

STICKS AND STONES

James 2:1-12

Ever said something you regretted? Of course, you have. We've all done it. Ever had the opportunity to immediately take it back? Not likely, unless, of course, you said it on Twitter.

I have never engaged in a Twitter account although apparently, I have one. Twitter is a social media platform that allows people to dump their thoughts on the world in 280 characters or less. It used to be 140 characters, but last year the platform expanded that capacity because, well, people wanted to have more opportunity to speak their minds and, sometimes, put their digital feet in their mouths.

Even those of us who don't have a Twitter account know about it these days because the president of the United States is a dedicated user. Whereas previous presidents often got their messages out via a speech or a press conference, these days we are more likely to hear instantly whatever is on the mind of the leader of the free world. I'll let you decide whether that's a good thing or a bad thing.

The instant nature of Twitter allows someone to run at the mouth/keyboard immediately in response to something they've read, seen or experienced. Sometimes that means that one's fingers engage faster than one's brain. The result is often a major faux pas that is very public. If you're quick enough, however, you can immediately delete the tweet and pull back your verbal misstep. Digital age notwithstanding, make sure brain is engaged before mouth is in gear!!

A man lived in a highland village in Scotland. He passed along a story about another man that he didn't care for. At the time, he thought the story to be true. When the story got around the village, it utterly destroyed the man. His family, his job and his integrity were all devastated by the rumor mill. He finally had to leave town — a ruined and defeated man. In time, the fellow who passed the story along discovered that the rumor was false. He had helped to destroy an innocent man with his tongue. He went to his pastor and said, "Pastor, I have destroyed a man with my words," and he told the whole story. "Please," he said, "I am sorry — can I be forgiven this sin?" The pastor told the man that this was not so simple and told him to take a bag of feathers and place one in the front yard of every house in the village. Although the fellow thought this to be a strange request for a pastor to make, he really wanted forgiveness, so he followed the instructions to the letter. At last he came back to the pastor and said, "I have done all that you asked, may I now be forgiven?" "Not yet, my son," the pastor replied. "You must first retrace your steps and bring back to me every feather you placed in the village!" "But — I could never do that; the wind has carried the feathers away!" "Yes," the pastor said, "and in like manner have your careless words destroyed an innocent man."

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. (James 3:1) Most will read these words and will respond in one of two ways: if you are a bona fide teacher or pastor, you will take this verse to heart. However, if you are neither, you might be tempted to ignore the message and the verses which follow. If one were to look

at this verse through the lens of faith, however, we would probably find we need to switch to a wide-angled lens in order to fit all the teachers in our lives into the picture.

Who are the first teachers a child meets? Mom and Dad, Granny and Grumpy, siblings, cousins...etc. Children are like sponges and are like little tape recorder's mimicking everything, and I mean everything they see and hear. One of my younger sisters was fond of dropping the "f-bomb" like many young people of her generation. This did not change when her son was born. Imagine her horror, 2 years later, of hearing her toddler son casually strolling through the grocery store dropping his own bombs as if he were saying a litany. Oh yeah, you can bet we picked him up and quickly made our exit. We were horrified, and my sister commented, "I guess I need to clean up my language."

When I think about growing in faith, parents and family are joined by a long list of teachers of the faith: the Pastor, Sunday school teachers, VBS teachers, choir directors, choir members, ushers, members of the church council, youth leader...and the list grows to include each person in the pew. Consider these words of James in this light and we realize that we are a community of teachers. So, listen up! None of us are free to point the finger. How would you rate yourself in the "tongue" evaluation?

Have you ever been hung by your tongue? It was his first day on the job. He was a new clerk in the green goods department of a supermarket. A lady came up to him and said she wanted to buy half of a head of lettuce. He tried to dissuade her from that goal, but she persisted. Finally, he said, "I'll have to go back and talk to the manager." He went to the rear of the store to talk to the manager, not noticing that the woman was walking right behind him. When he got into the back of the store, he said to the manager, "There's some stupid old bag out there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce. What should I tell her?" Seeing the horrified look on the face of the manager, he turned about and, seeing the woman, added, "And this nice lady wants to buy the other half of the head of lettuce. Will it be all right?" Relieved, the manager said, "That would be fine." Later in the day, he congratulated the boy on his quick thinking and asked, "Where are you from, son?" The boy said, "I'm from Toronto, Canada, the home of beautiful hockey players and ugly women." The manager replied, "My wife is from Toronto" — to which the boy said, "Oh, what team did she play for?"

James acknowledges that we will slip up from time to time: *All of us do many wrong things.* (Verse 2) But still he advises us to '*control our tongue,*' and to do so is one of the marks of a mature Christian, and it is up to us to make this choice. I realize that sometimes when a person gets excited this can become more of a challenge. I am one of these persons. Consequently, I have been known to pray to the Holy Spirit to "sit on my tongue," and only loose it when I have something worthwhile to say!

