

# The Tongue: Our Tool Of Power

by Staff

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*"Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit."  
— Proverbs 18:21*

A few weeks ago, I received an email from a longtime friend that started me thinking. The subject of the email asked, "If you could go back in time, what would be the one thing or event that you would want to change?" After I pondered the message in the email for a while, I thought back to my late teens to a sermon given by my pastor at the time, Ken Smylie. The sermon he gave that Sabbath in late summer 1982 holds just as true today as it did then—and just as it has for the past 6,000 years. He began:

There is a muscle in the human body that can cause more heartache, more pain, more mistrust, and more anger, than all the other muscles put together. It is so powerful that it has caused betrayals, murders, wars, and riots. It is a factor in the destruction of friendships, relationships, and families, and is a *major* factor in most separations and divorces.

After reading the email and thinking back to that sermon, I conducted a brief survey of some of my older employees. I asked them, "If you could go back twenty, fifteen, or even ten years in your life, is there one single event that you would want to change?" Everyone answered that there were actually *many* events that they would change, but after focusing on the question at hand, almost everyone said, yes, there was at least one event that they could remember quite vividly. Most of those asked remembered an event that involved something that had been *said* that caused them or someone they love severe strife or heartache. Words spoken in the heat of the moment had left scars, ruined friendships, destroyed relationships, or even alienated family members.

The muscle that Ken Smylie described is the tongue, and for 6,000 years, it has been the tool men have used to inflict the most pain. However, the tongue is not solely to blame because it is only a tool of the heart (Matthew 12:34). God tells us in Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" In Matthew 15:18-19, Christ echoes this: "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies."

Remember the old children's saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me"? In most cases, this is a lie. The hurtful words that we speak can create scars that last longer than any physical scar that sticks and stones may cause. The human body is quite resilient in healing itself from physical injury in a matter of days or weeks, but it may take years—or in some cases, a lifetime—to heal the injuries words cause.

## **Using God's Gift**

God created in man the ability to communicate with the spoken word. He gave us the tongue as a tool to use to speak with each other. It enables us to tell each other how we feel and what we think, as well as to convey words of wisdom, hope, encouragement, and love. He gave us the ability to worship Him in speech, to communicate His laws and His ways.

Unfortunately, however, this gift from God is all too often used by Satan for his own plans. The Devil hates God and His laws and ways, and he does everything possible to destroy relationships. He starts rumors and encourages prejudices. He will do anything and everything that he can to create differences between people and to get people upset with one another. At every opportunity, he tries to create stumbling blocks for God's people by fracturing their relationships with family, friends, and brethren. This way, their minds become focused on their differences, rather than on the ways of God.

There are so many ways that we can inflict pain on each other with our words. We need to remember that God has given us a few principles to help us to be mindful of each other and to refrain from hurting one another.

### ***Treat others the way you want to be treated.***

We start teaching our children from a young age to treat others as they would want to be treated, to speak as they would want to be spoken to, and to share as they would want to be shared with. However, as adults, we sometimes forget this basic instruction. If we ask ourselves, "Do I follow the teachings of my childhood?" most people in the world would probably answer, "No, I don't." As children of God, what is our answer?

We know what it should be. In Matthew 7:12, Christ exhorts us to follow this principle of respect: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

We all want to be treated with respect. Everyone desires to be treated as someone of value or worth. To be respected is a great human need. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves, "Do we always extend to others the same level of respect that we desire for ourselves?"

### ***Treat people as unique individuals.***

God, as we know, has created tremendous diversity on this earth. The many trees, animals, plants, and foods He has created testify to His delight in variety.

He has created that same diversity in people. We have many races, sizes, shapes, and attitudes. No two people on the face of the earth are alike. God looks upon His children, each of us, as unique, special beings and treats each of us separately and distinctively. Even though we are to become like Him, one in Spirit and character, we are all very different (see Romans 12:3-8; I Corinthians 12). Each of His children has unique trials, personalities, background, experiences, and needs. Nowhere in His Word does He require us to become proverbial yellow pencils in order to enter His Kingdom.

Because of this, we must remember that a piece of advice, encouragement, or criticism that works for one may not always work for another. We need to tailor our speech to the individual's need, attitude, understanding, and circumstance (Colossians 4:6).

***Do not be judgmental toward others.***

Now, we are to make discernments, evaluations, decisions, and judgments, but being judgmental is an attitude, one that tends to condemn others. When we first notice an individual, we have a propensity to judge him immediately based on his physical appearance or behavior.

To illustrate this point, the following story is worth reiterating:

A minister is observed going into a bar in the late afternoon. After an hour or so, he exits the bar, trips, stumbles, falls, and is seen lying on the sidewalk. Our immediate conclusion might be that he is stone-cold, falling-down drunk. Our immediate action might be to run and tell others what we *think* we know.

