

Tame Your Tongue



David Wilkerson February 7, 1994

"But the tongue no man can tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:8).

In this verse from his epistle, James is talking about the tongues of believers. He is issuing a call to the church to gain control of their tongues — before they are destroyed by them!

How serious is this matter of taming the tongue, you ask? Can an "unruly tongue" really be that sinful?

Indeed, many Christians right now are waging intense spiritual warfare against powerful habits such as drugs, alcohol, tobacco, lust. They can't imagine an unruly tongue as being a very serious sin. I can almost hear the reaction of the believer who is engaged in a titanic struggle with some great temptation:

"Hey, pastor — you've got to be kidding! I'm fighting the battle of my life, trying to get victory over a demonic stronghold, and you're talking about little words. How can you compare a loose tongue to the kind of battle I'm engaged in?"

Dear saint, I tell you, an untamed tongue is the world's deadliest weapon! An unsanctified, loose tongue is worse than drug or alcohol abuse — it is worse than any sin of the flesh! The Bible calls the tongue a world of iniquity, a defiler of multitudes, a taste of hell on earth! (See James 3:6.)

Let me show you from God's Word how dangerous and damning an unruly tongue is:

1. An Unruly, Careless Tongue Negates Everything Spiritual in Your Life!

A loose tongue renders all religion absolutely worthless! It can make your every spiritual activity totally useless in God's eyes: "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain" (James 1:26).

James is speaking here of those "among you — that is in the church. These aren't drug addicts or street people — they are part of the body of Christ who appear pious, spiritual. They are active in the work of the Lord. But their tongues are unbridled, out of control! James is zeroing in on those who seem to be holy, kind, gentle, loving — yet who move about the church or on their job or in their family with acid tongues, always listening to and telling morsels of gossip. They think nothing of murmuring and complaining. God says their religion — all their show of spirituality — is in vain. It's valueless, worthless!

Beloved, I do not want to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and discover that all my works for the Lord — my entire spiritual endeavor — has been in vain! I don't want to hear Him say, "David you did mighty works in My name. You established drug rehabilitation centers, homes for alcoholics. You preached to countless thousands and won many to My kingdom. You fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cast out devils, healed the sick.

"But it was all for nothing — all in vain! I simply don't know this man who spoke with a divided tongue. You used your

tongue to bless and then condemn! Out of your mouth came such sweetness — many wonderful, uplifting words. But there were also bitter, unkind words — killing, hateful, envious words! You took My warnings on this matter of the tongue too lightly. I warned you that all your spiritual activity was in vain if you did not control your tongue. But you did not heed!"

Beloved, think of all you have done in your walk with God — all the tears you've shed for others, all the compassionate, caring acts you've performed. You've even been willing to lay down your life for others. Yet all that is in vain if you have spewed out careless words!

You may wonder, "Surely God isn't so unloving that He would discount my spirituality simply because I said something uncharitable?"

I am speaking here of Christians whose tongues have never been tamed. They speak against God's people without blinking an eye! Here is what God says about such uncharitable tattlers:

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

All your spirituality, all your sacrificing, is rendered worthless because of an uncharitable untamed tongue! Can you imagine dying for Jesus — being burned at the stake, giving your every dollar to feed the poor, forsaking all in this life for the Lord, yet it is all in vain?

You won't receive a martyr's reward, because when you stand before the judgment seat the Lord will say, "You did it all with the wrong motive. You didn't have love in your heart! You had bitterness inside, and it came out through your mouth. Your tongue was not charitable and loving — it was bitter, unkind, acid. All your works have profited you nothing!"

2. The Words You Speak Reflect What Is in Your Heart!

"O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matthew 12:34).

Whenever I said something naughty as a child, my mother washed out my mouth with soap. But it wasn't my mouth that needed cleansing, — it was my heart!

You see, your tongue speaks only what is in your heart. Those are the very words of our Lord Jesus Christ. And He says that loose, careless, evil talk can come only from an evil, unclean heart!

