

The Sin of Idle Talking and Directions to Overcome It

A Sermon by Richard Baxter

Another part of sensuality to be denied, is, Idle and worldly talk, which most men make their daily recreation. It is not to be made light of that Christ himself hath told you, that for every idle word men shall give account in the day of Judgment, Matt. 12. 36, 37. such an account as that they shall be charged on you as sins; and if they be not repented of, and pardoned through the blood of Christ, they will be your condemnation as well as greater sins. By idle words is meant, not only all wicked, & all lying words, which are vain in a high degree and worse; but also useless unprofitable speeches that tend not to any good, and which you have no call to speak, Tit. 3. 9. And that which the Apostle calls [foolish talking] Eph. 5. 4. When that Christian wisdom is left out that should guide and season our speech, and direct it to some good end: especially when by vain jesting men will make fools of themselves to please others: or when they lay by Christian gravity, and by jesting affect to become ridiculous, Eph. 5. 4. much more when men jest with holy things, and speak irreverently, contemptuously or scornfully of the matters of God, which is impiety in an high degree: The same may be said of proud boasting words, and of multitude of words, even when the matter is good, but the multitude of words unseasonable and unprofitable; as also of rash unconsidered words, that tend to stir up strife and passion: as also censuring, back-biting, reproach, flattery, dissembling, and many the like: but the thing that I principally speak of now, is the pleasing of a man's self by a course of idle unprofitable talk. And alas how common is this sin! Not only the foolish multitude are guilty of it, but persons of judgment, and gravity, and reputation. How many may you come in company with, before you shall have any edifying Communication, that tends to minister grace to the hearers? vanity is become the common breath of the greatest part. What the better can any man be for their discourse, unless by taking warning by them, to avoid the vanity which we hear them guilty of? Even ancient persons with whom the words of wisdom should be found, (Job 12. 12.) and who should be examples unto youth, are yet given up to idle talk; and an old story is more savoury with them than heavenly discourse: even Parents and Masters that should be examples to their families, will in their hearing multiply idle words, as if they would teach them to be vain as they are; when alas, the souls of those about them have need of other

manner of discourse; and it's another task that God hath set them, Deut. 6. 6, 7, 8. & 11. 18, 19. Whence is it that Children learn a course of idle foolish talking, more than of their own parents? For one word of God, and the Doctrine of the Gospel, and the matters of salvation, that their families hear from most of them, they hear an hundred, yea a thousand of the world and of unprofitable things. Had God but the Tithe of their words, we should account them very pious. And they that cannot spare him the tithe of their words, I doubt do not allow him the Tithe of their affections, and would not allow him the tithe of their increase, if they could tell how to keep it. Not but that with some persons, that are called to much worldly business, more than ten parts of their daily speeches may woefully be about the creatures. But then even those with godly men are ultimately for God, and so are sanctified, and not unprofitable: and also they are glad to redeem what time they can for speeches of an higher and more excellent subject.

And the commonness of this sin of idle talk, yea with many that we hope are godly, doth make me think that it's thought to be a smaller matter than it is; and I doubt this conceit is it that makes it to be so common. And therefore I shall here give you some of the aggravations of this sin, that you may hereafter judge of it as it is, and not be encouraged in it by false apprehensions.

A custom of vain words is a sign of a vain and empty mind: was the heart but full of better things, the tongue would be employed in better speeches. Either the head, or heart, or both is empty and vain, in that measure as the tongue is vain, Eccles. 5. 3. [A dream cometh through the multitude of business, and a fools voice is known by multitude of words] Eccles. 10. 12. [The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself] Eccles. 10. 14. [A fool is full of words] And therefore Solomon opposeth the tongue of the just and the heart of the wicked, Prov. 10. 20. [The tongue of the just is as choice silver: the heart of the wicked is little worth] See Pro. 17. 27, 28. Psal. 37. 30, 31. [The mouth of the righteous speaketh wisdom, and his tongue talketh of judgement] and whence is this [The Law of his God is in his heart: none of his steps shall slide.] It is a sign that a man hath little feeling of the greatness of his own sin, of the greatness of God's Love in Christ, of the greatness of the joy that is set before him, of the greatness of duty that lyeth on him, when he can spend so much of his time in talking of mere vanity. You cannot get a dying man, or a man that's taken up with any great important business, to jest and prate with you

of idle matters. It's only alienated idle minds that can give way to a course of idle words: nay it is a sign that Conscience is not so tender as it ought to be, when men can knowingly go on in a course of sin: Doth not Conscience ask you what you are doing, and whether this discourse do tend to edification, and the cherishing of grace? What Consciences have you that look no better after your tongues, but will let them wander so long after vanity, before they call them to account? Do you remember God's presence, and withal his holiness and jealousy? Can you talk so idly and God stand by, and hear every word, and put down all? How can you be so contemptuously fearless of his presence?

