

THE TAMING OF THE TONGUE



According to the biological half-brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, it's easier to tame a tiger than to get your tongue under control. It's not just the lyrics of current songs, filled with sexism and violence against women. It's not so much the vile language in certain movies. It's the language husbands and wives use with each other when they get angry and abusive with their words. It's the hateful things children say to or about their parents. It's the sort of stuff people spew at one another in the workplace over a real or perceived slight and the

invectives we hurl at somebody who whips into a parking place in front of us or cuts one of us off in traffic.

Why, it even happens in churches. James wasn't writing to the world when he wrote his epistle. The things he says about the tongue in chapter 3 are meant for Christians to hear. He uses several impressive analogies to drive home his point about how dangerous the tongue can be. It is like a spirited, violent horse that needs reining in by bit and bridle (v.3). Out-of-control speech is like a ship broken loose from its moorings and can crash a person's entire life on the rocks; the captain must keep his hand on the helm at all times (v.4). Moral contradictions are sometimes found in the tongue, as when it spews both blessings and cursings from the same mouth (vs.9-11).

In The Message Bible, our text warns: "This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue — it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer."

The Tongue Is a Fire

Of all the figures used in James 3, none is more expressive than that of the fire and the forest. "Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts," says James. "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

This news story from a few years ago sounds like it comes from a Bible commentary on James:

RAPID CITY, South Dakota (AP) — A Wyoming woman has been arrested on suspicion of setting a fire that burned 83,000 acres in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

Janice Stevenson, 46, faces a federal charge of setting timber on fire on U.S. Forest Service property, U.S. Attorney Ted L. McBride said Friday.

If convicted, she faces up to five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. She also could be billed for the cost of the blaze, which could run into the hundreds of millions of dollars, authorities said.

Investigators said Stevenson admitted that she stopped by a

road August 24, lit a cigarette and tossed the burning match on the ground, according to U.S. Forest Service agents.

"Rather than putting the fire out, she looked at it and decided to leave the area," a court affidavit said.

Doesn't that final line sound all too familiar: "Rather than putting the fire out, she looked at it and decided to leave the area"? Garbled information started circulating in your office about one of the people working there. Somebody who was tired and stressed out at the end of the day made an insensitive remark to a family member. Somebody at church thought a Sunday School teacher was taking a cheap shot at her.

Rumors, half-truths, grumbling, sarcastic remarks, things said in the heat of anger — all these lighted matches have the potential for burning down acres of office morale, family peace, and church unity that have been cultivated over years. "It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire," said James. "A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that." It's true. All of us know it is true.

Court documents claimed that Ms. Stevenson saw her match ignite the fire, but she chose to drive away when it still could have been extinguished. If you've tossed any hot sparks lately, maybe it isn't too late to put them out with an apology. Failing to do so may leave you liable for a disaster you never intended to happen.

Keeping a Tight Rein

James' comments about the powers of the tongue for evil make it clear that one can never let down his or her guard about its misuse. "No man can tame the tongue," he says flatly. And that is why it must be bridled — with the rein kept in hand always. The purpose of a bridle is not to take away a horse's spirit and energy but to channel them constructively. In the same way, the goal of a Christian with their tongue is not dumbness but discipline. "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence," declared King David (Psalms 39:1).

When you are tempted to *profanity*, grab the bridle and pull back. "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name" (Exodus 20:7). Learned behavior can be unlearned. (If you're a

teenager with the same problem, you might try it.) A person whose body is the temple of the Holy Spirit has no business using his or her mouth to broadcast profanities.

When you are tempted to *complain* or *criticize*, hold the rein on your tongue. In the course of Israel's journey from slavery in Egypt to houses they had not built in Canaan, they had to pass through a variety of wilderness experiences. Yahweh met their needs. He gave them daily manna and quail, water from the rocks, and deliverance from their enemies. When the people gave way to grumbling and complaining against His anointed leader, Moses, He was greatly displeased — and took it as murmuring against Himself. Referring back to those events as precedent for our experiences between a time of deliverance and future glorification, Paul wrote this: "Do not grumble, as some of them did — and were killed by the destroying angel" (1 Corinthians 10:10; cf. Numbers 14:26a).

When you are tempted to *lie* to your parents, your mate, your friend — or a total stranger — by all means bridle your tongue. Lying is one of the specific things God has told us He hates (Proverbs 6:17b). His very nature is true and truth-loving (cf. John 3:33), so we cannot reflect honor to Him by resorting to deceit and lying. A lie is any intentional deception put into words. An honest mistake is one thing, but an intentional misrepresentation is something else again. Keeping to yourself what another has no right to know is one thing, but misleading that person with half-truths and silence on things that matter is something else again. "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body" (Ephesians 4:25).

When you are tempted to *discredit others* with your tongue, rein it in by the power of God's empowering grace. James wasn't really through with matters related to the tongue when chapter 3 ended. He came back to it, for example, in a later section on submission to God and wrote: "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it" (James 4:11). Don't listen to criticism and backbiting against a brother or sister. Here's how I try to handle it: "Whoa, let's get Frances on the phone and talk this over. If you haven't been to her and made a good-faith effort to settle your issue with her, I'm forbidden by Scripture to talk with you about it!" The Body of Christ can't be healthy while tolerating

an atmosphere of bickering, backbiting, and belittling among its members.

Conclusion

The gift of speech is a divine blessing. It allows us to praise God. It is our means to speak our prayers to the God of Heaven and Earth. It enables us to share the words of truth, life, and redemption about Jesus. The tongue allows me to tell you I love you, to encourage you in your tough times and to let you know how grateful I am for your fellowship in Christ.

The tongue is meant to give God pleasure — pleasure of the sort I have in listening to children. Even the mispronounced words are beautiful. The ones spoken with a lisp or with missing front teeth only make me smile. I think God hears our flawed words to Him with that same spirit. And I think He takes delight in our words of affirmation and concern spoken to one another. Indeed, the Bible says: "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (Proverbs 25:11). Ever wonder just what that means? Here it is in The Message: "The right word at the right time is like a custom-made piece of jewelry . . ."

Praise to God and encouragement for one another, prayers to Him and support to each other, confession to Him and forgiveness given to one another — these words are like beautiful pieces of spiritual adornment to the life of a disciple.