

TAMING THE TONGUE, pt 1

EXERCISING TONGUE CONTROL

Who Can Tame It?

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Talk is Cheap

TEV Proverbs 18:20 You will have to live with the consequences of everything you say. ²¹ What you say can preserve life or destroy it; so you must accept the consequences of your words.

How true this is!

People delight in airing their own opinions. Some people just love to hear themselves speak. And yet the tongue can be highly dangerous. The purpose of these verses is to warn against being too much in love with one's own words. One should recognize the power of words and use them with thoughtful restraint.

Talk may be cheap, but it can be expensive. The Midrash (commentaries of Jewish rabbis) notes that the evil tongue destroys three individuals, "the slanderer, the slandered, and the listener."

And the consequences of our words are far-reaching. Jesus said, "*You must give an account on judgment day for every idle word you speak. The words you say will either acquit you or condemn you.*" (Matthew 12:36-37)

Life or Death?

Proverbs refers to many uses of the tongue. Which of these would you say breeds death, and which breeds life?

- Lying tongue
- Flattering tongue
- Perverse tongue
- Wise tongue
- Wholesome tongue
- Spiteful tongue
- Gentle tongue
- Backbiting tongue
- Kind tongue

In the New Testament, James is very plain:

James 1:26 If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.

Our Bit and Bridle

James 3:2 Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way.

³ We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. ⁴ And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. ⁵ In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches. But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. ⁶ And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.

⁷ People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. ¹⁰ And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!

Where does this bitterness come from?

Accusation

Satan is called the “accuser of the brothers” (Revelation 12:10). This is pictured in a vision of the prophet Zechariah:

Zechariah 3:1 Then the angel showed me Jeshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord. The Accuser, Satan, was there at the angel's right hand, making accusations against Jeshua. ² And the Lord said to Satan, “I, the Lord, reject your accusations, Satan. Yes, the Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebukes you.

Satan also works indirectly, through human cooperation:

Mark 3:2 Since it was the Sabbath, Jesus' enemies watched him closely. If he healed the man's hand, they planned to accuse him of working on the Sabbath.

They “planned to accuse Him,” like demons themselves, waiting for their opportunity. Such planning is evil.

Grumbling

Sister to accusing, and even more prolific, is grumbling (murmuring, complaining).

James 5:9 Don't grumble about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. For look—the Judge is standing at the door!

Even Muslims know better. One day a disciple of Mohammed declared: “Master, my six brothers are asleep and I alone have remained awake to worship Allah.” “It would have been better for you to remain asleep,” answered the Prophet, “If your worship of Allah is to be mixed with accusations against your brothers.”

The Children of Israel were forever grumbling about one thing or another. Listen to these snippets from four consecutive chapters as they began their journey toward the Promised Land:

- Exodus 14:11: Then they said to Moses, “Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness?”
- Exodus 15:24: And the people complained against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?”
- Exodus 16:2: Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron....
- Exodus 17:3: ... and the people complained.

Paul warned, “[Do not] complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer.” (1 Corinthians 10:10). The church’s complaining demonstrated both a lack of gratitude for past blessings and a lack of confidence in God’s wisdom, will, and ways.

Perhaps the unknown author of “Grumble Tone” had the such people in mind when he wrote:

*There was a boy named Grumble Tone who ran away to sea,
“I’m sick of things on land,” he said, “as sick as I can be;
A life upon the bounding wave will suit a lad like me!”*

*The seething ocean billows failed to stimulate his mirth,
For he did not like the vessel, nor the dizzy, rolling berth,
And he thought the sea was almost as unpleasant as the earth.*

*He wandered into foreign lands, he saw each wondrous sight,
But nothing that he heard or saw seemed just exactly right;
And so he journeyed on and on, still seeking for delight.*

*He talked with kings and ladies fair; he dined in courts, they say,
But always found the people dull, and longed to get away
To search for that mysterious land where he would like to stay.*

*He wandered over all the world, his hair grew white as snow;
He reached that final [goal] at last where all of us must go,
But never found the land he sought. The reason you would know?*

*The reason was that north or south, where’er his steps were bent,
On land or sea, in court or hall, he found but discontent;
For he took his disposition with him everywhere he went.*

It is as one sage wrote, “Wherever you go, there you are.”

Finding a new location or a new partner doesn’t really change much. Perhaps that’s why second and third marriages, statistically, fall apart even more often than first marriages. Wherever you go, you take yourself with you. So, if you are a whiner, or a complainer, or a nit-picker, you’ll always find plenty to grumble about. What you may not yet have realized is this: the source of the problem is *you!*

Take Responsibility; Take Control

The way you choose to use your tongue creates the emotional environment in which you live. You can’t stop other people from acting like idiots, but you can stop joining them by your reactions. You can stop taking them home with you every day.

As someone wisely said, “When you throw mud at someone, you’re the one who is losing ground.”

Let us learn from this New Testament commandment:
Philippians 2:14 Do everything without complaining and arguing.

This is not a suggestion; it is as much a command from God as the Ten Commandments.

How much is “everything”?

James 1:19 Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. ²⁰ Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.

We *must* work on this, friends. “A tiny spark can set a great forest on fire.” You cannot handle fire without getting burned.

What to Do?

I have two recommendations:

1. Receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

With this enduement of power comes the unique ability to speak to God in languages that you have not learned — other tongues. When the rudder of your life (your tongue) comes under the sway of the Holy Spirit in daily practice, He subdues all kinds of carnal fires. He releases the power of *life* through your speech.

He helps you to live and speak the Good News about Jesus Christ.

He gives you life-giving words to speak in difficult times that lift people’s spirits and encourage their hearts.

If you have received this marvelous gift, but allowed carnal thinking and deadly words to persist, ask Jesus to renew this powerful gift in your life today. Be filled again, and resume worshipping in heavenly languages. Let your tongue be captured for God’s gracious purposes.

2. Fast from speaking for a day.

Fasting is a powerful means of submitting yourself to God. To fast from speaking means to spend an entire day without uttering a sound. Give your vocal chords a 24-hour break. You may need to use hand gestures or a writing pad to communicate necessary things, but keep your tongue quiet. If someone asks, just indicate that you “have no voice” today.

Let your voicemail take all your calls. Keep the television off. Don’t read, other than the Bible. Just think. When you give thanks or worship, use your hands, but not your tongue.

This exercise will show you how little speech is actually necessary and how much speech is frivolous. Most of us really like to hear ourselves speak!

These two exercises will help you regain control over the power of death that is in your tongue and loose its power for promoting life.