

“Tongues of Fire, Mouthfuls of Feet”

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9-16-18

Based upon Proverbs 6:16-23; James 3:1-12

There is an old, but helpful exercise teachers sometimes use to teach their students about the lasting harm teasing, bullying, and using unkind words can cause.¹ The teacher hands out pieces of paper to the class and instructs the students to crumple them up as hard as they can. After they have wadded up and stomped on their papers, the teacher then tells them to unfold them and smooth them out as well as they can. “Look at how scarred and dirty the paper is now,” the teacher says. “Now tell the paper that you are sorry. Did that make the wrinkles go away? No. Remember this. You can say you’re sorry after you have been rude or mean or hurtful, (and you should). You can do everything that you can think of to smooth over the situation. But the scars your hurtful words caused will never fully go away. Try to remember that before you open your mouth.”

It’s a powerful exercise, but one which, unfortunately, may not be quite powerful enough now given the fact that most children and adults save their worst words for the Internet these days. You can’t crumple up a phone or wrinkle up a computer, and the anonymity that the digital world allows can make it hard for adults as well as children to restrain their fingers, in the hopes of biting their tongues. As a result, the amount of bullying, threatening, and just plain mean communication online these days is growing not diminishing. To illustrate just how low people are willing to go when there are no consequences to themselves for being hurtful, late night comedian, Jimmy Kimmel, has a recurring sketch on his show called “#Meantweets.”² On the segment, various celebrities stand before a camera and read with straight faces some of the mean tweets that have been sent their way. I thought it would be a funny segment to show here until I watched a few and quickly discovered that the tweets were so crude, curse-laden, and offensive that they were totally inappropriate for church, even as an example of what not to do. Even though the celebrities try to laugh off the statements as nothing more than the noise Internet “trolls” like to make, you can still see in their eyes the hurt and bewilderment the unprovoked insults cause.

Hoping not just to illustrate the problem, but also take a step toward curing it, a bunch of guys out of Chicago put together a Podcast called “Just Not Sports,” to demonstrate how particularly bad are the comments some men make to women who are on TV.³ In the experiment, male volunteers were chosen to read in person to two female sportscasters some of the digital mail they had received. The women knew ahead of time what the comments said, but the men did not. Again most of the comments were so offensive that I can’t show a clip.⁴ The only comments that were not filled with curse words and vulgar insults, said horrifically cruel things

¹ See e.g. “*The Crumpled Paper Bullying Exercise 4 All Ages*,” <http://ripplekindness.org/crumpled-paper-bullying-exercise>.

² See e.g. *Jimmy Kimmel Live- Celebrities Read Mean Tweets*, Sept. 25, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2oVUxTV4WA> (with apologies for the language!).

³ Stevens, Heidi, “*I hope your boyfriend beats you, and other mean tweets to female sports reporters*,” CHICAGO TRIBUNE, April 27, 2016, retrieved Sept. 10, 2018 from

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/stevens/ct-female-sports-writers-mean-tweets-balancing-0427-20160427-column.html>

⁴ See “*Just Not Sports*” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tU-D-m2JY8>.

like, “I hope your boyfriend beats you,” “I hope your dog gets hit by a car,” and other explicit wishes that the women would be abused or killed, simply because they had the audacity to report on sports on TV. The male volunteers quickly found it uncomfortable to look in the women’s eyes as they read the other men’s words. Several of the volunteers asked if they could stop. A couple of men started tearing up reading them. They could not, or did not want to say in person what others had said anonymously.

That’s good news, I guess. But according to behavioral scientists, this kind of compassionate response may be increasingly endangered because social media is messing with our brains. The part of our brains designed to encourage us to do a good thing—defend justice and morality—is now being rewarded for the wrong reasons. According to recent studies out of Yale, our brains are hard-wired to feel good when we express moral outrage.⁵ When we see or hear of something we think is wrong, we feel better if we challenge it. From an evolutionary standpoint, this ensured that people would rise up and put a stop to bad behavior. But now the Internet allows us to get a brain buzz whenever we vent about anything because we can share our feelings with thousands or millions of people at once, and get positive feedback through “likes” when we do. As a result, content that triggers outrage is now more likely to be shared than content which reconciles or affirms. As psychologist Molly Crockett puts it: “What we’ve created online is ‘an ecosystem that selects for the most outrageous content, paired with a platform where it’s easier than ever before to express outrage.’”⁶ Add to that reality the additional truth that what is online never truly goes away, and you end up with a lot of people who, like the crumpled paper, are irreparably wounded. You also end up with a lot of people who are so used to venting for pleasure online, that now they are starting to lose their ability to be civil, tactful, and gracious in person too. The Pandora’s Box of the uncensored tongue has been opened, and as a result, our ability as a nation to talk to each other in a non-violent, non-judgmental gracious way is now in jeopardy.

