

OPENING THE MOUTH FOR THE DUMB

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"Open thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction. Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy"—Proverbs 31:8, 9.

There is, I believe, some difference of opinion, as to who this King Lemuel was, to whom the words I have just read were addressed by his mother, together with the remaining portion of the chapter; but the best-founded opinion seems to be, that he was King Solomon, and that he is here called Lemuel, either because it was an endearing appellation wherewith his mother was used to address him—a kind of fondling term, instead of Solomon, or else that it was a name of Solomon, in addition to that whereby he is generally known. For it was the practice amongst the Hebrews to give various names to the same individual. So Jehoiachin is called in Jeremiah, Coniah (12:24), and in the same way Solomon himself is, in another part of Scripture, called Jedediah (2Sa 12:25); and, therefore, there is reason to believe, that Lemuel here is merely another name for King Solomon.

The meaning of the word Lemuel is literally, "unto God," that is devoted unto God, belonging to God, as the apostle expresses himself when he speaks of Christ in one short word, "God's;" "All things are yours, and ye are Christ's and Christ is God's (1Co 3:23), that is, belonging to God. His mother then addresses to her son King Lemuel that excellent advice which is contained in the last chapter of the book of Proverbs; and, no doubt, the advice which she laid before him admitted a *literal*, as well as a spiritual interpretation. there appear to be two errors which men fall into; one is setting aside the spiritual meaning of a passage altogether and adopting the literal, and the other is setting aside the literal altogether and adopting only the spiritual. There seems little doubt, that in Scripture there is a literal interpretation, as well as a spiritual one, and that there always is an analogy—a resemblance between the two interpretations; the spiritual interpretation being based upon the literal, and the literal standing as a foundation, on which the spiritual interpretation rests.

Therefore, in endeavouring to trace out the experimental interpretation of these words, which I shall endeavour to lay before you, I mean not to set aside that literal meaning which doubtless the words were intended to convey. The mother of Lemuel exhorted him strictly and literally, when, as a king he sat in judgment, to "open" his "mouth for the dumb, in the cause of all such as were appointed to destruction." She inculcated upon him, as the judge of his people, as one that sat in the gates of the city to administer justice—that he should "open his mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy." But when we look at the spiritual and experimental meaning of the words, we see that "a greater than Solomon is here," and that Lemuel points at a greater king than ever Solomon was in all his glory. The word signifies as I hinted before, devoted unto God—"God's" in a word. Who can be then more emphatically pointed at than the Lord of life and glory, who is God's Son and God's servant—God's ambassador, who was devoted to Him, and who was consecrated to Him during His pilgrimage here below, and yet is one with Him in essence, and one with Him in glory?

But it may be asked, if Lemuel here signifies the Lord Jesus Christ, whom can we understand by "His mother," and who is she that she should give Him any advice? How is this to be explained consistently with the analogy of faith and the Scriptures of truth? What read we in Song of Solomon 3:11? "Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon with the crown wherewith *his mother* crowned him in the day of his espousals, and in the day of the gladness of his heart." There we have a strictly parallel passage, where King Solomon, who doubtless is Jesus (for the whole book of Canticles is taken up with a description of the loves of Jesus and His Church), is spoken of as having a mother, and being crowned by her. His mother, then, must represent the Church, seeing that the Lord Jesus Christ derived His human nature from a woman, was "made of a woman," as the Scripture speaks, and thus the Church may be said, in this sense, to be the mother of Christ. We have, then, in the text certain advice which was given to King Lemuel by his mother;

and her counsel to him was, "Open thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction. Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy."

It is, then, in this experimental and spiritual point of view, that I shall, with God's blessing, consider the passage and without making any formal divisions, I shall just speak of the leading points of the text, as they shall present themselves to my mind under the instruction of the blessed Spirit.

1. The first word that seems to strike our attention, is the expression "dumb;" for unless we have some idea who the character is, for whom King Lemuel is to open His mouth, we shall not be able to understand what reasons prompted Him to open His mouth on his behalf. There is a certain character, then, pointed out in these words, and upon him the title "dumb" is written. Who is this character? He is one whom God has quickened into spiritual life, and in whose heart He has planted His fear. He is one whom God has brought to His judgment-seat, and arraigned at His bar. But why should he be dumb? Why, there are several circumstances that will render him dumb; and if he were not dumb, he would not need a Mediator to "open His mouth" in his behalf.

