

**Practical Faith for Everyday People:
TAMING THE TONGUE¹**

James 2:1-12

*The faith in our hearts comes
out of our mouths.*

A sermon preached by
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There is a story from Texas about a Mexican bank robber by the name of Jorge Rodriguez. He operated along the Texas border around the turn of the 20th century. The Texas Rangers (not the baseball team, but the law enforcement officers) had been after Rodriguez for a long time. Finally they trailed him to a small village just south of the border. One of the Rangers slipped into the cantina and got the drop on the bandit. With a pistol to the side of the robber's head, he said, "I know who you are, Rodriguez, and I have come to get back the money you stole from the Texas banks. Give it to me, or I'm going to blow your brains out!" Unfortunately, Jorge Rodriguez didn't speak English, so he didn't understand a word the Ranger said. The Ranger couldn't speak Spanish, either. Everyone else had run out of the cantina when the Ranger pulled his gun. So there they were, at a verbal impasse, unable to communicate with each other at all.

Suddenly a young Mexican boy walked into the cantina and said, "I am bilingual. Would you like me to act as interpreter for you?"

The Ranger nodded, and the boy translated his demands to Rodriguez. Nervously, the bandit responded, "Tell the big Texas Ranger that I have not spent a penny of the money. If he will go to the town well, face north, count down five stones, he will find a loose stone there. Pull it out, and all the money is hidden in the well."

The little translator had a very serious look on his face but a twinkle in his eye as he said to the Ranger in perfect English, "Señor Rodriguez is a brave man. He says he is ready to die."²

Words can be a powerful thing, can't they? Our speech can even be a matter of life and death. The way we talk and the words we use usually determine our course of action. Last week as I preached on James' words about peace, the worst mass shooting in American history was unfolding in Las Vegas. Almost universally, what the police discover in these mass killings is that the shooter preceded the massacre with some kind of disturbed speech—words of hatred or threats or paranoia. Before the violence in Charlottesville, VA, this summer, there was hateful speech. Violent action is usually preceded

by violent words. So this is a critical issue. It matters how we talk to one another. Our words make a difference.

The Letter of James has a very practical word to say to us today about this issue. Hateful and hurtful speech is nothing new; the early church struggled with it 2,000 years ago. Paul talks about the evil of gossip three different times, and the Bible condemns slander, or speaking falsely and hatefully about someone—35 times.³

James goes on a little rant about inappropriate speech in our Scripture text today. He starts by talking about those who would teach the faith, how they are held to a higher standard of accountability—a word to preachers and teachers there. He says that those who teach should have self-discipline with their speech, like a bridle in the mouth of a horse. A small bridle can determine the direction a big horse will go. So should we be with our words.

James then uses the image of a ship. A big vessel can be controlled by a very small rudder in the water. The tongue is very small in comparison to the whole body, but it can often control the direction we go.

Then James starts to get heated up. He compares the tongue to a fire. A little fire can do a lot of damage. A match or a burning cigarette can burn a forest down. The tongue is like a little fire in our mouths: *“Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell.”*⁴

Finally James says we can tame any animal on earth, but nobody has yet discovered how to tame the tongue. He calls it *“a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”* Then he goes on to say, *“With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God’s likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn’t be this way!”*⁵

James should tell us how he really feels, right? You almost want to say, “James, watch your language!” But isn’t this a word from the Lord for us today? Isn’t this something we need to hear and be reminded of over and over? Wouldn’t it be awesome if everyone who

spoke in public read this passage before they said a word or posted on social media?

Facebook changed my life. Since 2004, Facebook and its younger siblings Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and others, have changed the way we communicate. In some ways social media is great; I am in touch with friends from high school, college, seminary, and every church I ever served—people I would have lost touch with otherwise. Social media can be a great and instantaneous communication tool.

On the other hand, social media has amplified our human problem. It's easy to say something rude or negative or hateful when you are sitting at a computer or holding a phone by yourself and not looking the person in the eye. And once you click "Post," that statement is worldwide; efforts to take it back are pretty much futile. Of course, the problem is not social media; the problem is human sinfulness. But the decline of civility in our society has been accelerated by our technology.

So how are we supposed to act? How are we supposed to speak? James goes on to talk about the "wisdom from above" which brings peace, but we covered that last week. Today let me offer three practical suggestions about how to talk like a Christian.

Let your words be compassionate. Our speech should always let the other person know that we identify with them in their situation and that we care about them. Why? Because God cares about them. Every single person on this planet is a creation of God, endowed with infinite worth and dignity. God has a special place in the divine heart for those who are lost, broken, hurting, struggling, and crying out for help. We identify with them. We've all been there; some of us are there right now. So we want to speak words that show our empathy, words that comfort, words that reassure, words that seek to bind up the wounded, brokenhearted children of God.

That's the way Jesus was in the world. Over and over Scripture talks about Jesus seeing the weary and wounded people in his time,

and he would have compassion on them, because they were “*troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*”⁶

In our modern era, nobody has personified compassion any more than Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Yet with all she did, people would still question her humanitarian efforts. Someone had the nerve to ask Mother Teresa, “Why give people fish to eat instead of teaching them how to fish?” The question came from the statement, “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.” Mother Teresa had a quick response: “My people can't even stand. They're sick, crippled, demented. When I have given them fish to eat, and they can stand, I'll turn them over, and you give them the rod to catch the fish.”