2. The tongue of man is a noble member, called our glory, Psal. 30. 12. & 57. 8. given us for the Praise of our great Creator, and for other high and noble ends. And should it be abased and abused to idleness and vanity? You will not take the clothes that adorn your bodies to clothe a Maukin, or sweep the Oven, or wipe your dishes with: and why should you use your tongues to filth or base unprofitable things, that are given you for the noblest uses in the world, even the honour of God, the edifying of your brethren, the reproof of sin, and your own salvation?

3. Consider, what abundance of great and needful employment you have for your tongues, and then tell me, whether you should spare them to idleness and vanity? O what work hath that little member to perform! what matters have you to mind and talk of? what transcendent subjects? what matter of highest excellency, and greatest necessity? you have a life of sin to look back upon and lament: you have many a sin to confess to others: you need much help against temptations, and for the strengthening and exercise of your graces: what need to make sure of your title to salvation? and to prepare for death, and to get ready the graces that you must use in you last necessities? and yet have you words to spare for vanity? What abundance of poor souls about you are ignorant, hard-hearted, sensual, covetous, empty of grace, in a state of death, and need all that ever you can do for their recovery, and all too little: and yet can you find in your heart to talk with them of vain unprofitable things? Alas Sirs, most of the persons about you are within a step of death, and going to the bar of God, and want nothing but one stroke of death to make them past help, and send them to damnation: And can you find in your hearts to talk idly with such men? O cruel unmerciful people, that regard no more your neighbours miseries! If you came to them at the point of death, or if their houses were on fire, would you sit down and tell them

an old tale, or talk of the weather, or this trifle, or that? what an absurdity would this be, and insensibility of your brethren's case? And will you do so in a case ten thousand fold greater? Can you find in your heart to stand jesting & prating with a poor unregenerate man that is within a step of Hell? Have you not more need to call to him to look about him in time, and to remember eternity, and to turn and live? If you see but the nakedness of the poor, or the sores of a Cripple, it should move you to compassion: And will not men's ignorance and ungodliness move you? Their miseries cry aloud to you for pity, though themselves are silent, [O help to save us from sin and hell, as you have the hearts of men] and yet will you stop your ears, and fall a prating and jesting with them? you rob them of the means that God hath commanded you to use for their recovery. God hath commanded, that [the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another—Col. 3. 16. yea that you daily exhort one another while it is called today, lest any be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, Heb. 3. 13.

Nay you have the great mysteries of the Gospel to discourse of with the Godly; the glorious things of everlasting life to make mention of to one another, yea you have the high praises of God to advance in the world, and all his blessed attributes to magnify, and all his glorious works to praise, & all the experiences of your own souls to lay open, & his many & great mercies towards you to admire and thankfully confess. And yet have you leisure for idle talk? For number of objects, you have God and all his works in heaven and earth (that are revealed) to talk of; you have all his providences, all his judgments all his mercies, and all his word: And is not this field large enough for your tongue to walk in, but you must seek out more work in vanity itself? For Greatness, you have the greatest things in all the world to mind and talk of: For necessity, you have the matters of your own and other men's salvation to discourse of: For excellency, you have God and his Image, and works, and ways, and heaven itself to talk of: For delightfulness, you have the sweetest objects in the world, even goodness itself, salvation, & the way to it, to be the matter of your discourse. And lest one thing should weary you, you have a world of variety to employ your speeches on; even God, and all his works, and word, and ways before-mentioned. And is it not a shame to talk of vanity, yea to go seek for recreation in vanity, while all these stand by, and offer themselves to the subjects of your wise, and fruitful, and delightfullest discourse: Consider whether this be wise or equal dealing.

4. Moreover a course of idle talk, is a thief that robs us of our precious time. And he that knows what God is, or what duty is, or what his soul is, or what everlasting joy or torment is, will know that time is a commodity of greater worth than so contemptuously to be cast away for nothing. O remember when thou art next in idle talk, did God make thee for this? doth he continue thee among the living, and keep thee out of hell, and yet prolongeth thy days, that thou shouldest waste thy time in idleness and vanity? Hast thou so many sins to mortify, and so many other works to do, which heaven or hell lyeth on, and so short and uncertain a time to do them in, and yet hast thou leisure for idle talk?

5. Moreover, this sin is so much the greater, because it is not a rare or seldom sin, but frequently committed and continued in. It is not like the sin of David or Noah, that though greater, yet was but once committed: But this is made great by the number and continuance. How many thousand idle words have you been guilty of in your time?

