

“Do You Have A Handle On Your Tongue?”
WHERE DO YOU STAND WITH YOUR FAITH? #6
Psalm 15, Matthew 12:30-37, James 3:1-12
October 8-9, 2022

“A man went to dinner with a friend of his. He asked his friend to take him to a restaurant with the best possible meat selection. The friend took him to a restaurant that served tongue - all kinds of tongue - fried tongue, baked tongue, salad tongue, and other tongue. When he asked his friend why he brought him to a restaurant that served tongue as his choice for the best meat, his friend replied, ‘What other meat do you know that can bless you, encourage you, strengthen you, and affirm you?’

“A little later, this same man went to dinner with this same friend and asked to be taken to a restaurant with the worst meat he could find in hopes of getting a different kind of restaurant. Again, they arrived at a place that served tongue. With a knowing look, his friend said, ‘Hey! What other meat do you know that can curse you, destroy you, or remove dignity from you?’”¹ That’s the tongue!

“Leonardo da Vinci rightly stated, “No other member of our bodies needs so great a number of muscles as our tongue, for this member exceeds all the rest in the number of its movements.”² However, I would add, no other member of our body is capable of such greatness or such wickedness from its movements as the tongue. In one instant we can be lifting and building up one who is heavily burdened, while at the very next instant we can be destroying the reputation or even the life of one we deem unworthy of praise, all with the use of the same tongue. **Our tongues’ movements can bring blessings and curses, it can protect or attack, and it can save or destroy.**

We can easily see the use and the misuse of the tongue all around us. In the same newscast we can hear praise for one person’s actions and also condemnation of another person’s actions. During election years, it is so easy for political candidates to be lured into doing their best to make their opponents look the very worst by the use of their tongues. We can belittle the best efforts of someone even to the point of killing that person with our very words.

¹ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 320, #964)

² (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998] pg. 574)

How many young people today are committing suicide because of what others say about them in social media? How many ministries have become decimated because one person used their tongue in such a way as to lead others to think something absolutely untrue about that ministry? How many families have been torn apart because of the wagging tongue of one person telling lies about another person?

On the other hand, how many lives have been saved from eternal destruction because one person used their tongue to share the best news of God's gift of Salvation? How many have been drawn up out of the pit of hell because they were challenged or encouraged to change their lives because one person told the absolute truth of the Gospel to them? How many corporations have flourished because one person used their words to encourage and inspire their employees because of the good work they were doing? How many nations have been stimulated into greatness because the words of one person giving them hope? You see, the use of our tongues can either destroy or renew the life of another, and each one of us is capable of both, unless we are very careful in how we use our tongues.

William Norris puts it this way, "If your lips would keep from slips, Five things observe with care; To whom you speak; of whom you speak; And how, and when, and where."³ The **one "TO whom" you speak may be going through very difficult times** and unless we are careful, our words can take them even further down their path to despair. That one to whom we speak may be in need of encouragement or a bit of laughter, but our words might never bring either unless we are careful about how we speak to them. Or, it could be that the one we are speaking to is seeking some tidbit of wrongdoing on the part of another, in order to repay them in revenge for the hurt or pain they have received from that other one. The one to whom we speak could then use the very words we speak to them, to seek retribution and pay-back for what they have experienced.

The one "OF whom" we speak may be completely innocent of what we have heard, but instead of seeking the truth about that particular situation, we readily spread the fallacious story we've

³ (Swindoll's *Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, pg. 574)

heard, further building into the destruction of that person. It is so easy for us to share the morsel of gossip with another, but be completely in the wrong about what was said or done. Word of mouth travels very quickly, and it hardly ever brings about good results. It ends up bringing as much devastation as a hurricane coming ashore.

“HOW we speak” toward or about another can also create dangerous results. If we continuously criticize someone, they will eventually give up, or they will turn bitter and take it out on another. The way we speak to another can become a domino effect of hurt and pain from one person to another. On the contrary, that same domino effect can happen if we praise and encourage one another. If we belittle, we’ll see the results in the office, or in the department, or in the home. If we encourage, the results usually produce a good result in manifold ways in those same environments.

“WHEN we speak” to another is also key as to whether we will see a good or an ugly result. If we speak to another when they are upset or troubled by body aches, we need to be very careful in what we say lest we aggravate the situation and bring about harsh responses. And when we’re the ones hurting or upset, it is so easy to lash out at another simply because we’re consumed with pain or grief. When to speak is vital for us to understand so that we might bring support at just the right time.