However, Mother Teresa was also quick to emphasize that she gave people more than just “fish”—a short-term solution. Equally important was the love and joy which came from the heart. The poor, she insisted, deserve more than just service and dedication: “If our actions are just useful actions that give no joy to the people, our poor people would never be able to rise up to the call which we want them to hear, the call to come closer to God. We want to make them feel that they are loved.”⁷ That’s the voice of compassion.

Second, let your words bring encouragement. Sometimes Christian speech is negative. We hate sin, prejudice, injustice, and violence. We are against poverty, homelessness, disease, despair, anything that destroys human potential. Nevertheless, most Christian speech should be positive. It should be uplifting, up-building, encouraging words. The world tells us we’re no good, that we’re insignificant, that our efforts are futile. People of faith don’t believe that; we are encouragers. Paul put it to the Thessalonians this way: “*We urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all*

circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”⁸ That’s encouraging language.

When you speak the language of encouragement, you become an oasis in the desert of discouragement. In his book *Sabbath Time*, Tilden Edwards tells about a family with teenage children who decided, as part of their Sabbath commitment, that they would not criticize each other on Sundays. Nothing but encouraging words on the Sabbath. As the months went on, they kept this commitment, and they realized more and more of their children's friends were coming over on Sundays just to hang out. No one in the family had talked about their Sunday commitment, but somehow the other teenagers knew this home was a good place to be.⁹ Practice positive, encouraging speech, and see if it doesn’t attract people who are looking for a better way.

Finally, let your speech be words of witness. When all else is said and done, the most important word we can say to our family, our friends, our acquaintances, and the world is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. This does not mean obnoxious speech or street-corner preaching. There are many ways to let people know that the reason you are the way you are, the foundation of the love and joy and peace and hope that you exhibit day by day, is due to a personal relationship with the living Christ. I Peter tells disciples, “*Whenever anyone asks you to speak of your hope, be ready to defend it. Yet do this with respectful humility, maintaining a good conscience.*”¹⁰ It may make you feel a little nervous to think that you might need to share your faith with someone. But the good news is, if you make the attempt, the Holy Spirit will work with your intention to produce the witness that is needed. God will give you the words you need to say.

Former President Jimmy Carter tells a story about being asked to speak to the national convention of the Southern Baptist Church the year he was elected President. On the podium with him were Dr. Billy Graham and a truck driver from some little town somewhere. Each of them had 5 minutes to speak. When Billy Graham got up to speak

first, the truck driver leaned over to Jimmy Carter and confessed that he had never spoken in front of a large group of people, and he was scared to death.

Five minutes later, this truck driver stood at the podium and looked out at 17,000 Southern Baptists, following a word of power and eloquence from Billy Graham. Taking a drink from a glass of water handed to him, he mumbled into the microphone, "I was always drunk, and didn't have any friends. The only people I knew were men like me who hung around the bar in the town where I lived."

Then somebody told this truck driver about Jesus. He became a Christian, and he wanted to tell others about the Lord. Spending time in Bible study and with other Christian men prepared him for witnessing. Since he felt comfortable in the local bar, he decided to talk to people there. The bartender wasn't sympathetic; he told the new convert he was bad for business and a nuisance.

Not discouraged, the truck driver kept on with his mission, and in time the people at the bar began asking questions. He said, "At first they treated me like a joke, but I kept up with the questions and when I couldn't answer one, I went and got the answer and came back with it. Fourteen of my friends became Christians."

Jimmy Carter said, "The truck driver's speech, of course, was the highlight of the convention. I don't believe anyone who was there will ever forget that five-minute, fumbling statement—or remember what I or even Billy Graham had to say."¹¹

The way we speak is important. The words we say are powerful—for good or evil. Our words of compassion, encouragement, and witness can make a difference for good.

I got a random email Friday. It was from a young man who was a teenager when I was his pastor. I remember we had some conversations about his feeling of being called to ministry in some way. Eleven years ago I moved to another church, and honestly, I had not thought about Chris in over a decade. Then I get this email:

“I don't know if you remember me, but I wanted to send you an email of encouragement today. I was thinking back to when you were in Bryant, and the many communion services you presided over. I was not only reminded in those services of what Jesus did for us, but how the Spirit of God was so sweet in those communion services... The great thing about our Heavenly Father—when we are allowed to be used by Him, you never know how many lives you impact. Just be encouraged today and realize it's never for nothing and that our Father knows the trials and tribulations you have faced and will face. God has used you in a mighty way because you said yes! I often think when we get to heaven and meet the Lord, He will show us all those we have impacted for His sake. I think one day when you meet the Lord all those folks you never thought you impacted will come and hug your neck and say because of you I'm in the kingdom! I pray and hope you are blessed today and hope today you are encouraged, and your spirit is renewed.”

Wow. Mission accomplished, Chris.

Here's God's word for us today: Be careful what you say. Tame your tongue. When you get a chance to say words of compassion, encouragement, or witness, say them. Say them! And you will make a powerful and positive difference.

¹ Cf. “Watch Your Language,” a sermon preached October 8, 2006.

² Source unknown, attributed to Dr. John Claypool.

³ Cf. Romans 1:29, 2 Corinthians 12:20, and I Timothy 5:13. www.biblegateway.com.

⁴ James 3:6.

⁵ James 3:8-10.

⁶ Matthew 9:36.

⁷ Ruth A. Tucker, "Mother Teresa," *Christian History* (Issue 65, Vol. 19, No. 1), p. 22.

⁸ 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18.

⁹ Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians* (Upper Room Books, 1992).

¹⁰ I Peter 3:15-16a.

¹¹ *PreachingToday.com*.