

Psalm 12 is a corrective to the false and misleading effort to wall off the problems of the world from worship. We come into the presence of God, not to escape the world, but to deal with the world. When the foundations begin to crumble (Ps 11:3) truth and truthfulness are the first to go. David laments the tsunami of smooth talking lies corrupting the human race and sweeping away the faithful. The psalmist is honest with his despair. He feels dominated by his home culture's faithlessness. Lies, flattery, deception, and boasting have swamped his soul.

Speech has become the weapon of choice in a daily assault on hearts and minds, pummeling the nation's soul. And the most dangerous speech act is not what you might think. It is not the bombastic rhetoric of the braggart or the in-your-face raunchy pop-song lyrics or the gratuitous profanity that has infiltrated everyday speech or the bellicose political fact-twisting and spin-casting on talk radio or the vulgarity that has become common place on social media.

David's lament bypasses the worthy concern of common decency and civility and heads right for the verbal factor that undermines the truth and destroys the faithful. His focus is on those who evade the truth with polite deception and easy to swallow lies. As one of my theology professors warned, "There are two kinds of teachers: rapists and seducers." To which he added, "I am a seducer." The crafty deceivers profiled in Psalm 12 couch their duplicity and double standard in "evangelical" language. They have taken a page out of the devil's play book. Posing as sincere Christians they ask, "Did God really say that gay sex is wrong? Did God really say that Jesus is the only way to salvation? Did God really say that hell is real?"

Help!

*Help, Lord for no one is faithful anymore;
those who are loyal have vanished from the human race.
Everyone lies to their neighbor;
they flatter with their lips
but harbor deception in their hearts.
May the Lord silence all flattering lips
and every boastful tongue –
those who say, "By our tongues we will prevail;
our own lips will defend us – who is lord over us?"*

Psalm 12:1-4

We may not know the back story for this psalm, but Absalom's conspiracy against king David illustrates the type of speech described and condemned in this psalm. The king's estranged son posted up at the city gate with his power team entourage of fifty men for the purpose of endearing himself to the people. He solicited their complaints, appealed to their pride, and promised them justice. What could be more appealing? Absalom would say, "Look, your claims are valid and proper, but there is no representative of the king to hear you. If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone who has a complaint or case could come to me and I would see that they receive justice." Through flattery and deception Absalom "stole the hearts of the people of Israel"

(1 Sam 15:3-6).

The psalmist laments the seductive power of talk that is outwardly sincere and inwardly malicious and manipulative. “Empty talk, smooth talk, and double talk” break down the meaning, worth, and integrity of human communication.¹ The capacity to trust one another is eroded. The faithful are destroyed. The popular evangelical blogger acts like Absalom when she seeks to persuade naive Christians to believe a lie. She may claim to be faithful to the Bible, but her strategy is to undermine a biblical sexual ethic. The psalmist describes lies and deceitfulness as double-hearted speech, literally “with a heart and a heart.”² It is not double-minded speech.³ The speaker is not confused or conflicted or uncertain. She knows the truth but prefers to tell smooth lies to achieve her selfish goals. She deliberately uses the truth, her Christianity, to promote her deceit. In the book of Proverbs the tongue and heart are almost interchangeable metaphors for a person’s character: “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value” (Prov 10:20; see 17:20).

The addictive and empowering impact of this kind of rhetoric leads to feelings of invincibility and superiority. They boast, “By our tongues we will prevail – who is lord over us?” Asaph captured the ethos of these communicators when he wrote, “Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth” (Ps 73:9). John Calvin located this deceitfulness not among pagans but among the people of God. Calvin wrote, “David does not here accuse strangers or foreigners, but informs us that this deluge of iniquity prevailed in the Church of God.”⁴ Is this why the psalmist felt like the prophet Elijah “when it seemed to him that he was the only person left in the land serving God” (1 Kgs 19:10).⁵ It is one thing to defend the truth in the world where you expect to come under attack, but it is far more disheartening to defend the truth in the church among professing believers. No wonder David felt no one was faithful and that loyal believers had vanished.

The apostle James was especially concerned about how Christians were influencing one another with their words. Opinionated Christians were garbling biblical truth on a host of issues. They were sharing their well-meaning but misguided thoughts rather than submitting to the word of God. And the result was heresy – the heresy of neglecting the poor, playing favorites, blaming God for problems, spiritual apathy and ethical complacency. James attributed much of the problem to the tongue. He saw the battle raging between the propaganda of self-appointed authorities and the truth of God’s word. James called the tongue “a world of evil” and “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8). Many well-intentioned Christians whose doctrines were formed at an impressionable time in their lives remain closed to any new insights from the word of God. They sit in judgment on others by imposing their own standard of truth on the church. On Sunday morning, they make it their job to look for errors in the sermon. They seem more intent on hearing what’s wrong with a sermon than hearing the word of God. Such people are often

¹ Kidner, *The Psalms*, 75.

² Ross, *Psalms*. Vol 1: 354. Augustine: “Deceitful lips, with a heart and a heart they have spoken evil things. The repetition, ‘with a heart and a heart,’ signifies a doubt heart.” *On the Psalms*, 44.

³ Craigie, *Psalms*, 138.

⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 171.

