

Gospel Self-Talk:

The Discipline of Sanctified Self-Address

Lesson 1 | Introduction

Outline:

- I. A Believer Must Talk to God.
 - II. A Believer Must Learn to Talk to Others and Be Addressed by Them
 - III. A Believer Must Learn to Talk to Himself (Ephesians 5:19).
 - A. What are Some Forms of Self-Communication?
 - B. What is the Content of Our Self-Communication to Be?
 - C. What is the Goal of Our Self-Communication to Be?
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- I. A Believer must talk to God. The more Scripturally-informed his conversations with God are, the more spiritually mature his prayers, conversation, and thinking prove to be. God speaks to us through His creation (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:19-20), through His Word (Psalm 19:7-12), and by His Spirit bearing witness with our spirit (Romans 8:16).
 - II. A Believer Must Learn to Talk to Others and Be Addressed by Them
 - By the writers of Scripture
 - By our brothers and sisters – Variety and volume of words in the New Testament magnifying our verbal ministry to each other. [30+ words describing or implying some form of verbal ministry to each other; important component of the Christian life = constructive verbal interaction]
 - Evaluate how you listen when God speaks to you through sermons or lessons.

Writing to his people while he was away from them recovering his health on an exploration to evangelize the Jews in 1839, M'Cheyne wrote: "It is not knowing a minister, or loving one, or hearing . . . that will save. You need to have your hand on the head of the Lamb yourselves. . . I fear I will need to be a swift witness against many of my people in the day of the Lord, that they looked to me, and not to Christ, when I preached to them. I always feared that some of you loved to hear the word, who do not love to do it. I always feared there were many of you who loved the Sabbath meetings, and the class, and the Thursday evenings, who yet were not careful to walk with God, to be meek, chaste, holy, loving, harmless, Christ-like, God-like. Now, God wants you to think that the only end of a gospel ministry is that you may be holy. Believe me, God himself could not make you happy except you be holy" (Andrew Bonar, *The Biography of R. M. M'Cheyne*, 102).

- Goal of listening is not to hear a sermon, but to learn God's Word and put it to use
- Alexander McLaren – God's people ruin many a good sermon
- John Calvin's biographer records the story of one man, Philibert Berthelier, a politician in Geneva, who tried to disturb Calvin's preaching with loud coughing.

When confronted, Berthelier responded by remarking that his body could produce other sounds that would be even more irritating! (see Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*, 114)

- What do we do with the preaching we hear? How many lives do we give the Word in us? . . . narrowing concentric circles, deeply penetrating, renewing our minds, reframing our thinking
 - Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, “Directions for Profitable Hearing the Word Preached” (Chapter 19, 473). He supplies thirteen directions to be a better hearer of God’s Word.
 - He offers four motivating reasons for this discipline: to hear with understanding, that you remember what you hear, that you be duly affected with it; and that you sincerely practice it.
 - Direction 1 focuses on preparation in private for hearing well so that our souls are not like a “stopped or narrow mouthed bottle, that keepeth out that which you desire to put in” (473). He states later, “Remember that you have but a little time to hear in; and you know not whether you shall ever hear again” (475).
 - Direction 2 – “Live under the clearest, distinct, convincing teaching that possibly you can procure. There is an unspeakable difference as to the edification of the hearers, between a judicious, clear, distinct, and skillful preacher, and one that is ignorant, confused, general, dry, and only scrapeth together a cento¹ or mingle-mangle of some undigested sayings to fill up the hour with.”
 - Direction 8 – focuses on how to respond to what we hear – “Meditate on what you hear when you come, till you better understand it” (Psalm 1:2).
 - Aiming to help the memory, **Baxter** further directs what he calls “after perusal,” and “digestion and review.” Envision your pastor coming to your home on a Sunday evening after the service for the express purpose of giving you a private, more personalized hearing of the same message and helping you massage into your heart and mind what you heard. How would you hear?
 - Baxter says, “Chew the cud, and call up all when you come home in secret, and by meditation preach it over to yourselves.” He is calling for us to view sermons to which we listen as sermon preparation for a sermon we will preach.

In the Puritan practice of “improving a sermon” – with their elongated titles and protracted length – the goal was still to go home and “improve” – to give it a longer life still – so that truth that began “in the understanding, endeth in affection; it begins in the brain, descends to the heart; begins on earth, ascends to heaven, not suddenly but by certain stairs and degrees until we come to the highest” (Joseph Hall [1574-1656]).²

¹ Poetic work of verses or passages taken from other authors but now put in a new form.

