollars. In desperation, Hezekiah had to strip the gold and silver from the doors of the temple that Solomon had built [2 Kgs 18:13-16]. Yet, that did not stop the attacks. Sennacherib ordered a second invasion under the command of three generals, one of whom was *Rabshakeh* [2 Kgs 18:17].

Rabshakeh was a very boastful and disrespectful man. He came to the busiest street in Jerusalem and began to shout out the orders from the king of Assyria:

Speak up now to Hezekiah, Thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria, What confidence is this wherein thou trustest? Thou sayest, (but they are but vain words) I have counsel and strength for the war. Now on whom dost thou trust, that thou rebellest against me? [2 Kgs 18: 19-20]

Then, he poured out more venom. Hezekiah couldn't be relying on the Pharaoh of Egypt, "this bruised reed" [v. 21] nor on the Lord God "whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah had taken away" [v. 22]. Of course, that was a lie! He added more lies: "Am I come up without the Lord against this place to destroy it? The Lord said to me, go up against this land and destroy it" [v.25]. That is an example of how people speak authoritatively on something they know little or nothing about!

For more effect, Rabshakeh stood up and spoke with a loud voice in the local dialect of the Jews:

Thus said the king, let not Hezekiah deceive you: for he shall not be able to deliver you out of his hand. Neither let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord, saying, the Lord will surely deliver us, and this city shall not be delivered into the hand of the king of Assyria [vv. 28-30]

The people held their peace, as King Hezekiah had commanded them, and they did not answer him [v.36]. That is how to deal with somebody with a big mouth! You can read the rest of this interesting story in **2 Kgs 19: 1-37**. In response to the people's prayer, God sent prophet Isaiah to assure Hezekiah not to be afraid "of the words which thou hast heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me. Behold, I will send a blast upon him and he shall hear a rumour and shall return to his own land, and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land" [**2 Kgs 19:6-7**]. God defended Jerusalem "for My own sake and for My servant David's sake" [v.34] by sending an angel at night who killed 185,000 soldiers in the Assyrian camp, including most probably bigmouth Rabshakeh. Sennacherib himself was killed by his own sons in his place of idol worship [vv. 35-37]. That is how the king and his bigmouth generals perished.

(b) The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican [Lk 18: 9-14]

Jesus told this parable to a group of people who "trusted in themselves that they are righteous and despised others" [v. 9]. Therefore, it is very relevant to the subject of our discussion.

The Pharisees were a Jewish sect [**Acts 15:5**], which believed in the resurrection of the dead [**Acts 23:8**]. They were very zealous for Judaism [**Matt. 23:15**] and upholding the Law of Moses [**Acts 26:5**]. Outward details were more important to them [**Matt. 23:23**]. The Publicans, on the other hand, were lower class Jews [**Matt. 9:10-11**] who collected taxes for the Romans that were generally hated by the Jews [**Lk 5:27**]. Apostle and gospel writer Matthew was a Publican. My purpose here is to show that, sometimes, our cultural upbringing or social status can condition us to be loud-mouthed or humble!

The Pharisee came to the temple. I can imagine him surveying the pews to pick the most dignified. It had to be far away from those used by the Publicans. Soon, he picked the front one but he did not consider it clean enough. So, he decided to pray, standing up. Hear his words:

God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this Publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess [Lk 18: 11-12]

Does that sound familiar to you? I have heard church leaders shout from the pulpit, "I am baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. When I am not asleep, I am tongue-talking." When some of us give testimonies, the emphasis is on how spiritually powerful we are rather than how merciful and gracious God is to us. When we are not putting other denominations down, we are underrating other worshippers in our congregation. Therefore, we should not behave shocked over the Pharisee's prayer!

Jesus completed the story by saying that the Publican went home justified because, unlike the Pharisee, he was humble and genuinely repentant “for everyone that exalted himself shall be abased and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” [Lk 18:13-14].

