

Keep Your Tongue

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James 3:

Story of garbage delivered to a man's house. We'll call him Mr. Brown.

Mr. Brown heard the clatter of a wheelbarrow in front of his house. He stepped to the window, wondering who it could be. It was one of his neighbors with his wheelbarrow loaded with all sorts of garbage. He turned into the yard and approached the house. His collection of rotten apples, tin cans, ashes, and what not, contrasted strongly with the neat lawn and beautiful flower beds.

"Good morning, Mr. Brown. I've brought you a load of garbage and I'm wondering where you wish to have it dumped." Mr. Brown's eyes opened widely with surprise. "Where do I wish that stuff? Have you gone crazy? Do you see any signs telling you to dump garbage here?"

The neighbor pointed to a beautiful flower bed. "There is room for it there," he suggested. "I believe that's a good place to dump it." Mr. Brown gasped, "You dump that stuff here and see what happens!"

"Would you prefer it in the middle of the lawn?" the neighbor asked. "Say, what's the meaning of all this?" Mr. Brown was getting pretty irate. "The best thing you can do is to get that stuff out of here."

The neighbor nodded. "I really believe this stuff should be taken to the garbage dump, too. But I thought if you could dump your garbage where you pleased, I certainly should have the same privilege."

"What do you mean?" Mr. Brown asked.

"Let me refresh your memory. You'll understand what I mean. Do you remember talking yesterday afternoon with some boys? Before you left them you dumped a foul story on them, and also some profane language. Those boys go to church where I attend. We spend time and effort to keep their lives pure and clean, and they are as much a source of pride to us as your beautiful lawn and flower beds are to you. Yet you dumped your foul garbage on the minds of those boys. Having done so, you laughed and went away, leaving the garbage there to breed evil thoughts and possibly evil deeds."

"You do not wish your flowers buried beneath a pile of garbage; neither do we wish the purity of those boys spoiled by your offensive

language. You could remove this stuff from your lawn, but it is more difficult to remove evil thoughts which have been sown in the mind.”

(This was a paraphrased story by L. Wightman.)

Youngsters look up to adults as their ideal. Great care must be exercised in our speech so that this type of garbage is not dumped upon them.

God’s emphasis on sins of speech

Two of the Ten Commandments refer to sins of the tongue.

- Exo. 20:7, “*Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.*”
- Exo. 20:16, “*Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*”

Of the seven things God hates, three have to do with the tongue.

- Prov. 6:17, “*A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,*”
- Prov. 6:19, “*A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.*”

One of Christ’s warnings that is given little thought by many is:

- Matt. 12:36, “*But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.*”

The words reveal the man

Did you know that the words you speak reveal the type of person you are?

Even a person’s accent often betrays one’s geographical origin. For instance, Peter’s Galilean accent gave him away. Matt. 26:73, “*And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee.*”

Just as the accent indicates one’s geographical origin, so speech betrays the condition of one’s heart.

By examining the tongue of a patient, the physician can diagnose the diseases of the body.

By examination of the tongue the Lord can diagnose the diseases of the spirit.

The Great Physician said: Matt. 12:34, “*O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.*”

Think before you speak

James 1:19, “*Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.*”

Someone once said a person should always think twice before he speaks once.

Look at how God designed the human body. Humans have two ears, but only one tongue. The ears are exposed; the tongue is walled in by the teeth and mouth. Ears are not made to shut; the mouth is.

Poem by Edward Hersey Richards:

A wise old own lived in an oak;
The more he saw the less he spoke;
The less he spoke the more he heard:
Why can't we all be like that bird?

A saying that is true by an unknown author: “Many things are opened by mistake, but none so frequently as one's mouth.”

Thermometer and Thermostat.

The thermometer records temperature; the thermostat controls the temperature. The tongue combines both the thermometer and thermostat in the same device.

The tongue as a thermometer. Just as the thermometer declares the temperature level, so one's conversation reveals the level of his spirituality. Speech exposes the condition of the heart. Examples:

- Swearing discloses a profane heart.
- Impure stories reveal a filthy heart.
- Murmurings come from a thankless heart.

- Criticism unveils a jealous heart.

The tongue as a thermostat.

Remember, the thermometer registers temperature, but in no way regulates it. The thermostat governs temperature. The tongue not only measures moral condition, but it also is a determining instrument.

The tongue is spoken in terms of bit and rudder. James 3:2-4, *“For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.”*

A bit determines the course of a horse, making him turn to the left or right, letting him run fast or jolting him to a stop. A rudder guides the ship’s course, turning it in any desired direction.

Similarly, proper use of the tongue can guide a person safely through hazardous circumstances.

Sins of the tongue are numerous

I shall attempt to cover some of the most common.

Swearing.

God warned the people of Israel against this. Exo. 20:7, *“Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”*

The Lord’s displeasure with cursing was made plain by His instructions to Moses. Lev. 24:14, *“Bring forth him that hath cursed without the camp; and let all that heard him lay their hands upon his head, and let all the congregation stone him.”*

I’m sure cursing was rare back then, considering the punishment.

Profanity is not a mark of toughness. Rather it is an indication of weakness and stupidity. Those who profane God's name indicate their lack of self-control.

General George Washington felt that God's favor would not be on his troops if swearing was practiced. He said in his orderly book of August 3, 1776: "I am sorry to be informed that the foolish and wicked practice of profane swearing, a vice heretofore little known in the American army, is growing into fashion. I hope that the officers will, by example and influence, endeavor to check it; and that both they and the men will reflect, that we have but little hope of the blessing of heaven on our arms, if we insult Him by our impiety and folly. Added to this it is a vice so mean and low... that every man of sense and character detests and despises it."