⁵ Okorochoa, *Africa Commentary*, 620.

difficult to get along with. Their presumption becomes an obstacle for spiritual growth, not only for themselves, but for those they influence. Their system of thought and their strongly held opinions tend to become a substitute for submitting to the word of God.⁶

If we take this psalm to heart we will make it our earnest aim not deceive our neighbor or obscure the truth of the gospel. We will do this lest our “flattering lips” be silenced and we end up cut off from the people of God. Calvin admonished those “who are resolved to act truthfully” to “lay open their whole heart” to their neighbor. Sincere speech allows “the uprightness of heart” to shine through.⁷ However, this psalm pivots not on our action but the Lord’s. The psalmist has been speaking to God, but now the Lord offers a definitive answer to the lament. The proud boast of the wicked insiders is decisively cut off by the pure word of God.

Arise!

*“Because the poor are plundered
and the needy groan,
I will now arise,” says the Lord.
“I will protect them from those who malign them.”
And the words of the Lord are flawless,
like silver purified in a crucible,
like gold refined seven times.*

Psalm 12:5-6

The Lord’s bold announcement, “I will now arise,” is predicated on the plight of the poor and needy. The verbal assault against the poor in the form of flattery, lies, and deception is equated with violence against the poor causing the Lord to act on their behalf. The Old Testament understanding of the poor distinguishes them from the slothful, the vagrant, the thief, and the addict. The poor are oppressed because they are orphaned or widowed or victims of injustice (Job 29:12-17; Psalm 12:5; Isaiah 3:14). The law protects the poor (Exodus 22:22f) and the Lord is seen as rescuing the poor “from those too strong for them” (Psalm 35:10).

The primary meaning of the poor and needy is that they acknowledge their total dependence on the Lord. Even the king cries out, “Hear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy” (Psalm 86:1). David prays, “This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles” (Psalm 34:6). The Old Testament meaning of the poor describes those who are helpless and humble, who turn to God in prayer, acknowledge their great need for his salvation. .

Augustine drew a direct link between Psalm 12 and the first beatitude.⁸ The reason Jesus came was to preach good news to the poor (Matt 11:5). He is the ultimate answer promised in the psalm (12:5), which Augustine insisted “must be taken as spoken in the person of God the Father, who, because of the needy and the poor, that is, who in need and poverty were lacking spiritual good things, ordained to send His own Son. From thence begins His sermon the mount. .

⁶ Webster, Finding Spiritual Direction, 89-97.

⁷ Calvin, Psalm XII, 172.

⁸ Augustine, Psalms, 45.

.”⁹ Augustine reasoned that this is the definition of the poor that lies behind Jesus’ Beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:5). The poor acknowledge their need for God and their inability to merit salvation. They are receptive to the gospel.

There was never a greater *now* than when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). As the apostle said, “when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.” We have gone from being poor and needy to being God’s children, calling out “Abba, Father and becoming heirs of the kingdom (Gal 4:4-7).

There was never a greater *arising* than when in these last days the Father has “spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:1-3).

There was never a greater *protection* from the forces that malign the poor than the saving power of Jesus Christ who prayed, “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11). The apostle John envision a double-edged sword coming out of the mouth of the Son of Man. In Isaiah, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding is linked to this sword: “He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked” (Isa 11:2,4). The weapon of choice in the war of words is the Word of God. The sword signifies the wisdom of God that cuts through the rhetoric, the propaganda, the sales pitches, and the gossip. In Hebrews we read, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account” (Heb 4:12-13).

There was never a greater *purity* of truth than the words of Jesus. God’s word, the Living Word, is better than silver purified in a crucible or gold refined seven times. The empty, smooth, and double-hearted talk of the wicked elite is filled with impurities and empty of value. But the word of Christ is “devoid of the dross of flattery, vanity, and lies, and can therefore be relied upon absolutely.”¹⁰ The crowds were amazed at Jesus’ teaching, “because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matt 7:28-29). In the company of the Master, Peter testified, “You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69). In the war of words, to know the truth is to hold to the teaching of Jesus – the truth that will set us free” (John 8:32).

Safe

⁹ Augustine, Psalms, 45.

¹⁰ Craigie, Psalms, 138.

*You, Lord, will keep the needy safe
and will protect us forever from the wicked,
who freely strut about when what is vile is honored
by the human race.*

Psalm 12:6-8

The conflict is far from over. The struggle continues. The wicked continue “to stalk us with lies” and “collect honors for their wonderful lies.”¹¹ On this side of eternity the barrage of vain and vile speech will continue and believers have to determine how they will respond. If we truly take God at his word and trust in him with our lives then we will know that the solution is not found in matching evil for evil. The personality and vocabulary of the old sin nature is characterized by malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander, but the new nature in Christ is nourished on the “pure unadulterated” word of God (see 1 Pet 2:2). We refuse to insult, “put down,” “bad-mouth,” or “disparage” others.¹² The apostle Peter’s emphasis on ridding ourselves of *all* malice and *all* deceit and slander of *every kind* stresses a “no-tolerance” policy for evil in the born-again Christian. When we “grow up in our salvation” it is evident in our speech and actions. There is no room here for a vindictive spirit or resentment. We see this emphasis on the word of God and ethical transformation throughout the New Testament (Rom 12:1-2; James 1:21; Col 3:12-17). Fed up with the rhetoric of lies and boasting, true worshipers should be starving for the living and enduring word of God (1 Pet 1:23).

Calvin admonished patience in an on-going daily conflict: “And if the guardianship which God exercises over the faithful is sometimes hidden, and is not manifest in its effects, let them wait in patience until he arise; and the greater the flood of calamities which overflows them, let them keep themselves so much the more in the exercise of godly fear and solicitude.”¹³

¹¹ Peterson, *The Message*, Psalm 12, 584.

¹² Elliott, *1 Peter*, 398.

¹³ Calvin, *Psalms*, 180.