

Perils of an Untamed Tongue

“...but no one can tame the tongue - a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” James 3:8

James 3:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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As I mentioned in this morning's Time With the Children, we are all very aware that the old childhood saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” isn't really true. Though it is still an often-necessary response to verbal and written bullying, we all know **words can and often do inflict great harm.**

I still remember particular words that caused me pain, especially as a kid in junior high. You, too, may have vivid memories of the times when you have been on the receiving end of harmful words. Perhaps most us also remember the times when we were the ones *inflicting* the damaging words. Many of us remember the exact words that came out of our mouth that we wish we hadn't spoken, or had rephrased or said differently. Sometimes we carry those conversations with us for weeks, or much longer, and replay them over and over again in our heads. Yet, at other times we may actually be unaware that what we have said has caused another person pain.

This is an important and tough issue to address. But address it we must, for **the scriptures are filled with words of warning about the damage that is caused by the untamed tongue.** The author of the New Testament Book of James, for instance, has a lot of wisdom to share on this subject. And he concedes the reality, **“All of us make many mistakes”** (v. 2). James knows that small things can have a big impact. Size is not always the main measure of power and control. Using dynamic and vivid imagery, James says that the tongue is like a rudder on a boat, or a bridle bit in a horse's mouth - tiny by comparison with a ship or a horse, but yielding great control. So goes the rudder, so goes the ship; so goes the bridle bit, so goes the horse. That is the power, says James, of the tongue - small, often hidden from view, but yielding great power and control.

James also makes a similar analogy to fire. Huge and destructive fires often begin with just a small match, a carelessly tossed cigarette, or a single spark from a campfire. Never one to mince words, James writes, **“How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.** It is a world of wrong, occupying its place in our bodies and spreading evil through our whole being. It sets on fire the entire course of our existence with the fire that comes to it from hell itself” (v. 6). I bet if James had children of his own they had their mouths washed out with soap on a regular basis.

Admittedly, harmful words sometimes come out of our mouths unintentionally, not meant to sound as bad as they are. **We're learning more and more how often our words are culturally inappropriate.** At other times, however, they are purposely malicious. Perhaps these intentionally harmful words are what James has in mind when he speaks of the tongue as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (v.8). In today's modern electronic world, **harmful words are not only spoken but also written, especially in emails, text messages, Facebook, Instagram, and as we are all too familiar, in tweets.**

Unfortunately, the assumed **tone** of our or another's written comments are commonly misinterpreted. So, I encourage you to re-read and think twice before you

hit "Send," just to check how the recipient might perceive your message. A re-write may be in order. And be cautious about being passive aggressive or overly cynical in print. Also, perhaps sleep on it and see how you feel about what you've written the next day.

James continues by saying that even though we, as humans, are able to tame every animal in creation (an intentional reference back to the creation story in Genesis), "**no one can tame the tongue**" (v. 8). Like so much else in the book of James, parallels to this passage can be found in Hebrew wisdom literature. The wisdom found in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs is a great example. For instance, from Proverbs 16, "A perverse person spreads strife, and a gossip separates close friends" (v. 28). The actual Hebrew word translated here as 'gossip' (which is a fairly modern-day word) is more literally translated as a 'whisperer.' **So yes, a particularly harmful use of words is indeed gossip.** And the Bible has lots to say about that, like Proverbs 20:19, "A gossip reveals secrets; therefore, **do not associate with someone who talks too much.**"

Around 200 years before the birth of Jesus a Jewish teacher in Jerusalem, named Ben Sira, wrote a book of wisdom literature that we call **Sirach**, or Ecclesiasticus (not to be confused with the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.) It is part of the Apocrypha, the biblical literature that's included in the Catholic Bible, but not ours. Listen to some of these sayings, written over 2200 years ago, about the misuse of words:

- The blow of a whip raises a welt, but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones.
- Many have fallen by the edge of a sword, but not as many as have fallen because of the tongue.
- As you fence in your property with thorns, so make a door and a bolt for your mouth.

