

Lesson 7.

Freedom of Speech. Second Part.

Free Speech and Society.

The idea exists, that in a free country, where free speech is permitted, a person may say anything he chooses. This is entirely without foundation. Society is more important than the individual. If a person desires to share in community life, he must obey the requirements of society. If unwilling to do this, he should move to some isolated spot, where his unlovely speech may be addressed to the clouds and the trees. Society has formulated laws respecting free speech, which must be obeyed. Such laws are necessary, for it is as important that free speech comply with the needs of society as with the needs of the individual. True freedom comes only by obedience to the laws that surround us.

The laws of society declare that slanderous words must not be uttered. Society has no use for the character assassin. Society further declares that libel cannot be uttered without endangering the whole of society, and that libelous words will be punished. Moreover, in a country where free speech is permitted, a man cannot approach his neighbor and heap words of abuse upon him without endangering his own freedom. A man must in all things be respectful to his fellow men. He must speak the truth to them, gently and kindly, if he speaks at all. Moreover, a person must so guard his tongue as to say nothing that will disturb the peace, or that will give offence because of vulgarity or blasphemy. Our speech must be used in accordance with the legal statutes of the land.

Unfortunately, however, society has not made punishable by law all the evils efforts of the wagging tongue. There are things

that must be guarded in our speech though they are not mentioned in the laws of the State. Society objects to the loud speaker, who drowns all other voices in his fierce conversations. Likewise, the habit of whispering in company is bad form. If secrets must be told, they should be whispered when the two are alone, and not in the presence of others. Society demands, moreover, that in conversation no person shall interrupt another. If an individual once has the floor, he shall be allowed to elaborate and complete his idea. He should, of course, make his discussion as brief and as clear as possible. But he who interrupts, is a greater sinner than he who unwisely continues his speech.

A serious breach of conversational etiquette is to contradict, flatly, a person who has made some statement. A correction of an error can always be made a little later in a mild and pleasant manner. Young people especially in their zeal for truth, are tempted to contradict immediately any untruth that they hear. This is not proper. Frequently, things that sound arroneous, upon closer examination are found to be right; equally frequently, we fail to understand a speaker correctly, and so are led to contradict him.

Society frowns down upon gossip. The spending of precious time by men and women, in discussing the affairs of their neighbors, is wholly contrary to good form in society, and is equally in opposition to the spirit of the Gospel. The wonders of the universe, in the heavens above, in the earth below and in the nature of man, should keep us busy all our lives, and we should have no time to discuss the petty failings of our neighbors. Gossip has no place in a high civilization. Yet, unfortunately, it is one of the commonest forms of present-day speech.

The habit of "talking shop" on every and all occasions is also objected to by society. It is perfectly proper for a man to be thoroughly interested in his work, and to talk about it whenever he feels so inclined to a person who is willing to listen to him or who is equally interested. When, however, a person persists in talking about his daily work on every and all occasions to any one who may come within the range of his voice, he is probably inflicting misery upon society. It is well for a man to talk about his work publicly only and when he is asked to do so. It helps our daily work, if we get away from it a few moments daily. For that reason it is well to talk about things somewhat foreign to that which occupies our minds throughout the day.

In general, every person who speaks in the presence of society, should remember not only to obey the laws established by society with regard to free speech, but should also honor and respect the customs of society. These customs can best be expressed in one statement: Social speech should be filled with substance and should be fitted to the time, and the occasion, and to those who listen. If that were done by all, we should enjoy far better social intercourse with our fellows. Voices should be gentle; words should be chosen carefully; correct forms of expression should be used; grammatical and rhetorical accuracy should be observed; good thoughts should be expressed; substantial lines of conversation should be adopted. All in all, the great power of free speech should be guided with the utmost care for the good of society.

Just as the speech of an individual gradually shapes that individual, so the speech of society gradually affects all the labors and aspects of society. Each man, as a unit of society,

has the making of the whole in his hands. He should of necessity consider the double responsibility to himself and to society in every word that he utters. The speech of a community is a fair measure of the social conditions in the district. If the people of a town speak loudly, coarsely, ungrammatically, and of things impure or of little worth, we may know that the community is of little consequence for good in the state. If in another town the people use well modulated voices, well chosen words, and subjects of good and general interest, we know that the community will become a power in the land. Communities should be impressed with this fact, that they are read by their speech; and that as their speech is improved, their lives are generally improved. Latter Day Saints, of all people, should be extremely careful in their speech. The freedom of their speech should be the freedom founded on law and guided by great visions.

Free Speech and God.