The first thing that makes him dumb, is, a deep conviction and sensation of guilt upon his conscience. We find this naturally amongst men. It is a common saying, "such a person was quite dumb-founded." When an accusation, which is true, is made against a man, and his conscience is not as yet "seared as with a hot iron," that charge will strike him dumb; as Hannah speaks in her song, "the wicked shall be *silent* in darkness" (1Sa 2:9). The very force of conscience, when conscience is obliged to fall under the accusation, renders a man utterly mute. When God, then, by the application of His holy law to a man's conscience, arraigns him at His righteous bar, He strikes him dumb, that is, he has not a word to say why judgment should not take place.

It is a common practice in criminal courts, after all the evidence has been heard, for the judge to say to the prisoner, "what have you to say in your defense that judgment should not pass?" The criminal sometimes endeavours to falter out some excuse, but in many cases he is dumb, he has no word to plead to stay judgment; he has no excuse to bring forward, why the sentence should not drop from the mouth of the judge against him. This is the case always in spiritual criminals, universally so with those who are arraigned by the Holy Ghost at the bar of God. They cannot plead one excuse why judgment should not pass, they cannot offer one pretext why the mouth of the Lord should not pronounce that righteous sentence which they have deserved at His hands. They stand dumb before the Judge of all. And this posture seems to be spoken of in Lamentations 3:29, where it says, "He putteth his mouth in the dust," as though he had not a word to say. Not chattering or prattling with God, as a man can talk with his fellow; no, nor aping the posture of those who *claim* blessings at God's hands; no, nor rushing daringly and presumptuously "upon the thick bosses of God's buckler" (Job 15:26), without one atom of holy reverence or godly fear; no, nor like Baal's worshippers, of whom we have so many imitators howling and screeching, as if they would alter the mind of God, and wrest the blessing out of His hand, whether He means to bestow it or not. No spiritually-convinced, law-condemned criminal ever came before that God, who is made known in his conscience as "a consuming fire," with bold presumption and familiarity. He stands dumb before Him, as not having an excuse, or a pretext, or a word to say, why judgment should not pass.

But this criminal is not merely dumb before God, but he is also dumb before his fellow-men. You may reasonably suspect the religion of those persons, who have a word for everything and a word for everybody; whose tongue is tipped with the language of Scripture, and who seem to carry about with them a bag full of texts, and all they have to do is to dip their fingers in, and pull out the first that comes to hand. There seems little knowledge of the writing of God's hand upon the wall, or of the teaching of God's Spirit in the heart, when they are so ready with texts of Scripture, not one of which was ever applied with power to their souls.

But this poor criminal is dumb before his fellow-men—that is to say, he has little to speak about, little to tell of, because he cannot speak of God's goodness to his soul. He has little to boast of, for in himself he is nothing but "wounds and bruises and putrefying sores" (Isa 1:6); he cannot yet chant the high praises of God, and all he can tell (if he could speak at all) would be a tale of wretchedness, misery, and woe. And,

therefore, so far from going amid the busy haunts of men, or thrusting himself amongst every knot of talkative professors, "he sitteth alone, and keepeth silence, because he hath borne it [the yoke of God] upon him" (Lam 3:28).

But there is another sense in which this poor guilty criminal is "dumb," and that is, he is not able to pour out the very feelings of his heart into the ears and the bosom of God, whatever be the workings of his soul, and whatever tumultuous thoughts and painful anxieties are passing within. His language is the language of groans and sighs; he has not an elegant assortment of phrases which he has learned from the mouth of others; he cannot go before God in borrowed language, or what he has stolen from the pulpit; he can only go before the Lord with groans and sighs and tears and breathings after the *mercy* which God may be pleased to extend to his guilty soul. He does not seem able, except very rarely, to tell out all the various feelings of his heart, and is often obliged, when he comes to the throne of grace, merely to groan and sigh forth the desires of his soul, because he cannot find access to God, nor language so as to tell freely that which is passing in the secret recesses of his bosom.

