

Tame That Tongue

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

James 3:1-12 Matthew 12:33-37
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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- Have you ever seen something you wish you hadn't seen?
- Have you ever heard something you wish you hadn't heard?
- Have you ever said something you wish you hadn't said?

Sometimes it makes me wish we had the ability to see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil. Of those three, **it's often impossible to block out all that we see or all that we hear. What we have more control over, however, is what we speak – the words that come out of our mouths.** Helpful words can be used to instruct, correct, build others up and even heal emotional wounds. Damaging words can act to tear down and inflict wounds.

We are all too aware that the old childhood saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” isn't really true. Words can and often do inflict great harm. If you're like me, we all still have vivid memories of times when words caused us pain. I remember in particular that junior high was an especially cruel time verbally. We tend to forget, however, the times when we were the ones inflicting the damaging words. 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 tongue. The author of the New Testament Book of James, for instance, has a lot of wisdom to shed on this subject. And he concedes, “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. 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 when it comes to the direction it takes. 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, a single spark from a campfire, or one lightning strike. 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.” (James 3:6)*

Don't you that if James had children of his own they had their mouths washed out with soap on a regular basis. And not an Ivory or Dove kind of soap, but more like Lava soap – remember that? (I remember a few intimate occasions with Lava Soap.)

Admittedly, harmful words sometimes come out of our mouths unintentionally, not meant to sound as bad as they are. 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 and digital world, harmful words are not only spoken but also written, especially in emails or text messages. So I encourage you to re-read and think twice before you hit “Send,” just to check how your message may be perceived by the recipient. A re-write may be in order. Or, perhaps sleeping on it and seeing the next day how you feel about what you wanted to say.

James continues by saying that even though we, as humans, are able to tame every animal in creation (a reference back to the creation story in Genesis), “no one can tame the tongue” (v. 8). Like so many other statements in the book of James, parallels to this passage can be found in Jewish wisdom literature. The wisdom found in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs is a good example. For instance, from Chapter 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 ‘whisperer.’

So yes, **a particularly harmful use of our 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.” Listen to these words of wisdom found in **Proverbs 10:19, “The more you talk, the more likely you are to sin. If you are wise, you will restrain your speech.”** This advise is echoed in the psalmist's prayer in **Psalms 141:3, “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!

Another observant point that James makes is **how inconsistent we are in our speech**. He rightly claims 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). Such a contradiction ought not occur, but it does nevertheless.

So what can we do about all this? Here's a few suggestions. Perhaps disconnecting the gossip hotline is a good 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!

To help in this regard, I came across a poem written way back in 1855 by Beth Day. It's entitled, “Three Gates of Gold,” and it offers the following suggestion. Let the information pass through three gates.

The first gate, “Is it true?” The second gate, “Is it needed?” And the third, which she describes as the narrowest gate, “Is it kind?” She concludes, “If 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?

Let us never be lulled into believing that our words don't matter, because they do. For there are consequences to pay for our untamed tongue! That can range anywhere from hurt feelings to broken relationships to worse.

I want to leave with you the following visual image to think about throughout this next week and beyond. I've shared it with you a few years ago 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 saying false and damaging things about 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, they cannot be retrieved. Yet when we do misspeak, our goal must always be reconciliation, which includes asking for forgiveness.

I suggest it may be helpful to remember the following prayer this week, repeating it as often as necessary.

- *Set a guard over my mouths, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.*

Amen.