

Psalms 34:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile.

Analysis

Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile. David begins practical instruction on fearing LORD (v. 11) by addressing speech. Controlling tongue is first step toward experiencing long, good life (v. 12), establishing that godliness manifests in how we speak.

Keep thy tongue from evil commands speech control. Keep (natsar) means guard, watch over, preserve. Tongue (lashon) represents speech, words, communication. From evil (ra') means from harm, badness, wickedness, destructive words. This isn't merely avoiding profanity but guarding against any harmful speech—slander, gossip, lies, hurtful words, divisive talk. Tongue is small member but directs whole body like rudder (James 3:4-5). Controlling it requires constant vigilance.

And thy lips from speaking guile provides parallel prohibition. Lips (saphah) represents what mouth says. Speaking guile (mirmah) means deceit, treachery, dishonesty. Guile includes lies, false testimony, misleading statements, deceptive omissions. Psalm 12:2-3 condemns those speaking vanity with flattering lips and double heart. Proverbs repeatedly warns against lying lips, false tongue, deceitful mouth (Proverbs 6:17, 12:22, 26:28).

Why does fearing LORD begin with speech control? Because tongue reveals heart (Matthew 12:34: out of abundance of heart mouth speaks). Can't fear God while speaking evil; can't honor Him while lying. Speech either glorifies God or dishonors Him, builds others up or tears them down, promotes truth or spreads falsehood. James 1:26 declares: If anyone thinks he is religious yet doesn't bridle tongue, this one's religion is vain. Genuine godliness controls speech.

Paul repeats this in Ephesians 4:25,29: Put away lying, speak truth with neighbor; let no corrupt word proceed from your mouth, but what is good for edification. Colossians 4:6: Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt. Disciples' speech should be truthful, gracious, edifying, purposeful. Controlling tongue is early evidence of growing in fear of LORD.

Historical Context

Torah regulated speech explicitly. Ninth commandment prohibits false witness (Exodus 20:16). Leviticus 19:16 forbids going about as talebearer, standing against neighbor's blood. Proverbs devotes extensive attention to speech—wise versus foolish words, truthful versus lying lips, edifying versus destructive tongue. Jewish wisdom recognized tongue's power to give life or death (Proverbs 18:21).

Jesus warned that every idle word will be accounted for in judgment (Matthew 12:36). Words reveal heart; speech demonstrates character. Early church regulated speech strictly. Ephesians 4:25-32, 5:4; Colossians 3:8-9, 4:6; James 1:19,26, 3:1-12, 4:11; 1 Peter 2:1, 3:10 all address tongue control. This emphasis across Scripture demonstrates speech's centrality to godliness.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What specific kinds of speech fall under evil and guile that you need to guard against?
2. Why does David begin instruction on fearing LORD with controlling tongue rather than other behaviors?
3. How does your speech reveal what's truly in your heart—what does your typical speech pattern show?

4. What practical strategies can you employ to keep tongue from evil and lips from speaking guile?
5. In what ways does controlling speech demonstrate reverence for God and love for neighbors?

Interlinear Text

מִרְמָה: מִדְבָּר נִצְרָן לְשׂוֹנָה מִכְעָד אֶשְׁפָּת יְבָרֶכֶת
Keep thy tongue from evil and thy lips from speaking guile

H5341 H3956 H7451 H8193 H1696 H4820

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 141:3 (Parallel theme): Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips.

Proverbs 21:23 (Parallel theme): Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue keepeth his soul from troubles.

James 1:26 (Parallel theme): If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.

1 Peter 2:22 (Parallel theme): Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth:

Colossians 3:9 (Parallel theme): Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds;

James 1:19 (Parallel theme): Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:

Proverbs 13:3 (Parallel theme): He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.

James 3:2 (Parallel theme): For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

Psalms 39:1 (Evil): I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me.

Proverbs 12:22 (Parallel theme): Lying lips are abomination to the LORD: but they that deal truly are his delight.

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