We as believers have not yet taken seriously what our Lord has said about taming our tongues. He has made it a heart issue — an issue of life and death! Not only does my careless tongue discount all my supposed spirituality — it also makes me face the indisputable fact that my heart is unclean, defiled. Something of hellfire is smoldering inside me!

If I hear sensual, lustful words coming out of my mouth... if I speak any gossip... if I tell a dirty joke... if I run another person down... if I speak unkindly or jealously about someone... if I raise my voice and scream at my family... if name-calling pours from my lips... if I utter curse words... if a stream of angry words flows out of my mouth... then I must ask myself: "What unclean, filthy stuff is still treasured up in me that I could talk this way?"

I've got to examine my heart and ask, "Where does this come from? There must still be something I haven't dealt with, or I wouldn't be saying such things. Why do I go on gossiping and bad-mouthing? Why do I utter such mean, careless words? What unsanctified strongholds still hold my heart?"

Careless, unruly talk is not just a flaw. it is not just a weakness or a habit we fall into occasionally. You can't say of a fellow Christian, "Oh, sometimes he can hurt you with his words. But most of the time he really is sweet and kind. And he loves the Lord deep within. He doesn't mean to hurt anybody."

No! James says all of that person's spirituality is discounted! And more than that. Jesus says he has an unclean, evil heart!

Do you know someone at church who occasionally comes up to you and whispers, "Did you hear what I heard?..." Mark it down: No matter how pious that person may appear, no matter how she may pray or praise God in church, there is something evil in her heart — something wrong that has not been dealt with by the Holy Spirit!

Jesus gives this matter serious weight: "... out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things; and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things" (Matthew 12:34-35). Jesus is saying, "If you are careless with your tongue — quarreling, complaining, murmuring, tattling — you have a serious heart problem! Your heart is not right with God, and it goes very deep. There is an evil treasure stored up in you, just as a snake has bags of poison stored behind his jaw. If deadly poison is coming out of you, it is because the bag hasn't been drained!"

No minister, no Christian worker is exempt from this warning of the Lord! To all of us Jesus says, "Check your heart — find out why you still speak unguardedly and carelessly!" "Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?" (James 3:11).

Whenever I allow a morsel of gossip to come out of my lips, I must stop and say to the Lord, "Master, there must still be in my heart a root of jealousy or envy. How else could I take it so lightly to judge my brother or sister? It must be there is much cleansing, much Holy—Ghost dealing, left to be done in me! Oh Father, dig deep into my heart and pluck out the roots of bitterness, covetousness, pride — whatever it is!"

Recently a young convert was overheard by one of our staff as he tried to excuse the adultery of a brother in Christ. This new Christian said, "No problem — the blood of Jesus covers all of our sins. He's covered."

My young friend, you've got it all wrong! The blood of Jesus covers only those sins that are truly repented of and forsaken. The blood never excuses or overlooks sin. Your brother living in adultery needs to fall before Jesus, confess his sin, and cry out for power to overcome the lure of that Delilah he is living with!

And so it is with the sin of the tongue! We dare not continue mouthing off gossip, slander, argumentative words — and then lie down at night and utter a casual prayer of confession: "Lord, if I've said anything wrong today, forgive me. Cover me with the blood."

No! God wants to get at that evil in your heart — that bag of poison hidden inside you! It doesn't need to be covered — but uncovered, and removed. God wants to root out the cause of it and to heal you of it completely. Your trouble is, you pray to be covered by the blood when you've never truly repented and gotten to the root of the evil!

3. On Judgment Day, We Will Have to Answer for Every Careless, Vain Word We Ever Spoke!

"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" (Matthew 12:36-37).

We seem to think our words simply fail to the ground and die, or vanish into thin air and dissolve into nothingness. Not so! Our words live on — they do not die!

You may say, "But I only told this gossip to one friend, and he promises never to repeat it. It will end with him." No, it won't! Every single word you and I utter is recorded, written down in eternity — and we will hear them all repeated to us verbatim at the judgment. Those words will condemn us unless we confess them, forsaken [sic] them, and pull up the evil roots that caused us to utter them!