² Quoted in *Banner of Truth Magazine* online by Stephen Yuille, “Puritan Meditation: The Gateway from the Head to the Heart,” July 2005, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2005/puritan-meditation-the-gateway-from-the-head-to-the-heart/>).

What Baxter and other Puritans encouraged sets up for the next point, and this point will be the major focus of our study this fall.

III. A Believer Must Learn to Talk to Himself (Ephesians 5:19).

¹⁸ *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,* ¹⁹ *speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord;* ²⁰ *always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father;* ²¹ *and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ* (Ephesians 5:18-21).

Self-talk is indeed one of the many manifestations of being filled with God's Spirit. Spirit-filling governs not only the way we view the world around us, or even the way we respond to others, but it governs the way we communicate to ourselves.

- *Speaking to one another* (marginal reading – *speaking to yourselves*)
- *Where does this conversation take place? With your heart* (internal, soul conversation)

Connecting our last point with this point, Joe Thorn writes, "The finer the preaching we hear, the more obligated – not less – we are to grow in the skill of preaching to ourselves" (*Note to Self: The Discipline of Preaching to Yourself*). Solid preaching then does not lessen, but rather heightens our obligation to become faithful preachers ourselves. We want to work hard to avoid becoming expert in letting others preach to us without ever learning how to preach to ourselves.

J. I. Packer, in *A Quest For Godliness*, writes: "Richard Baxter convinced me long ago that regular discursive³ meditation, in which as he quaintly put it, you 'imitate the most powerful preacher you ever heard' in applying spiritual truth to yourself, as well as turning that truth into praise, is a vital discipline for spiritual health. This unanimous Puritan view is now mine too."

"Good sermons not only inform the mind with sound doctrine but also stir up the affections. They turn the will away from sin and toward loving God and one's neighbor. Meditation enlarges and directs the affections through the reception of the Word of God in the heart from the mind. When people stop meditating on sermons, they stop benefiting from them" (Joel Beeke, *The Puritan Practice of Meditation*, http://www.grace4u.org/puritan/free_beeke.html).

³ "Discursive" comes from the medieval Latin noun *discursivus* and the verb *discurrere*. The root *discurs-* suggests 'gone hastily to and fro,' and is the source from our English word "discourse" rises.

A. What are Some Forms of Self-Communication?

1. Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

All of these stated forms have what in common? Musical expression. And musical expression is certainly a powerful evidence of the presence of God's Spirit. A careful reader of Ephesians has seen Paul use what are thought to be ancient hymns to minister to them (Ephesians 1:3-14; 3:14-21).

But let's probe this list a little further. What does the list of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" suggest?

- 1) *Psalms* – Divine compositions are well-chosen fodder for self-talk
- 2) *Hymns and spiritual songs* – Human compositions of Scriptural content are allowable and helpful fodder for self-talk
- 3) *Memorableness is important* – since music is such a powerful aid to recall and retention, these forms suggest the advantage of taking time to rehearse truths in ways that make them memorable to us.
- 4) *Portableness is helpful* – music's power, in part, is due to its portability. It is recoverable and reproducible in our minds anywhere. It often suggests itself powerfully to us spontaneously.
- 5) *Composing or arranging truths strategically is advantageous* – these forms of music are all compositions. Time has been taken to arrange truths that might otherwise appear to be an undigested mass, and to arrange the truths into an orderly form in which the message could be clear, develop, climax, be repeated, etc.

2. Are Other Forms Possible?

The book of Ephesians itself suggests other forms of self-communication. For example, in the section immediately to follow that focuses our attention on what Spirit-filling looks like within relationships (Ephesians 5:22-6:9), we find we can articulate truths to ourselves that may not be musical in nature.

As Paul progresses, we find we can rehearse truths to ourselves in the context of spiritual warfare that may or may not be musical in expression (Ephesians 6:10-18).