2. But we have another character for whom King Lemuel is to "open his mouth," one that is "appointed to destruction." Now, this expression does not mean any of those spoken of in the Epistle of Jude, "who were before of old ordained to this condemnation." The character spoken of in these words, is not one of those whom God has "appointed unto wrath," as a "vessel of wrath;" but it is one who is condemned in his own feelings, one who is "appointed to destruction" in the judgment that he passes upon himself. The Lord of life and glory never opens His mouth for the reprobate. The counsel to Him in the text is to "judge righteously;" and He can only "judge righteously" when justice has been satisfied, when all its imperious demands have been answered, when a payment has been rendered.

He could not plead righteously, if He pleaded the cause of those for whom no satisfaction has been made, and whose debts had not been discharged. Therefore, the term does not signify those whom God has fore-ordained unto wrath, but His elect people, who, by a work of grace upon their hearts, are brought into those feelings, whereby they stand "appointed to destruction"—that is, a sentence of death is written in their conscience, as the apostle speaks, "we had the sentence of death in ourselves" (2Co 1:9). They see no hope of escape "from the wrath to come," they cannot see how their sins can ever be forgiven, since they are so black and aggravated; they know not how God can, consistently with those attributes which He has made manifest in their consciences, ever save them from eternal death; and therefore mercy not having yet visited their souls, the blood of the atonement not having been sprinkled on their consciences, and they not having been brought to know the things of Christ by the Holy Ghost leading them by faith into the satisfaction of Christ, they stand condemned in their own feelings before God, and only a step between them and eternal death.

Now for these characters King Lemuel is to "open His mouth," that is, He is to plead and intercede for them; He is to open His mouth as their Advocate at the bar of God, to stand forth as their Mediator and Intercessor "from the wrath to come." The whole of Jesus' life upon earth, every branch of His active and passive obedience was an opening His mouth for the dumb, for those who are "appointed to destruction;" and never did He more powerfully and effectually plead, than when His gaping wounds were opened on the cross. And in the courts above, in the prevalence of His intercession, in that incense which He is continually offering by sitting there as the High Priest and Saviour of His chosen, He is opening His mouth, though not in actual words, yet by His presence there, He is opening His mouth to God for the dumb, He is pleading and interceding in the cause of all such as are "appointed to destruction."

But there is another sense of the words, which, I think, is very consistent with Scripture, and the meaning of the passage. The word Lemuel signifies one who is devoted to God; and may not this aptly represent an ambassador of the Most High, one who has been sanctified and set apart, that he should stand forth in His name, one who has been quickened by the Holy Ghost into a knowledge of the "Three-one God," and who has been brought by the Spirit's leadings and operations to stand forth in the name, and give himself up to do the work of God?

In this sense the Church may speak to those among the "kings and priests unto God," to those of her sons who are devoted to the Lord's cause, and to the promotion of His glory upon earth; to them may she also address this language of exhortation, and say to each of them, "Open thy mouth for the dumb, in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction." Now the minister of the Spirit opens his mouth for the dumb when he traces out their experience, and thus enters into all the feelings of their troubled hearts; when he is enabled to describe to them the very sensations under which they are labouring, the very pangs of guilt and harassing convictions under which they are suffering, and the whole work of grace upon their souls, in such a way as they are not able to describe it themselves; he opens his mouth, when he unfolds, from some personal experience of it in his own soul, and from the light thrown upon it from the Scriptures, the very spot in which they stand, the very feelings which they are passing through, and the work of grace which the Holy Ghost is tracing out in their hearts.

And thus many of God's poor "dumb" children, who feel themselves "appointed to destruction," when they have come into a chapel where a minister of truth is speaking in the name of the Lord, have found to their surprise and consolation, that he has a tongue to explain the secret workings of their hearts, that he has an acquaintance with all that is passing in their bosoms, and that he can tell out the secret feelings of their minds, which they are not able to tell out themselves.

And again; this Lemuel, this anointed servant of the Most High, "opens his mouth for the dumb, and for such as are appointed to destruction," when in public prayer, he is able to pour out the very feelings of their hearts to God; when he pleads for them and with them at the throne of grace, and bears them up in his solemn petitions to the throne of the Most High, and thus in his prayers, by expressing the feelings, desires, and breathings of his own soul, is enabled, to their wonder and astonishment, to express the very feelings that they are exercised with, and to lay before God the very sensations and breathing desires of their hearts.