The great power conferred upon man by free speech, of necessity carries with it a great responsibility to God. In fact, before God, as before society, man is held accountable for words. In the Mosaic code of laws one of the first commandments refers to speech; "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord, thy God, in vain." This commandment does not indicate alone that we must use the name of God in a respectable manner, but it implies, also, that all words must be spoken with a purpose --if God's name is used, it must be used definitely and for a distinct purpose and word must so be used. This fundamental law should be engraven upon the hearts of all peoples who desire to rise to greatness before their God.

Yet another commandment in the Mosaic code has reference to

speech; "Thou shalt not lie." Truth and truth only shall be spoken. From that point of view, speech should always be constructive; if temporarily destructive it should be only in the cause of truth. Of all forms of speech impurity none equals that which comes from the lying tongue. Any person who tells untruths gradually and unconsciously acquires the habit of lying until he finds it difficult to tell the truth, even if he so desires. Later comes a stage in which a lie is not recognized by him; and later still he loses his hate of a lie, he then loves a lie. At last untruth becomes a part of the man who then is at variance with the great mastering and perfecting truths of the universe. Then, even when he speaks the truth, he is looked upon with suspicion by his fellows. The man who lies about his fellow man, who destroys the character of a neighbor, is a murderer and no better than the cannibal who eats the flesh of his victim. Upon him the heavy hand of God will be laid. A liar murders truth, and should be treated as a murderer. He should be an outcast from society.

It is to be remembered however, that even truth is to be spoken with wisdom, at certain times and in certain places. Because I know something to be true, is not fitting that I should stand on the housetops and shout it. If it is a physical truth regarding some agricultural practice it should be stated before a body of farmers, for their inspiration. If stated at the wrong time, or in the wrong place, it may fall unheeded or even be turned to evil. Likewise truth should be spoken in the right spirit, or it may do harm, as for instance, truth spoken by the mouth of hate is as a poisoned arrow. A bit of truth taken away from its relation may be made to do great injury. Truth itself, therefore, should be spoken wisely, with caution; and untruth should never

be uttered.

When Jesus walked on earth, He, also frequently referred to speech. He declared "Let thy communications be Yea, Yea and Nay, Nay." Before God, men should speak directly, simply, stating the bare truth so that it may be clearly understood, adding little to it, taking nothing from it, but confine themselves to the eternal truth. The Savior also said that we must not call our brother a fool, for he who does so shall be in danger of hell fire. According to the laws of God we must speak to a purpose, with respect to truth; and kindly and respectfully to our brothers. This is demanded of us by our Father in return for the power of speech which he has bestowed upon us.

In prayer man approaches his God if he lives a correct life. The Savior has given to man a model prayer, the Lord's Prayer. It is a model not only in the thoughts it contains, but in its speech. It is clear, logical, simple and direct; and emphasizes the principles that have been outlined in these lessons. Prayer should be free from vain repetitions for it is just as important in addressing our God as in addressing our fellow men to speak directly, expressing our thoughts clearly and stopping when we have finished.

The public discourse as delivered in our churches is often of the type of prayers. Such discourse or sermons should likewise be made to comply with the requirements of free speech as herein outlined. There is many a sinner against these laws in our pulpits. There is much vain repetition of the same thought; there is much circumvention of ideas; there are many words that tend to obscure the real thought of the speaker. Preachers should be noted rather for the substance than for the length of their sermons. The wonderful discourses of the savior are full of ideas from beginning

to end, and yet in length barely cover a page or two of the Holy Book. They can well be taken as our models.

It is said that speech is silver, but that silence is golden. This is undoubtedly true when speech is misused. Moreover silence indicates intervals in our speech; is in itself a form of our speech. There are times and places when speech has no place. For example, when we enter the meeting house, to worship, we should think and listen, not speak. In such a case silence is golden. The habit of conversing in public places of worship is a sure indication of an undeveloped or lawless mind.

We should rejoice in the great gift of speech that God has given us and find joy in its use. There should be no attempt to circumscribe speech, except to harmonize it with law. We should cultivate a knowledge of words, of proper sentences, of ideas to express in words; and should seek the power of transmitting our ideas in well chosen words and well built sentences to our fellow men. Speech graces the individual and is part of his loveliness. The lover values it in his beloved as one of her chief charms:

"Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet,
Thy speech is comely,
Thy temples are like a pomegranate"

Freedom consists of the privilege of doing what should be done, and no more. Freedom of speech consists, therefore, in saying what ought to be said, and no more. "Excellent speech becometh not a fool; much less do lying lips a prince."