

## Changing Unclean Lips to Clean

### Isaiah 6:1-8 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. <sup>3</sup> And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." <sup>4</sup> At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." <sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>7</sup> With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." <sup>8</sup> Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

What a vision given to Isaiah! He gets to see God in the temple. He is high and exalted on a giant throne, not some little man sitting up high on a chair; he's larger than life, bigger than any man. The train of his robe is filling the room maybe a little like the flowing golden locks of Rapunzel's hair. Then there are above this big God special angels, seraphim, a word denoting a burning fire. Smoke fills the temple. These fiery beings with all their wings praise the Triune God with the three repeated words: "HOLY! HOLY! HOLY!" The force shakes the doorposts and the thresholds. If you were unsettled by our earthquake last year, imagine something with so much more force, but the source of the shaking coming from these three shouts of praise to this one God. Such a sight, maybe you would want to step back and soak it all in, pull out your phone, take a video. How cool and majestic is this!?

But that's not Isaiah's reaction. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." (verse 5) Isaiah's scared! Before the HOLY HOLY HOLY LORD Almighty, he immediately recognizes how unclean, how sinful, how impure he is. The source of his personal fear is his lips. But this guy is the prophet of the LORD. He has already spoken powerful words of judgment from God on people for their sins as well as beautiful words of God's comfort, care, and grace. Why would Isaiah freak out in the presence of God because of his lips?

Over this past year, I've been learning and counseling regarding abuse. The numbers are staggering. Roughly 1 in 3 women and men alike have experienced some form of abuse throughout their lives; many less have actually reported it. I don't know what comes to mind when I say the word "abuse," but here's the working definition I've heard repeatedly: abuse is defined as a pattern of behavior that uses fear or force to maintain power and control. When it comes to verbal abuse, it's the attitude behind the words that matters.

Some forms are easy to point out: vulgar and derogatory terms for people, belittling words, you know that's abusive and wrong. So is the more common place not quite as harsh put downs as when you say to someone, "Well, that's stupid," in response to a person's thoughts, ideas, or feelings. It's that sick verbal burn that you said because you wanted those words to ring in that person's ears or those specific comments said in anger and frustration that you said just to get under someone's skin and hurt them. Then there's the cover up when you say something inappropriate or rude but quickly add, "I was only joking." It can be a somewhat nice sounding put down like, "Oh, I think that's too much for you. Here, let me take care of it." The implication and message often received is that they can't take care of it, that they aren't smart enough or capable enough. Many of these examples are sin in and of themselves, but when these words are used to get your way, to control and manipulate someone, you are abusing them with unclean lips.

Can we claim that our lips are cleaner than Isaiah's? I can't. Isaiah's confession resonates with me because I too am a man of unclean lips. A truth that has become more and more apparent to me lately is that we only ever see a small part of the whole picture with any person. A part of me hopes that you all think that this pastor never uses his words to use fear or force to maintain power and control over anyone. I would be lying if I said I never had. I've used words to try to get what I want, to say that perfect zinger that gets under someone's skin to change them for what I want. I've spoken to people in ways that are dismissive of their thoughts and feelings, interrupting what a person is saying as I insert what I think they will say, thus controlling the conversation.

There's no use in justifying any of it. It doesn't matter if you talk this way because that's how you were raised or because this is how everyone talked to each other. It's not okay if it's just a couple times and you don't consider it a pattern. Once is still a sin. It's not okay if you don't recognize it, especially when it's pointed out to you. It's still not okay to use our words to put people down so that we get our way. It's sin. It's verbal abuse. God hates it.

Maybe one way to get rid of our excuses for the words we use and the way we talk is this: Can you imagine some of the words we have spoken from our unclean lips not as if we spoke them standing before the HOLY HOLY HOLY LORD Almighty like Isaiah did? Would you heap those same insults on him? Would you try to skate by those comments by saying, "I was only joking, God"? Would you tell him that he didn't know what he was doing, that he was in over his head, and that I should take over? When the Lord spoke, would you smile and dismissively say, "That's cute," in a very patronizing way? Would you or me or Isaiah have a chance before HOLY HOLY HOLY LORD Almighty if we talked like that to him? He wouldn't wink it away or say, "Well, I know that's just how you talk." We should expect, "Off with his head!" That's why Isaiah cries that he's ruined. We are ruined as a people of unclean lips.

