

Wisdom in Relationships *Slow To Speak*

Joe Stowell writes: “Having a tongue is like having dynamite in our dentures – it must be reckoned with.” This morning, we are going to consider something that affects all of us; if you are able to speak, this message is for you.

It seems no one is immune from the difficulty of controlling the tongue. Survey biblical history and you find struggles in this area: Abraham, Moses, David, Peter – the list goes on.

It is a life-long challenge. On a windswept hill in an English country churchyard stands a drab, gray slate tombstone. The faint etchings read:



BENEATH THIS STONE, A LUMP OF CLAY,
LIES ARABELLA YOUNG,
WHO, ON THE TWENTY-FOURTH OF MAY,
BEGAN TO HOLD HER TONGUE.

The basis for this short message series titled *Wisdom in Relationships* comes from the New Testament book of James. Turn in your Bible to James, chapter one.

James 1:19

Last week, we looked at the subject of anger. We saw a framework for dealing with anger in Paul’s letter of Ephesians. “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Ephesians 4:26-27).

We turn our attention now to James’ admonition to be slow to speak. Later in his letter, James describes the tongue – a description that helps us to understand why he says, “Be slow to speak.”

James 3:1-12

James has much to say about the power of the tongue. He begins with two illustrations regarding the power to direct:



1) Bit –

We had horses growing up on the farm. Sometimes we would go out in the pasture and jump aboard to ride. That was a far different experience than when you saddled up with a bridle. Without the bridle, without the bit, there was little direction, little control. The horse was the one who was really in charge. With the bridle, I was in control, in charge. I chose which direction we would go, and when we would stop.

James says that the tongue so often controls everything else. Controlling the tongue means controlling the entire body.



2) Rudder –

The rudder, though small, exercises immense control over a large ship. It directs the ship safely and securely.

Early in World War II, a shell from the German battleship *Bismarck* sank the heavy cruiser *Hood*, the pride of the British navy. A great chase commenced, and the *Bismarck* was finally doomed when a torpedo from a British ship damaged its rudder, causing it to sail haplessly in circles until a barrage of naval artillery sent her to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

The tongue, this smallest of organs, exerts tremendous influence upon us in its power to direct our entire being. And it has a great effect upon relationships

Then, James speaks about the power of the tongue to destroy. There is a destructive power to the tongue. We know – with bitter memories – that the childhood taunt: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” is actually a reversal of the truth. It is far easier to heal the wounds caused by sticks and stones than those caused by words. Some of you this morning still struggle with the sting of words spoken to you years ago. They are as fresh as yesterday in your mind. And they hurt deeply – things spoken in anger, in disgust, in disappointment. Words intended to wound maliciously.

In his book, *Becoming a Whole Person in a Broken World*, Ron Lee Davis tells the following story:

A few years ago, the body of a young woman was pulled from the harbor waters of New York City. She had jumped from a bridge, taking her own life. Her body was laid out upon the dock and inspected for clues to the reason for her suicide. In the pocket of her coat, a piece of paper was found. There were only two words written upon it, as if she had started to scrawl a last despairing message, but was unable to continue. It read simply, “They said.”

James uses two pictures to illustrate the power of the tongue to destroy:



1) Fire –

One of the worst urban blazes in modern history, the Oakland Firestorm of 1991 began as a relatively small grass fire in the Berkeley Hills. But after being persistently fanned by the strong seasonal "Diablo winds," that brush fire eventually grew to consume 1,520 acres, including more than 3,500 homes, apartments and condominiums. Such destruction — and in such a densely populated area — meant the disaster carried one of the heftiest price tags for wildfire damage in U.S. history: an estimated \$1.5 billion.

The single largest fire in California’s recorded history was in 2003, the so-called Cedar Fire, a blaze that began after a lost hunter lit a small signal fire in the Cleveland National Forest, just 25 miles from San Diego. The blaze eventually came to consume more than 280,000 acres — almost 30,000 of which were within the city limits of San Diego.

Once the fire has begun, there is no way of reversing course. So it is when the tongue sets a fire. There is an old saying: “Three things come not back – the spent arrow, the spoken word, and the lost opportunity.”

James says the tongue is a fire from hell itself. The damage it does, the hurt it produces, the pain it causes – what devastating effects from so small a thing.

Look again at **Verse 7 & 8a**. Notice that James does not say the tongue cannot be tamed; he says that no man can tame the tongue. If ever we need God's power it is in this area. Listen to David's plea in Psalm 141:3 – "Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!"

