

TAMING THE TONGUE

Alternatives to Corrupting Talk and Crude Joking

Nothing is more difficult to tame than the venomous tongue: “For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (Jam. 3:7-8). Earlier James said, “For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body” (Jam. 3:2). In other words, if you’re able to bridle your tongue, you’re able to bridle your entire being. So if we could only domesticate our tongues, everything else would follow suit. It seems as though the tongue is the last aspect of our flesh to be sanctified.

James is not using hyperbole when he says, “no human being can tame the tongue.” It’s the only monster that man has failed to subdue. It would be nice if we could go to Walmart and purchase tongue bridles (for ourselves and others), but we can’t for obvious reasons. Only the grace of God and the life of Jesus Christ flowing through us by the power of the Holy Spirit will enable us to control the tongue. Thus, when we pray, as David did, “Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!” (Ps. 141:3), we are praying for nothing less than a miraculous work of God to take place.

This is due to the fact that it is “out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34), and only God can transform the heart. We think that people can’t see the deep recesses of our heart, but every time we open our mouths we expose a little more of the condition of our heart. A positive and funny illustration of this comes from the Welsh Revivals, when God brought about a great harvest of conversions. Among those converted were coalminers. God gave them new hearts, and along with their new hearts came a new vocabulary. In fact, there was such a dramatic change in their vocabulary that the donkeys they worked with were thoroughly confused, and unable to follow the new orders void of foul four-letter words.

Also, as we think about the tongue, we must not take careless and casual “slips of the tongue” lightly. Jesus said, “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (vv. 36-37). So as we talk about appropriate speech, we must be ever mindful of our utter dependence upon God’s grace in this serious endeavor with eternal consequences.

So what type of speech should be proceeding from our mouths? “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29). Interestingly, the answer to “corrupting talk” is not “clean talk,” but “edifying talk.” Perhaps, you’ve heard that certain foul-mouthed folks need to clean up their language. What they really need to do is start loving their neighbor more. If their concern was for the edification of others, their speech would change.

Similarly, in Ephesians 5:4, the alternative to “crude joking” is not “clean joking,” but thanksgiving. “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.” I can still recall talking with a college student after a message I gave, in which I briefly referred to this verse. He admitted that this verse described most of the conversations that he and his friends had. How can we eliminate filthiness, foolish talk and crude joking from our speech? The answer here is through thanksgiving. One of the reasons why it’s so important to teach our children to say “thank you” is because it will foster God-exalting and people-edifying speech. Saying “thank you” isn’t just a polite thing to do, it is a Christian virtue. It is a response to grace—unmerited favor. And it could be as simple as saying “thank you” to somebody who opens a door for you. Inevitably, as magic words like “please” and “thank you” lose their charm and fall by the wayside, vulgarity will fill the vacuum.

What we say is important, and equally important is *how* we say it. As a pastor 1 Timothy 5:1 has guided me as I have dealt with older men: “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father.” This verse also implies that children, of all ages, should speak respectfully to their father and mother. And this respect extends even to how they look at their parents. “The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures” (Pro. 30:17). The common practice of rolling one’s eyes at a parent’s command is mockery, and it is a summons to all the ravens and vultures of the valley. Children who value their eye-sight should avoid this disrespectful way of “speaking.”

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