

The Taming of the Tongue

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

James 3:1-12 Proverbs 10:19; 11:13; 12:23; 13:3; 16:28; 18:8; 20:19 Matthew 12:33-37
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa June 15, 2008 Rev. Todd B. Freeman

When I was growing up there were always nick-knacks sitting on various shelves and tables around the house. I remember most of them because for years my brothers and sister and I had to dust them. I remember one in particular. Actually, it was a set of three that sat together. They were three wooden carvings of monkeys about six inches tall. You've probably seen something like these. One has its hands over its eyes, another over its ears, and the third over its mouth. **See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil.**

As you and I go about our daily lives it's sometimes impossible to block out all that we see or all that we hear. But in light of today's rather scathing Scripture passages that warn us about the words we speak, it reminded me that **the one we have the most control over is that which we say - the "speak no evil" part.**

Just imagine what kind of place the world would be if even for 24 hours everyone would speak no evil. Imagine what a difference that would make at your work, at school, in your home, even here at church. Imagine a day if people only used **life-giving words that build others up and heal emotional wounds**, not words that tear down and inflict wounds. Now, I'm not exactly sure what heaven is going to be like, but I'm pretty certain it's a place where "speak no evil" is always a reality.

As I mentioned in this morning's time with the children, 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 true. Words can and often do inflict great harm.

You may have vivid memories of the times when you have been on the receiving end of harmful words or the object of malicious gossip. We tend to forget the times when we were the ones inflicting the damaging words or spreading the gossip. 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 and can be done 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 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. 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."

Wow, don't you know 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 occasions).

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 world, harmful words are not only spoken but also written, especially in emails [or in text messages]. It's a good idea to re-read an email 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 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 (a reference back to the creation story in Genesis), **no one can tame the tongue.**

Like so much else 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. We heard several verses a few moments ago – they are on an insert in your bulletin for you to take home and refer to – maybe often, as the case may be.

For instance, from Chapter 16, "A perverse person spreads strife, and a gossip separates close friends" (vs. 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 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 Apocryphal biblical literature that's included in the Catholic Bible. Listen to 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**, "**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*:

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

In the gospel of Matthew, the author attributes the following strong words to Jesus, who tells the Pharisees that "on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matt. 12:36-37)

No matter how you think this verse should be interpreted, or if you think Jesus even said this (which the Jesus Seminar folks do not because they believe that apocalyptic judgment was alien to the thought of Jesus – *The Five Gospels*, pg. 188) it should at least cause us to think twice before we speak.

Another point that James makes is how inconsistent we are in our speech. He believes that we speak with a forked tongue, speaking out of both sides of our mouth. He states in verse 9, "With the tongue we bless God, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God."

The very same gift of speech that enables us to praise God also enables us to curse our fellow human beings, who like ourselves, are made in God's image. Such a contradiction ought not occur, but it does nevertheless.

James' overall concern is that you and I, as Christians, must learn to control our tongue, even though he acknowledges that it can't be completely tamed, and that we will make many mistakes.

So what can we all do in this regard? 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!

But 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.

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 offers this suggestion: Before you speak, 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! So just for fun this week see if you can go for 24 hours and "speak no evil." And before you speak, also be guided by the words from Ephesians 4:29, **"Do not use harmful words, but only words that build up."**

I want to leave you with the following visual image 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, they cannot be retrieved. Yet when we do misspeak, reconciliation and asking for forgiveness must always be our goal. So set a guard over our mouths, O Lord; keep watch over the door of our lips.**

Amen.