

Bethel

Prayer Meeting Addresses

Number 116

A Time to Keep Silence: A Time to Speak

Text: *“A time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3. 7).*

The wise man, Solomon, tells us that “to every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.” And then he lists these various times one after another, all so different, and twenty-eight altogether in number. Now the wonderful thing is that though all these times recorded here are so different, and changing the whole of the time, there is no change with our God.

“Our lives through various scenes are drawn,
And vexed with trifling cares,
While His eternal thought moves on
His undisturbed affairs” –

completely unmoved by all these various changes, all these different things. And then you see, what a mercy if you and I are enabled to look at them and to say, and to feel, “My times are in Thy hand.” One hymnwriter added, “My God, I wish them there.” Well, we do.

But here before us this evening we have this: “A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” It is not always easy to know when we should keep silence or when we should speak, but our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is the blessed example in this. “A time to keep silence.” We think especially of that long, solemn silence in the judgment hall when again and again He answered them not a word. The Man Christ Jesus in His silence! We think especially of that very solemn case of Herod, after he had had John the Baptist murdered. We are told he had a great longing to see the Lord Jesus. He hoped he might see Him perform some great miracle, and in the judgment hall Herod had that opportunity. He met the Man of sorrows face to face and he asked Him so many questions, but Jesus answered him not a word. The old divines used to say that in that awful silence, the voice of John the Baptist cried aloud in Herod’s conscience.

Over the years I have seen a special beauty in the silence of the Lord Jesus in the hall Gabbatha. “Behold the Man!” said Pilate, and by faith we behold this glorious Man in His silence. But He did speak. There was a time to speak as well as a time of silence. You know what He said: “Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?” The Man in His silence! One word would have brought an easy escape, and eternal destruction to Pilate, Herod, Annas, Caiaphas, the Jews, the scribes, the Pharisees, the soldiers, the Romans. “Behold the Man” in His silence.”

“A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”

“It were an easy part
For Him the cross to fly;
But love to sinners fills His heart,
And makes Him choose to die.”

Now here is our hope, our joy, our resting place as sinners. “Behold the Man” in His silence.

“A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” And also, “Behold the Man” in His gracious example left on record for us. Now this is the standard the Lord has set before us. There are times when we would speak, and like to speak, but it is the Lord’s will we should keep silence. And there are also those many other times when we would like to keep silence, and it is the Lord’s will that we should speak. We do need grace to be shown which time is which. You cannot help but notice that it says, “A time to keep silence” before it says, “A time to speak.”

Now beloved friends, I think everyone, whoever they are, has a tendency one way or the other. Some have a tendency to speak too often, and perhaps when it is not necessary for them to speak, and then there are others who have a tendency to keep silent, and there are important times when they ought to speak, especially if the truth is at stake, and it is wrong for them to keep silent. I am sure all of you come into this. I think of parents with their families, bringing up children – when to keep silent, when to speak; meeting with friends together, when issues, when concerns come up, when something important takes place, or when there are meetings with those out of the world, or sometimes perhaps one of the Lord’s children, and we are not sure whether they are speaking just right. Do we speak, or is it better to be silent? One thing is very, very clear: there are times when it is best for us to keep silent, but not keep silence to God. “A time to keep silence” with man, “and a time to speak” to God

at the blood-sprinkled mercy seat, where “with heaven and earth at His command, He waits to answer prayer.”

“A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” Now there is one very interesting and remarkable case in Scripture, and that is that difficult time for King Hezekiah when Sennacherib and his army surrounded the walls of Jerusalem. Sennacherib’s emissary came close to the people and shouted over the walls terrible things of hatred and blasphemy, and I am sure the people were getting more and more enraged, and more and more angry, and more and more distressed. Then we read that the people were silent, because Hezekiah had commanded them not to speak a word (2 Kings 18. 36). Hezekiah left it to the Lord to speak to Rabshakeh and to Sennacherib, and the Lord did speak: one-hundred-and-forty-four-thousand dead men lying round the walls of Jerusalem. Now that is it: for a sinner to keep silence. Hezekiah was a great man as well as a godly man. I am sure there are many things he could have said, and many things he could have done, but he felt his wisdom was to keep silence, and his God did everything for him.

“A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” I feel very much condemned myself that talking to people we often keep silence when we should speak. We sinfully keep silence. There are times when we ought to speak. How much do we speak to our young people? Do we ever enquire about their spiritual state? Do we try to warn them, or to help them, or to encourage them, or do we just sit in silence and let things go by? And especially when of necessity we have to meet with the world, and have opportunities, and we do not speak a word in season or a word for the Saviour. But again, we need grace to know what to do. The Lord has solemnly told us not to cast pearls before swine. O but in the history of the church of God, how often it has been a word in season. There was a time to speak, not to be silent, a time to speak, and a word in season was “like apples of gold in pictures of silver,” which means they just completely fit. But there are those times when we need to be silent – not silent in the cause of God, but silent in our own cause. We are warned not to be too hasty to speak. In speaking hastily we can make a wrong decision, or we could give some wrong advice.

I was at a meeting a few years ago of one of the societies, and the speaker gave an excellent address, and afterwards a person in the congregation stood up and asked a most long, involved question, a most complicated, difficult question. The speaker stood up and thanked the man for his question. Then he said, “I am not capable of answering a question as involved, as important as that on the spot. If you write it out for me at the end of the meeting, I promise within a short time

prayerfully to give you a considered reply.” I thought what wisdom there was in that man, and what grace, and what an example! He felt there was a time to keep silent, and he kept silent. How often we do otherwise. It would be a good thing sometimes if we are asked important questions, if we were to say, “Let me pray about it, meditate about it first.” With that man it was not a careless silence. He promised that with the Lord’s help he would speak.

“A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” Well, beloved friends, there *are* those times when we ought to keep silent, we should keep silent, we must keep silent. But there are some times when we must speak. You know what they are: to speak to the Lord in prayer; to make our wants and wishes known; to be not silent to Him. Sadly, we sometimes, often, are silent to Him. And then we do not want Him to be silent to us. O but there is a time to speak!

You young ones listening, the old people used to speak about *the quiet time*. They meant a few minutes set aside each day to meditate, to read God’s Word and to pray, and those quiet times are essential for a true believer. Do not neglect them. There *is* a time also to speak. So a time to speak to Almighty God in humble confession, a time to speak to Almighty God in thanksgiving, what He has done in His beloved Son, what He daily does for us in providence. “A time to speak.” And do not omit this: a time to speak in humble testimony. Can you say, “Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what He hath done for my soul”?

So a gospel minister has to walk this out. He needs a lot of time to be silent – silent before his God in prayer, in meditation, in thinking of the services, and sometimes having to wrestle hard, and then he is favoured with a time to speak. May you pray for the minister. In your times of silence, pray for the minister when it is his time to speak. What kind of things to pray for? Our old deacons used to say to me, “Speak well of Him!” What about this: “My heart is inditing a good matter: I speak of the things which I have made touching the King: my tongue is the pen of a ready writer.” And those are some blessed things to think about in our silence, to speak about in public: those precious things of Jesus, the only things which really matter.

“A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”

This address was given by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom, on Thursday, 18th June, 2020