You ask, "Can't I just pray one blanket prayer and say, 'Jesus, forgive me. Blot it all out!'" No — not if you refuse to deal with the root of your sin!

I recall coming under deep conviction some time ago, after sharing a vicious bit of gossip with a friend. What I said was indeed true — it was about a moral situation I'd had to deal with concerning a certain minister. His name came

up in the conversation, and I said, "Don't trust him. I know something about him!"

Even as I mouthed off, I felt condemned. The Holy Spirit whispered to me, "Stop right there! Nobody needs to know that. Don't say any more, because there's no purpose to it — it's just gossip. Even though it's true, don't repeat it — because it can hurt the man's character!"

What I'd already said was bad enough. But then I blurted out the lurid details! I knew I should have been quiet. And, sure enough, I was deeply convicted by the Spirit. So I later called my friend and said, "I'm sorry — that was gossip. I was out of order. Please don't repeat it. Try not to even think about it."

My friend assured me it was a dead issue. "I don't know the man," he said. "And I never repeat such things." That seemed to satisfy my spirit at first. But the Spirit's conviction still nagged at me. Why? Why couldn't I let it go? Because when you plant something in someone else's mind, you can't pluck it out! Even if it is never repeated. It does not die there!

The feeling that continued to nag at me was: "Why did I do it? God, do I have something against him? Did I secretly delight in his fall? Why was I not more interested in his recovery? What kind of heart do I have? Lord, forgive me. But also heal me of this. I don't want to face You on Judgment Day with any unresolved evil in me!"

Is my sin covered by the blood of Jesus? Yes — because I fully acknowledged that I had sinned grievously. And I allowed the Holy Spirit to show me some of the legalistic pride left in me. I allowed Him to humble me and heal me! Now, whenever I begin to say something against somebody, I obey the Holy Ghost as I hear Him say, loud and clear, "Stop!"

Jesus' warning has awakened the fear of God in me: "For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" (Matthew 12:37). By our words! Jesus didn't say we would be condemned by lust or drugs or alcohol; those are all ugly sins, and yes, there will be judgment because of them. But, rather, Jesus told us, "You're going to be judged by your words — by what you've said!"

I ask you — are you one who blesses with your tongue, yet also curses? "Therewith [the tongue] bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude [likeness] of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be" (James 3:9-10).

The Greek word for curse here means "to tear down, bring one down, denounce as evil." And indeed, so often out of our mouths come praises to God, worship and blessing of Him — but also evil gossip that tears down the reputation of His servants. Such loose talk tears down the body of Christ! It opposes the work of God!

Yet you can damage a person's reputation without saying a word — simply by making negative facial expressions. On one occasion I was asked about a certain individual with whom I'd had to deal concerning a number of problems. When asked about the person, I didn't say a word — I just wrinkled up my nose and shook my head. The person inquiring told me, "Well, you haven't said a word, but you've told me everything I need to know." I'd planted negative thoughts in that person's mind! This also has to do with an untamed tongue.

Now, some believers are very careful not to speak their thoughts; they aren't careless with their words. Yet the good things that many Christians say are hypocritical — because their thoughts are full of evil! "...they bless with their mouth, but they curse inwardly" (Psalm 62:4).

These people take your hand, smile warmly, and say nice things to you, such as, "How are you? Nice to see you. You're looking so good!" But as they turn away, they mumble to someone nearby, "What a phony! She looks like death warmed over. Did you see how much weight she's gained? Her eyes look terrible!" "...they flatter with their tongue" (Psalm 5:9).

No Christian should have this kind attitude. Rest assured, there are roots of bitterness and rebellion in that person — something desperately wrong in her heart! A true believer who walks closely with the Lord couldn't even conceive of that kind of behavior.

You say, "Now, wait a minute, pastor. First you tell me how serious it is to have a loose tongue. But now you say I'm going to be judged by my mere thoughts about people?"

Absolutely — yes!