In fact, the practice of "self-talk" passes by many other names in Scripture both in the OT and the NT:

- *Words be on your hearts* (Deuteronomy 6:5-6), that you can come to love the Lord with all your heart, **soul**, and might.
- Deuteronomy 8:3 – but man *lives by* everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD

- *Fear the Lord* – This expression that occurs so frequently in the Old Testament means much more, but at least includes a sobered awareness of God’s presence and humility before His speech.
- *Meditate* on them day and night that you may observe to do (Joshua 1:8)
 - The word meditate or muse means to “think upon” or “reflect.” “While I was musing the fire burned,” David said (Psalm 39:3). It also means “to murmur, to mutter, to make sound with the mouth.... It implies what we express by one talking to himself” (William Wilson, *Old Testament Word Studies* (McLean, Va.: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d.), 271).
- “Selah” – word that punctuates the psalter encouraging reflection on what has been read or heard (“think on that”)
- The frequency with which God calls His children to the spiritual exercise of “remembering” from the earliest pages of Scripture
- This is the activity in which Mary engaged as “she pondered these things in her heart” or “cast them about in her mind” (Luke 1)
- Jesus calls His hearers to do this:
 - *Let these words sink down into your ears* (Luke 9:44)
 - *If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you* (John 15:7)
 - His oft-repeated refrain – *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*
- Paul addresses this in so many different ways:
 - *Let the Word of Christ richly dwell within you* (Colossians 3:16)
 - *Walk by the Spirit* (Galatians 5:16)
 - *Keep in step with the Spirit* (Galatians 5:25, ESV)
 - *[Truthing] in love* (Ephesians 4:15)
 - ¹⁵ *Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. ¹⁶ Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you* (1 Timothy 4:15-16).
 - *Bringing every thought captive to the obedience of Christ* (2 Corinthians 10:5)
 - *Set your minds on the things above* (Colossians 3:2)
 - *Renewing of your mind* (Romans 12:2), *renewing the spirit of your mind* (Ephesians 4:23); *being of sound mind* (2 Timothy 1:7, KJV); *however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained* (Philippians 3:16).
 - *Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything* (2 Timothy 2:7).
- James
 - Looking into *the law of liberty* and abiding by it (James 1:25)
- Writer of Hebrews
 - *We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it* (2:1)
 - *Because it was not united by faith in those who heard* (Hebrews 4:2)
 - *Hold fast* (3:14; 4:14)

- Matthew 28:19-20 – “observe all that I commanded you” – words of Jesus live on, are digested, and are to flesh themselves out in action

When, therefore, a pastor like David Martyn Lloyd-Jones exhorts his people to address themselves, to preach to themselves, and to question themselves, he is in very good company!

“The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul; ‘Why art thou cast down’—what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: ‘Hope thou in God’—instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and then defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man; ‘I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, who is also the health of my countenance and my God’” (David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cures*, 21).

B. What is the Content of Our Self-Communication to Be?

But speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15; *aletheuo*, /al-ayth-yoo'-o/)

Truth. All truth. God’s truth.

The words a believer utters to himself, however, are most powerful when they reflect truth not original with him, but with God. The degree to which a believer desires to comprehend God’s vocabulary and use it appropriately and applicationally is a sign of spiritual understanding and takes a foundational step to spiritual victory. Listen to the apostle Peter minister to scattered believers the Gospel truths he has learned to savor and preach to himself:

¹ *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen*
² *according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.* ³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,* ⁴ *to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,* ⁵ *who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time* (1 Peter 1:1-5).

“Bible intake is not only the most important Spiritual Discipline, it is the most broad. It actually consists of several subdisciplines. It’s much like a university comprised of

many colleges, each specializing in a different discipline, yet all united under the general name of university” (Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 25).

[The next lesson will focus on this point more fully.]

C. What is the Goal of Our Self-Communication to Be?

¹⁴ *As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;* ¹⁵ *but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,* ¹⁶ *from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love* (Ephesians 4:14-16).

The Bible knows nothing of a faith that does not call upon the people of God to remember God’s words breathed out by God’s Spirit, whether given directly by God or by a prophet, and re-preach them to ourselves.

1. To mature us (*we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, 4:15*). Not only are we to mature individually, but our maturity contributes to the overall maturity of the body of Christ.

The discipline is indispensable to our growth into maturity. Our Good Shepherd ministers to us to restore our souls, and one of the ways He does so is through our own ministry of His Word to ourselves. He causes us to lie down in green pastures, but we must do the eating ourselves.

- From spiritual infants (1 Corinthians 3:1-2) into maturity (2 Timothy 3:17), thoroughly furnished
- From being weak into strong (Romans 14-15)
- From a diet of milk to solid food
- From being children to those who have their senses exercised to discern between evil and good.

¹² *For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.* ¹³ *For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant.* ¹⁴ *But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil* (Hebrews 5:12-14).

The New Testament captures maturity in the word “godliness,” and our energies must be disciplined toward this end (1 Timothy 4:7-8).

