

The Book of James Taming the Tongue

Lesson #7 for November 15, 2014

Scriptures: James 3:1-12; Deuteronomy 6:4-7; 17:14-20; Luke 9:51-56; Proverbs 16:27; Matthew 7:16-18.

1. What is the relationship between our words, our characters, and our faith—our relationship with God? Words can be very powerful. Think of great speeches, poems, and especially the Scriptures. Words spoken, especially at critical times, may be remembered and have their impact for entire lifetimes. Consider the Gettysburg Address by President Abraham Lincoln.
2. Especially children absorb what they hear and what they see. Very early, they develop the skill of knowing what is behind the words. Parents need to remember that children will grow up to be like what they see and hear.

Fredrika Bremer (August 17, 1801–December 31, 1865) was a Swedish writer and a feminist activist. She is credited by some for coining the phrase, “The apple does not fall far from the tree!”

Smile, parents; smile, teachers. If your heart is sad, let not your face reveal the fact. Let the sunshine from a loving, grateful heart light up the countenance. Unbend from your iron dignity, adapt yourselves to the children’s needs, and make them love you. **You must win their affection, if you would impress religious truth upon their heart.**—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, March 21, 1882 par. 13; *FE* 68.3; *CG* 148.1; *AH* 432.2. [Bold type is added.]

3. We as adults tend to think that young children do not understand what we are saying, and therefore, we do not need to be very careful about what we say around them. That is a very erroneous idea. Children very rapidly reflect what they see and hear—not only the words but also the tone and the emotional impact as well. No wonder God advises that we should begin every day by spending time with His Word. God’s words had the power to create the universe, and they can also have incredible power in our lives. (Psalm 33:6; 2 Corinthians 4:6) Considering the power that words can have, are we being very careful in everything that we say?

The largest share of life’s annoyances, its heartaches, its irritations, is due to uncontrolled temper. In one moment, by hasty, passionate, careless words, may be wrought evil that a whole lifetime’s repentance cannot undo. Oh, the hearts that are broken, the friends estranged, the lives wrecked, by the harsh, hasty words of those who might have brought help and healing! (*RH*, October 31, 1907 par. 7; *MYP* 135.1)

4. Scriptures tell us much about the power of words and ideas. Psalm 119:105, *GNB*, tells us, “Your word is a lamp to guide me and a light for my path.” Jesus Himself said: “What gives life is God’s Spirit; human power is of no use at all. The words I have spoken to you bring God’s life-giving Spirit.” (John 6:63, *GNB*) Words can be calming and reassuring or they can be inflammatory, even poisonous. Are we careful to think of the implications and the impact of our words before we speak them? The book of James has some very significant things to say about words. Communication, of course, involves much more than just the words.
5. Read James 3:1. In the very first verse of this chapter, James made it very clear that those who are given the responsibility of teaching others—and especially those being an example to children—are held to the highest possible standard. The more we know—or have the chance to know—and the more lives we touch, the more responsible we are for good or evil. Mouths speak what hearts feel.