2) Poison – The second picture of a destructive tongue is that of a poison.



James continues in Verse 8: "It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." He picks up language from Psalm 140.

Deliver me, O LORD, from evil men; preserve me from violent men, who plan evil things in their heart and stir up wars continually. They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's, and under their lips is the venom of asps. – *Psalm 140:1-3*

How true that is. Words can poison relationships. Words direct; words destroy; words also deceive. James talks finally about their power to deceive.

He uses a well-understood and valued truth for his readers. The importance of the spring in dry Palestine cannot be overestimated. It was essential. Many villages owed their every existence to the discovery of a spring, and depended on its reliable production of usable water for its continued existence.

But here's the point – it could not / would not send out both bitter and fresh water. It was capable of only producing what was within itself.

Likewise, a fig tree cannot produce olives, nor a vine produce figs. Why? Because it is not within their nature to produce anything different. I think that James is echoing the words of Jesus when he said that the mouth speaks out of the heart; what is in the heart will come out of the mouth.

Not a pretty picture, is it. The Scriptures pull no punches – they tell it like it is. James warns us that the tongue is a deadly weapon.

You see, words matter. Partly, it's what we say, and partly, it is how we say them. These are some actual newspaper headlines. See how they sound to you:

- Something went wrong in jet crash, experts say.
- Police begin campaign to run down jaywalkers.
- Drunk gets nine months in violin case.
- Enraged cow injures farmer with ax.
- Stolen painting found by tree.
- Two sisters reunited after 18 years in checkout counter.
- Cold wave linked to temperatures.

Words matter; they matter in relationships. The Old Testament book of Proverbs has so much to say about the power of words – for good and for bad and their influence in relationships. If there is a banner verse from this book on the power of words, it would Proverbs 18:21.

Proverbs 18:21

Words are powerful. I think that is why James exhorts us to measure our words; be careful with how we speak. Someone has written a piece titled: *A Builder or a Wrecker*. Listen to the poem and see it through the prism of the power of words to build or tear down:

As I watched them tear a building down
A gang of men in a busy town
With a ho-heave-ho, and a lusty yell
They swung a beam and the side wall fell
I asked the foreman, "Are these men skilled,
And the men you'd hire if you wanted to build?"
He gave a laugh and said, "No, indeed,
Just common labor is all I need."
"I can easily wreck in a day or two,
What builders have taken years to do."
And I thought to myself, as I went my way
Which of these roles have I tried to play?
Am I a builder who works with care,
Measuring life by rule and square?
Am I shaping my work to a well-made plan
Patiently doing the best I can?
Or am I a wrecker who walks to town

Content with the labor of tearing down?
“O Lord let my life and my labors be
That which will build for eternity!”

[Author Unknown - The Increase, 35th Anniversary Issue, 1993, p. 9 (www.bible.org/illus/c/c)]

By our words we are able to build people up or tear them down. How important it is that we measure the effect of our words before we speak. Look at some more of Solomon’s proverbs:

Proverbs 12:25; 16:24

In the Library of Congress is a box on display. It is marked, “Contents of the pockets of the President of the United States the night of April 14, 1865.” Here’s a picture of the contents.



Included were some old faded newspaper clippings praising the work of the President. One of the clippings is a speech from John Bright proclaiming, “President Abraham Lincoln is one of the greatest men of all time.” Well—everyone thinks that today, but back in 1865, a lot of people did not feel that way. The President’s critics were many and they were fierce, and he spent hours in lonely despair. There is something touching about this man who is now thought of as one of the great men of all time needing to hear some words of encouragement in his own lifetime.

One of the great “one another” commands in the New Testament is to “encourage one another.” Words play a major role in fulfilling that command.

Solomon makes quite a distinction between the fool and the wise person in the Proverbs – in the area of our words as well as actions. Let’s look at some verses to consider each; you will note that he speaks to both in many of the verses.

Proverbs 10:19 – The New Living Translation reads: “Too much talk leads to sin. Be sensible and keep your mouth shut.”

The fool doesn't know when to stop talking. And inevitably, he or she will put their foot in their mouths. There's no discretion here; no self-control, no discernment. The mouth just keeps running. The fool might be tempted to think they just have the "gift of gab."

A young lady once said to John Wesley, the co-founder of Methodism, "I think I know what my talent is." Wesley said, "Tell me." She replied, "I think it is to speak my mind." Wesley said, "I do not think God would mind if you bury that talent."