2. To Retard Untruth

False teaching may come to us through the mouths or the pen of others (Ephesians 4:14), but very often we assume the role of false teacher in our self-talk. We tend to excel in preaching “non-truth” to ourselves.

We already talk to ourselves all the time. We confront ourselves all the time . . . with our emotions, our desires, our flesh. We all already exercise the skill of talking to ourselves. Take “worry” for example – “It is difficult to let go of worries. The very nature of worrying seems to keep the mind busy, thinking of the concern over and over again. The more we think about the concern, the more anxious we feel.”⁴

Reflect how often we “preach” to ourselves in a way that nurtures sin:

- Continually reviewing uncomfortable and unexpected circumstances in a way that fosters a grumbling, complaining spirit
- Confessing to myself the sins of others against me or against someone else to justify bitterness or a spirit of vengeance, or simple failure to treat them as a brother or sister that has the same heavenly Father I do.
- Reminding myself of justifications for sinning or even reasons not to repent of my unkindness, harsh words, or simmering thoughts of resentment
- Setting my mind on things below – things that I covet, ideas or things that literally become controlling influences in my life – or idols.
- Rehearsing accusations against myself for how readily I fall or have fallen
- Meditating on my fears – of people, events, or death

In fact, it is often the content of what we find ourselves saying to ourselves that makes us aware that we may be “preaching” well, but that our content is skewed!

Learning then to order one’s mind according to God’s redemptive thoughts and words rather than to our own fleeting, faltering feelings proves to be a faith-building, love-growing, obedience-fostering discipline. Proclaiming God’s truth to ourselves is faith on display; we need this in every area of our lives. A child of God must talk to himself when he is doing well and when he is not. He must talk to himself when he is obeying God, when he is tempted to disobey, and after he has disobeyed.

⁴ (<http://www.wildmind.org/blogs/on-practice/how-to-free-your-mind-from-worries#more-13961>).

3. To Counter Our Tendency to Forgetfulness

The Old Testament word for “forget” (*shakah*) occurs 102 times, and the most frequent context is Israel’s idolatry, beginning with warnings very early in their national relationship with God (i.e., Deuteronomy 4:23; 8:18-19; 32:16-18). Their forgetting God paved the way to spiritual adultery.

“It is in God and man’s reciprocal relationship that the verb *shakah* finds its most steady use. . . . Either God or man (Israel) may be the subject of *shakah*. . . . More often man is the subject of *shakah*, the one who forgets. Forgetting is not simply a psychological act of having a thought pass from one’s consciousness, a temporary or permanent lapse in memory. This is indicated by the frequent identification of the verb with an action. To forget God is to ignore His commandments (Deut 8:11). To forget God is to follow other gods (Deut 8:19); to forget God is to stand in fear of harm and danger, to live fretfully and timidly (Isa 51:13). To forget God is to challenge Him (Ps 106:13). The Bible would indicate that satiety [/sə'tiədē/] is the major factor for forgetting God (Deut 8:12ff; Hose 13:6 for example)” (*TWOT*, 2 vols., 2:922).

Our hearts may naturally rally to these goals, and we may promptly resolve to become expert in Scriptural self-address, aspiring by the end of this very week to have honed our self-communication skills to a fine edge. Without dampening the enthusiastic willingness, allow the following admonition to settle realistically into your mind:

“Do not expect to master the Bible in a day, or a month, or a year. Rather expect often to be puzzled by its contents. It is not all equally clear. Great men of God often feel like absolute novices when they read the Word. The apostle Peter said that there were some things hard to understand in the epistles of Paul (2 Peter 3:16). I am glad he wrote those words because I have felt that often. So do not expect always to get an emotional charge or a feeling of quiet peace when you read the Bible. By the grace of God you may expect that to be a frequent experience, but often you will get no emotional response at all. Let the Word break over your heart and mind again and again as the years go by, and imperceptibly there will come great changes in your attitude and outlook and conduct. You will probably be the last to recognize these. Often you will feel very, very small, because increasingly the God of the Bible will become to you wonderfully great. So go on reading it until you can read no longer, and then you will not need the Bible any more, because when your eyes close for the last time in death, and never again read the Word of God in Scripture you will open them to the Word of God in the flesh, that same Jesus of the Bible whom you have known for so long, standing before you to take you for ever to His eternal home (Geoffrey Thomas, *Reading the Bible*, quoted in Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 34).