“WHERE we talk” to another is also key in what the result will be. If we try to correct another person in the midst of a crowded room, the person may not receive the correction congenially, and others may see us as us being either punitive or adversarial. Correction is always best one on one, just the two of you, lest disrespect happens to either one of you. Likewise, praise of a person in large groups can be perceived as flattery and received as derogatory. The places that we speak can work all on their own to either show love or to show hatred.

Throughout the Bible we hear references of warning about how we should speak to one another. Psalm 15 asks the question, *“Lord, who may dwell in Your sacred tent? Who may live on Your holy mountain?”* (15:1). The question is asked as to what kind of person could possibly stand before the presence of the Holy Lord God Almighty. And the answer comes to us as the one who is wise, *“whose*

walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart; whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others” (15:2-3).

These are positive and negative requirements given to us as guidelines for our own self-evaluation so that we might prepare ourselves to be in the presence of the Lord God Almighty. If we are to be representatives of God in the way that we live, our hearts must be set upon living in such a way as to accurately embody The Lord within us. The godly representative is expected to live wisely, striving for holiness, thereby being worthy of the description of “*blameless,*” “*righteous,*” and “*truthful.*”

The ones who are blameless, righteous and truthful are those who actively live out integrity in the activities of walking, doing, and speaking. Their whole life is harmoniously coordinating every aspect of their lives to demonstrate the characteristics and expectations of God. Their whole life is the reflection of the condition of their heart, and the actions of walking, doing and speaking mirror all that is going on within the mind and heart of that person. As Jesus described a tree being known by its fruit (Matthew 12:33), so a person is known by their actions and words representing the intentions of their heart.

But **the psalmist goes on to say that a godly person is very careful in the way that they use their tongue.** They do not slander another, using information that was obtained by spying on the other to bring disgrace to that person. They are careful to build up and encourage their neighbor, and never purposely hurt them. And they strive never to slur the reputation of another, but rather seek to protect them from disgraceful accusations.

This is what keeps a person blameless in their walk before the Lord. A close handle on our tongues restrains us from doing anything that might destroy either the reputation of another, or more importantly, our own reputations as we live as ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20).

Jesus drives this caution in the use of our tongues even further. He tells the Pharisees, “*You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil*

*things out of the evil stored up in him. **But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.** For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned”* (Matthew 12:34-37).

If we seriously consider the words we have spoken to one another, how many of us could be acquitted of any wrongdoing? Likewise, how many of us would be condemned by those same words? How we speak to one another is not disregarded in how we are judged, but rather it becomes an integral demonstration of all that is within our hearts. It is a good and proper thing for us to look at the words we speak, for they indicate where we stand in our faith in the Lord Jesus.

In the same way, James 3:1-12 illuminates these truths. I invite you to listen to the challenging words of this lesson. (READ James 3:1-12)

Those who are in leadership positions are judged more severely than those who are not. The standards of expectations are much higher for the leader because they represent the people, especially the leaders within the church. And all those who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, those who claim to be Christians, are also held to even higher standards because we claim to be representatives of the Lord Jesus. **The name “Christian” means “little Christs.” So if we claim to be little Christs, we are expected to live in the same way as Jesus Christ.** Therefore we are to have higher standards than those living according to the ways of the world. We are to live exemplary lives after the model of Jesus, and if we fail at living exemplary lives, then we really have no right to be called a Christian. And if we live by the ways of the world instead of following Jesus’ ways, we actually bring dishonor to the One whom we are named after.

So James tells us that we need to be careful in how we live - walking, doing and speaking - if we are counted as “teachers” or leaders, for we will be judged much more strictly than others. Our example of that which is within us has to be blameless, righteous and truthful, or else we totally misrepresent God, and lead others to think less of God, too.

James desires that we take notice of the importance of controlling our tongues so that we do not

bring disgrace, or hurt, or destruction, but rather to bring honor, glory and everlasting life to those around us. We need to tame our tongues so that they do not run wild, wreaking havoc everywhere we go. We need to harness our mouths so that we do not shamelessly spout out evil, but rather stay true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to be very careful of what we say, else we will end up ruined upon the reefs of life, having run aground because of the use of our tongue.

What would it take to change the way we speak and use our tongues? James 3:3-4 tells us that bits in the mouths of horses control the whole animal. Rudders on large ships determine where that ship will go, even though the rudder is very small compared to the rest of the ship. So would it take a muzzle over our mouth to keep us quiet? Would it take tying up our tongues so that we don't steer our lives into dangerous waters as we talk? It takes us back a few weeks where James told us to be "*quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry*" (Ja. 1:19).

