

The Power of Speech

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We know a number of things about the Old Testament prophet Moses. One is that he was unsure of his ability to speak eloquently. When God tells him that he is to bring the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, Moses demurs: "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

Moses' uneasiness continues even when God promises him that he will be able to do signs, such as turning the water of the Nile into blood, to convince the Egyptians. Moses describes himself as "slow of speech and of a slow tongue" (Exodus 4: 10).

God becomes angry with Moses over the prophet's delays and excuses. Finally He sends Aaron, who does speak well, to be his brother's "spokesman" to the Egyptians. But both men have the solemn duty to use their speech to express the will of God, who tells Moses that Aaron "shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God" (Exodus 4: 16b).

In II Corinthians 9: 12 to 10: 18 we read verses in which Saint Paul is answering accusations that some members of the church in Corinth have made. Paul, like Moses, is concerned about the power of his speech. These church members are saying that his letters "are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible" (2 Corinthians 10: 10). There is an implication that Paul is able to be "tough" on the Corinthians from a distance--in letters, but that face to face he is ineffectual and unimpressive.

Paul cautions his critics against looking only at the outward aspect of things. If his appearance and speech are nothing special, his message is. He has been given authority by God, to teach and edify.

How does Paul claim such authority? He says it is because he doesn't commend himself. He is not like those who think they are great because they use as a standard of comparison others who are just like them, measuring themselves by themselves.

But Paul measures himself in a very different way, and urges others to do the same. He says that rather than seeking a way to commend ourselves, we should seek God's commendation; we should measure ourselves by the standard God has set. He writes: "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord" (10: 17).

Like Moses, Paul always knew that his words were not his own, but came from God. His speech was so powerful that his influence in Christianity is unsurpassed. But in his humility he would have assented to God's direction to Moses and Aaron, those other powerful speakers, in the Book of Exodus: "I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do" (4: 15).

Troparion - Tone 2

You ascended to the heights of the virtues, Prophet Moses; therefore, you were deemed worthy to see the glory of God. Having received the grace-filled tablets of the Law, and bearing the grace of the writing within yourself, you were the honorable praise of prophets, and a great mystery of piety.