

How to Kill Relationships and Irritate People

"Say Whatever You Want"

James 3:1-12

Mark Vroegop

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water (James 3:1-12).

Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th Century preacher in London, was greeting the parishioners of his church after the conclusion of morning worship when a woman known for complaining approached him. Spurgeon knew the woman well – too well. Her complaint this time was about the bold tie that he was wearing that day. The woman said, "Pastor Spurgeon, your tie is offensive to me!" Upon hearing her comment, Spurgeon grabbed scissors and promptly cut his tie in half and handed it to her. The woman thought she had won. However Spurgeon was not finished. He handed her the scissors and said "Madam, your tongue offends me."

James 3 says that the tongue is a fire...a restless evil, full of deadly poison. We all know this to be true. You can probably tell me something someone said about you, wrote about you, posted on your Facebook, or texted you that you'd love to forget but you will never be able to. Further, I would suspect that everyone has said something that you wish you could take back. It is painfully obvious that saying whatever you want will kill relationships.

Killing relationships and irritating people is not hard to do. All you need to do is:

- Be full of yourself
- Use anger to get what you want

- Live with unresolved conflict
- Say whatever you want
- Never be satisfied

So far in our series we've seen that "God resists the proud but gives grace the humble" (1 Peter 5:5), that "the anger of man doesn't work the righteousness of God" (James 1:20), and that we should resolve conflict quickly or we will give the devil an opportunity (Eph 4:27).

Today we take up the subject of how we talk, and I really hope to help you prayerfully think through the impact of words upon your relationships. Words after all don't have to wound; they can bless, encourage, and heal. The tongue is a powerful tool of good and evil. It can be a restless evil or a reservoir of encouragement.

A Restless Evil

The book of James is all about real religion and its evidences. The book identifies that your speech is an evidence of whether you are real or a phony. In other words it is a little hard to believe that a man loves his wife and kids when he is verbally abusive. It is hard to believe that a woman is a committed Christian when she uses hateful and hurtful speech with her family. Our words are telling. And that is why James gives us some major warnings about our speech or our tongue.

1. Controlling the tongue is tough

James begins with a pretty simple but important point: if you talk a lot, you open yourself up for more problems. In verse 1 he cautions against wanting to be a teacher because of the reality that you are judged with greater strictness by God and others. The more you talk, the more opinions you offer, the more direction you give, the more discussions you have, the more possibility it is someone to misunderstand, be offended, take you the wrong way or think that you are being hypocritical. Every time you open your mouth the possibility of something going wrong increases.

Controlling the tongue is tough, and that is why in verse 2 he says "For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body." In other words it takes an enormous amount of maturity and discipline to control the tongue, and it is typically true that an uncontrolled tongue is a sign of an uncontrolled life.

James wants us to see that dealing with the tongue is really important.

2. The tongue is powerful and dangerous

The tongue, in comparison to other parts of the body, is relatively small, but James wants us to not make the mistake of underestimating the powerful threat associated with our words. Don't minimize the power of something so small. "I just needed to vent," "they know I was kidding," "I didn't really mean that," and "they can handle it," and "I just tell it like it is" are expressions that reveal that we don't know what we are messing with. The tongue is dangerous!

James illustrates this point in verses 3-4. First, he references a bit in a horse's mouth, and then he mentions the rudder on a ship. The point of both is obvious: small things can wield great power. The tongue, though small, should be dealt with carefully.

This is not the only place in the Bible where there is a strong warning about the potential for damage with our words. Let me share with you a few others:

- Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him. (Prov 29:20)
- When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent (Prov 10:19-20)
- Whoever loves transgression loves strife (Prov 17:19)
- For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases. As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife (Prov 26:20-22)
- Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent (Prov 17:27-28)
- Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble (Prov 21:23-24)
- It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman (Prov 21:19)

The tongue is destructive far beyond its size, and that is why James' final illustration is fire. In verses 5-8, he explains how a small spark can create a massive and destructive fire – "how great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!" It is destructive to others and to ourselves – "The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:6, NIV).

We know this to be true. We've seen it and felt it way too many times. Words can be weapons – nuclear weapons – that bring about untold devastation. An unchecked tongue calls for lots of relationship body-bags. That little thing in your mouth can create a lot of problems. But the problem is not the tongue; the problem is something else.

3. The mouth reveals the heart

In verses 8-9 James says that "the tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison...from the same mouth come blessings and cursing." The reality is that tongue is not really the problem. The real problem is the heart. Here's what Jesus said about this:

43 "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, 44 for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. 45 The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks (Luke 6:43-45).

Our words come from somewhere. It is not just that the tongue is a restless evil; it is that our hearts, what we think about, feel, and dwell upon, are constantly being filled with wrong thoughts and wrong feelings. Therefore words are the fruit of deeper issues in our hearts. Paul Tripp in his book *War of Words* says:

Word problems are always related to heart problems. Jesus' brilliant metaphor reveals that our words are shaped and controlled by the thoughts and motives of our hearts. It is very tempting to blame others ("She makes me so angry" or "He pushes all my buttons") or to blame the situation around us ("I didn't have time to sit down and discuss it calmly" or "With four kids in the house all talking at once, a soft answer doesn't work"). My words reveal the true desires of my heart. Word problems reveal heart problems.¹

So we need to see that people and circumstances do not cause the words that we say. People and circumstances only serve as the triggers that reveal what is really going on in the heart. Therefore, the reason that our words kill relationships and irritate people is because our hearts are desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9). The Bible tells us that our real problem is not our words; it is who we are! We are natural born sinners.