Proverbs 15:2

The fool can't stop talking. Solomon says they "pour out" their folly. They don't know when to stop. This week I read about a man who spoke at a Yale University alumni dinner. He gave a brilliant address.

He spoke thirty minutes on the letter *Y* (Youth), one-half hour on *A* (Achievement), thirty minutes on *L* (Leadership), and one-half hour on the *E* (Excellence).

Afterward a man was crying. The speaker asked him what it was about his message that touched him so. He said, "I'm so happy." "Why?"

"I'm so glad this isn't the alumni dinner of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology!"

Solomon has great advice for the fool. Look at this example:

Proverbs 29:20

In other words: "engage the mind before putting mouth in gear." Don't we often get into trouble with our words when we just aren't thinking? Most of us don't think on our feet fast enough to make up for what we say. Seldom are we quick enough to recover from the potential consequences.

There was a 6'10" Texan who walked up to the counter of McDonalds, slammed down his big fist, and said to the girl behind the counter, "I want half a Big Mac." She said, "What?" He said, "I want half a Big Mac, and I want it now!"

Not sure what to do, she said, “Excuse me for a minute.” And she headed back to her manager without realizing that the man was following behind her.

She got back to the manager and said, “There’s a big klutz out there who is dumber than lead and he has ordered half a Big Mac.” And just about that moment she suddenly realized that he was standing right behind her. Quickly she added, “And this gentleman wants the other half.”

Since most of us aren’t that quick, we would be better served if we just were a bit more restrained. Another piece of advice: **Proverbs 17:28**

If we are quiet, at least no one will see that we are a fool! So, how about the wise? What does Solomon have to say about the wise person and his/her words?

He shows the awesome power for good that the words of the wise bring to others: **Proverbs 12:18**

Have you been on the receiving end of either or both of those? Words kill; words destroy. But there are words that heal, that restore, that rejuvenate. Those are the words that come from the wise.

This doesn’t mean there is no place for constructive criticism, or even reproof and correction. It is the intent and the manner with which words are spoken that make all the difference in the world.

You can discern when words are meant to destroy you rather than correct you. You can tell the difference when someone uses words against you instead of for you. You know when someone has ill-intent in saying something to you rather than having your best interests at heart.

Look at more of Solomon’s observations – **Proverbs 13:3; 17:27**

Again, similar to James’ admonition, this indicates self-control and discernment. George Sala writes: “Not only to say the right thing in the right place, but far more difficult, to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.”

Proverbs 21:23

Someone has said, “It is when the fish opens his mouth that he gets caught.”

The power of the tongue – for good and evil. Words of the fool and words of the wise. So, how do we become wise? How do we change? How do we control what we say and how we say it?

One day, a controversy arose over Jesus healing of a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute. The religious leaders accused him of performing a miracle by the power of Satan. Jesus answered them, and in doing so, talked about speaking against the Holy Spirit. Then he went on to talk about the power of words and from where they originate. He said:

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. – *Matthew 12:33-35*

If we desire that what comes out of the mouth is clean and not unclean, the heart has to be changed. And that is something only God can do. True change has to come through a transformed heart. If we would be wise in our words, it is the source that must be addressed.

That's why Solomon begins his proverbs with this statement: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." It is why he says that wisdom is found by understanding the fear of the LORD and the knowledge of God.

Here, then, is true wisdom – wisdom for relationships. It is sourced in God, revealed through Christ, and brought into our lives through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

So what should we draw from this by way of application?

- 1) Admit you understand the problem. We know what James is talking about. We cannot plead ignorance.
- 2) Repent for the sins of the tongue. Repentance involves a change in attitude. We must be willing for God to work in this area.
- 3) Ask God to help you in the control of your tongue. As David prayed, "Lord, set a guard about my mouth."

4) Cultivate a godly heart – for the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.

5) Be cautious, be careful in the use of our tongue. Listen again to Proverbs 10:19

When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise.

6) Speak the truth in love – Paul’s admonition.

- Choose truthfulness. Mark Twain said, “When in doubt, tell the truth. It will confound your enemies and astound your friends.”
- Balance with love – temper your words with love. So often, it is not the words that are wrong, but the tone, volume or demeanor.

David’s prayer in Psalm 19:14 is a good approach and perspective on being slow to speak: *“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.”*

Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, once remarked:

I have learned this art: When I have nothing more to say, I stop talking.

I think I will take his advice. Let’s close in prayer.