6. How much better our world would be if we all recognized the wisdom of Proverbs 9:10, *GNB*: “To be wise you must first have reverence for the LORD. If you know the Holy One, you have understanding.” Recently, a student said, “Bless you,” and was expelled from class.
7. Unfortunately, in our time and age and particularly in developed countries, education tends to lead people further and further away from God. Modern science is trying to completely eliminate God from human thinking. Religion is often thought of as being old-fashioned and excessively limiting to one’s thought.
8. In the New Testament, Paul clearly talked about the responsibility of church leaders. (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) When instructing Timothy and Titus, the younger workers that were associated with him, he repeatedly told them to be cautious about whom they chose to lead Christian groups. (1 Timothy 1:3-7; 3:2-6; 6:2-5; 2 Timothy 2:14-15; 3:7)
9. Think about family members or teachers who have had a great influence in your own life. What did they do? Why did they have such an influence on you? Good teachers can make it look easy. One high school math teacher said, “Algebra can’t be hard, or else I couldn’t do it!” What kind of impact do you think you are having on your own children or others associated with you?
10. James continued his discussion of the impact of our lives and our words with a remarkable statement: “All of us often make mistakes. But if a person never makes a mistake in what he says, he is perfect and is also able to control his whole being.” (James 3:2, *GNB*) Do you agree with James? Is it possible that if one can control the tongue, he can control everything else? We realize that what James was talking about is our emotions, reactions, etc.
11. What did James mean when he wrote that in James 3:2? What does it mean to be perfect? This should remind us of Matthew 5:48. James seemed to imply that if we can control our tongues, we are perfect. The word *perfect* in English comes from the Greek word *teleios* and means mature, grown-up, even ripe when talking about fruit. Are we indeed grown-up Christians? Do we exercise the correct power of choice when choosing our words? Carefully choosing our words also includes choosing what not to say! But, consider the second part of James’s statement. Is it really true that if we can control our tongues, we can control our physical natures with all their appetites, passions, desires, and cravings? James seemed to be implying that if we can develop the characters to control our words, we can control everything else. Jesus supported that idea in Matthew 12:34 when He said, “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” In other words, if we fill our minds with the right thoughts and the right ideas and eliminate as far as possible wrong thoughts and wrong ideas, then we will be able to control what comes out of our mouths.

It is a law both of the intellectual and the spiritual nature that by beholding we become changed. The mind gradually adapts itself to the subjects upon which it is allowed to dwell. It becomes assimilated to that which it is accustomed to love and reverence. Man will never rise higher than his standard of purity or goodness or truth.—Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy* 555.1.

12. Speech is the most obvious characteristic which separates human beings from other creatures. Of course, it is not the ability to make sounds that is important; instead, it is the ideas, thoughts, and emotions that express themselves through words. So, would it be correct to say that it is the ideas and emotions that are hard to control? The tongue may seem like a small part of the body; but, it has a very disproportionate impact on us and all around us. James compared it to the bit and bridle used to control a horse, the rudder used to steer a ship, and even to a spark that can consume a forest in flames.
13. Look at some of the advice given in Scripture regarding how parents should instruct and guide their children. (Deuteronomy 6:4-7; **17:14-20**; 23:23; Psalm 40:3; Proverbs 10:20-21; 12:25; Malachi 2:6-7; Luke 4:22; Romans 10:6-8) Is it any wonder that God through Moses

gave the instructions He did in Deuteronomy 6:4-7 and 17:14-20? Think how different the history of our world would be—and especially the history of the children of Israel—if the people had carefully followed these instructions throughout their history!

14. Read James 3:3-5. Do we consistently recognize the potential impact of our words? Proverbs 15:1 (*GNB*) tells us: “A gentle answer quiets anger, but a harsh one stirs it up.” In Luke 9:51-56, Jesus illustrated the teaching from Proverbs by His words to His disciples when they were refused help by inhabitants of a Samaritan village because they were on their way to Jerusalem.

15. Ellen White suggested that Jesus, even as a young man, was very good at calming waters.

Through the help that Christ can give, we shall be able to learn to bridle the tongue. Sorely as He was tried on the point of hasty and angry speech, He never once sinned with His lips. With patient calmness He met the sneers, the taunts, and the ridicule of His fellow workers at the carpenter’s bench. [Did that include James?] Instead of retorting angrily, He would begin to sing one of David’s beautiful psalms; and His companions, before realizing what they were doing, would unite with Him in the hymn. What a transformation would be wrought in this world if men and women today would follow Christ’s example in the use of words. (*RH* May 26, 1904; *7BC* 936.8) [Content in brackets is added.]

16. What an incredible solution to a difficult problem! Do we recognize the impact of “little” things in our daily lives?

As drops of water make the river, so little things make up life. Life is a river, peaceful, calm, and enjoyable, or it is a troubled river, always casting up mire and dirt.—Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him*, p. 209.6.

17. It is always better to avoid saying the wrong thing. What happens if we do say the wrong thing sometimes, even unintentionally? And what should we do if our words are taken completely out of context and even misquoted to stir up trouble? Read James 3:6. A little fire can do much damage.

