

Are You Sharp-Tongued? (Part Two)

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From the beginning, humanity has found many ways to sin. Similarly, men have developed various methods to curb sin among themselves, whether through laws, fines, prisons or executions. Some methods have been more successful than others, and some have not worked at all.

James 3 is a commentary and admonition on an area of a person's life that no one has successfully tamed: the tongue. God has created us with an instrument that can sing His praises yet curse His name. Our tongues compliment and criticize, comfort and offend, instruct and deceive. Since giving our lives to God, however, we have embarked on a lifelong task to tune this instrument to harmonize with God's melody. And what an arduous and intensive task that is!

The first twelve verses of James 3 inform us how strong and wild this "little member" is in each of us. Like a bit controls a horse, or a rudder turns a huge ship, the tongue has the ability to do things far beyond its size. It can start wars, condemn innocents, ruin lives and careers, separate friends and family, and worst of all, lead others to throw away their salvation. It is so vital that we control the use of our tongue!

Related Material

Most modern translations start a new paragraph with James 3:13. Though it is a new section, James must have intended his next instructions to relate directly to his graphic words about the violent force of the tongue.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (verses 13-18)

The apostle reveals here the nature of "the bit and the rudder" that control the horse and the ship. It is spiritual wisdom and understanding that descend upon us directly from God above that empowers us to keep our tongue in check. As earthly men, we have no means or strength to control this wild beast that resides in our tongue and expresses itself in our words. But as children of God, endowed with the power of His spirit and wisdom of His character, we can gain control over this member within. Not only that, we can use it in service to His will and purpose. If we examine our words and run them carefully through the filter of the fruit of the Spirit, we stand a far better chance of releasing the fresh waters that give life and restraining the salt waters that cause destruction.

We can derive several points from these verses to aid us in our quest to tame our tongues:

1. Speak in meekness.

Meekness is not weakness. It is knowing at all times where we stand with God, fully realizing who He is and the nature of His power in contrast to ourselves, His creation. Joshua cried out in confidence for the army of Israel to go forward; His confidence was not in himself or his leadership but totally in his awareness of God's purpose in his life, God's law to live by, and God's sovereignty over him. He was, after all, clay in the Potter's hands. If we keep this in mind, we will never have cause to feel better, more righteous, more successful, or more honorable than another.

Meekness is the ability to esteem others better than ourselves and to allow God to use us as He wills. II Timothy 2:20 shows us that God will honor whom He will. To seek honor for ourselves or to feel worthy of honor is a dead end, and it will taint how we communicate to others. We will naturally look down on them, disrespect them, overlook them, and criticize them.

Test: If we have experienced dishonor, perhaps we need to look closely to see where we have dishonored others. We all stand guilty as charged.

2. Give no place to envy.

The second trait James mentions is "bitter envy." If "envy" is desire for what another has, "bitter envy" must mean a person wants something so much that he is angry and hateful over it. Bitterness is a child of anger and resentment. Satan takes great delight in burdening our hearts with these harmful emotions. Unprovoked or quick-tempered anger is a hallmark of our modern cities, which resound in the night with the bark of gunfire and the howl of sirens.

Bitter envy takes jealousy to the next step by adding resentment and anger, and from it emerges words that stab, cut, tear down, refute and diminish. We use these to reduce the stature of another so we may seem to stand taller. A talebearer or gossip only wants his listener to think less of another so that he might think more of him.

We can be envious because another sinned and "got away with it." We can envy those who have more, whom we feel do not deserve it. Envy often springs up when we receive unwarranted correction and someone else, who deserves it, does not. We can feel envy when one receives attention we desire for ourselves or when we fail to receive hard-earned recognition.

Envious words are bitter words: They are pointed and sharp, but their target is subtle. On the surface, they may even sound righteous, but in reality, they manipulate thinking in the speaker's favor.

Test: Do our words build or burn? If we build our stature by burning another's, we are standing on a platform of ashes that will crumble and topple us anytime. Only after I was gossiped about repeatedly did I begin to see my own words of envy expressed. How foolish it had made me look, trying to stand taller on a pile of ashes!

3. Self-seekers end up lonely.

A speaker once said, "Young people feel like they have to 'find themselves,' so they search this and that, here and there, all in an effort to 'find themselves.' So, what if you spend all this time and energy to find yourself, and in the end you discover nobody's home?"

Humorous but so true! The loneliest people on the planet are those focused on themselves. If I am brutally honest in recalling the lonelier times of my life, I was lonely mostly because I was focused too much on myself. We learn to recognize self-focused people by their constant talking about themselves, their achievements, their experiences, their things, their opinions. They drone on endlessly.

One author writes, "People sometimes talk about themselves because there is nothing else rattling around in their heads." Such people usually have a better way of doing almost everything, yet one often wonders why they are not more successful in life. They ache to express an opinion and believe in their abilities so wholeheartedly that they must be restrained from taking charge. One learns that, when around them, a person's value is significant only in regard to their personal plans, and they will seldom alter their course to fit another in.

