

Tame Your Tongue

James 3:1-12

Intro

It is said that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill exemplified integrity and respect in the face of opposition. During his last year in office, he attended an official ceremony. Several rows behind him two gentlemen began whispering. "That's Winston Churchill. They say he is getting senile. They say he should step aside and leave the running of the nation to more dynamic and capable men." When the ceremony was over, Churchill turned to the men and said, "Gentlemen, they also say he is deaf!" Talking behind a person's back is bad and its worse when the person gets knowledge of what has been said.

People can say hurtful things, damage a person's life and reputation or even cause suicidal death, especially the bullying that is going on in our society. The tongue can be a dangerous thing! Proverbs 11:9 says, "*The hypocrite with his mouth destroys his neighbour.*" Also Proverbs 18:21 says, "*Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*"

Deadly Arrow

In Psalm 64:3, it says that the tongue and its words are like deadly arrows. The reason why it is like an arrow is because an arrow can kill at a distance. It can kill without even being anywhere near the person or the victim. Somebody said, "Every one of us is carrying around a concealed weapon. All we have to do is open our mouths and it's unconcealed."

If you're an average person you will spend one fifth of your life talking. I read somewhere that a person speaks about 18 to 30 thousand words a day? Someone has said that the average man speaks about 20,000 words a day and that the average woman speaks 30,000 a day. One woman told me the reason that's so is because she has to repeat everything so her husband so that he will hear her.

The Tongue Tells on the Heart

There is a story about a young man who devoted himself to ideological and moral studies and who had been wanting to be further stimulated by meeting the great philosopher Socrates. But contact with this intellectual "giant" so overwhelmed him that he dared not to open his mouth or ask a question. So they walked side by side for a while without conversation. Then Socrates suddenly broke the silence and said kindly but briefly to his young companion, '*Speak, that I may see you.*'

In this short sentence lies the deep recognition of the connection between a person's character and his word. Basically whatever is in your life is what comes out through your words.

Jesus taught this. He said, "*The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks*" (Luke 6:45).

Whatever is in your heart is what comes out. A good person has a changed heart. An evil person does not. The good man here represents the true believer, the regenerated, and because he's been transformed on the inside, he bears what is good and what comes out of his mouth is good and it represents the goodness of his heart, having been transformed by God.

On the other hand, the evil man has an evil heart and so what comes out of his mouth is only evil. Not only out of his mouth but in his conduct. The mouth is just sort of the first place that evil shows up. It's the easiest place to manifest your character. Also it's easier to say things that are representative of your nature than to act on them.

Book of James

In the book of James, James mentions the tongue in every chapter. He mentions it twice in James 1:19 & 26. He mentions it in chapter 2:12. He mentions it in chapter 4:11. He mentions it in chapter 5:12. But he spends a good portion of chapter 3 dealing specifically with the matter of the tongue.

Somebody has asked the question: why doesn't James use the heart? Why doesn't he say the heart is the problem, why does he say the tongue? The tongue only reacts to the heart. The mouth only responds to the heart.

And so, when James talks about the mouth and the tongue, it isn't that he in fact blames the physical mouth and tongue as if they operated independently. It is simply that they are the organ by which the heart expresses itself. And so, James in a sense *personifies* the tongue as the living symbol of what is in the heart. The tongue is just sort of the first place that evil shows up. It's the easiest place to manifest what's in the heart.

Nothing is more liable to reveal who you are than your tongue or your words. It's like the people in the courtyard who confronted Peter in his denial and said, "*The way you talk gives you away*" (Matt. 26:73).

So, the mouth is the monitor on the human condition. Right words then would be the manifestation of a righteous life. That's what James is saying. And so, in chapter 3, he calls us to measure our speech to see if it is consistent with what we claim to be the reality of our faith.

Small But Powerful

In the third chapter James presents the matter of the tongue, as another test of living faith because true faith will be demonstrated by speech as well as false faith. Nothing is more telling on the heart than the tongue. And it's of great concern to James.