18. While we do not know the details of exactly how it all started, it is certain that sin began in heaven just as it began here on this earth; that was by insinuating doubts through the use of questions and cleverly designed words. In heaven Lucifer “began to insinuate doubts concerning the laws that governed heavenly beings.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 37. Truly, our words can lead all the way to the fires of hell.

19. If we find that we have said something inappropriate or if we have been misunderstood or if we have, in actual fact, said something completely wrong by mistake, we should hasten to correct it as soon as we understand the problem. (See 2 Samuel 7:1-17.)

20. Read James 3:8, *GNB*. “But no one has ever been able to tame the tongue. It is evil and uncontrollable, full of deadly poison.” Is it really that difficult to control our words? Is it even impossible? Long before the days of James, David said in Psalm 34:13, *GNB*: “Then keep from speaking evil and from telling lies.” Apparently, David thought that it was possible. If we ask Him and really want to control our tongues, God’s Holy Spirit will help us. (See Ephesians 4:29-32.)

21. Read James 3:9-12. How should we understand and apply these words? Is it safe to watch television programs full of profanity, drugs, killing, and sex? Does it add to or detract from our interest in reading Scripture? Parents and teachers, do we set the right example before our children not only by what we say but also by what we listen to and watch? Do we like to repeat off-color jokes that we pick up from the media?

22. James made it very clear that springs of water are not at one time pure and a little later

contaminated and then pure again. At this time in history, we must make every possible effort to keep the springs of our faith as pure as possible.

23. However, to be honest, we must recognize that even the best of biblical examples had their weak moments. Moses murdered an Egyptian, David had that affair with Bathsheba, etc. If those events were all that we knew about those men, wouldn't we have serious questions about their relationships with God?
24. Read 1 John 2:1. Clearly, God's hope is that we will stop sinning. But, generous provision has been made for all of us because we still do sin. Some of the most encouraging words in Scripture are found in Psalm 32 and Psalm 51 which David wrote after his sin with Bathsheba. But, even if we repent and are frequently and generously forgiven by God, we still have to live with the consequences of our behavior.
25. So, what should we do about our words on a day-by-day basis?

When in the company of those who indulge in foolish talk, it is our duty to change the subject of conversation if possible. By the help of the grace of God we should quietly drop words or introduce a subject that will turn the conversation into a profitable channel...

Far more than we do, we need to speak of the precious chapters in our experience. We should speak of the mercy and loving-kindness of God, of the matchless depths of the Saviour's love. Our words should be words of praise and thanksgiving. If the mind and heart are full of the love of God, this will be revealed in the conversation. It will not be a difficult matter to impart that which enters into our spiritual life. Great thoughts, noble aspirations, clear perceptions of truth, unselfish purposes, yearnings for piety and holiness, will bear fruit in words that reveal the character of the heart treasure. When Christ is thus revealed in our speech, it will have power in winning souls to Him.—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 337.3-338.1.

26. Unfortunately, in emotionally loaded situations, words often come tumbling out of our mouths even before we have had a chance to think about them. Could we try this experiment? Try to set aside a whole day in which we say only good things, perhaps even talking about what God has done for us personally or the blessings that we have experienced or how He has helped us through trials. At the end of the day, consider how this effort has impacted your day.
27. There are times when very serious words need to be spoken. As an example, consider Jesus's conversation with the Sanhedrin as recorded in John 8:12-59. But, such words should not be spoken without a great deal of prayer and divine guidance.
28. In summary, we must recognize that the tongue is a very powerful tool. We can use it for blessing, and we can use it for cursing and destruction.
29. There is an interesting expression used in our modern computer age: GIGO—Garbage In, Garbage Out. Is that true of our thoughts and ideas? Does GIGO work for the human mind just as it does for machines?
30. Controlling our speech is probably beyond our human capabilities unless aided by the Holy Spirit. But, all things are possible with God. (Luke 18:27) The time is certainly here when Christians need to be limiting the "garbage in" so that we can eliminate the "garbage out"! Are we prepared to do that?

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