But God didn't strike down Isaiah for his unclean lips. Instead, "one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'" (verses 6-7) Isaiah's confession was answered with forgiveness from the HOLY HOLY HOLY LORD Almighty.

The triune God cleansed Isaiah's lips, and he cleanses ours as well. How? For those who have been hurt and abused by unclean lips, Jesus was too. People heaped abusive insults on him, calling him crazy, claiming he had a demon, mocking his supposed power while he was on the cross. He took all this verbal abuse on him and paid for it with his life to cleanse our unclean lips, atone for our sins. God the Holy Spirit has given us the works and merits of God the Son as other people used their lips to tell us what Jesus did for us. The HOLY HOLY HOLY LORD Almighty has made us holy, perfect, and new. You can now use your clean lips as God intended.

God the Father created us, formed our lips, and gave us the gift of language so that we could speak to him, to each other, to confess our sins, to speak his forgiveness and his work to purify us. God the Son used his lips not to insult people, control them by belittling them. No, he used his lips to tell people what he was doing for them, of the God who so loved the world, and that means you. He addressed people with kindness, called his disciples friends even while he was the HOLY HOLY HOLY LORD Almighty veiled in human flesh. He patiently taught no matter the challenges or hardness of heart of the people listening. When he had to, he rebuked people of their sins to turn them away from their unclean lips, from their ruin, and then told them that he is the Lamb of God who is their perfect substitute – his life given to cover us with his perfection, his sacrificial death paying the penalty all the abusive things that we have said with our lips.

If you want to think about how God used his lips perfectly, consider this. When you read the Bible, have you ever paid attention to how God refers to his people? Another pastor noted this specifically in the New Testament of the Bible. There are 682 names, adjectives, given referring to God's people. And, yes, some of them are negative like calling his people "weak," "sinful," "little faith." But he also calls them "holy," "saints," "loved," "perfect." What do you think the ratio is for the negative references to the positive ones? 50/50? One-third, two-thirds? Not even close. Out of 682 references, for every one time God refers to us as something negative, there are nine more times that he calls us something positive. For every time he says, "chief of sinners," God says 9 more times that you are holy, without sin, perfect. For every one time God says, "you of little faith," 9 more times he calls you "faithful," because you are clothed with Christ's faithfulness. For every time that you are called weak, 9 more times God says that you are "loved," "complete," and "strong" in him.

With clean lips, we can control what comes out of them. I have some of my own rules in this regard, especially in what I say and think about my wife. There are certain words I will never use referring to her or any woman for that matter, not even in my mind. They're forbidden. For that reason, I won't specifically spell out those words for you. Just know that they are casually bounced around in primetime tv and PG-13 movies. We can stop these hurtful, belittling, and controlling words from coming out of our mouths.

With clean lips, we use them now to build up, instead of control. Before the words come out of your mouth, step back and honestly ask yourself that if this was said to you, about you, would it build you up? Would it help you? Would it make you a better person? Basically, if we wouldn't say this to the HOLY HOLY HOLY LORD Almighty's face, we shouldn't be saying this to or about this person. Sometimes that means that we use the two ears we have instead of the one mouth. Spend more time listening, asking questions to hear where a person is coming from, what they're going through. Believe them that this is what they are feeling.

God knows that we all need to hear that we are forgiven, that we are loved, that we are holy, because there are so many unclean lips that tell you otherwise. The HOLY HOLY HOLY LORD Almighty says this is true because he has taken away our guilt and atoned for your sin. Your lips are clean. God is calling you to use those lips for him. "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" (verse 8a) We answer with Isaiah: I said, "Here am I. Send me!" (verse 8b) Lord, use my clean lips to serve you by building people up, defending them, valuing them as you do, and sharing what you say about them. Amen.