This last statement echoes the psalmist's prayer in **Psalm 141:3**, and now one of the scripture passages I remind myself of often, "**Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.**" What a great visual image, and what a great prayer! Let me share with you now some additional proverbs from a variety of countries around the world that I found in a book that I have entitled, *The Encyclopedia of World Proverbs*:

- *If the mouth is fastened shut, no quarrel arises.* - Japan
- *It is the mouth that cuts the throat.* - Africa (Hausa)
- *A wicked tongue is worse than an evil hand.* - Yiddish
- *Below the tongue, there is an ax hidden.* - Korea
- *Even four horses cannot pull back what the tongue has let go.* - Slovakia
- *The tongue is like a sharp knife; it kills without drawing blood.* - China

Please take notice there is a worship bulletin insert, which is also included in the email sent out this morning, containing many Old and New Testament passages of wisdom warning us about the need to tame the tongue. You may want to put it on your refrigerator.

Another point that James makes is **how inconsistent we are in our speech**. He rightly believes that we speak with a forked tongue, speaking out of both sides of our mouth. He states, "**With the tongue we bless God, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God**" (v. 9). How many times, especially in the past year, have we heard stories of good religious folks saying one thing on a Sunday morning, and then

spew hate speech the very next day, if not that afternoon? Many of the January 6 insurrectionists at the nation's Capitol building are a good example of this. But such a contradiction ought not occur, yet it does nevertheless – and yes, **we do it too.**

James' overall concern is that you and I as Christians – followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus - must learn to control our tongue, even though he acknowledges that it can't be completely tamed, and that we will make many mistakes. I know I have.

So, what can we do in this regard? Here's a few suggestions. **Perhaps disconnecting the gossip hotline is the best place to start. We cannot always control when we hear gossip from another, but we do have control over whether or not we spread it any further.** And heaven forbid that we should be the one to start it! Yet, I also want to acknowledge that it is sometimes a difficult judgment call (even for pastors) to know when we cross the sometimes-fine line from simply sharing information out of concern for others, and gossiping about them. I think the difference goes back to our motivation, which we should always question. **Gossip most often comes with the selfish motivation to make ourselves look more important in the eyes of another, rather than sharing out of a genuine concern for another.**

To help in this regard, I want to share a poem, of which you may be familiar, written way back in 1835 by **Beth Day.** It's entitled, "**Three Gates of Gold,**" and it offers this wise suggestion:

Three Gates

If you are tempted to reveal
A tale to you someone has told
About another, make it pass,
Before you speak, three gates of gold.

These narrow gates: First, "Is it true?"
Then, "Is it needful?" In your mind
Give truthful answer. And the next
Is last and narrowest, "Is it kind?"

And if to reach your lips at last
It passes through these gateways three,
Then you may tell the tale, nor fear
What the result of speech may be.

Those three gates again: Is it true? Is it needed? Is it kind? I'm fond of another saying, **"Everyone you meet is struggling with something you know nothing about. Be kind!"**

So, let us never be lulled into believing that our words don't matter – because they do – and often **there are consequences to pay for our untamed tongue!** That can range anywhere from hurt feelings to broken relationships to violence and much worse.

I want to leave with you the following visual image that I've shared with you on a couple of previous occasions to help put this issue of how we use our words into perspective.

A Jewish folktale, set in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, tells of a man who went through a small community slandering the rabbi. One day, feeling suddenly and deeply remorseful, he begged the rabbi for forgiveness and offered to undergo any form of penance to make amends. The rabbi told him to take a feather pillow from his

home, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the wind. The man did as he was told and returned to the rabbi. He asked, "Am I now forgiven?" "Almost," came the response. "You just have to perform one last task: **Go and gather all the feathers.**" "**But that's impossible,**" the man protested, "**for the wind has already scattered them.**" "**Precisely,**" answered the rabbi.

And so it is with the words we speak. Once spoken or written, they cannot be retrieved. Yet, when we do misspeak, asking for forgiveness and hopefully working toward reconciliation, must always be our goal.

So, set a guard over our mouths, O Lord; keep watch over the door of our lips.

Amen.