And again; God's Lemuels open their mouths for the dumb, and for such as are "appointed to destruction," when they vindicate their cause, when they stand up as sympathizing with "the poor and needy," when they hold up their shield and buckler (so far as they are enabled) to catch the arrows that are shot against the poor, tempted, tried family of God. And thus, in every company and in every place, in every pulpit and on every occasion, are not ashamed when needful to open their mouths, and plead the cause of the dumb, who have not a word to say for themselves, and declare that these are the people of the living God, let presumptuous professors shoot out what arrows they may against them.

3. But we will go on a little further with our text, for we find there another character spoken of, and that is the "poor and needy." A man is not spiritually dumb all his life, nor is he all his days one of those who "are appointed to destruction." This seems to point at the beginning of the work of grace in his heart, as well as peculiar seasons of trial and temptation; but as we go on, we find a character that runs parallel with all the life of a Christian, we find a word that describes what a child of God is in every state and in every stage. In the eighty-sixth Psalm, David speaks "of God having delivered him from the lowest hell." He speaks of the sweet deliverance he had experienced, but he begins the Psalm with saying, "I am poor and needy." And, therefore, whatever deliverance a man may have experienced, let him have been delivered from the "lowest hell," all his life long he will have this experience wrought in him by the Holy Ghost, to be "poor and needy;" and only so far as he is "poor and needy" will he want to know anything experimentally of the riches of Christ, or to taste the consolations which the Spirit of God alone can communicate to his parched and thirsty soul.

How many we find in our day, who are "rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing," and yet they are always speaking and boasting of the riches of Christ! But what can they know of Christ's riches? His riches are for the "poor and needy," His blood is for the guilty, His righteousness is for the naked, His perfect work and finished salvation for those who continually stand in need of His powerful arm to save them from the "lowest hell." And therefore whatever notions men may have about Christ's riches, Christ's blood, Christ's righteousness, and Christ's glorious salvation, there are none that prize it, that really pant with unutterable longings after it, that really desire to live upon it as the very food of their hearts, that are calling

to God for a sweet manifestation of it, that are restless, uneasy, and dissatisfied without the enjoyment of it—there are none that thus breathe and thus feel, except those who are spiritually "poor and needy," who are stripped and emptied and despoiled of everything that the flesh can boast of, and everything that nature can exalt itself with.

But these "poor and needy" have "a cause." We often find that the work of grace in a man's soul, and the exercises in a man's heart, are compared in Scripture to an action at law, to some trial which is to take place in a court of judgment. We find this in various parts of the Scripture. "Let my *sentence*," says David, "come forth from Thy presence," that is, the termination and adjudication of my cause. So we read in Micah, "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against Him, until He plead my cause," implying that there is a decision to be made, that there is a trial to take place in the court of conscience, and that this trial must be settled by the mouth of the Most High. Now, he who has never had this cause tried in his heart, knows not whether he has been acquitted, or whether he has been condemned. He who has never had a court of trial set up in his bosom, he himself arraigned at that bar, found guilty without a word to say, and then to receive from the mouth of the judge an acquittal, knows nothing at all of what it is to have a manifest testimony from the Lord God Almighty that he is one of His chosen and pardoned ones.

The Church then calls upon King Lemuel, "the King of kings, and Lord of lords," the great High Priest and Mediator of His dear people, to plead the cause of such—that is, when "the books are opened, and the judgment is set," when the "poor and needy" have no counsellor, and have no spiritual coin to purchase the aid of an Advocate, and their own mouths are shut through the weight of guilt and condemnation, then to step forward, and advocate their cause. And how does He plead their cause? By unrolling the book, and showing that under their names the discharge has been written, that blood has been shed for their transgressions, and that their iniquities have been blotted out from the sight of God. He pleads their cause, when, so to speak, He stands forth in their name as having borne their sins "in His own body on the tree," as having gone to the end of the law for righteousness, and brought in an everlasting justification of their persons "from all things from which they could not be justified by the law of Moses." Thus He pleads their cause.