When Adlai Stevenson ran against Eisenhower for the presidency he made a serious error that cost him the office he so wanted. During the political convention when he was speaking a group of some of his supporters got in front of the stage and interrupted his speech by chanting "Adlai for president!" and waving political banners. Adlai was so upset at this interruption that he let out a stream of swearing that was heard not only in the convention, but all over the United States because he did it front of a live mike. Many say that this very serious mistake of the tongue cost him the election.

Swearing is neither sensible nor worthwhile. The person who swears lays aside his character, inflicts pain upon those close to him, violates the scriptures, and tarnishes his soul.

The name of the Lord is a strong tower. A wise person will call upon Him instead of cursing Him when he has difficulty. Prov. 18:10, "*The name of the LORD is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.*"

A few things to think about concerning swearing:

- Does it please our parents?
- Is it a mark of manliness?
- Does it prove that I have self-control?
- Does it indicate how clearly my mind operates?
- Does it make my conversation pleasing to everybody?
- Does it impress people that I have more than an ordinary education?
- Is it a sign of culture and refinement?

- Does it make me a desirable person in society?
- Does it honor God?

What God's word says of the tongue: James 3:9-11, "*Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?*"

How mysterious it would be to get fresh water and salt water from the same spring. It is as puzzling for blessing and cursing to come from the same tongue.

How strange for the tongue to speak praise one moment and then spew poisonous words of profanity the next.

Gossiping and talebearing.

Lev. 19:16, "*Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour; I am the LORD.*"

Do you know what a gossip is? The gossip is a "reputation assassin."

A poet, Beth Day, has pointed out that one's thoughts should pass three gates of gold before they are spoken.

If I am tempted to reveal
A tale someone to me has told
About another, let it pass,
Before I speak, three gates of gold.

Three narrow gates: First, is it true?
Then, is it needful? In my mind
Give truthful answer, and the next
Is last and narrowest, Is it kind?

And if, to reach my lips at last,
It passes through these gateways three,
Then I may tell the tale, nor fear
What the result of speech may be.

Is it true?

One should not relate any story about another unless he is absolutely certain that it is true. Exo. 20:16, "*Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*"

David asked God, “*Who shall dwell in thy holy hill?*” God’s reply was: Psa. 15:3, “*He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour.*”

Many will pass on a story about another without taking time to verify the accuracy of it. One should say nothing about another that he would be unwilling to write out and sign.

Most people even have a tendency to add a little to a tale before passing it on. By the time it has circulated several times it doesn’t even resemble the original report.

Is it needful?

One’s remarks about others should serve a purpose. Even some things about others which are true are better left unsaid.

Prov. 17:9, “*He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends.*”

Just as picking a flower to pieces, petal by petal, will destroy its beauty, so the dissection of another’s character, by whispering and gossip, may shatter his reputation.

Is it kind?

Prov. 18:8, “*The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.*”

Nothing hurts so deeply as the unthoughtful words of a gossip.

The danger of gossip is multiplied by the fact that one has absolutely no control over his words after they leave his lips. Gossip is like feathers blowing in the wind. They scatter in all directions and you can never recollect them all if you wanted.

Contentious words.

Contention is sometimes unavoidable. But usually it can be averted by proper control of the tongue. This is like guiding a ship through hazardous waters; caution is needed.

Prov. 15:1, “*A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.*”

When a wasp buzzes around your head, if you do not bother it, it will probably leave you alone. But try to swat it and you are likely to get stung.

There are some remarks which will invariably “stir up a hornet’s nest”. The following clichés are dangerous, and you should bite your tongue before saying any of these:

- “I wouldn’t let him get away with that.”
- “She’s just jealous, that’s all.”

- “She thinks she’s somebody now, but I remember her when...”
- “Don’t be mad if I tell you this, but...”
- “I think you should know what she said about you.”

Learn the art of remaining calm when a storm of contention is in the making. Prov. 16:32, *“He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.”*

Soft words will stop arguments. A gentle response indicates that the party replying will not engage in battle.

No fight can ensue because a fight demands two people or more. Would you go into a boxing match where a boxer is shadowboxing with himself?

Lying.

Lying ranks high among the vices of human beings. Many feel there is nothing serious about lying, unless one gets caught. But God says:

- Prov. 12:22, *“Lying lips are abomination to the LORD: but they that deal truly are his delight.”*
- Prov. 6:17, *“A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,”*

If one always speaks the truth he need not worry about remembering what he has said because the truth will always be the same. But when one lies he finds that one lie leads to another until he finally becomes hopelessly entangled.

Lying, unless forgiven, will keep a person out of heaven. Rev. 21:27, *“And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”*

Jesting.

- Matt. 12:36, *“But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.”*
- Eph. 5:4, *“Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks.”*

Some have concluded from these passages that all joking is wrong and that humor must be completely shunned by Christians. But the word “idle” literally means, “free from work, not working, inactive”.

An idle word is one which isn't working or producing. It is a weed in the garden of speech.

Humor has its rightful place in life. Prov. 17:22, "*A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones.*"

Words of humor can refresh the tired mind. Such words are not idle words.

However, the kind of jesting the Bible speaks of is wrong. For instance, it is sinful to make fun of, or take advantage of a person's handicap.

- Lev. 19:14, "*Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the LORD.*"
- Prov. 17:5, "*Whoso mocketh the poor reproacheth his Maker: and he that is glad at calamities shall not be unpunished.*"
- Children mocked Elijah's bald head. 2 Kings 2:23-24, "*And he went up from thence unto Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head. And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the LORD. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them.*"

Conclusion - Justified or condemned

Matt. 12:36-37, "*But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.*"