2. Why do we blow our trumpets?

From the two cases treated above, we can identify the following reasons (among many others):

- ❑ *Man’s limited knowledge*- In the sight of God, human beings are as mere grasshoppers [Is. 40:22]. We boast out of ignorance, thinking that all knowledge resides in the little that we know. Because Goliath was over nine feet tall, he couldn’t imagine any other human being that could defeat him. So, he boasted “I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man that we may fight together” [1 Sam. 17:10]. All it took to kill him was a mere pebble which the Spirit of God had converted into a lethal weapon in the hands of teenager David who was as yet not even qualified to enter the Israelite army! [1 Sam. 17: 4-7, 44].
- ❑ *Vanity and Pride*- “Every man at his best state is altogether vanity” [Ps. 39:5], and men “with their mouth they speak proudly” [Ps. 17:10b]. After his humiliating experience with Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego [Dan. 3:1-30], Nebuchadnezzar could still open his big mouth to boast, “is not this great Babylon, that *I have built* for the house of the kingdom *by the might of my power and for the honour of my majesty*?” Immediately, God turned him into a beast and he fed on grass for seven years until he learned to give glory to whom it is due [Dan. 4:30-31].
- ❑ *Foolishness*- The Parable of the Rich Fool best illustrates this. God had blessed him with material abundance. Instead of offering thanks to God and giving to the poor, he opened his big mouth to betray his foolishness, “I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink and be merry.” God called him “thou fool” and he died that night [Lk 12:16-20]. Even where Paul recounted his sufferings to support his apostleship, he still called it a foolish action, “that which I speak, I speak not after the Lord but *as it were foolishly, in this confidence of boasting*” [2 Cor. 11:17].
- ❑ *Lying*- There is the story of a young man who bore the same last name as that of the head of state of his country. He boasted everywhere that he was quite close to the man in power. One day, the dictator died and his associates were being investigated for corrupt practices. Our young man was the first to cry aloud that he had no blood relationship with the dead man and that he actually *never* met him. Although that was the truth, nobody believed him on account of his antecedence. That is what a big mouth can lead us into!

It appears that a big mouth is the product of a non-transformed mind [**Rom. 12; 2**]. What defiles a man comes from within [**Matt. 15:18-19**], and as a man thinks in his heart, so is he [**Prov. 23:7**], for out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks [**Matt. 11:34**].

3. Overcoming the problem of a big mouth

- (a) Realize and *accept* that it is a problem. The Psalmist cried out to God, “deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips and from a deceitful tongue. I am for peace but when I speak, they are for war” [**Ps. 120:2,7**]. David prayed, “set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips” **Ps. 141:3**].
- (b) A big mouth is a habit. Therefore, break it! Jesus has warned that “every idle word that men speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment” [**Matt. 11:36**]. Therefore, let your mouth speak in “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” [**Eph. 5:19**]. Cultivate the habit of active listening. For once, let others speak while you listen with rapt attention!
- (c) Pray for the Holy Spirit of God to teach you to behave wisely at all times [**1 Sam.18: 14-16**], and to give you the mind of Christ [**1 Cor. 2:16; Phil. 2:5-11**]. It is only then that the big mouth can speak with “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” [**Gal. 5:22-23**].
- (d) If you must boast, boast in the Lord “for not he that commendeth himself is approved but whom the Lord commendeth” [**2 Cor. 10:18**]. In recalling his vision of Paradise, Paul never mentioned his own name but kept referring to “a man” he knew, “of such an one will I glory, yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities” [**2 Cor. 12: 2-5**]. Each time John discussed his role in Christ’s earthly ministry, he always referred to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” [**Jn 13:23; Jn 19:26; Jn 20:2; etc.**]. Each time Jesus healed somebody, He would command him to tell nobody [**Lk 8:56**], just as He commanded Peter, James and John soon after His Transfiguration to “tell the vision to no man until the Son of man be risen again from the dead” [**Matt. 17:9**].

4. Conclusion

In this lesson, we have concentrated only on one tiny aspect of what danger the mouth can pose for us. We have not yet discussed the tongue, that little member of the body that carries death and life in its arsenal [**Prov. 18:21**]. That is another lesson. For the bigmouth problem, we can minimize it if we can stop our ego trips and become more God-centred. Let us learn to imitate Christ who was always pointing to His Father and away from Himself. Let us learn from the popular saying that empty vessels make the loudest noise.