"For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he..." (Proverbs 23:7). "(Love)...thinketh no evil" (1 Corinthians 13:5). Show me a person of a suspicious nature, and I'll show you someone with a legalistic spirit. That person has a stubborn nature, perhaps never fully yielded to Jesus. He always suspects others of falling into the things he himself is greatly tempted to do!

Perhaps the most dangerous person, though, is the one who passes along gossip — who gets involved in conversations that are not edifying, but destructive — and yet believes he meant no harm! When you question him about it, he might even get tears in his eyes and say sorrowfully, "I'm not like that. I love my church and my pastors — I love the body of Christ. Yes, I may have said some things that could be construed as gossip or careless. But God knows my heart. I've never meant any harm."

Such an attitude is dangerous! The Bible says great fires are caused by little sparks! And your little spark can ignite a big fire, even though you don't mean it to get out of hand. "Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!" (James 3:5). You can nonchalantly drop a tidbit about somebody — and it can end up affecting their character, spirit and very nature!

It doesn't matter what your motive was — the damage is done. Your little spark has already started a fire, and it's raging out of control. It could damage a reputation. It may bring someone shame, disgrace and sorrow. And no matter what your motive was in telling it, you are still guilty — you are the fire bug! It was your unruly tongue that started it all!

How can you gain control over the deadly weapon of your tongue?

4. You Cannot Tame Your Own Tongue — God Must Do It!

"But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:8).

How does God expect us to bridle or tame our tongue when His Word says no man can do this? Jesus gives us the answer: "But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). You can no more tame your tongue by yourself than a wild horse can tame itself. Wild horses are tamed by experienced trainers who "break" them. And the Holy Spirit is our trainer. Only He can break our unruly, wild tongues!

The prophet Isaiah provides us with an example of how we can heal our tongue:

1.

Isaiah drew near to the Lord. and he prayed for a vision of God's holiness. He said: "...I saw... the Lord... upon a throne, high and lifted up..." (Isaiah 6:1).

Anyone who wants to live pleasing to the Lord must constantly go into His presence until he obtains a vision of God's holiness. All healing, all true blessings, all victories begin at His throne. That is where we see God in His holiness!

2.

In God's holy presence Isaiah was deeply convicted of having unclean lips. "Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (verse 5).

Why did Isaiah cry out, "I am a man of unclean lips"? It was because he'd seen the King of Glory! "I've seen Him in my mind — I've seen the glory of His holiness! And I know He will not tolerate sin!" Our sin becomes exceedingly sinful when we are in God's presence. The light of His holy countenance exposes everything that is unlike Him!

3.

Isaiah allowed the Lord to touch him and cleanse him with His holy fire. "Then flew one of the seraphims

unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged" (verses 6-7).

God's Word is a live coal — and the Holy Ghost is its fire! Right now you have been touched by the Holy Ghost through this message. And God wants to put His fire to your tongue and sanctify it. He can do it for you — if you'll let His Word convict you! He is the only One who can do it. Your part is simply to confess as Isaiah did, "Woe is me, I'm unclean!"

The secret to victory over drugs, alcohol or an uncontrollable tongue is closeness to Jesus — intimacy with Him — knowing Him! Drawing nigh to His presence will reveal what is in your heart. Many Christians continue to gossip and slander because they never really have been close to Christ. They have never been intimate enough to see how unruly their tongue is!

Let this word go straight to your heart and purge you with its fire. Confess, "Yes, it's me, Lord! I'll not let this word pass me by! Purge my lips, purge my tongue. Cleanse my mouth and my heart!"

Ask the Holy Ghost to put such conviction in you that each time you start to say something careless, unthinking or unkind, He will raise a flag and wave it at you. Ask Him to make you super — sensitive to His voice — and then obey Him when he speaks. He may stop you in the middle of a sentence with Holy Ghost conviction, and you'll say to the person you're talking to, "I'm sorry — God told me to stop. Let's drop it right now. Forget it!"

May only blessings come forth from your life — from a pure heart and a kind tongue — tamed by prayer and by the Holy Ghost!

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