Test: How much of our needs and desires fills our agenda each day? Conversely, how much room do we make for others? I used to say with pride, "I usually don't do anything I don't want to do." I meant that I was master of my choices and in control of my life, but I was actually saying, "My plans, ideas, and schedule are far more important than anyone else's."

4. Boasts and lies are subtle, verbal garnish.

I like to tell stories, and my family has told me more than once that I sometimes exaggerate things. I always justified it as good humor and in fun. I have come to learn, however, the exaggerations, boasts or little white lies that "spice up" stories or humor can often hurt and damage others. Sometimes someone hearing the story remembers the situation, and it was not as funny or, from his perspective, happened some other way.

Boasting is usually successful only when another is put down, and though everyone may laugh, the victim may be recoiling from what feels like jabs and insults. Sarcasm and teasing often produce the same results. James refers to boasting and lying as assaults against the truth. One may not realize how true this is until he feels the sting of sarcasm directed toward him. I love to tease and be teased, but I am realizing increasingly that people can become carried away in their words, violate the truth and do severe damage.

An old saying runs, "Everyone loves a clown but no one wants to be his best friend." Laughter helps people to relax and bond more closely together in shared experiences, but it is good to learn to look around to see if someone is no longer laughing. Many years ago, a dinner party with several good friends also included a minister and his wife who had just been transferred to our city. It was our first occasion to dine with them, and it was a very pleasant evening. Most of us, knowing each other well, had a long evening teasing, joking, laughing and putting each other down. We never noticed anything amiss with the new guests.

The next week at church, however, we heard a sermon about the damages of put-down humor and how it has absolutely no place in a Christian's lifestyle. The new minister talked about how even the most subtle humor can tear relationships down and cause doubts about another's affection or respect. Such humor includes referring to one's wife as "the old ball and chain" or "the biscuit-burner." Such names and teasing—as "good fun" as they may seem—diminish our friends and family, do not express the kind affection we really feel for them, are not true, and thus are lies. A Christian should never lie, not even in fun. All of us were shame-faced and sorry we had left such a negative impression, and we apologized to him, his wife and to each other.

Test: Are we teasing and boasting to another's pleasure or his discomfort? Is it true and factual? If it is not, it is a lie, and no matter how funny it is, it is sin. Sarcasm belongs in the same category: If it is not true, it is a lie. Even if it is true, how are we expressing it? Does sarcasm express love, gentleness, peace and mercy? Can we tease one another righteously? I would like to think so, but I am still working on learning how. Without God's Spirit guiding our words, our tongues remain subtle, merciless and destructive weapons.

James concludes by telling us directly that these forms of speaking are not godly wisdom, but "earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there" (verses 15-16). The fallout from communication based on our human, selfish motivations is evident about us. The state of the world and the way it functions are often actions and reactions of crushing blows of words. Governments, businesses, sports teams, even schools, churches and neighborhoods communicate with each other in wars of words. Our world—this "Information Age"—is practically devoid of godly, righteous speech, relying on the sensual, material, selfish pursuits that drive Satan himself. How much does it affect us and our communications with one another?

5. Godliness is the only standard to judge our speech.

James concludes chapter 3 by describing the wisdom that comes only from Almighty God. It is the bit and rudder by which we can effectively gain control of our speech. Godly wisdom begins in the heart, replacing the self-indulgent human motivations with purity, peacefulness, gentleness, yieldedness, mercy, goodness, fairness and sincerity. Words that employ these godly attributes contrast to the raging winds that fan flames of war toward total destruction. The apostle does not allow us any time to spend in the middle; our words should be fresh and trustworthy, without the bitter and shocking elements of a sharp tongue.

In Matthew 12:34, Christ says, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." The real issue is that our words reveal the essence of our hearts. They will tell whether we are motivated by the earthly wisdom of human desire or by the godly wisdom of the fruit of the Spirit. Unkind words reveal an unkind heart, and kind words, a kind heart.

Must the Truth Hurt?

Among the more dangerous pitfalls in life concerning the use of the tongue are the ex-cuses we use to justify and continue habitual behaviors. Notice this partial list of such excuses:

- » "Honesty is the best policy," or "I'm only being honest."
- » "The truth hurts."
- » "Wrong is wrong, and it must be corrected."
- » "I've been through a lot, so it comes out in how I express myself."
- » "It's just my sense of humor. Don't take it seriously."

Unfortunately, each of these excuses is probably painfully familiar. If they are, we must work on examining how we speak to others and what motivates it.

We can express honesty bluntly or kindly. In the Gospels, Christ is blunt with sin but kind and patient with sinners. We sometimes struggle to learn that honesty must be reciprocal for others to respect it. Can we take someone being as honest with us as we are with him? What a challenge! Christ instructs us to deal with each other as we would like them to deal with us, and this most certainly applies to how we communicate and deal with issues when they arise.

