

SERMON

Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 12:33–37 · 1941

31 August 1941

Valdemarsvik Church

Text: Matthew 12:33–37

Hymns: 396:2–3; 412:1–4; 414:6; 173:4–6; 423:5

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray.

Let our ears be open, Lord God.

Rule mind and sense,

that we may hear your commandments

and have them in mind,

so that we rightly understand the word

and always walk in your will

and so do the word. Amen.

(Swedish Hymnal 213:3)

“And the Lord God brought all the beasts to the man, to see what he would call them. For as the man called every living creature, so it was to be named. And the man gave names to all the cattle, to the birds under heaven, and to all the beasts of the field.” These words out of the creation history, on one of the Bible’s first leaves, give, like everything else in this deep narrative, expression to something eternally right. Speech, the power to form words and to take in words, is something reserved for the human being. Even he who today takes on the task of catching and naming what marks the human being, what separates him from the

beasts, is forced at last to stop before the gift of language. Now the Creator never gives anyone a preference without also giving the responsibility for how the gift is used. Our preaching text on the Sunday about “the use of the tongue” deals with “people’s words,” and through everything the Savior says about this matter the thought of the judgment runs like a red thread. You shall answer for your words. “For every idle word that people speak, they shall give account on the day of judgment. For by your words you shall be judged righteous, and by your words you shall be judged guilty.”

Now each one of us must, examining, let the thought go to his own world. We must confess that it becomes more unclean the farther we come in toward our most private life, the life among our nearest and our friends. Worst of all it can be at home. What, because of pride and cowardice together, is fought and held down out among others, that presses up to the surface when we are among those whom we have grown used to having always upon us. There come the hard words of the quarrel and the stabbing words of the small sour-mindedness. In the home and at the workplace such things easily slide over the tongue, words that strike wounds in our neighbor and often drive forward payment in the same coin. And among the friends there is surely always one moment and another given to speaking ill of others who are not present, the ridiculous envy’s words over those who succeed and have success. Even if we have the habit of never saying anything other than what is true, we should surely want to hide our face if we got to hear our own words from only the last half-year repeated before our eyes.

You comfort yourself that such a repeating of your words shall never need to befall you. What is said belongs to the time past. It never comes again. The judgment, the future judgment after death, that one speaks of indeed in church, but it is not a question of any reality. How can it then come about that your conscience is always so restless in you when you have misused your tongue? You are as sick when you have forgotten yourself with hard words against someone. Why does your glance always turn aside as soon as you do not speak the truth? Why do you have that guilt-conscious emptiness in you after every evening of empty and loose talk? These movements in your heart, which you yourself are not lord over, witness unceasingly to you that you are created to speak the true, the pure, and the good words, and that you one day in a strange world shall answer for what you have said. It is true that you can come whole through that judgment, but not because it shall not take place, or be mild, but because another can cover you and all your evil words. He whose words, even in the torment of the cross, were brimful of mercy, he is the atonement also for your loveless words, if you judge yourself and believe in him.

But. It is strange that one does not mend oneself more willingly than one does, that one does not once for all make an end of the evil words, since one still continually has to suffer for the misuse of the tongue. He who has tried a thorough change for the better on that point has surely discovered that in the moment of wrath and disappointment the human being is seldom lord over his words. This is the second feature which runs through our whole text. The words become helplessly such as the heart is. One cannot, only through one's will and through hard practice, hold the bad words far off and press forward the good. "What the heart is full of, that the mouth speaks," the Lord Christ sharpens. "An evil person bears out of his evil store what is evil." And the heart is not struck by your decisions and good resolutions. If I am a bad tree, my fruits — my words — are bad. One cannot get a sewer-pipe clean for any longer time by washing the mouths with soap and water. The inflow must be clean if the mouth is to be clean. What comes to me, what I receive, that becomes my store, my evil or good store, out of which I then "bear forth" when my mouth speaks. So our consideration is linked over from the words which we speak to the words which we hear, the words which we receive from without and with which our heart and mind are filled.

A person who lived a hundred years ago would, if he returned today, have much to be astonished at. More than anything else, our time's many means of carrying words farther would strike him with wonder. He himself lived — perhaps your father's father — without telephone, without radio, and presumably without a newspaper. The post was carried by horse, and all news was old when it arrived. One seldom traveled, and therefore did not often meet new people to speak with. Out of all this came a hunger for words and a great carefulness with the words. What labor one laid down on a letter, and what a feast for the receiver, who at last got to open it. One gladly walked some miles to hear a good sermon, and if one got some printed writing in one's hands, one could afford to read it over again and again.

Now one can sit in a remote Swedish corner and hear through the midday news what happened in Japan the same morning. A stream of speech washes the day long over us. Space is full of cast-out words, lie and truth mixed. If I turn a knob, this flood strikes my ears. Even very hidden homes are gifted week by week with more newspapers and print than the members of the family read. One glances a little at it and throws it. All this has created in us a bluntness before the word, which was unknown to our fathers. If one always has a tray of food before one, one never becomes really hungry. The person of the present comes more comfortably than his fathers over both speech and writing.

Now this modern person opens his Bible. Otherwise he reads chiefly newspapers and hears pleasant programs on the radio, but now he opens one day his Bible. He reads a chapter in the same quick strokes as he is used to reading the newspaper — understands one thing and another, but on the whole feels hopelessly strange. He strikes forward and back, finds a known place, that he likes. But right beside it stands something strange again. No, the Bible one cannot read. One gets nothing of it for one's life.

