

Are You Sharp-Tongued? (Part One)

by Staff

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The idea of a "sharp tongue" was always humorous to me as a child. Mental pictures of huge pencil sharpeners shaping one's tongue into a spear would play across my mind. Such weird imagery is reminiscent of cartoons drawn by the late Basil Wolverton.

Probably no other part of the body has been used with such effectiveness both to build and destroy human lives throughout history. The tongues of powerful leaders have stirred nations to seemingly impossible feats or inspired episodes of willing personal sacrifice. An individual's expression of love or pain, even in the fewest and simplest of words, can reduce entire rooms of people to tears.

Who has not longed to hear a word from one we deeply love? Yet which of us has not also experienced great anger, frustration, irritation or pain from words expressed by that same person? Conversely, who among us is not also responsible for words of love and kindness that encourage and build—as well as for words that have shaken, hurt, or even devastated another?

Is it not ironic that we most often direct these contrasting words of kindness and cruelty at the same individuals? A wife or husband, a child, a parent, a brother or sister, or a friend. An old song goes: "You always hurt the one you love, the one you shouldn't hurt at all." Words can be the warmest of embraces or the hardest of slaps in the face.

Perhaps this seems a bit like bouncing between extremes. In reality, most of us spend our time somewhere in the middle. The best of us may even lean toward verbal kindness and gentleness. Anyone who spends much time spouting off nasty words is usually devoid of friends and a social life. Or such a person ends up spending his time with someone just as unpleasant as he is. On the other hand, we might call someone who lavishes sugary phrases "gushy" or "silly." We may smile at first, but after a while we pay little attention to them and their words.

Most of us truly spend our time somewhere between "nasty" and "gushy," filling our days with normal conversation, spiced with occasional excitement, irritation or temper. Extremes in behavior are obvious. We recognize them immediately and easily see them in ourselves. It is in the middle of the road where the ruts develop; between the extremes is where habits become ingrained. Our minds fail to see any problems in our speech because everything just feels "normal." Beyond speech, this applies to so much of life: our personalities, our reactions, our senses of humor, our choices and our routines.

We become accustomed to words or expressions others or we use—it may even be how we recognize one another. We know one as "serious-minded," another as "sarcastic," "brutally honest," "depressed," "bubbly," "friendly," "outgoing," "encouraging," "irritable," or "sharp-tongued." Our list of traits describing each other might be as long as the list of individuals themselves, but more importantly, we compose these descriptions most often based on how a person expresses himself. How would others describe you?

James 3

James devotes nearly the entire third chapter of his epistle to the wildness of the tongue and the constant challenge of governing it with godly self-control (James 3:1-12). By taking it verse by verse, we can distill a great deal of wise teaching on the matter of controlling our words.

James begins with a piece of general advice that leads to his main discussion of the use of the tongue: *"My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment"* (verse 1). God holds us all accountable for what we have learned as well as how we instruct others. In the various situations of life, we are often both receiving instruction and giving instruction, so he warns that we need to examine ourselves closely and realize that God holds those accountable who would instruct or correct others, whether toward the brethren, our mates, our children, or our friends.

"For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body" (verse 2). We all make mistakes—and probably a majority of them are verbal. The challenge before us is to learn to control our words and use them effectively in dealing with others. For followers of Christ, "effective use of words" is using them as Christ and the Father do. If we do anything less, we stumble and run the risk of offending.

So great is this challenge that, if we can master our tongue, we have in essence come to master our entire bodies. We could conclude from this that our bodies function as they are instructed. We instruct our bodies and minds through words, whether spoken or thought. In other words, the mind speaks, and the body follows. We lead ourselves, as well as others, with our words.

Though one of the smaller members of the body, it wields power out of proportion to its size. *"Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires"* (verses 3-4).

James makes three interesting comparisons. First, the horse has historically been considered symbolic of strength, endurance, speed, gracefulness, agility, beauty and loyalty. At certain times in history, men have preferred to be buried next to their horses rather than their wives! How many countless times has the horse been the deciding factor in battle, in travel, in survival? Yet this powerful animal can be rendered as docile as a puppy by placing a small bit in its mouth, through which it learns to obey every command its master might give it.