Matthew 18:15 instructs us to deal honestly with a brother over an offense, and not to tell it to others. This is also a great challenge. When irritated or offended, the first thing we want to do is to talk about it! We want to receive encouragement, comfort, understanding, or just get it off our chests. It is critical, though, for us to temper our honesty with the loving attributes of God's Spirit, and solve our differences with words that heal, encourage and enable greater affection to grow. Honesty may at times require forgiveness and forbearance that neglect and lying might let slide by.

Every time someone says, "The truth hurts," it never feels positive or encouraging. Our Savior never says this, but in John 8:32, He says, "The truth shall make you free." Do we have the wisdom to "free" others by blasting them with truth, or worse yet, our versions of the truth? A burdened heart carrying hurt and anguish in the name of truth is not set free but imprisoned and immobilized. Only God has perfect insight, judgment and wisdom to use the truth for another's ultimate good, and we must grow toward His perfection in this.

If we hurt one another with our words of truth, we are neglecting every aspect of what James describes as "wisdom from above." Truth must be expressed in love, forgiveness, mercy, and peace. We must at times call a spade a spade when it comes to sin or serious error. Sometimes we must stand aside when another departs from truth to pursue another course. But we should never use the banner of truth to attack one another as brothers and sisters. We must deliver the truth in peace and righteousness, not in the rage of war.

Righteous indignation is frequently an excuse to make a speech that draws attention to oneself. Conversely, Christ instructs the apostles to shake the dust off their shoes and quietly walk away from a city that would not receive them. Many of us can think of times when something was not right—someone was behaving badly or an activity was improper. Whenever someone spoke in "righteous indignation" about it, the words would fly, and a war broke out. Such civil wars never ended positively. How different they may have turned out if a peaceful approach had accompanied the disapproving statement!

Righteous indignation often arises when we feel we have no control over the situation, yet we do not like what is going on. We must remember that Christ has promised to fight our battles. He knows our distress, especially if the behavior in question is truly wrong. He will take care of the sinner, and we must remember that "with what judgment [we] judge, [we] will be judged" (Matthew 7:2).

Pain and Humor

We live in a society absorbed with its own feelings. Today, people are addicted to seeing themselves as victims and demanding special tolerance, favor, acceptance or gifts. Yet a mind concerned with its own painful experiences, rejections, mistakes or emotional hurts is one that refuses healing. These emotions comfort like old bandages, and many are afraid to see what is underneath. Some cling to them because they give special "handicap" privileges, and they use them to justify what they believe, say or do. It is a demonic delusion because it only perpetuates the pain and denies the freedom or forgiveness that God offers.

Pain should serve to teach and mature us, not box us into the darkness. Hebrews 2:10 says Christ learned by the things He suffered—His pain was His teacher. Likewise, our painful experiences can teach us the contrasts between this human life and the glorious life for which God is preparing us.

However, a mind that feels pain speaks pain, and, if left unchecked, will eventually drive others away. Sharing a painful experience with a confidant is empowering and emotionally bonding, but continually sharing it with anyone who will listen deludes us into thinking that it is good for us when it is actually a kind of psychosis. Preoccupation with personal pain denies the fruit of the Spirit. It brings no peace or joy or love, etc.

Proverbs 23:7 teaches, "For as [one] thinks in his heart, so is he." It is easy to become caught up in life's painful experiences, and some of us have enough of them to fill novels. Yet Paul instructs the Philippians not to dwell on themselves so much: "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). At times, the best way to put aside pain is to care for the needs of someone else. Positive and outgoing communication provides plenty of time to talk about painful experiences, but it does not allow them to become a way of life. When someone asks, we can feel free to express some of the painful events of our lives, but we should show interest and concern for the other's experiences and provide encouragement as needed.

Finally, we excuse much misuse of the tongue as humor. As mentioned before, we must determine whether our humor is building or tearing down. Is it to lighten another's heart with laughter or to make him the butt of a joke? Most of us never know when our teasing and joking goes beyond what another person may enjoy into the realm of discomfort, so we have a difficult time judging our unique brand of humor.

Perhaps we can allow Jesus Christ to be our guide. He did not bang off one-liners at the Pharisees or lace His sermons with put downs of the Samaritans. His life expressed joy but not at the expense of others. He always showed remarkable respect even for His enemies. Yet it is obvious from many of the things He created that He has a sense of humor, particularly man and his proclivity to find humor even in the worst situations.

Paul gives the Philippians a set of standards for their thoughts, a list that certainly applies to speech as well:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. (Philippians 4:8)

What we think about will reveal itself in what we say. A mind fed by godly wisdom can follow this advice and control that most wild of all members, the tongue. As we grow in that great wisdom, our words will become fresh and reliable. We will lose the sharp edge from our tongues. Our speech will not be duplicitous, like grapes growing on a fig tree or bitter waters emerging from a freshwater spring.

Once we emerge out of the ruts of human habit in our communication, we will truly begin to express what is true, noble, pure, lovely and good. Our words will convey virtue and offer praise to God, uplifting those who hear us. As James ends his third chapter, "Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (verse 18), so will be the results of our efforts. Righteousness will come to fruition in an atmosphere of peace.