There are times when I know that God has issued an angel to be at my side who reaches out and grabs a hold of my tongue so that I do not quickly speak what is on my mind. What I would have said would have been very destructive to those listening, so God saved me by getting ahold of my tongue and stopping me from speaking.

There have been other times when that same angel has kicked me up out of my chair in order to speak at just the right time to bring clarity or reason to a situation. **When we let God be the One who has control of our tongues, it can save us from great humiliation AND it can bring about His work at just the right time to fulfill His purpose.** But we need to let God tame our tongues so that we know to whom we need to speak, of whom we speak of, and how and when and where.

Again, James clarifies the issue. He says, "*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 body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell*" (Ja. 3:5-6).

Now, that's straight talking for us to hear, understand and correct. But it won't be corrected

unless we take the initiative to start controlling this little organ we call the tongue. Unless we determine to be better listeners rather than quick speakers, these words will have little to no meaning to us, and we'll go on setting worlds on fire and destroying the lives of many others in the process.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. "On October 8, 1871, Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over the lantern at 8:30 p.m. That led to the Great Chicago Fire. It left 100,000 people homeless, 17,500 buildings destroyed, 300 people dead, and 40 million dollars' worth of damage done - all because a cow kicked over a lantern. One match can burn down a house. The tongue is like a match that sets things aflame," bringing destruction and death in its path. That's the power of the tongue.⁴ And that's not the kind of action that leads us to be blameless, righteous and truthful.

The world tells us to "speak it like it is," to "say what's on our minds," and to "don't hold any punches." And that's exactly where we get ourselves into trouble. **We can easily say what's on our minds and destroy another without even another thought.** Whether it's true or not, we speak out. BUT the danger is that once the words are out of our mouths, there is no taking them back again. Unless we're all alone in a woods somewhere talking to ourselves, we need to keep a lid on those thoughts before we say things that just might set fires and bring great destruction.

But then James addresses this issue a little bit differently. He says, "*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praises and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be!*" (Ja. 3:9-10).

Folks, you saw the result of this being done right here in this church where fires were started by one who praised God, yet cursed and maligned others. It didn't build up the church. It didn't create an atmosphere that was inviting to have new members become involved into the life of this congregation. It didn't create a safe environment in which you all could worship the Lord and live as the body of Christ. As soon as one lives with such dichotomy in their lives, it brings chaos to all those around them, and it leads to the death of that congregation. And it almost did that here, though it was caught in time

⁴ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans' Book of Illustrations*, pg. 321, #967)

so that total destruction did not occur. But we are suffering the results of all of those fires. For those caught in the situations, there is very little reason for them to return here. For those on the receiving end of the tongue lashings, there is no way on this side of heaven that they will even step foot back here. The tongue that praised God also cursed and condemned people, and the results were devastating.

There is only one statement to say about this: “My brothers and sisters, **THIS SHOULD NOT BE!**” **The church cannot survive if we gather here on Sunday mornings to worship God, yet spend the rest of the week using out tongues to destroy the lives of others.** A very good statement comes from a little children’s book: “If you can’t say nothing nice, don’t say nothing at all.”

So we have to choose which kind of church we want to be. Do we want to be a church that puts forth salt water that causes upset and discord? Or do we want to be a church that puts forth fresh water from the spring of life given to us by the Holy Spirit? It has to be one or the other, for it cannot be both.

The world so desperately needs the life-giving water of the Holy Spirit, and that is the only thing that should come out of the people of this congregation. For if we try to live according to the ways of the world AND live according to the ways of God, we will be torn apart deciding which way we should go. And we’ll end up destroying all those around us at the same time.

So I invite you to very carefully evaluate the words you speak. Are they better left unsaid, lest they bring hurt and pain and confusion? Or will they be spoken to build up and encourage and strengthen the faith of those around us? Be careful, lest our tongue destroy. Use your words wisely to be found blameless, righteous and truthful in all you say. Let’s pray.

Father You have gifted us with the ability of speaking to one another. But it is so easy for us to misuse that gift and bring hurt instead of help. Today, O God, we give our tongues to You, for You to control for Your glory. Teach us how to nurture each other and to use our words only to lift up and encourage, to strengthen and to edify, to guide and direct to Your love and peace. Convict us of the damage we’ve brought because of our words, and enable us to seek forgiveness where we have brought pain. This I pray in Jesus’ powerful and holy Name. AMEN.