

"To Tie the Tongue"
By Rev. James C. Ramsey

Texts: Proverbs 1:20-23; 2:1-5
James 3:1-12

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Have you ever wished you could take your words back, realizing that what you just said was hurtful,

Embarrassing,

or simply came out wrong?

It seems to be a very human trait...opening the mouth and inserting one's foot... Or, put another way, having a tongue that excessively flaps!

Have you seen the latest ridiculous Geico Commercial? – where Meerkats spread office gossip? There's a big room, filled with dozens of cubicles and one of the office workers is on a phone call. She's obviously talking to her boyfriend... they're in the midst of breaking up. It's a private moment, but her co-workers...the meerkats can't help but overhear...and the news spreads quickly.

The woman talks into the phone: What do you mean it's not working out, Craig? I just introduced you to my parents.

A meerkat pops up above his cubicle wall and cannot keep his mouth shut: Psst! Craig and Sheila broke up.

Another meerkat responds: What, really?

Another has overheard: Craig and Shelia broke up!? No, Craig!? What happened?

I don't know. (Is she okay?)

Craig and Sheila broke up! (Craig and Sheila!?)

In a matter of seconds, everyone on the floor knows the news...even the boss!

The narrator chimes in: As long as office gossip travels fast, you can count on GEICO saving folks money.

Craig and Sheila broke up! What!?

We've all been privy to gossip at one time or another. It can be quite tempting to join the jabber. You might say to yourself, "everyone is doing it, what does it matter?"

You've heard it said in a variety of forms --- that "Talk is cheap." It's not what you say, but what you do. "Talk is cheap, show me the money!"

Talk may be cheap – but it can be costly. We might think of our religion as having to do with what we believe...but the Bible's Letter of James insists that what we say has a profound influence on others and matters to God.

James doesn't mince words. Early in his letter he makes this sobering statement:

²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. (James 1:26)

In some instances, you might be ridiculed if you found yourself tongue-tied...as in "What's the matter with you? Cat got your tongue?!" But James advises that it is spiritually essential for us to understand the power of our words...and for us to be able to show wisdom and restraint when speaking...for us to be able "To Tie the Tongue." How many of us can truly do that?

To read James' letter – it sounds like there was as much sinful talk in antiquity as there is today, and in biblical times they didn't have Snapchat, Facebook or Twitter!

Listen to James again:

the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷For every

species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,⁸ but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

And this next bit really gets me. James explains:

⁹With it (with our tongues) we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

Faithful people have always struggled with their tongues...but it is a struggle well worth having.

The Ladder of Divine Ascent is a monastical document written in the year 600 AD by John Climacus, at the request of John, Abbot of Raithu, a monastery situated on the shores of the Red Sea. There is still a monastery there today.

The work is addressed to monks in the desert and attempts to lay out a series of detailed steps, by which one might achieve the highest degree of religious perfection. Divided into thirty parts, or "steps", in memory of the thirty years of the life of Christ, it presents a picture of all the virtues...and seeks to exhibit practical guidelines.

Even though the words of the Ladder are now 1400 years old, they are amazingly contemporary – especially these from Step 11...where “talkativeness” is compared and contrasted with “intelligent silence.”

Talkativeness is the throne of vainglory on which it loves to preen itself and show off. Talkativeness is a sign of ignorance, a doorway to slander, a leader of jesting, a servant of lies, the ruin of compunction, a summoner of despondency, a messenger of sleep, a dissipation of recollection, the end of vigilance, the cooling of zeal, the darkening of prayer.

Whereas,

Intelligent silence is the mother of prayer, freedom from bondage, custodian of zeal, a guard on our thoughts, a watch on our enemies, a prison of mourning, a friend of tears, a sure recollection of death, a painter

of punishment, a concern with judgment, a servant of anguish, a foe of license, a companion of stillness, the opponent of dogmatism, a growth of knowledge, a hand to shape contemplation, hidden progress, the secret journey upward. For those who recognize their sins have taken control of their tongue, while the chatterers have yet to discover themselves as they should.

This week a friend relayed this story to me...I would file it under the heading “**O Lord, teach me to bridle my tongue!**” -- My outspoken friend has strong opinions on a variety of issues. Several weeks ago he got up on his high horse, shall we say, about the breaking news concerning abusive Catholic priests.

He launched into several text threads with close Catholic friends and families he knew well. He began pastorally, sensitively, he believed, but little by little he clearly became quite angry...and tired, too. By his own admission, he stopped “listening” and began “pontificating,” especially to those families to whom he was closest. These were folks with whom he had shared meals and evenings by the bonfire, people he trusted, had enjoyed heated debates in the Spirit, ones he had agreed to disagree with on a variety of church and doctrinal issues.

His textual pontificating sucked the juice out of his phone battery, until his screen had gone dark. He was frustrated because he was not done pontificating, so he went to his van to plug in – recharge. Well, as he tells the story, he put his phone down on the windshield of his van, while he retrieved his charging cord. While he was rummaging for the cord, the phone started to “slide” and proceeded down the windshield and in-between the windshield and the hood and on into the depths of the engine compartment!

At that moment, my friend declared, “I knew it was time to Shut Up!”

The next day it took him three hours to remove the fenders and air filters and other various mechanical contraptions within the engine to finally recover his phone. Of course, it was dead, completely out of power. This gave him time to reflect...and read his Bible...his old-fashioned paper Bible before going to work. He spent his time in the amazing values and wisdom of Proverbs!

Even after his phone was finally working again, he waited three days to re-contact his Catholic friends and families, all of whom love and serve the same God. His message was brief: *I talk too much and we are unconditionally with you and your faith community.*

Today we are invited to consider our speech...to be thoughtful and faithful with our tongues...

A recent book by Baylor University professor Alan Jacobs offers great advice for how to repair the connection between the brain and the tongue. Jacobs seems to have the Letter of James in the back of his mind when he offers what he calls his “Thinking Person’s Checklist” of good things to remember before we engage our tongues. While Jacobs lists 12 ideas...we can boil them down to three main categories.

First, be slow. In a world of instant messaging, Twitter and sound bites, it’s tempting to react quickly when confronted with an idea or a provocation. But Jacobs suggests that when we’re tempted to respond quickly we should, instead, give it five minutes. Take a walk, make dinner, do some deep breathing — whatever it takes to get your body involved. When our bodies are moving, our brains tend to have time to process. Forgo the need for an instant response to that nasty email or “idiotic” tweet. Consider not responding at all. As James says earlier in the letter: *“Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness”* (1:19).

Second, be teachable. Be a student of God’s Word. But always be ready to be taught. The truth is: that we can all learn from others, even from those with whom we disagree. Value learning over debating. Listen and learn in order to understand.

Finally, be honest. When you do speak, state what you think and believe with conviction, but draw from the well of God’s wisdom and love. As James says later, *“The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy”* (v. 17). When we speak out of that wisdom, says James, *“a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace”* (v. 18).

“To Tie the Tongue” – would you consider it?...could you try it? Words

matter. Try being slow, teachable and honest...before you speak. May the love of God speak in us and through us.