

## TAMING THE TONGUE

James 3:1-12  
September 13, 2009

I'm sure all you've heard the phrase, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me." We said that as children to try and insulate ourselves from the hurtful words of others, but the truth is – Words Can Hurt!

In our text today James talks about how difficult it is to tame the tongue. He calls it "a restless evil, full of deadly poison." We need to be careful, then, how we use our words. Words can be used to encourage others and build them up. They can also be used to hurt others and tear them down. At times we're all guilty of speaking hurtful words, thoughtless words, words spoken out of anger and frustration. I can think of so many examples.

A soccer coach says to his team of 14-year-olds, "You're a bunch of idiots. You can't do anything right." A mom says to her children, "If I could do it all over again, I wouldn't have any children." A girl screams at her mother, "I hate you!"

Words can hurt. Words can cut deep. Sometimes it's the words themselves. Sometimes it's the tone of our voice, the way we talk to others. That's why the Bible encourages us over and over again to treat one another with kindness, gentleness, patience, and love

We need to really think about how we speak to others and about others. Another problem we have when we can't tame our tongues is gossip. I want to spend most of our time this morning talking about gossip. It's been a problem for a long, long time. It can be very hurtful and even fatal. Many years ago a ten-year-old child died. The cause of death was listed as - general peritonitis, a ruptured appendix, and malicious gossip.

It seems that some tests on the child revealed peritonitis. The doctor said that appendicitis was bound to occur. He advised an appendectomy and scheduled a date for the operation.

Two days before the child was to enter the hospital, his mother went to a dinner party. She returned visibly upset. "What's wrong, Helen?" her husband asked. She responded: "John, we simply cannot have Doc do that surgery."

"Not have Doc? Are you out of your mind? Why, he's been our doctor for years."

"I know, but wait until I tell you what Marsha told me, and she ought to know. Her mother keeps house for Doc. Well, since Doc's wife died, he's not been himself. Marsha's mother says that even though he puts up a good front to his patients, he's having a nervous breakdown. Not that I'm surprised, John, after all Doc's been through. But our baby, John! Can we let anybody who might go out of his mind operate on our child?"

So the next morning John canceled the surgery. The child seemed better. No use hurting Doc's feelings by consulting another physician. So months passed. One night the child started screaming. He was rushed to the hospital. There was no time to waste. Doc tried to save him but it was too late. The child died two days later.

At the funeral, Marsha was among the mourners. After it was over the mother of the child went up to her and said: "I don't care what your mother says about Doc. John and I think he's a wonderful physician. No person could have done more for little Jack."

"Why, whatever makes you say that?" said Marsha. "I've always said Doc was the best. Oh," she added as the recollection appeared, "do you mean that business about a year ago? I meant to tell you. There was nothing to it." Then, she dealt the final blow: "After all, you know Mother and her tongue."

Gossip can be very hurtful, damaging, and in that case, fatal. Why is it so hard to tame the tongue? Let me suggest to you this morning **four motivations for gossip**.

**The first is boredom.** Most people are rather bored with life. We all have a desire for excitement. And it takes more and more to get us excited. Last week, I said to some of our students at Northwest School, "How is school going? Are you having fun this year?" And one little boy shouted out, "School is boring." I can't tell you how many times my children have said, "Dad, I'm bored. There's nothing to do." Someone once said, "You can be bored by virtually anything if you put your mind to it." Gossip is an attempt to inject a little excitement into life; to stir things up.

**The second motivation is a desire for attention.** Those who gossip are attention seekers. The concern for self-interest as you and I gossip outweighs our concern for the plight of the people about whom we gossip. We don't have the slightest intention of helping the person we are talking about. It's simply an attention-grabbing device for ourselves.

**Third, there is a desire for prestige.** Most gossipers have a tremendous inferiority complex. "I know something you don't know." It bolsters our self-importance.

**The fourth motivation is a desire for security.** We think by ripping someone else to shreds we can make ourselves feel better. This happens a lot in the world of politics. So often in political campaigns the candidates focus not on their own strengths and qualification, but on the faults and failings of the other guy. Instead of, "This is what I will do" it's "this is what he has not done."

