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1

A WORD'S WORTH

The "Problem" Tongue Exposed

Insurance adjusters like to collect unique statements from the claims of people asked to describe their accidents in the fewest words possible. Here are a few of my favorites:

- “I pulled from the side of the road, glanced at my mother-in-law, and headed for the embankment.”
- “The pedestrian had no idea which way to run, so I ran over him.”
- “The guy was all over the road; I had to swerve a number of times before I hit him.”
- “The telephone pole was approaching fast. I was attempting to swerve out of its path when it struck my front end.”
- “Coming home, I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I don’t have.”

The words are simple enough, but sometimes we have trouble putting them together to say what we really mean—to communicate. Communication is the process of expressing how we feel and what we think. Most of our communication is nonverbal as others watch our facial expressions and body language to get an impression of our thoughts and feelings.

However, it’s usually *verbal* communication that causes the most problems for us. When used appropriately, our words have the power to heal, encourage, help, and teach. On the other hand, words can also confuse, embarrass, and hurt.

Here is one man’s testimony of the destructive potential that words possess:

My junior high school had scheduled its annual operatic production. Talented students were quick to try out for the various parts. I was not so certain of my abilities and had decided that singing in an operetta wasn’t really for me.

Then Mrs. Wilson, my music teacher, asked me to try out. It was not a coveted role, but it *did* have three solos.

I am certain that my audition was only mediocre. But Mrs. Wilson reacted as if she had just heard a choir of heavenly

angels. "Oh, that was just beautiful. It was perfect. You are just right for the role. You will do it, won't you?" I accepted.

When the time came for the next year's operetta, most of the students who had played the leads the year before had graduated. And Mrs. Wilson had transferred to another school. In her place was a rather imposing figure who had an excellent singing voice and a sound knowledge of music theory.

As the tryouts began, I was ready. I felt confident that my talent was just what the operetta needed. With approximately 150 of my peers assembled, I knew everything would go well.

But if I live for an eternity I will never forget the words spoken on that day. When my audition was completed, the teacher asked, "Who told you you could sing?"

The timid youth of a year earlier was suddenly reborn. I was totally destroyed. Harsh words are bad enough under any circumstances. To a young idealistic boy, they can be devastating. From the time those six words were stated, it took eight years and the coaxing of my fiancée before my voice was raised in song again.

You can probably recall similar instances from your own past where a few words—either positive or negative—made a significant difference in your life. Words have tremendous weight. Recent studies tend to disprove the saying many of us grew up with: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Adults polled said they had gotten over most of the *physical* pains of childhood. But many had never fully recovered from the hurtful words, names, and labels that had been placed on them. Physical wounds heal, as is evidenced from the scars we carry. But verbal wounds frequently refuse to close, oozing pain and keeping us tender and vulnerable.

In spite of all of Job's physical and emotional suffering, the verbal jabs of his so-called friends made his situation even worse. He challenged one of them: "How long will you torment me and crush me with words?" (Job 19:2).

We must be constantly aware that our words carry an impact. They affect our children, our students, our spouses, our friends, our neighbors, and our business associates.

That's why God holds me accountable for "every careless word" (Matthew 12:36). Yet controlling the words that come out of my mouth is a huge challenge.

For one thing, the stress of everyday encounters gets the better of us. We quickly say things we don't really mean. In addition, most of us are exposed to negative patterns of speech on a daily basis. From the demeaning words of an angry boss to the crude language of prime-time television, from sarcastic conversation with a neighbor to careless chatter among Christians, many of us have regular exposure to corrupted communication. The problem is that such verbal habits are highly contagious. Unfortunately, our tongues often recycle the input and, to our chagrin, the destructive words are out of *our* mouths before we know it—occasionally in front of people who can't believe what they're hearing!

Whether the reason is unintentional confusion, careless destruction, survival in chaos, or subconscious submission to environmental patterns of speech, inappropriate words are always destructive. Having a tongue is like having dynamite in our dentures—it's got to be reckoned with. It influences three major dimensions of our lives: our relationship with God, our relationship with those we treasure the most, and even our relationship with ourselves.

God's Word describes the tremendous task we face. James wrote, "No one can tame the tongue" (3:8). This statement is not intended to cause despair or to justify continued failure, but rather to let us know that self-initiated effort is worthless. To make matters worse, we read that the tongue is "set on fire by hell" (v. 6). In our desire to transform the tongue from a hellish fire to an instrument of constructive communication, we find ourselves up against a task of supernatural proportions. In this arena in particular, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood," but against an organized hierarchy of satanic power (Ephesians 6:12).