Second, the wind drives and tosses giant ships on the seas as if they were toys. Wind, especially at sea, evokes the fierceness of war, raging into every crevice and overturning everything in its path. Calm it down, however, and it becomes a gentle, cooling, refreshing breeze. Gentle winds can bring pleasant fragrances and invigorating fresh air. Having grown up near the Pacific Ocean, nothing quite stirs me like a fresh wind off the sea. Words, like wind, can be unbelievable forces of destruction that leave nothing and no one standing in their paths. But tamed, slowed down and controlled, they can be refreshing, fragrant breezes across our faces.

Third, rudders manipulate the course of immense ocean vessels with a slight movement of a pilot's hand. Since it is underwater and aft, the rudder of a ship does its work unseen. A passenger is ignorant of its movements most of the time. Yet, when it is in proper working order, the rudder holds more power over the ship than the wind. The wind will blow, toss, even destroy the ship's rigging, but the rudder guides the ship exactly where it directs. James wants us to contemplate—as horses are controlled by bits in the mouth and ships by rudders below the stern—what tools we might use to

control our words, which can be as dynamic as a horse or fierce as the wind. Learning to use that bit and rudder is the challenge!

A Little Member

Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!" (verse 5). He warns that the size of the tongue is no measure of the power it wields. Just as the tiniest of sparks can ignite a great forest fire, the smallest of words, unwisely spoken, can cause immeasurable harm.

James continues the theme of fire in verse 6: *"And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell [gehenna]."* Uncontrolled and untamed, without interference, a fire can spread to leave absolutely nothing untouched, unscorched and unaffected. It is startling to think that fire, of itself, could erase all life from the earth! Were it to burn and spread unaffected by rain, wind, or the efforts of man, it could conceivably cover the earth and burn all life and all oxygen from our world.

Anyone who has witnessed a forest fire and seen flames leap from one treetop to another can grasp the traveling power of fire. James wants us to capture this graphic vision of the potential destruction our words perpetuated in sin can achieve. The iniquity created and perpetuated by words can spread to the ultimate of all damages: death. Solomon writes, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (Proverbs 18:21). Does man have any other ability that can cause such a degree of devastation?

James finishes his description of the tongue by comparing it to the most ferocious beasts, the most lethal aerial predators, the most deadly reptiles, the most frightening sea creatures—and concluding none of them are a match for the savagery of the tongue: *"For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison"* (James 3:7-8).

What hope do we have as men if "no man can tame the tongue"? Mothers once washed their children's mouths out with soap for using bad language or expressing verbal disrespect. The entertainment media have made such words part of our households, schools and workplaces. James' admonishment is not a soap-and-water application or a fatherly reprimand. His statements are blunt instruments: The tongue is as a vicious animal, whose words are capable of causing ultimate destruction, and it is as a creature of such monstrous character that no man can tame it.

As a kid, I loved to play "Cowboys and Indians," and when I heard "no man can tame the tongue," I imagined a tongue running around like a loose calf, with a cowboy on horseback riding frantically, trying to rope it down and tame it. It is a silly scene, but even now when I think about it, how accurately it pictures the feeling of trying to run after my own words and tame them after I have let them loose!

Blessing and Cursing

James 3:9-10 brings us back to our discussion of extremes: *"With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so."* Most of us do not spend

our time speaking blessings continually or pronouncing curses without end; our words and lives are spent somewhere in the middle. We may be nice most of the time, yet on occasion our words will fly out in anger or defensiveness.

No one likes to think of himself as an uncaged brute, wreaking havoc, hurt and destruction on his fellow man by the words he utters. Poets have long expressed themselves with terms of love and adoration. Great orators stir men and women to courage and confidence. No individual truly wants to cut his loved ones down with his words as with a sharp scythe. James makes it clear, though, that we each possess the ability to effect such destruction on each other's lives.

James next asks a few questions designed to give us the proper perspective on this human propensity to speak with a forked tongue: "*Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring can yield both salt water and fresh*" (verses 11-12).

In examining ourselves, perhaps the critical question is "How much salt can be in the water before it tastes salty?" If our words hurt or cut others down only on occasion, does that make us guilty of all that James describes? How much confidence would we have in the kitchen faucet if we never knew whether we would receive salt water or fresh water from it? Would we fill a glass and drink it down or carefully test it each time?