“How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire,” James warns in today’s text. He didn’t mean that in a good Pentecostal tongues-of-fire-way either. Although the scale and scope of today’s civility and compassion problems might have shocked him, James would not have been surprised by the fact that the human tongue, (or by extension the thumbs today), was behind a lot of our problems. Even without the Internet, James lived during a time when the power of the tongue to harm and destroy was evident everywhere. He wrote during the years leading up to the Zealot’s revolt in 66 C.E., which ultimately led to the Jewish war against Rome, and the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70. Everyone James knew was hot under the collar, stirred up by anger, fear, and moral outrage. Among the Jews, the various factions, some pro-revolt, some against, were spreading rumors, provoking each other to violence and mini-rebellions. In the Christian community, false teachings were mixing with authentic ones provoking boasting and rivalries among church leaders, and Jews and Gentiles were often at odds. It was not a time of sweet talk and peace.

⁵ Vince, Gaia, “*Why nice people become mean online*,” MOSAIC: THE SCIENCE OF LIFE, April 3, 2018, retrieved Sept. 12, 2018 from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/03/health/good-people-bad-online-partner/index.html>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

James believed that this was a serious problem for a number of reasons. Like all good Jews, he believed that words were not harmless, as the nursery rhyme about sticks and stones claims; words had real power. When one spoke words of blessing, the person was blessed; likewise, when one spoke words to curse, the person was cursed. It was particularly important therefore, that the members of the faith community, who were charged with speaking on behalf of God in Christ, learn how to control their tongues and choose their words wisely. “You know how a small bridle can steer a big horse, and how a small rudder can steer a huge ship?” he said. “The tongue is like that. It’s a small but powerful part of the body. In fact, it’s the one thing that human beings have not been able to tame. We can tame all kinds of creatures, but so far we haven’t been able to tame our mouths. As a result, the tongue is the source of sin in our bodies, and a source of destruction in the world because it is ‘set on fire by hell.’”

James was writing in a highly rhetorical and hyperbolic way in this passage. But his comment about hell is still illuminating as we think about the way our tongues get us in trouble because in the Greek, the word which is translated in English as “hell” is really “Gehenna.” You may or may not remember when I did a sermon on hell in the Bible, that Gehenna was a valley outside of Jerusalem which in Jesus’ day was where garbage was incinerated. Many centuries before Christ, however, the same valley, called the Valley of Hinson back then, was where unfaithful Jews sacrificed human beings, often children, in order to appease the pagan god Molech. You can understand therefore, where the image people have of hell today as a place where fires burn all the time developed. Gehenna was a powerful visual metaphor in more ways than one. But if we think about Gehenna in the context of James’ exhortation about the evils of the tongue, and not the context of devils with pitchforks or eternal damnation, the place captures beautifully the different kinds of tongue-talk that we are called as Christians to avoid.

Consider the garbage image of Gehenna for example. One of the kinds of talk that gets people in trouble today is called, literally, “trash talk.” It is talk that has no real redemptive value, which makes us feel better about ourselves at other’s expense. Gossip, or tongue wagging, is a kind of trash talk, as is boasting much of the time. We put down others to make ourselves look or feel good. In James’ day the different teachers in the church were the ones doing the trash talking, hyping their own credentials and disparaging the wisdom of others. In our day, people in and outside the church boast and gossip about pretty much everything, good behavior and bad behavior alike. “Did you hear what happened to Sally?” “Can you believe that Jim actually...?” “I don’t know what she was thinking; when I do this, I can...” Half the time we talk this way we aren’t consciously trying to be malicious. Sometimes we do it just to make conversation or to feel a part of the community, which is why church gossip is such a common problem. What starts as a chat in the parking lot takes on a life of its own. But intent notwithstanding, gossip is destructive, and isn’t using words in a way which recognizes both their power and value.

Another kind of garbage talk is using words in an unloving way, as when we speak with sarcasm and snark instead of humility and grace. You don’t actually have to say something mean to garbage talk in this way. Your words can be innocuous or even sickly sweet. But the tone conveys disrespect of the person or subject at issue, which is why when this kind of garbage talk becomes the primary language in families, it strains relationships and can cause lasting hurt.