Therefore, transforming our tongues requires supernatural strength. Victory demands taking up supernatural arms—being "strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might" (v. 10). Being strong in the Lord is no mystical, hocus-

pocus process. In fact, we have a number of solid resources available to us. These resources are what Paul calls the armor of God (vv. 14–17), and the first piece of the armor he lists is *truth*. Scripture teaches that the truth of God is our source of spiritual energy and growth (Matthew 4:4; 1 Peter 2:2). As we discover and digest God's Word, the indwelling Spirit uses it to stimulate growth that produces spiritual, victorious strength.

God has blessed us with a wealth of truth in regard to the tongue. As we respond to His truth, it warns, convicts, and transforms us. One of the most instructive sections of truth concerning the tongue is James 3. In this passage, five principles unfold that make us more aware of the gravity of our words.

**PRINCIPLE 1:
CONTROLLED SPEECH IS A MEASURE OF MATURITY**

“We all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well” (James 3:2).

The word *stumble* means “to fall or to trip.” Feet that stumble can bring your whole body crashing to the ground, and a tongue that stumbles is no less a threat. One little trip can do a lot of damage. When our sheepdog, Paddington, was a puppy, he tripped over everything in his path. His clumsiness reflected his immaturity. Similarly, a stumbling tongue reflects spiritual immaturity. Unfortunately, we not only trip ourselves as we talk our way through life, but we also trip others.

Perhaps some of us feel more comfortable with stumbling speech patterns if the people around us tend to be “tongue-trippers” as well. We may assume that the normal Christian experience is to leave behind us a large body count of people felled by our words. After all, doesn't everyone have trouble with their tongue? Yet we are not to measure our spiritual maturity by the communication patterns of those around us, but by the standards of God's Word.

The word *perfect* literally means *complete* or *mature*. We are

never spiritually mature until we no longer trip people up with our words, proving that we are able to bring our entire body under control.

Certain skills are known as *priority skills*. If you master one, other related skills come quite naturally. For example, a marathon runner has no difficulty running a mile. A professional golfer can sink two-foot putts consistently. And if we master the tongue, we have the capacity to master other areas of our lives with far less effort.

Have you ever seen someone revive a drowning victim with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation? What a thrill it would be to bring renewed life to our relationships by learning the skill of mouth-to-mouth maturity.

PRINCIPLE 2: THE TONGUE IS SMALL BUT SIGNIFICANT

“If we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires” (James 3:3–4).

Small words have started wars, resulting in thousands of lives lost. Marriages that once set sail on a joyous adventure have been steered onto the rocks by a faulty *rudder*. I cannot recall one counseling situation I’ve conducted where the problem was not either ignited or seriously complicated by negative words.

We tend to think that small things are insignificant. How can a few words do serious damage? But ignoring the problem is like ignoring termites nesting in your house. The insects are small and normally unseen, yet they chew their way through the accumulated equity of many homes. James says the tongue is like that—small but significant. He demonstrates the significance of small things with the illustrations of a bit, a rudder, and a spark. He then concludes, “The tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things” (v. 5).

The neighborhood kids say it best by naming the local

tattletale “Mr. Bigmouth.” His title isn’t a reference to the *size* of his mouth, but rather a colorful description of the heap of trouble that his little mouth produces.

**PRINCIPLE 3:
OUR WORDS ARE POTENTIALLY COMBUSTIBLE**

“The tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell” (James 3:6).

To celebrate the end of school in 1996, a teenager in Norway decided to show his exuberance by burning his textbooks. He made a bonfire out of his book bag during a recess on the last day of school. But the book bag was a bit too close to a shed . . . which was a little too close to the school. The end result of his action was that he accidentally burned down the whole school.

We tend to tolerate a bit of “fire” in our speech, thinking it can do no harm. But fire spreads quickly—often before we realize it. And after a raging fire has done its damage, it doesn’t matter whether or not it was intentional.

Living in Chicago as I do, I have heard several discussions about the great fire that took place here in 1871. (Mrs. O’Leary’s cow was recently cleared of the offense, by the way.) Fire is one of the few forces that does irreparable damage, and signs of it are still evident around our city even 125 years later. Fiery words often destroy relationships that, even when restored, are never again as strong. Families, businesses, churches, friends, wealth, security, happiness, and peace are all vulnerable to the defilement of the tongue. We should wear signs that say, “CAUTION: LIFE IS A COMBUSTIBLE COMMODITY. PLEASE DOUSE YOUR TONGUE!”

