

A Living Faith – Taming the 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
September 15, 2024

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 times when you have been on the receiving end of harmful words, whether in the distant past or recently. We probably also remember times when we were the ones *inflicting* the harmful words.

Many of us remember exact words that came out of our mouth that we wish we hadn't spoken, or had rephrased and said differently. Yet, at other times we may actually be unaware that what we have said has caused another person pain. Open communication, therefore, is necessary so that it doesn't lead to resentment or bitterness.

The words we speak 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 of why words matter. 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 bridle bit in a horse's mouth, or a rudder on a boat – tiny by comparison with a horse or a ship, but yielding great control. As the bridle bit goes the horse; as the rudder goes, so goes the ship. That, says James, is **the power 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 and is itself set on fire by hell” (v. 6). I bet if James had children 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. And we're learning more and more how often our words can be culturally inappropriate, thus harmful. **What we say can unite people, or it can create great division.** Just ask the community of **Springfield, Ohio**, dealing with the false rumors and fabrications of Haitian refugees eating local cats and dogs. Words of lies from hell itself. As Proverbs 1:4 asks, “How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing, and fools hate knowledge?”

Perhaps intentionally malicious and 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 and digital world, **harmful words are not only spoken but also written**, especially in emails, text messages, and posts on Facebook, Instagram, and other digital formats. Unfortunately, the assumed tone of our or another's written comments are commonly misinterpreted, usually toward the negative. Therefore, 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.

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 16:28, “A perverse person spreads strife, and a gossip separates close friends.” The actual Hebrew word translated here as ‘**gossip**’ (which is a fairly modern-day word) is 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 a passage 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 an important 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 containing many additional 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). James’ overall concern is that as Christians – followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus – you and I 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 made mistakes, of which I genuinely apologize.**

So, what can we do in this regard? Here are 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. 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” and it offers much wisdom.

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 needful? Is it kind? So, let us never be lulled into believing that our words don’t matter – because they do. And yes, **there are consequences to pay for our untamed tongue!** That can range anywhere from hurt feelings to broken relationships to violence and much worse. Remember, once spoken or written and sent, our words cannot be retrieved. Therefore, **when we do misspeak, asking for forgiveness and working with the hope of reconciliation, must always be our goal.**

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

Amen.