

511 “Always with grace”

One symptom of these tumultuous times is the current debate about “free speech”. In one corner are those individuals who shout, “It is my human right that I will say WHAT I like WHENEVER I like, and if you don’t like what I say then that’s your problem, not mine”. Elon Musk, the richest man in the world we are told, has just bought Twitter for over \$40 billion, (he is rather less rich now), vowing to uphold such free speech sentiments on the internet.

In the opposite corner are the powerful individuals, pressure groups, social media companies and governments, whose line is – “You will NOT say what you like whenever you like. You will say only what we permit you to say - or else”. Under such an approach (as for example in China, Russia, North Korea and Iran), the internet is closely monitored, and is shut down for some or all whenever the Deciders so choose.

Things are in a mess. The USA for instance is deeply riven between Left and Right, with hot-tempered words from both sides being fanned by the mainstream media (MSM), the 24-hour news channels and the social media companies. Such acrimonious behaviour is hardly a good advertisement for unfettered free speech. Something must be done!

As so often in current debates such as this, Almighty God and His Word are largely ignored, so it is little wonder that great problems have arisen (eg., II Timothy 3.16-17). Speech has such a crucial role in human existence that the Lord God has given us in His Word an abundance of teaching about how we are to speak, concerning first our hearts, and then our utterances. There is little new for us in what follows from here, but in view of the way things are going, may these timely scriptural reminders be of value.

In Matthew 12. 33-37 the Lord Jesus plainly sets the scene. As a tree is known by its fruit, so is a person known by their speech; and that speech springs either from the good, or the bad, “treasure of the heart” (vv.33-35, KJV). Jesus assures us that “every idle word that men shall speak” must be accounted for in the day of judgment (vv.36-37): if that simple truth was widely known, what a sobering effect it could have on people’s speech! Elsewhere the tongue is likened to “a fire, a world of iniquity”; it is untameable, “an unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (from James 3.6,8). Of the seven things abominable to the Lord (Proverbs 6.16-19), three concern speech – “a lying tongue, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren”. We join in the Psalmist’s cry to

the Lord, “Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips, and from a deceitful tongue” (Psalm 120.2).

But we are also given much positive teaching about our speech. In Proverbs for example, we read, “The mouth of a righteous [man] is a well of life ... he that refraineth his lips is wise ... the lips of the righteous feed many ... A soft answer turneth away wrath ... where there is no tale-bearer, the strife ceaseth” (from Proverbs 10.11a,19b,21a; 15.1a; 26.20b).

In some examples from the Epistles we read, “... putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour ... no corrupt communication ... but that which is good to the use of edifying ... (to) minister grace unto the hearers / ... speak evil of no man / ... be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath / let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile” (from Ephesians 4.25a,29 / Titus 3.2a / James 1.19b / I Peter 3.10).

The rounded scriptural answer to the vexed question of “free speech” is thus quite simple. In Christ we “have been called to liberty” (Galatians 5.13a): that is, by faith in the blood of Christ we are saved by God’s grace alone (Ephesians 2.8-10), and are indeed freed from the demands of the old Law as far as our salvation is concerned. So, “stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free ...” (Galatians 5.1a).

But! – Galatians 5.13 continues, “only [use] not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another”. In theory therefore, Christians do have the liberty to say whatever we like! But of course we will restrain that liberty, out of a loving obedience to the Lord and a loving concern for the well-being of those around us, both Christians and not-yet Christians.

In summary, “Let your speech [be] always with grace ...” (from Colossians 4.6a). Following the lead of our Lord Jesus Christ, may we speak thus ourselves – “always with grace” - and encourage those on social media and in public life that, as much as they are able, they will do the same.