The seriousness of the tongue’s destructive potential is revealed in the truth that it is “set on fire by hell.” It is “the very world of iniquity,” literally an entire network of sin. We have an organized crime syndicate right in our mouths. Our tongues have the capacity to corrupt our entire beings. Nothing is exempt from the damage our tongues can cause.

**PRINCIPLE 4:
THE TONGUE IS LIKE A WILD AND DEADLY BEAST**

“Every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison” (James 3:7–8).

I get a kick out of how much effort we put into taming animals. We have elephant soccer, donkey basketball, dogs that bark “Jingle Bells,” chimps that communicate in sign language, birds that talk, and porpoises that shoot baskets better than I do.

But more difficult—and more essential—than any of these things is the priority of taming the tiger in our tongues. If we do not bring our speech habits under the Spirit’s control, our tongues will be “full of deadly poison.” When referring to sinful people, Paul borrowed from an Old Testament reference, “The poison of asps is under their lips” (Romans 3:13; cf. Psalm 140:3).

In regions of South America lives a reptile called the “Two-Step” snake. If it bites you, you seldom take more than two steps before you die. Its venom swiftly paralyzes your nervous system and stops your heart. Words can be like that. They have the potential to quickly kill a relationship, paralyze love, poison minds, destroy faith, stain purity, and deface reputations.

**PRINCIPLE 5: THE TONGUE
TENDS TO PROMOTE A DOUBLE STANDARD**

“With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh” (James 3:9–12).

Someone has said that most tongues are tied in the middle, wagging at both ends. Perhaps this was the image in Paul’s mind when he warned Timothy to avoid positioning

“double-tongued” men as church leaders (1 Timothy 3:8). It’s amazing how we can verbally poison other people all the way to church, but as soon as we pull into the parking lot we begin to speak out of the pious side of our mouths. Then we hardly finish singing the doxology until we start complaining again. “My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.”

Even nature doesn’t act so incongruously. It is impossible for wells to produce both salt and freshwater, or for fig trees to bear olives! We would be utterly disappointed to expect a cold drink of pure water, only to draw up a bucket full of salty and undrinkable seawater. Similarly, God must be disappointed whenever His “new creatures” (see 2 Corinthians 5:17) continue to issue “old words.”

KEEPING OUR TONGUES IN CHECK

In these five principles James categorizes the dark and shifty potential of the tongue. The first step toward victory is to permit these truths to penetrate our minds and hearts. The warning is clear: A transformed tongue must be a top priority for those committed to spiritual growth.

James’s warning, however, takes on added weight when we realize that many Christians are insensitive to the problems of destructive speech. We excuse one another with a number of rationalizations. For example, perhaps you have heard someone say something derogatory about another person, yet accompany the damaging statement with one of the following disclaimers:

- “Well, it’s the truth, isn’t it?”
- “If they didn’t want people to talk, they never should have done it.”
- “Let me share this with you so we can pray more intelligently.”
- “I heard this from a reliable source, or I wouldn’t be repeating it.”

This desensitization process opens the floodgates to com-

munication sins. By making careless communication an acceptable part of our lives, we strive for spiritual maturity while exempting the tongue from the process. Yet the word-sparks that fly from an untamed tongue can leave an entire life (or lives) in ashes. Until we get serious about bringing our tongues under the control of the Holy Spirit, our churches, schools, homes, friendships, and relationships with God will all be victimized.

Sins such as beguilement, deceit, lying, and false witness need to be understood from God's point of view. Social sins of the tongue, including gossip and slander, must be checked. Verbal ego trips, such as boasting, flattery, and exaggeration, are clearly out of bounds. The cancer of a murmuring, contentious tongue needs to be removed. Expletives that violate the dignity of God's name and our sensitivity to moral purity must be deleted.

The following chapters will go into further detail in all these areas. But first let me provide a recent illustration of how serious we need to be about controlling our speech. A favorite sportswriter of mine once analyzed a fine levied on a local baseball manager for verbally chewing out the commissioner. His column defended the manager by saying, "After all, they were just words." At the time I thought, *Just words? There's no such thing. It's like saying, "After all, it's just an atom bomb!"*

Years later a front-page story in the *Chicago Tribune* reported on the aftermath of a high school state play-off football game in northwestern Illinois. The article ran ten days after the game, and the facts that had come to light since the game were alarming. The game had been close and went into overtime. When one team finally won, the fans of the defeated team were naturally disappointed. However, some had gone out of their way to place the blame on a particular referee. One fan followed him home (a distance of sixty-five miles) and sat outside his house for two hours. In the days that followed, parents and teachers from the town of the losing team sent hostile letters and made cruel phone calls. As a result, the thirty-six-year-old referee tried to kill himself.