So what can we do? There are three phases to gossip: the telling, the hearing, and the retelling. You and I can do little to stop the telling of gossip. There are too many bored, inferior-feeling, attention-seeking, insecure people in the world.

Gossip will continue to be told. And there's little we can do to stop hearing it. People will gather together and talk. But here's the key – WE DON'T HAVE TO RETELL WHAT WE HEAR. We can stop the spread of gossip. And to do that, the scriptures can help us.

A child of God, a Christian, should never be bored with life. To be given the gift of life is to receive the image of God. We were made by God for a purpose – to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to make Him known to others. God has given us the ability to love, to care, to serve, to sacrifice for others. To live each day as a child of God is a blessing.

As children of God we can focus attention on others and not on ourselves. Jesus said, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." When we

hear about the misfortune of some other person, true or not, we should pray for them, not talk about them.

You and I should never have an inferiority complex. By faith in Jesus, we have become sons and daughters of God. God loves you so much that He sent His Son to suffer and die as the payment for your sins. The Son of God laid down his life for you? That's how valuable and important you are to God. You have a personal relationship with God and He wants you to be with Him forever.

Because we are God's children, holy and dearly loved, we don't have to tear others down to make ourselves feel better. We can speak words that bless others, encourage others, help others.

Taming the tongue is as big a problem today as it was in the early church. To explain how powerful the tongue is James compares it to the rudder of a ship or a bit in a horse's mouth. Something so small has a lot of power and lot of control.

The only way we can tame the tongue is through the power of the Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who helps us to stop and think before we speak. It's the Holy Spirit who points us back to Scripture again and again . . . to the fruits of the Spirit - patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control. Over time, we learn to engage the brain before starting the mouth.

I want to share with you now **three ways that we can use our words to the glory of God.**

**First, the words that we speak should bless rather than blast another person.** A young lady named Sally and her mother had a violent shouting match about the dent Sally put in her mother's car. After the confrontation, the father tried to console her. "What did your mother say about the dent in the car?" he asked. "Dad, do you want me to leave out the swear words?" "Please," he replied. Sally said, "Then she didn't say anything."

That mother failed to realize that words also can leave "dents" in people--but more than that they can damage and destroy a relationship. Dents can be hammered out of a car--they are much more difficult to remove from human beings.

We can use the tongue blast someone:

To verbally abuse a spouse.

To verbally spank a child.

To ridicule a classmate, colleague or co-worker.

To put down another race of people.

We can also use the tongue to bless others:

To tell a spouse--I love you.

To tell a child--I am proud of you.

To ask a colleague--Can I help you?

To hold a fellow Christian's hand--Can we pray together?

To knock on a neighbor's door and say -- Welcome to the neighborhood.

### **Second, we can use our tongues to praise God.**

The decade of the 1660s in England was filled with disaster. The plague in 1665 made its way through the City of London leaving 70,000 dead. A year later a fire destroyed much of that city. The prophets of doom and gloom predicted that London and England would never recover.

During all of this a godly Christian man--Bishop Thomas Kent--kept encouraging the people that he could still see the Light of God's purpose and presence even in tough times.

He felt inspired one night to write a song to testify to his convictions, that God was still in control and worthy of praise. The Church still sings that song today:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,

Praise Him all creatures here below,

Praise him above ye Heavenly Host.

Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

**Third, we can use our words to tell others about Jesus our Savior.** What an opportunity we have to tell others what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. God has called us to witness to others, to tell others how God has saved us from sin and called us to be His own children. We can tell others that God is our source of hope and foundation for life. He has given us tongues and lips and voices to use to His glory and for His purposes.

The words of James in our Bible reading today encourage us to think about the way we use our words. The tongue is certainly a powerful thing. It can be used for good or it can be used for evil. Let's resolve to use our words to bless rather than blast others, to praise our God, and to tell the world about life in Jesus. Amen.