James 3:4 "*Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.*"

That's a very graphic illustration. A huge ship...and you might think, "Well, they weren't so big in that day." Well, the one in Acts 27 had 276 passengers on it and that's a pretty good size ship, and it was controlled and directed totally by a small rudder.

That's what James says. If you can just get control of the little tongue, you can move everything else. The idea is this, listen to it; power applied at the right point is efficient to control the whole vessel. And power applied at the right point - being the tongue - is sufficient to control the whole person. James says control your tongue because of its power to control you and others.

Speak only gracious words. Speak only kind words. Speak only loving words, true words, thoughtful words, and sensitive words, edifying words. Speak only gentle words, comforting words, words of blessing, and words of humility, words of wisdom, words of thanksgiving. Speak only unselfish words and peaceful words. And if you do that, you'll control every other part of your life because the only way you can do all of that is being under the power of the Holy Spirit. But the focal point is to concentrate on the taming of your tongue.

James 3:5-6 "*Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*"

Stop there. What does he mean? It boasts great things. You know why? It is proud of its power to control and destroy. James likens it to a spark that causes a huge forest fire.

It is a powerful instrument. It can tear down people. It can destroy relationships, it can destroy churches. It can destroy marriages and families. It can rip apart a nation. It can lead to murder. It can cause wars and huge devastation.

BUT on the other hand, under the Spirit's power it can create love, encouragement, kindness, comfort, peace, joy. The tongue is a powerful thing.

So, James says, "Look at your speech. Is it the speech of living faith? Then apply yourself to control your tongue because of its power to condemn you and its power to control you." What a practical word that is for us.

Gossip

I think one of the worst sins of the tongue besides lying and cursing is gossip. Gossip is often untrue, demeaning, detrimental to one's reputation, and always wrong. As you seek God's truth in Scripture, you will find many passages that speak of the evils of gossip.

Proverbs 20:19 says, "*A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a person who talks too much.*"

The Damage of Gossip

Yiddish folklore offers a telling tale about gossip-makers. One such man had told so many malicious lies about the local rabbi that he was overcome by remorse, he begged the rabbi to forgive him and asked, "Rabbi, tell me how I can make amends." The rabbi sighed, "Take two pillows, go to the public square and there cut the pillows open. Wave them in the air. Then come back."

The gossip quickly went home got two pillows and a knife, rushed to the square, cut the pillows open, waved them in the air and ran back to the rabbi and said, "I did just what you said, Rabbi!"

"Good." The rabbi smiled. "Now, to realize how much harm is done by gossip, go back to the square and collect all your feathers."

Sometimes keeping personal defamatory information to yourself is the best solution. Often your best response as a Christian is to help stop the rumor and gossip in its tracks. In fact, Proverbs 10:19 says, "*In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his tongue is wise.*"

Don't allow the Holy Spirit to be grieved by the sins of the tongue. Do your part in honouring God by holding your tongue.

Think

Dr. Alan Redpath shared this truth. He said, "*I once formed a mutual encouragement fellowship at a time of stress in one of my pastorates. The members subscribed to a simple formula applied before speaking of any person or subject that was perhaps controversial. The THINK formula:*

- *T— is it True?*
- *H— is it Helpful?*
- *I— is it Inspiring?*
- *N— is it Necessary?*
- *K— is it Kind?*

If what I am about to say does not pass those tests, I will keep my mouth shut! And it worked!"

Conclusion

In Luke 6:43, Jesus said, "*A good tree brings not forth corrupt fruit, neither does a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. For every tree is known by its fruit, for from thorns men do not gather figs, nor from a bramble bush gather they grapes. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is*

good, an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth that which is evil, for of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks."

I believe James had this teaching from our Lord in mind when he wrote this. He was really referring to what our Lord had said. The true believer is known by what his or her mouth speaks. A true believer will always seek to speak with a tongue that is under control.

Peter says, the true believer will love life, 1 Peter 3:10-11 *"For, whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it."*

And as you look at your life, beloved, if you see those things coming out of your mouth that ought not to come, you need to confess it as sin and turn away from it.

Remember, if you have nothing good to say PUT A LID ON IT!