There is still worse tongue-talk than this, however. When pure venom replaces sarcasm, and we use our words intentionally to hurt others, as Internet trolls do, then our tongues have taken on the language, not of garbage Gehenna, but of ancient Gehenna, that twisted place of supposedly redemptive violence, the Gehenna that was created by people who had strayed so far from God that they actually believed killing their children was a good idea. This is the tongue-talk that today's text from *Proverbs* condemns, the tongue-talk that does more than make the eyes roll, it also leads the rest of the body to commit evil actions. Did you notice that out of the seven things named as being things the Lord hates, the lying tongue is listed twice? Lying, intentionally trying to deceive another, is not using the tongue in a Godly way, and it often accompanies other evils. *Proverbs* conveys this by describing the tongue's poison spreading to the rest of the body: "the hands that shed innocent blood, the heart that devises wicked plans, the feet that run to evil." But even if we don't stray that far from God, our tongues can still slip into the language of ancient Gehenna if we aren't careful. Whenever we use our words to lash out at others, out of anger or fatigue, there is a whiff of smoke from the Valley of Hinson in our breath because part of us in that moment wants to hurt another. God calls us to use our words to build people up not tear them down. We are called to bless not curse, to reconcile not reject.

According to James, the secret to controlling the tongue better is remembering this. We need to remember who we are called to be, and whose we are. In the same way a single spring cannot pour forth fresh and brackish water, and a fig tree cannot yield olives, if Jesus truly dwells in our hearts, then Gehenna-talk can't be on our tongues. We won't use the Gospel or the Church to spread hate instead of love. We won't say mean, thoughtless, or selfish things, gossip or lash out. Our tongues will be able to speak only the language of grace and love.

Now this, of course, is easier said than done. I don't know anyone who is so faithful that their tongue speaks this way 100% of the time. Even faithful people slip up and lose control every once and a while. But I do believe that we all can learn to manage our tongues better if we ponder James' words carefully. I know that just from doing *Faith 5* Bible study with my son this week, and thinking every day about the images of "Gehenna" tongues and fresh and brackish water, has made me more aware of what and how I speak than usual. If James' mixed metaphors still don't help you think before you speak, however, then just think about the word THINK, which is a handy acronym for what we should all ask ourselves before we open your mouths.

Is it **T**ruthful?

Is it **H**elpful?

Is it **I**nspiring?

Is it **N**ecessary?

Is it **K**ind?

If what you want to say doesn't meet that criteria, then the odds are good that it isn't anything God would want you to say, and you would do better to remain silent. If what you want to say does meet the criteria, then you can probably find a way to say it to someone you disagree with without doing irreparable harm.

⁷ See e.g. THINK Acronym for Kinder and More Effective Communications (Infographic), February 24, 2016 at <https://www.thecoachingtoolscompany.com/think-acronym-for-kinder-and-more-effective-communications>; original source of acronym unknown.

The problem of the tongue has been around so long that there is a tongue story that appears in various forms across multiple cultures and religions.⁸ The gist of it is that a powerful person orders someone, his son, a messenger, or a wise man to go out and find the worst thing in the entire world, and bring it back within a few days. When the person returns, he brings with him either a tongue in hand, or sticks out the tongue in his mouth. “My tongue is the worst thing in the world,” the person explains. “It can do many horrible things, including speaking evil and telling lies. I can say things that hurt other people.” Pleased, the powerful person then orders the other man to go find him the best thing in the entire world. Again, the person returns with a tongue in hand or mouth. “How can it be?” the powerful one asks. “My tongue is the best thing in the world,” the man explains. “It is a messenger of love, allowing me to share beauty, grace, and truth, to bless others, and to speak to and of God.” The powerful one is so pleased by the response he appoints the person to be his highest personal advisor.

We all have been given by God the best thing in the world: a tongue to speak the truth of God’s love, to build up others, to teach, and to inspire. In the real world and the digital world, let us not turn it into the worst thing out of thoughtlessness, selfishness, anger, or malice. Think before you speak, remember who and whose you are, and with the help of the grace of God, always speak your truth in love. Amen.

⁸ See e.g. “*A Tongue Story*,” INSPIRATIONAL, March 1, 2017, retrieved Sept. 14, 2018 from <https://www.inspirational.biz/inspirational-reflections/2017/3/1/a-tongue-story>