Ideally, however, we should aspire to speaking and teaching with precision. When our words are sound, the whole "body" comes into line, just like a horse is controlled by a bit and bridle, and like a ship is controlled by a rudder (vv. 3-4). On the other hand, if these small controlling mechanisms are used incorrectly, they can lead the whole community to a destructive destination (v. 5). (Homiletics online, 2018) James may be referring to rumors when he says, "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire?" (v. 5) A misplaced word by the "tongue" can incite an individual or a whole "body" of people to violence, despair or fear. It can bring forth "a world of iniquity" that sets on fire the very

“cycle of nature” — the kind of stuff that is sparked by “hell” itself. (v. 6) When our speech is out of control, it has the potential to upset the entire created order. James refers back to the creation story in verses 7 and 8 when he reminds his readers that God gave humankind dominion over all the animals of the earth, and all of them have been “tamed.” But no human has been able to tame the “tongue” because it’s like trying to tame a venomous snake with a forked tongue. Out of the same mouth we can bless the Lord one minute and, in the very next, curse another fellow human being made in the image of God (v. 9). When at times we find ourselves in challenging circumstances, it can happen that our brains are driven by flight or fight we will speak or “tweet” without thinking of the implications of our words on others. James says, “My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” (v. 10)

Instead, James says, we need to pay attention to the source of our words — to consider our internal thought processes from which our words spring forth. If a spring is full of fresh water, it won’t be pumping out nasty, undrinkable liquid (v. 11). A fig tree doesn’t produce olives, nor does a grapevine produce figs; and you can’t automatically get fresh water from salt water (v. 12). Here we need to consider the ways we are spending our time: the things we watch on TV, conversations we follow on Facebook, the things we read, and the company we keep. I had an interesting conversation just the other day about how easy it can be to fall back on coarse speech (AKA using profanity on a regular basis when speaking). This seems to occur most when we are in the company of people whose normal speech pattern is peppered with four letter words, and I don’t mean the word “love!” In pondering the why persons find themselves in this situation of falling back into this speech pattern some interesting observations were made: “I want to be accepted by my peers,” “I don’t want to appear ‘holier than thou!’” While I can appreciate this line of reasoning, I think it also weakens our witness to the world. This is not to say that I am not also guilty of slips of the tongue, because I am.

James implies that our words are the product of what’s going on inside of us. Rather than allowing our tongues and tweets to be controlled by a reptilian brain, the wise and understanding person leads a life in which actions and words emerge from a well of “gentleness born of wisdom” (v. 13) — the kind of wisdom that comes “from above” (v. 17). (Homiletics online) Okay Pastor Tizzy, how do we prime the pump for that kind of wisdom? How can we learn to “tame” our tongues to speak in ways that edify instead of sparking dissension and destruction? I am so glad you asked!!! A recent book by Baylor University professor Alan Jacobs offers great advice for how to repair the connection between the brain and the tongue. When someone posts an outrageous tweet or inflammatory post on Facebook, we’re prone to wonder, “What were they thinking?” Chances are, they weren’t.

Jacobs suggests that we all need to relearn “how to think” before we engage the process of “how to speak”. In his book, *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds*, Jacobs seems to be building on James’ advice when he offers his “Thinking Person’s Checklist” of good things to remember before we engage our tongues. While Jacobs lists 12 ideas for better thinking, we might summarize those ideas by boiling them down to three main categories.

First, “*be slow*”. In a world of instant messaging, Twitter and sound bites, it’s tempting to react quickly when confronted with an idea or a provocation. Often our knee jerk reaction is to immediately fight or flee and immediately respond. But Jacobs suggests that when we’re tempted to respond quickly we

should, instead, give it five minutes. Take a walk, make dinner, do some deep breathing — whatever it takes to get your body involved. When our bodies are moving, our brains tend to have time to process. Forgo the need for an instant response to that nasty email or “idiotic” tweet. Consider not responding at all. Good and wise thinkers focus on thinking and responding about the “right” things, not about EVERYthing. As James says earlier in the letter: *Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.* (1:19)

One thing I have found most helpful when I need to “vent” is to write a letter to the person or persons with whom I am upset. DO NOT IMMEDIATELY HIT THE SEND BUTTON!! Instead, I have let the letter sit for a few days. What I have found is that when I return to it, I discover I am no longer foaming at the mouth angry that I was when I first penned the letter. Better yet, write the letter as a document first and not as an email. It is so easy to slip and hit send as a matter of reflex, and the damage can be catastrophic.

Second, “*be teachable*”. Jacobs suggests that one of the reasons we are so quick to respond to things in a Twitter culture is that others are watching and we want to impress our like-minded friend group. When we’re focused on the Inner Ring, however, it’s then that our speech becomes caustic. This is the same as resorting to coarse speech when in the company of unchurched friends and co-workers.

Finally, “*be honest*”. When you do speak, state what you think and believe with conviction but draw from the well of God’s wisdom and love. When we speak out of that wisdom, *a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.* (v. 18) This is helpful wisdom and advice in an age where good thinking and speaking are in short supply. Words matter, so let us think and speak clearly, whether it’s with our mouths or our keyboards!

Our words and speech matter as the following final story illustrates! A fellow has a parrot who swears like an old salt. The bird is a pistol. He can swear for five minutes straight without repeating himself. Trouble is, the guy who owns him is a quiet, conservative type, and the bird’s foul mouth is driving him nuts. One day, it just gets to be too much. The guy grabs the bird by the throat, shakes him really hard and yells, “QUIT IT!” But this just makes the bird mad, and he swears more than ever. Then the guy gets angry and says, “Okay for you” and locks the bird in a kitchen cabinet. This really aggravates the bird, who claws and scratches. When the guy finally lets him out, the bird cuts loose with a stream of vulgarities that would make a sailor blush. At that point, the guy is so mad that he throws the bird into the freezer. For the first few seconds, there is a terrible din. The bird kicks and claws and thrashes. Then it suddenly gets very quiet. At first the guy just waits, but then he starts to think that the bird may be hurt. After a couple of minutes of silence, he’s so worried that he opens up the freezer door. The bird meekly climbs onto the man’s outstretched arm and says, “Awfully sorry about the trouble I gave you. I’ll do my best to improve my vocabulary from now on.” The man is astounded and amazed at the transformation that has come over the parrot. Then the parrot says, “By the way, what did the *chicken* do?”