So, in an inferior sense, those also that stand forth in the name of the Most High, plead the cause of "the poor and needy," when they open up unto them, under the Spirit's teaching, the way of salvation through the satisfaction of the Mediator, when they show that there is a glorious righteousness, which is "unto all and upon all them that believe," and when they declare that God hath put away the sins of His elect by the blood of His dear Son. When they are enabled so to trace out the experience of the soul, under the Spirit's teaching, the Spirit Himself raises up a blessed evidence in the hearts of their poor and needy hearers, that they have passed through the same.

They plead the cause of "the poor and needy" then, by bringing forth those reasons why they should stand acquitted at God's bar. the counsel that stands to plead for the imprisoned debtor, if he can bring forward any evidence that the debt has been paid by another, or the advocate for a criminal at the bar, if he can unroll the king's proclamation of pardon and amnesty, and can prove that his trembling client is included therein, will plead so effectually, that judgment will be stayed, and the prisoner set at liberty. Now, what better cause of acquittal can there be for a poor debtor at God's bar, than to shew that a full satisfaction has been made for his debts, that the demands of justice have been complied with, that blood has been shed, and the sinner been reconciled to God by the perfect work of God's dear Son?

Thus God's servants plead the cause of "the poor and needy;" and when they are enabled to open the roll before the eyes of the prisoner, and show him his name there, and the blessed Spirit seals that testimony in the prisoner's heart and conscience the judge is satisfied, the prisoner is satisfied, and the spectators, that reverence the laws and yet have a spiritual sympathy with the prisoner, are satisfied, and all can unite in ascribing "honour and praise to the Lamb."

4. But we have a solemn hint given, both to Lemuel that intercedes above, though indeed He needs no such counsel, and to those Lemuels that stand forth in God's name to plead the cause of "the poor and needy"

below, which is, to "judge righteously." Let no partiality bias or influence your judgment; let justice have its full sway, as well as mercy; let not the criminal be pardoned, if justice thereby suffer; but let judgment, in every sense, have all that justice claims.

King Lemuel, then, as Intercessor above, would not "judge righteously" if He opened His mouth for those who were fore-ordained to destruction; because justice was never satisfied for them, blood was never shed for them, their sins were never atoned for, righteousness was never brought in to justify them in the sight of God. Therefore, King Lemuel, the great Intercessor above, though He "opens His mouth for the dumb, and pleads the cause of the poor and needy," yet does it with the strictest observance of the laws of justice. If He included in His mediation and intercession anyone whom God had not chosen, whose name was not in the covenant, whose sins were not expiated on the cross, He would not "judge righteously;" or on the other hand, if He excluded from His petitions, if He shut out from His mediatorial intercession at the right hand of God any who were included in the covenant of grace, any for whose sins He died upon the cross, and whose transgressions He had blotted out by His own blood-shedding, if He excluded any whom God had included, then He would not "judge righteously."

But He "judges righteously" when He acts according to the strictest requisitions of justice; and it would be as inconsistent with righteousness to save any through His mediation, who had not been pardoned by His blood, as that any should be lost for want of His mediation, who had been pardoned by His atoning sacrifice. But He "judges righteously;" He weighs the real merits of the case; He acts upon the strictest demands of justice; not justice tempered by mercy, and yet justice kissing mercy—mercy in its fullness and justice in its fullness; mercy not adulterated by justice, nor justice adulterated by mercy; meeting, but not mingling; wedded, but each preserving its distinct identity; flowing in parallel channels, but not intermixing their streams; each pursuing its own course, and yet running side by side from eternity to eternity.

But we come to the Lemuels on earth — those that stand forth in the name of the Lord to do His work in the sanctuary, they too must "judge righteously," as well as "open their mouths for the dumb." How then are they to "judge righteously?" By weighing up and examining the cases that come before them; by drawing a straight and narrow line between false religion and true religion, between fleshly convictions and spiritual convictions, between the teachings of God and the workings of nature. A minister may have such a compassionate heart naturally, as to be continually binding up wounds, whether those wounds have been inflicted by the Holy Ghost or not; or he may have such misguided and mistaken views of what the real teachings of the Spirit are, that on the other hand, he may make the hearts of those sad whom God has not made sad. We fall into errors on both sides. Some will wound God's dear afflicted ones, will lay grievous burdens upon those who are already sinking under the heavy load of guilt upon their consciences, and put stumbling-blocks in the path of those who are passing through deep exercises. they judge not righteously, they exercise no discernment nor discrimination, nor do they move according to the channel that God has tracked in His Word.

