

*How Then Shall We Live? : Taming The Tongue*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Psalm 52, Ephesians 5:1-10, James 3*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from James 3. Listen now to God's Word. "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. 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. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness."

Catha and I are fans of romantic comedies, and one of our favorites is *You've Got Mail* with Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks. It's the story of two bitter enemies – she owns a small children's bookshop on the Upper West Side of Manhattan; he owns a bookstore mega-chain that opens across the street. While they are at each other's throats in person, they wind up in an anonymous relationship via email. They talk about themselves and give each other advice online, never realizing who it is that they are writing to. It makes the movie a little painful when you see these two so kind and caring in email and so quarrelsome with each in the real world. There's a part that's always stuck with me when Meg Ryan's character finally finds the words to insult Tom Hanks' character. When she realizes what she's done, she writes, "I was able, for the first time in my life to say the exact thing I wanted to say at the exact moment I wanted to say it. And of course, afterwards I felt terrible just as you said I would. I was cruel and I'm never cruel. Though I can hardly believe what I said mattered to this man...but what if it did?"

What if it did? What if words really do matter? As we continue our study of the Bible's take on ethics and morality, we come to the subject of our speech – what we say to others. When we see what Scripture teaches on the tongue, we realize that the old standby "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" simply isn't true.

When we turn to the start of Scripture, where we find the origins of many of the problems of the human race addressed, it's interesting to see where the tongue first gets us into trouble. The first dialogue in the Bible is when Adam and Eve talk with the serpent and are convinced that they can become like God. From the very beginning, conversation gets us into trouble! When they eat of the tree, they suddenly learn how to blame each other. Not long after that, we come across the first lie when Cain kills his brother Abel, then says to God that he has no idea what has happened to him. As the story of Genesis continues, we see the trouble the tongue makes. Abraham lies about his wife Sarah to save his skin only to have it backfire. Lies create a near-deadly split between Jacob and Esau. The sons of Jacob plot against their brother Joseph. We get the idea that when evil thoughts are put into words, all of a sudden plans become actions and lives get torn apart.

When God brought the people of Israel together after their captivity in Egypt, His Law not only covered legal issues but ones of how speech was to be used. Before God's commands got to dealing with human issues, He set the law that His name was not to be used in vain. The Hebrew word here is *shav*, which means emptiness or uselessness, or in some situations falseness. In other words, God said not to use His name in any manner devoid of purpose. In the ancient near east, your name was who you are, and God did not want His name used lightly. In fact, this is the reason we sometimes here God called Yahweh or Jehovah. No one knows exactly how to pronounce the four Hebrew letters that are the name of God because no Jew would ever pronounce them. When reading a text in Hebrew, they would say "Adonai" when they came across the name of God to avoid saying it altogether.

But God also extends two more of the Ten Commandments to the tongue. He says that we should honor our fathers and mothers, which is something we do by the way we treat them and talk to them. God also commanded us not to give false witness against a neighbor. That's not just a legal thing; it's saying, "don't say anything false about your neighbor, period." The Israelites were taught that this was so serious, if it was discovered that you lied in a court of law about what someone had done, the penalty for that crime would apply to you. The Psalms and Proverbs confirmed that speaking the truth was God's expectation for His people.

Not surprisingly, as we've found throughout Scripture, Jesus expands upon the Old Testament. In Matthew 12:34-36, Jesus teaches, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken." He warned in Matthew 5 that we are in danger when we even call someone a fool, and He taught against taking oaths beyond a simple "yes" or "no." Jesus knew that what we say reveals who we really are – what we think.

The disciples of Jesus made it clear exactly how Jesus' teachings affect us in real life. The tongue can steer us towards life or death, and if we are doubleminded, our tongues will show it. James called for consistency between what we believe and what we say. In Ephesians, Paul lumps obscene, foolish, and coarse talk in with greed and sexual immorality as sins that separate us from God. They don't have a place in the life of Christian purity.

So how do we avoid sinning with our words? In looking through Scripture, I see a few ways that we are can reign in our speech. First, we acknowledge the seriousness of sins of speech. Second, we recognize that what we say, we say in the presence of God. Third, we become quick to listen and slow to speak.

We naturally want to overlook our own shortcomings, so we have a tendency to downplay when we sin, and perhaps no more so than when it comes to what we say. How many times have you heard a cutting remark followed by, “it’s just a joke?” How often do we say, “Oh my god” as an unthinking reaction? Or in the church, how often do we mask gossip about someone by saying, “We need to pray for them”? We don’t take sins of the tongue seriously.

But Scripture does. In Romans 1, Paul puts gossips and slanderers next to God-haters. Revelation 21 includes liars with the unbelieving, murderers, and the sexually immoral as those who will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus says that even a simple insult puts us at risk of the fires of hell. It’s not that these things cannot be forgiven – we’ve all done them. We all need God’s forgiveness. But woe to us if we don’t repent of these actions! As Christians, our words are often how we are judged...and if we come up lacking, it reflects on the One to whom we claim allegiance.

We need to realize that we aren’t just talking about bad words here. I grew up being taught that there were words you just didn’t say...the “wash your mouth out with soap” kind of words. Some of us may still struggle with these; just like anything else, it’s hard to break habits built over the course of many years. Yet those habits can be broken. But when Scripture talks about what we say, the emphasis isn’t on saying “bad words.” A lot of cultures don’t have “bad words” as we think of them because what offends one culture doesn’t offend another.