In reality, the truth could be this: At the late hour at which he exited the bar from a counseling session with an old friend who works there, the setting sun was reflected straight into his eyes by a window from across the street. The glare temporarily blinded him, causing him to miss seeing an uneven section of concrete on the sidewalk. His toe caught on the raised lip, and he tripped, stumbled, and fell onto the sidewalk, hitting his head and knocking himself unconscious.

In many instances, we judge situations where we have no concept whatsoever of the struggles, the battles, or the experiences the person may have been through—and may still be going through. There are two sides to every coin and at least two sides to every contention. We must learn to take a deep breath, step back, and evaluate these occasions objectively and realistically, gathering as much pertinent information as possible before we reach a conclusion.

In Matthew 7:1-5, Christ exhorts us:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why

do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how do you say to your brother, "Let me remove the speck out of your eye"; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

It is inevitable that, at some point in our lives, someone will say something that will cause us pain, whether it comes from family, friends, or even our brethren in the church. It is at that point that we must choose how to deal with it. Either we will let it consume our thoughts and emotions, or we will follow what Christ commands us to do.

***Pray for, love, and forgive your enemies.***

Jesus instructs us in Matthew 5:44, "But I say to you, love your enemies." We might think for a moment, "Who are our enemies?" Many of us believe we have no enemies. However, an enemy might be someone we thought was a friend, a family member with a long-held grudge, or even a brother or sister in Christ. An enemy can be someone we feel does not like us and has hurt or mistreated us. Whether we consider them enemies or not, there is no denying their hostility. In the same verse, Jesus goes on to expand His list of hostiles: "Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."

If we have been in the church any length of time, we have all been through this particular trial and test as we grow to love one another as brethren. The church is just like a big family, where people can be hurt or feel mistreated in one way or another. Conflicts, misunderstandings, and slights—real or imagined—occur in every group of human beings, Christian or not.

It is very difficult to "love," "bless," "do good," and "pray" for a person who has hurt us deeply. It goes against our human nature to behave positively toward someone we feel deserves shame, censure, and punishment! Putting this principle into practice is a high hurdle for any Christian to clear.

Yet, as Christians, we know that forgiveness is one of the keys that Jesus taught for healing. Not only is it a teaching—it is also a command. Christ admonishes us to keep this charge in His model prayer in Matthew 6:12: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Alternatively, it could be said, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us" (see Luke 11:4).

Jesus comments further on this in Matthew 6:14-15: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

In Matthew 18:21-22, we find another example: "Then Peter came to Him and said, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not

say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." In other words, we must always be willing to forgive a brother.

## **The Power of Words**

The following story illustrates just how powerful our words can be:

A group of frogs were traveling through the woods one day, and two of them fell into a deep pit. All of the other frogs gathered around the pit to see what had become of their friends.

When they saw how deep the pit was, they told the unfortunate frogs that they could never get out. It is just too deep. But the two frogs ignored the comments and tried to jump up out of the pit.

The other frogs kept jumping and yelling and telling them to stop, that they were just as good as dead.

Finally, after dozens of attempts to jump out of the pit, one of the frogs took heed to what the other frogs were saying and simply gave up. He fell down and died.

The other frog, though, continued to jump just as hard as he could.

Once again, the crowd of frogs yelled at him to stop the pain and suffering and just die. But seeing his friends jumping and yelling, the last frog jumped even harder and finally made it out.

The other frogs asked him, "Why did you continue jumping? Didn't you hear us?"

The frog explained to them that he was nearly deaf. He thought they were encouraging him the entire time!

This story teaches us that the tongue, the spoken word, has the power of life and death (Proverbs 18: 21). An encouraging word to someone who is down can lift him up and help him make it through the day (Proverbs 10:11; 15:23; 16:24; 24:26; 25:11). On the other hand, a destructive word can cause him to give up and quit (Job 19:2).

Anyone can speak words that rob another of the will to continue in difficult times, but special is the individual who will take the time to encourage another.

How we choose to deal with one another is up to us. As we grow in brotherly love, we need to remember the tongue and its awesome power, as James 3:2-10 (*The Amplified Bible*) attests:

For we all often stumble and fall and offend in many things. And if anyone does not offend in speech [that is, never says the wrong things], he is a fully developed character and a perfect man, able to control his whole body and to curb his entire nature. If we set bits in the horses' mouths to make them obey us, we can turn their whole bodies about. Likewise, look at the ships: though they are so great and are driven by rough winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the impulse of the helmsman determines. Even so the tongue is a little member, and it can boast of great things. See how much wood or how great a forest a tiny spark can set ablaze! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is a world of wickedness set among our members, contaminating and depraving the whole body and setting on fire the wheel of birth, being itself ignited by hell (that is Gehenna). For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea animal, can be tamed and has been tamed by human genius. But the human tongue can be tamed by no man. It is a restless, undisciplined, and irreconcilable evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who were made in God's likeness! Out of the same mouth come forth blessing and cursing. These things, my brethren, ought not to be so.