Then there are others who judge not righteously by going to the other extreme, who mistake every trickling tear that falls down the cheek of a hypocrite for the real pangs of godly sorrow, who believe every solemn-looking professor who hangs his head like a bulrush, to be "a mourner in Zion," mistaking the mere soft feelings of the natural heart, worked up into something like tenderness under an affecting sermon, for the deep contrition of spirit, which is the work of the Holy Ghost, and of the Holy Ghost alone to produce. But the Church counsels her Lemuels to "judge righteously"—that is, to move in such strict accordance with the work of the Holy Ghost, and so run in the channel which God Himself has traced out in His Word, as not to be turned aside by natural compassion on the one hand, nor yet to err by harshness of spirit on the other.

Again; these Lemuels are apt to be biased by very carnal motives. If there be any rich respectable persons in their congregation, they are apt to be drawn aside from judging righteously, that is, they are inclined to allow them to come into the Church with a shallower experience than those who are temporally poor. Or perhaps they will soften down their ministry, lest some wealthy deacon, or some rich supporter of the cause should take offence, and turn his back upon them; and thus they are turned aside from judging

righteously, by the base workings of their carnal and covetous heart. Others are kept from judging righteously by the "fear of man that bringeth a snare." They cannot bear the cross which every faithful minister must carry; they cannot endure to be shot at with those bitter arrows which self-righteous and presumptuous professors are continually seeking to wound them with; and, therefore, they so pare down truth, they so round the jutting edge of everything which seems to be offensive, that whilst they maintain the outlines of truth, every salient point, every jutting angle is rounded off like the corner of a street, lest the passer-by should strike his foot against it. And thus they clip and pare down truth to please professors, instead of standing forth fearlessly and faithfully in the naked simplicity of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Again; wherever there are family connections in the way, there is always a great temptation for the Lemuels not to "judge righteously." If, for instance, his own children begin to be a little serious, he is tempted not to "judge righteously." If he has relations in the flesh, who begin to make a profession of religion, he is tempted not to "judge righteously," but to have his eyes, in some way, blinded by some favorable prejudices, and to seek to thrust those upon the Church, who, were they not akin to him in the flesh, he would never dream of bringing forward at all. And thus biased by the warm feelings of his natural heart, he is drawn aside from judging righteously.

Again, it continually happens in a Church, that there are those who cannot hear the minister; or those who have taken up a prejudice against him, and who, from various motives, may side with a party (most churches being split into parties) that is unfavorable to him. Now it is very hard for a man thus circumstanced to "judge righteously." He will be strongly tempted to detract from that which is really good in them, and perhaps ascribe to them motives of which they really are not guilty; and whilst he looks at the most favorable side in the case of his supporters, he will look at the most unfavorable side in the case of his opponents. And I do believe, from what I have seen, that many divisions in churches arise from the spirit of the minister; and where they do not spring from him, are much fostered by him in this, that he, instead of seeking to heal breaches, and bring the people of God together, would rather stand as a party-man, and be the head and leader of the strongest side. Now this is not "judging righteously;" he does not stand as he should do, a pastor over the flock, when he would pay his chief attention to some sheep, and neglect or wound others. These are not personal reflections, as I am utterly unacquainted with you as a church. Think not, for a moment, that I am indulging in personalities, for I assure you I know not any individual belonging to this church, nor have I any such information from others. They are mere general observations as they have occurred to my mind, at this present moment, from the text.

Well, here then is the prescribed course, which those servants of God who would desire to walk in the footsteps of their great Master, are called upon to follow, "To open their mouth for the dumb," to "plead the cause of the poor and needy," and yet to "judge righteously," to run in that narrow line, to walk in that difficult path, to steer in that intricate channel, surrounded on every side by rocks and shoals, and out of which they so easily glide to fall upon one sandbank or another.