Scripture is much more concerned about the intent of what you say. In our culture, you could say the nicest words to someone, yet if you use them sarcastically, they are meant to harm. We sometimes substitute “better” words when we’re mad about something, but the venom is still all there. When we are condescending, when we are bitter, when we are jealous, those things come out in how we say our words as much as in the actual terms we use. The sin is tied up not just in the literal words that come out of our mouths but in the desired response.

One of the best ways for us to recognize our own problems in this area is through remembering that what we say is said in the presence of God. In Ephesians 4:29-31, Paul writes, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” Did you catch the statement in the middle there? In the center of Paul’s admonition about what we say, he says that we can grieve the Holy Spirit by what we say.

How is that possible? We as Christians believe that every person who puts their genuine faith and trust in Jesus Christ is given the gift of the Holy Spirit. That means that God Himself resides within us. He lives in us and spiritually takes up residence. He’s not just looking upon us from outside the universe in heaven; He is with us wherever we go and whatever we do.

At first, that might seem shocking to us, even scary. But it should be comforting. God does not say that He'll be with us in only a spiritual sense. God promises that His Spirit will reside with us. God's promise is genuine, and that's a good thing. We know that whatever happens, God is literally present in our midst. Whatever dangers we face, whatever challenges, we know that God is not just watching from a distance but is in the middle of it with us, just like Jesus was when He was on earth.

If we can keep that in mind, it can also really affect the way we think about sinning. When it comes down to big-ticket sins, we often can discern right and wrong even if we choose to do the wrong thing. But with sins of speech, it's not always clear-cut. Sometimes we feel like saying something but we can't discern if it's necessary or vindictive, if it's good-natured or mean-spirited. When we aren't sure, when we need guidance, we can ask, "Would I say this in the presence of Jesus without remorse?" Because the Holy Spirit lives within us, that's not a rhetorical question. Through the Holy Spirit, God is present at every conversation we have. It's no different than if we were sitting around shooting the breeze around the Sea of Galilee with Him and His disciples.

So what would our conversations be like if we remembered that God was literally present at every one of them? Maybe they would be less anxious. Maybe they would be less angry. Maybe they would be more joyful. Maybe they would be more full of praise for God's blessings. As Paul said to the Colossian church, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." If God is the God of grace who gave His Son for us that we might know Him in a real and living way, He can work in our lives in such a way that our speech can be made graceful as well. Instead of our talk being full of salty words, it can be salt and light, sharing the goodness of God with others. It can be a reality if we remember that God is always a participant in our discussions.

That leads us to perhaps the easiest way to tame the tongue: slow down. James 1:19-20 says, "My dear brothers, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." Our era is perhaps the quickest ever, with super-fast information, cell phones and laptops everywhere, and cars that can take us the width of Israel in an hour. And our reaction to everything is fast.

What most of you don't know about our car accident in February is that while we waited for an emergency crew to arrive, another car slid off the road right at us. I believe that God's hand moved that car that day. But my first reaction was fast, and even though I didn't verbalize it, it was not "thank you Lord." All of us have done that, sometimes letting the tongue slip too, in an instant reaction to things. But if Jesus said that we will be judged for every careless word we utter, then even in desperate times and in quick reactions, we need to be mindful of God's desires for us.

To do that, we need to remember that we need not say anything. There is virtually no time in our lives that we must say something. I'm sure many of you who hear me preach every Sunday would like to remind me of that fact! But in all seriousness, we will bear a unique witness to Christ if we are slow to speak.

When I was almost done with seminary, I had a semester where I served as a hospice chaplain. I had a head full of ideas and thought I had a lot to teach people. But in that ministry, the thing that was taught to me over and over was simply to shut up. We are bombarded with messages, images, lights, sounds, everything telling us to buy something, believe something, do something. One of the best things we can do is simply to be present with other people. We can give them permission to rest from the bombardment of everyday life with us alongside.

For the first thirty years of his life, we have only a couple of sentences from Him. For thirty years, God lived among us. He didn't teach or preach. His words weren't recorded. We have no record of miracles during that time. God listened. Jesus knew every last word others would say, yet He listened anyway. When the time was right, He spoke up, boldly and clearly. Yet you could read every last recorded word of Jesus aloud in less than a few hours. He spoke deliberately. In that time, we read words He said when He was angry, yet He did not sin. He spoke words that sound in our ears harsh – but they were truthful, designed to bring those who had wandered from godliness back to repentance and trust. His words were so poignant, so full of life, that they have shaped even those who have not believed in Him as Lord and Savior. Partially, they are memorable because they were few; they were a simple stream of living water.

We can do so much good when we are willing to be quiet. Let others fight and argue. Let us be the people who are known for loving encouragement. Let us be known as those who speak grace and truth into others lives. This doesn't mean not speaking boldly when times call for it, when sin is left unchecked or justice left undone. But it means being silent enough that when you do choose to speak, other people will take notice.

My encouragement this morning for all of us is to let our tongues take a rest. Let us speak when the Spirit is speaking within us; otherwise, let us enjoy the silence. And maybe to take my own advice...that's all I'm going to say about that.