

Matthew 12:36

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.

Analysis

'But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.' Jesus's sobering warning: 'every idle word' (πᾶν ὁῆμα ἀργόν/pan rhēma argon)—careless, useless, unprofitable words—requires accounting on 'day of judgment' (ἡμέρᾳ κρίσεως/hēmera kriseōs). Reformed theology sees this demonstrating:

1. God's comprehensive knowledge—He hears every word
2. Human accountability—we'll answer for speech
3. Sin's seriousness—even careless words matter
4. Judgment's certainty—accounting day is coming.

The verse terrifies if separated from gospel: who could stand if judged by every word? But in context with v.37, it drives us to Christ. For believers, Christ bore judgment for our words (all sins); but character still revealed by speech, and rewards affected by stewardship of words. The warning promotes careful speech: knowing we'll give account produces circumspection. It also comforts regarding others' evil words: they'll answer for slander, lies, blasphemy.

Historical Context

'Idle words' (ὑῶμα ἀργόν/rhēma argon) literally means 'non-working words'—words accomplishing no good purpose: gossip, lies, foolish talk, careless oaths, blasphemy, slander. James 3:1-12 expands this teaching: tongue is small but powerful, destructive if uncontrolled. Rabbinic tradition also emphasized speech's

importance: the Talmud discusses 'evil tongue' (לְשׁוֹן חַר/lashon hara) as serious sin. Jesus heightens this: not just deliberately evil speech but even careless words require accounting. Early church took this seriously: Ephesians 4:29 ('Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth'), Ephesians 5:4 (avoid foolish talking, jesting), Colossians 4:6 ('Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt'). Throughout church history, spiritual disciplines included guarding speech: medieval monks practiced silence; Puritans cultivated careful speech; Quakers avoided oaths; various traditions emphasized verbal restraint. Modern casual culture treats words cheaply—profanity, gossip, careless social media posts. Jesus's warning stands: every word matters; all require accounting.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How does knowing you'll give account for every word affect your daily speech —what would change if you consistently remembered this?
2. What 'idle words'—gossip, complaining, cursing, careless criticism—do you need to eliminate from your speech?
3. How do you balance the seriousness of this warning with gospel assurance that Christ bore judgment for believers' sins?

Interlinear Text

λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶν ῥῆμα ἀργὸν ὅ ἐὰν
I say But unto you That every word idle G3739 that
G3004 G1161 G5213 G3754 G3956 G4487 G692 G1437

λαλήσωσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι ἀποδώσουσιν περὶ αὐτοῦ λόγον
shall speak men they shall give thereof account
G2980 G3588 G444 G591 G4012 G846 G3056

ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρίσεως·
in the day of judgment
G1722 G2250 G2920

Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 12:14 (Judgment): For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

Romans 2:16 (Judgment): In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.

Revelation 20:12 (Judgment): And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.