One day more than four hundred years ago a young master and monk got a red Bible in his hand. He opened it and saw the streets. He prayed and read on. "One shall read often," he says in one place, "but only a little piece at a time, very slowly, gladly learn it by heart, so that it presses in and is inside one." The words which one comfortably takes in are worthless and run out of the soul in a couple of days. Martin Luther bored in the word of God for tens of years before its deep flood welled up, before he could open the Bible for others. The Bible is not there so that I shall be moved when I read it. Then I should have reason for disappointment if I get to read long pieces without feeling any special feelings. No. God's word is there to give knowledge of the spiritual reality. And no person has ever taken in real knowledge without first having stood precisely "strange" before what is to be learned. All true knowledge is joined with exertion and toil.

But especially strong our strangeness must of course be before the word about God. It is after all a corrupted and self-loving person, and God is God — the God of the gnawing judgment of conscience, who cannot gladly be pleasant to you. God's law turns its point straight against you. And God's gospel is the gospel about Christ, poor and crucified, with all his mercy. God's word — his law and his gospel — goes clean contrary to your thoughts, not only clean contrary to what you call your "sins," but strangely hard-handed in its judgment also over your so-called better I. You become nothing, you think. One feels in a quite other way like a "fine person" when one reads thoughtful books which deal with people nowadays and the great significance their life has had.

It easily goes so, that the really strong nourishment gets to lie unused and is replaced by luxury dishes. But at last the cakes are conquered by the coarse bread. The Bible has an experience of nearly two thousand years. It has seen favorite dishes and easy cheap reading come and go. It can wait, for it holds the truth. And when you no longer "think" anything, but lie in your coffin, it will surely be from the Bible's leaves that the last words will be read over you — after the three shovels of mold.

But try to get some nourishment for the spirit despite the difficulties in our hunted time. Shut off the stream of words and the talk, and give yourself something of the stillness which your father's father had. Return to the springs, the great simple authors. Go into the hymnbook, for example. The words which we receive, the words which go into us and which fasten in there, those words form us and mark us in life. So we get our evil or good store to bear forth out of ourselves. But most of all God's own word has this reshaping power in the heart. It is the instrument for the Lord's work with us. Go, always in humility, to that Bible to which thousands, who have been stronger than you and seen clearer than you, have wandered before you. And remember that the Lord of the Scripture, aware of the offense in his form of lowliness, himself said: "Blessed is he for whom I do not become a stumbling block."

And now we can leave the words which we receive, the words which strike us, and at last return to our original subject: the words which we speak here among people. Now we see our words in the light of God's word. It becomes three things which we then especially must lay on the memory.

First: learn to be silent. He who has seen his own inward part lit by God's holiness becomes fairly free from the imagination that he should be called to speak about everything and everyone. He prays as Birgitta: "Hold back my tongue until I have considered what and how I shall speak." You surely remember some silent people whom you have met in life, and what you remember most of all of them is perhaps the inward power which dwelt in their words when they sometime spoke, calmly and clearly. Just now it is modern to overemphasize the worth of the personal witness. One can really speak of God in season and out of season, so that it comes threateningly near a breach of the second commandment: "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God." A short and simple word, borne by a self-evident certainty, is the everyday's best witness — together with the act.

Second: learn to be merciful. He who himself knows what forgiveness is finds no pleasure in hitting on others' weaknesses and spreading himself over that subject. He knows indeed that all kindness and goodness is misused on this earth, but the Christian's love shall be misused. Why should it go better for me than it went for God's own Son, who saw the smile in people's faces around the cross? There are limits to mildness, that is true. But mark that Christ's mercy did not hesitate before any coarse and groping sinner, neither before adulteresses nor robbers — if they themselves knew themselves to be sinners. The "limit" went at pride, haughtiness, and self-righteousness. There, against the sure Pharisees, the Master's lack of mercy began.

And you know from your own dealings with God that all sin which is repented is forgiven, while on the contrary the self-satisfaction, the unwillingness to repent, in you is continually cast from its throne and judged by God's word. So also a Christian person shall be merciful toward all weakness, but without fear say what is so before all impudence in his surroundings.

Therefore it becomes the third: learn to be courageous in your words. It always costs something to go up against the wind, but it is a Christian duty to do so when the overbearing man of power, whom the crowd always creeps before, comes in the middle of our way. If you stand before such a duty, take the Lord's word to the prophet Jeremiah as said to your heart: Speak, and do not fear. "I make you today a fortified city and an iron pillar and a wall of copper, so that they shall not become too strong for you, if they want to strive against you" (Jeremiah 1:18–19).

When a Christian person so honestly applies himself to "the right use of the tongue," he gets to mark his own lack. But in the middle of all imperfection it has still happened that God has used an ordinary person's voice to bring his message to his neighbor. This is the deepest secret in the Savior's speech about "the good store" in our text. If you live in God's word, God himself can speak to others through you. You then "bear forth out of your good store what is good." In the Old Testament there is a Bible verse which in a peculiar way expresses that truth. The Lord says to his servant: "If you bring forth noble metal without dross, you shall get to serve me as a mouth" (compare [reference unclear]). Amen.

Let us pray.

Praised be God and blessed forever, who with his word has comforted, taught, exhorted, and warned us. His Holy Spirit now confirm the word in our hearts, that we may not be forgetful hearers, but daily grow in faith, hope, love, and patience until the end, and become blessed. Amen.

Translator's notes. He gave this sermon no title. "The use of the tongue" is the Sunday's heading in the gospel book, not a title he set on the sermon. The person of a hundred years ago stays he. The adulteresses stay they. The reference after the verse about noble metal is unclear in the typescript and is left blank. The hymn lines are for sense, not meter.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·