When I was in school, a common practical joke was to dump salt in someone's milk or water, watch him unsuspectingly drink it down and chortle gleefully when the shock emerged on his face as he discovered what he had just consumed. When it happened to me, it was indeed a shock! No matter how many times I had watched it done to another, or participated in doing it, or how hard I laughed at another's "getting it," when my turn for a "salting" took place, it was totally unexpected and *entirely* unpleasant.

It happens like this in our relationships. We expect to trust one another, and we expect the "waters" of our words to be refreshing, to be pleasant, to be loving and positive. When we are hit with the "salt"—words spoken in anger, gossip, merciless criticism, or caustic sarcasm toward us when we may need some kinder attention—it is always a shock and always leaves us feeling distaste in our mouths and betrayal in our hearts.

All of us are capable of all these kinds of communication. We have to ask ourselves: Do I send both fresh and bitter water from my mouth? Does my tongue produce both figs and olives?

This Isn't Me!

For years, I read these scriptures, and I always thought, "I'm not starting forest fires with my words. I'm not viciously devouring people like a roaring beast. I can take this in stride and not worry so much about examining this. After all, these examples are for the extremes: the Adolf Hitlers, the serial criminal minds, the hardened and bitter sinners who retreat from humanity. This isn't me!"

God sometimes focuses our minds on the things we are guilty of by allowing us to experience the same behaviors from others. David did not see himself as he was behaving and affecting others until Nathan described to him another man's behavior (II Samuel 12:1-4). David was so outraged by the man's gross actions and attitude that he, as king, declared the death penalty on him (verses 5-6). Had this been an actual individual, chances are David would have pursued the matter to see the man

brought to justice! However, the man he judged as worthy of death was none other than himself (verse 7).

We experience similar lessons. We are at times brought into the company of people who are offensive to us, whose behavior hurts us, and whose words can cut us and wound us, because something in the experience will teach us what we need to learn. God is allowing us to experience ourselves.

We chuckle at times, observing how someone known for gossiping will howl in dismay when he is gossiped about, or how a person often critical of others is intolerant of criticism directed toward himself. We say about teasing, "Don't give it unless you can take it!" Similarly, we enjoy people who are warm and friendly, and we feel warm and friendly when we are around them. Happy people tend to attract other happy people, while bitter or angry people often find another unhappy person with whom they can share their complaints.

A deeper principle can be employed here: If we look at others' behaviors, we can learn to see ourselves. Job's friends had this opportunity. They saw Job going through his calamities, how miserable he was, and in their care for him, they did their best to find his fault and help him solve his dilemma. In the end, God simply dismissed these three friends and all their long-winded speeches because they failed to recognize the very thing God gave them opportunity to see: They failed to see themselves in Job.

Job was not singled out for this experience because he was Job. He represents mankind, blinded by himself and unable to see the reality of God. Even today, many centuries later, we examine the life and thoughts of Job in an effort to see ourselves in his shoes; we try to learn from his experience by exposing the same faults within us. This aids us by allowing us both to see what we might miss and to change what is incompatible with our Creator.

How often do these opportunities emerge for us to see ourselves in the actions of others? In the past decade, we have had many opportunities to witness the effects of deceitful men upon trusting and unsuspecting people. We have seen people shift allegiances and loyalties but deny doing so by their words. We have seen couples speak words of lifelong devotion only to cast them aside for a new attraction. We have seen friends and family who expressed the deepest of commitments to one another both deny those relationships and turn against one another. We have seen hearts broken by sarcasm and neglect. We have seen the crushing effects of criticism upon those needing reassurance and encouragement.

Most of us do not escape life without being deeply touched by such actions from others. But how incredibly sobering it is to see ourselves in these actions of others, to realize that we are guilty of the very things that may have hurt us deeply! We, too, are responsible for spreading the flames of a fire that devours and destroys all in its path. The evil of our tongues is as limitless as the evil James describes.

A sharp tongue is a weapon, no less as effective as a pointed spear or a sword honed to a razor's edge. A sharp tongue has no place among the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). It does not express love, spread joy or promote peace. It shows no patience, kindness or goodness in its words. It betrays faithfulness and gentleness, and most of all, it shows no measure of self-control.

My sharp tongue has been a contradiction to the convictions I have expressed nearly all my life. I never saw it until I had to come face to face with the jabs, slices and pricks of other sharp tongues, and to feel the fires they started within me. I would beg the Father for understanding, of why such communication should exist and why I should receive it with such bitterness—until I finally saw, as David did, that I am the guilty one.