When our twins were about four years old they learned the phrase "on purpose" and it took on special meaning to them. They learned it after discovering that there was a difference between doing something on accident and on purpose. For instance, when one would complain about some small inconvenience – like getting knocked over – we would say, "Oh honey, it's okay...

¹ Paul Tripp, *War of Words – Getting to the Heart of Communication Struggles*, (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2000), 55.

he didn't mean to do that." But over time there were things that they learned were done on purpose. Well one day they were fighting over a toy – tugging on it at the same time, back and forth. And after one of them successfully yanked it away, the other twin put his finger in his brother's face and said, "You're such a purpose boy!" It doesn't even make sense, but the point and the source were very clear.

The problem with mouth is the heart. That's the bad news. The good news is that Jesus died so that we could be forgiven of our sins and have our hearts fundamentally changed. In other words, a personal relationship with Jesus will change how you talk because he changes the source – the heart. And it may just be that this message helps you to realize that you need where your sinful, angry, hurtful words come from – a rebellious heart.

The great news is that it doesn't have to be that way.

A Reservoir of Encouragement²

Proverbs 18:21, in *The Message*, says this: "Words kill, words give life; they are either poison or fruit – you choose." While it is true that the tongue is a restless evil, it can be used for gracious, God-centered, hope-filled purposes. The reality is that your words are going to generate some kind of harvest. I want to call you to have mouths that heal not hurt; mouths full of encouragement not evil.

What is encouragement?

There are different words that are used for encouragement in the Bible, but the general sense of all them is to persuade forward, to call to one's aid, to come along side. In other words, it means to be a helper to someone else. Interestingly Jesus described the Holy Spirit as our helper (see John 14:16).

What does the Holy Spirit do? Among his many roles, he helps us, aids us, encourages us, and empowers us in doing God's will. He gives us more spiritual energy to obey God. And while we are not comparable to the Holy Spirit, we still need to ask ourselves if our words, our tones, and our non-verbals help and aid people in doing God's will.

Every fire needs oxygen, and sometimes it is helpful to blow more oxygen to make the fire burn even hotter. Encouragement is like a bellows of air. Toxic words are like a fire extinguisher.

² I am indebted to Tullian Tchividjian's chapter on Redemptive Words in *Unfashionable* for much of the material in this section.

Why encourage?

Did you know that we are commanded to encourage? 1 Thessalonians 4:18 (“encourage one another with these words”), 5:11 (“Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up”), and 5:14 (“...admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted”) all tell us to encourage one another. In the midst of a fallen, hurtful, abusive, and negative world the Bible calls for the church to be filled with people who fill people with hope.

But why should we be this way? Two reasons: first, because of what Christ **has done** for us. People who have been forgiven of their sin, given a new mind, a new heart, and a new life see life through different lens. “Having thus been given everything, while deserving nothing, how could we ever be reluctant to encourage others?”³

The second reason is because of what Christ **will do** for us. Over and over the motivation for encouragement is the future hope of the believer. “Encourage one another...as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:25). “So we will always be with the Lord...encourage one another with these words” (1 Thess 4:17-18). This is a reminder that there is more to come, this life is not the only thing we are living for, and that there is a real purpose for life – to glorify God.

In the midst of pain, difficulty, wrestling with our sin, disappointment, and discouragement the hope of followers of Jesus is that there is a bigger plan. Encouragement reminds us about the plan!

How to encourage?

Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” The passage links encouragement and stirring one another up to love and good works. Encouragement is using words that motivate people toward real change.

Encouragement is speaking redemptively. “The sweetness and the strength of the gospel – the sweetness of grace, the strength of truth – should flavor everything we say.”⁴ It means using our words to treat people with the same kindness that God has bestowed upon us – to **demonstrate** the love of God. And it means using our words to bring life and hope to hurting people – to **direct** people to the grace of God.

³ Tullian Tchividjian, Unfashionable – making a difference in the world by being different, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Books, 2009), 140.

⁴ Tchividjian, 135.

So do your words do that? Are your words redemptive? Do you demonstrate the love of God with your words? Do your words direct people to the grace of God? Do your words make a relationship with Jesus attractive?

The tongue can be a restless evil or it can be a reservoir of encouragement. Make no mistake about it – our words yield some kind of harvest. The question is – “what kind of harvest are your words producing?”

When I was seventeen years-old I remember weeping in my Dad’s arms over the pain of someone’s words. I still remember the moment like it was yesterday. The pain was so real! It was basketball season and the night before a big game there was a pep rally at school. Each player was introduced as they walked through a smoke-filled tunnel. When my name was announced most the student crowd cheered, but there were a few who booed – loudly. To this day, I have no idea why. But while the cause wasn’t clear – the effect was. I was crushed. I was a 6’4” young man but the words of others had brought me to my emotional knees.

My father held me and just said, “Son, I’m so sorry. I know how much that must have hurt. We love you, very much.” It was a moment I’ll never forget. On the one hand there was the pain of hurtful words. And on the other hand there was the amazing comfort of encouragement.

Do not underestimate the power of your words! The tongue may be a small part of your body but it has tremendous potential for good or evil. The mouth reveals the heart, and my prayer today is that you will see how important it is to have the right heart through a relationship with Jesus that is demonstrated in redemptive, grace-giving, God-glorifying words.

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