

# Revealing Self-Talk

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We all talk with ourselves. In fact, most of our thoughts are unspoken self-talk, because thinking is really a kind of silent speaking. Yet self-talk is broader than just thinking because it includes what we feel, imagine, desire and devise.

Our inner self-talk provides a running audio-visual track to our daily lives that even spills over into our sleep. While it is at times a monologue, like when we worry, it is usually a dialogue with a wide range of voices, voices that clamor for our attention and consideration, like when we assess ourselves and what we have done. In either case we don't usually decide to speak, or what to say, but we are caught up in an unsolicited discussion that wells up from deep inside us.

Cognitive psychologists have recently begun to pay close attention to its role in people's lives. Even though they, most commonly, regard it as a kind of inner critic that censures their performance and character, they also now consider it as an inner advocate, the voice with which we justify and affirm ourselves. They therefore admit that people are beset by both positive and negative self-talk, an inner argument in which they not only disparage themselves but also assert their personal worth. Therapists have learnt from them to train their troubled clients to counter their negative self-criticism with positive self-affirmation.

I find all this analysis of interest to me as a pastor, because in pastoral care and counselling people so often articulate their self-talk, and as an Old Testament scholar, because many of the psalms address the self-talk of a believer to God. In contrast with psychologists, the Bible understands our self-talk in a theological rather than psychological frame of reference. In fact, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and in the Greek New Testament two related terms are used to describe some of this religious self-talk. They are *logísmoi* and *dialogísmoi*, plural nouns that derive from *lógos*, the Greek term for speech and its use to think and plan, assess and argue. So in this reflection I would like to examine four kinds of religious self-talk that they describe.

First, both testaments teach that only the Lord God searches and knows the human heart with its secret self-talk. In Ps 139:2 David acknowledges that whether he is awake or asleep, the Lord discerns and assesses his self-talk. Likewise Jesus discerns the unspoken self-talk of the Pharisees (Luke 5:2; 6:8) and his disciples (Luke 9:47). The Lord also knows all the evil self-talk of pagan rulers who plot to destroy David (Ps 56:5) and God's people (Ps 94:11; 1 Cor 3:19). In fact, unbelievers are characterized by the folly of their idolatrous, futile, benighted self-talk which refuses to acknowledge their unrighteousness and God's goodness (Rom 1:21).

Second, the most telling assessment of human self-talk comes from the parabolic teaching of Jesus on the source and effect of impurity in Matthew 15:10-20 and Mark 7:14-23. There he asserts that people are not defiled spiritually by the food that they eat, food that is either inherently unclean or polluted by preparation with unclean cooking pots and consumption with unwashed hands. Rather they are defiled by what comes from their

hearts that have become unclean from their evil self-talk. This is described in these two carefully constructed, diagnostic lists. Both have the same general heading. They are 'evil thoughts,' more precisely, instances of evil self-talk.

The first shorter list is given in Matthew 15:10. It has six items. They are all couched in plural nouns that recall the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments in the second table of the Decalogue. Yet, unlike them, these nouns do not describe physical transgressions but their inner, mental antecedents that are best taken to refer to emotionally charged, toxic fantasies that are pondered rather than enacted, imagined rather than performed. Jesus therefore depicts the human heart as a hotbed of evil self-talk with lurid musings of murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false testimony and slander. These trains of evil self-talk contaminate the whole person completely from the inside out.

The other expanded, diagnostic list in Mark 7:21-22 has twelve items. They are divided grammatically into two parts by the use of six abstract plural nouns for six mental activities followed by six singular nouns that describe the mentality of the person who is captivated by them. Here Jesus lists a wide range of evil self-talk with fantasies of fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting and evil-doing that are produced in the heart of a deceitful, licentious, envious, blasphemous, arrogant, godlessly senseless person. When Jesus here speaks about senselessness he recalls the depiction of an evil-doer in Psalm 14. In sum, evil self-talk stems from the evil hearts, the corrupt nature of those who are riddled with it.

In both accounts Jesus does not address this diagnosis of spiritual heart disease to the Pharisees or the crowd of bystanders, as we would expect, but to his disciples. They need his instruction to examine and understand themselves first before they pass any judgment on the hearts of others, let alone minister to them. All alike are equally self-polluted by their own evil machinations and desires. All alike need to be cleansed by Jesus from the same impurity that separates them all from God.

Third, in Romans 2:15-16 St. Paul mentions another kind of self-talk in his discussion on God's work in the hearts of the Gentiles who have some of God's law written in their hearts, even though they do not know the Decalogue. Their awareness of God's law is evident in the intervention of their conscience on their self-talk. He claims: 'They (the Gentiles) show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, as their conscience also bears witness with it, and their conflicting self-talk accuses or even excuses them on the day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus' (ESV modified). Paul's mention of 'the day when God judges the secrets of men' refers both to the final day of judgment (Rom 2:5; 1 Cor 4:3) and to the day when God convicts a person of sin (1 Cor 14:25; Heb 4:12).

Paul here envisages the human heart as the location of a secret court of law. In this scenario all people stand on trial for rebellion against God. The outcome of that trial is that they will either be pronounced guilty or not guilty. But it is a strange court of law because there is no actual judge in it apart from each accused soul which acts as its own 'judge.' There are no actual witnesses apart from the defendant himself whose self-talk recalls all the evidence that could be used to either accuse or excuse him, to incriminate or exonerate him. There is also no counsel for his prosecution and no counsel for his defense apart from his conscience. Worst of all, the defendant rightly knows in his heart that he is culpable. He

therefore tries hard to justify himself before himself as his own virtual judge to escape a negative verdict and the consequent sentence that will be imposed on him.

But Paul does not stop there with that deadlocked trial. He claims that this messy, indecisive, virtual trial actually foreshadows the final decisive trial in which God is the just judge and Jesus is the merciful advocate for those who plead guilty of breaking God's law. By his gospel Jesus already now intervenes in the hearts of those who listen to him and trust in his message of justification, a powerful word that silences the voice of the guilty conscience and replaces its negative self-talk with divine justification rather than notional self-affirmation.

Fourth, in Luke 2:34 Simeon tells Mary that her baby child has been appointed by God to enact his judgment on the people of Israel in a strange way. By their encounter with Jesus the 'self-talk' of their hearts will be 'revealed' to them in its true light, the light of God's judgment on them for either their 'uprising' or their 'downfall,' their God-given justification or their self-inflicted condemnation. By their acceptance of Jesus or their opposition to him their eternal destiny will be determined for them and disclosed to them well before the final day of judgment and in anticipation of it. By his presence with them as a man among men, he not only reveals their evil self-talk but also transforms it with his true affirmation of them.

We are instinctively afraid that someone will one day discover what we are really like inside and expose us to blame and shame by its public disclosure. So we keep our hearts hidden from others, God, and even ourselves. We cover up and pretend to be good people. We seize the moral high ground and claim the judge's seat for ourselves. But that make-belief does not free us from our negative self-assessment; instead, it locks us up in our own endless self-talk which is, by default, mainly negative. No self-therapy with even the best kinds of self-affirmation can change that. Only Jesus can do that with his gospel, so that in our hearts we have a foretaste of heaven rather than hell.