6. And it is a sin that tendeth to greater sins. For idle words are the ordinary passage to backbiting, railing, lying, and contentious words, [Prov. 10. 19. In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin, but he that refraineth his lips is wise] Thus a fools lips enter into contention, Prov. 18. 6. [His mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul] Eccles. 5. 7. [In the multitude of dreams, and many words, are divers vanities: but fear thou God] Eccles. 10. 12, 13. [The Lips of a fool will swallow up himself; the beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is madness] Idleness is the beginning, but worse than Idleness is the end.

7. It is a sin that habituateth the speaker and hearers both to vanity: use makes us disposed to that which we use. It will grow strange to you to speak of better things when you are used to vanity. And the use of hearing you, is an exceeding wrong to the souls of the hearers. And a small matter confirmeth such bad hearts as the most have, in the vanity that they are in. You cast water on their graces and your own, if there were any. If any of them had better thoughts, your idle talk doth drown and divert them.

8. And it is a sin that hindreth abundance of Edification that holy conference might bring. It's a precious thriving course for Christians to be communicating experiences, and declaring the Excellency and loving-kindness of God, and exciting one another: and this you lay by and turn to vanity. Nay perhaps some other that is in the company may be purposed to set upon such profitable discourse, and your idle talk doth hinder them, and suppress the exercise of

Gods graces for your good. At least there may be much precious matter in them, that wants but vent, & if you would but begin, it may be poured forth as precious ointment. Many wise and able men are too backward in beginning edifying discourse, that yet are exceeding fruitful when you have once set them a work. And idle talk is the hinderer of this.

9. And it is a very fruitless sin. You offend God for nothing. What get you by an hour's idle talk? or what have you to tempt you to it?

10. And it is a wilful sin, and usually accompanied with much Impenitency, which makes it much the greater. Men use not to lament it, and call themselves to account for it, and say, what have I done? but go on in it as if it were no sin.

And now you see the greatness of the sin, I beseech you make more conscience of it than you have done. And that you may avoid it, observe these brief Directions.

Direct. 1. Labour for understanding in the matters of God: for that's it that must furnish the tongue, and prevent vanity, Prov. 11. 12. & 10. 19. A foolish head will have a foolish tongue.

Direct. 2. Get a deep impression and lively sense of the matters of God upon the heart. For a man never talks heartily, that talks not from the Heart. He that is full of the Love of God, possessed of the Spirit of Christ, taken up with the riches of grace and of glory, will scarce want matter to talk of, nor an holy disposition to set him a work: For the Word of God will be as a fire in his heart; he will be weary with forbearing, till the flames burst out, Psal. 119. 11. & 40. 8. & 57. 7. & 119. 111. & 39. 3. Jer. 20.

9. The hearty experienced Christian is usually the fruitful Christian in word and deed.

Direct. 3. Preserve a tender conscience, that may check you when you begin to turn to vanity. The fear of God is the souls preserver, Psal. 19. 9. Prov. 16. 6. & 23. 17.

Direct. 4. Walk as before the Lord: Live, and think, and speak as in his presence. If the presence of an Angel would call you off from idle words, what then should the presence of God himself do! Dare you run on in idle foolish prating when you remember that he heareth you?

Direct. 5. Keep out of the company of idle talkers, lest they entangle you in the sin: unless when you have a call to be among them, Prov. 13. 20. We are apt to let our discourse run with the stream.

Direct. 6. When you are with the ungodly, maintain in you a believing compassion to their souls; And then the sense of their condition will heal your discourse.

Direct. 7. Provide matter of holy discourse of purpose beforehand. As you will not travel without money in your purses to defray your charges; so you should not go into company without a provision of such matter as may be profitable for the company that you may be cast upon. Study and contrive how to suit your speeches to the Edification of others, or else to draw good from others, even as Ministers study for their Sermons.

Direct. 8. Speak not till you have considered what is like to be the effect of it, and weighed the quality of the person, and other circumstances to that end. Do not speak first, and consider after, but first think, and then speak.

Direct. 9. Be still sensible of the worth of time and opportunity, and then you will be as loth to cast it away on idle talk, as a good husband will be to cast away his money for nothing.

Direct. 10. Keep up a sense of your own necessity, which may provoke you to be better husbands of your tongues and time: and engage those you converse with, to mind you of your idle talk, and take you off it as soon as you begin.

Direct. 11. See that your heart, and tongue, and all be absolutely devoted to God; and then you will question any by-expense of words: and [Whatsoever you do in word or deed, you will do all in the name of Christ, and to the glory and praise of God] Col. 3. 17. 1 Cor. 10. 31.

Direct. 12. Be Resolute for God, and be not ashamed to own him and his cause. A sinful bashfulness hinders much good. Observe these Directions for this part of self-denial.