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The Stewardship of the Tongue

Central Truth: The tongue is a powerful instrument for good or for evil.

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Topic: Stewardship; Tongue.

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer” (Psalm 19:14). That prayer can introduce, guide, and conclude a study on “The Stewardship of the Tongue.” It recognizes the influence of our words and thoughts. It acknowledges God's judgment of them both. It understands our responsibility to govern words and thoughts according to the will of God.

Our words are very important. Jesus said, *“By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned”* (Matthew 12:37). That is a very solemn statement. Why is it true? *“A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh”* (Luke 6:45).

You may not be what you say you are; but what you say, you are.

I. RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE TONGUE (James 3:1, 2)

A. There are differing degrees of accountability for our speech.

James warns against so many Christians desiring to be teachers (verse 1). Those who teach are judged by a stricter standard. Why? Because God judges on the basis of maturity in understanding (Luke 12:47, 48). He who is mature enough to teach will be judged more strictly than those whom he teaches. So the more you grow in the Lord, the purer your speech should become.

B. There are degrees of maturity, as indicated by our speech (verse 2). We are likely to err in many different ways, but he who does not err by his speech is growing toward real maturity. One reveals his maturity, therefore, by the way he talks. (1) He who cannot speak of the things of God is a babe (Hebrews 5:12 — 6:1). (2) He who quarrels about his favorite preacher is a babe (I Corinthians 3:1-4). (3) He who neglects Bible study will remain a babe (I Peter 2:2). (4) But he whose heart is set toward God grows “*from strength to strength*” (Psalm 84:7).

What does your speech say about your spiritual maturity? You may not be what you say you are; but what you say, you are.

II. INFLUENCE OF THE TONGUE (James 3:3, 5)

A. The tongue has an influence far beyond its size (verses 3-5). James calls three illustrations to our attention to show the power of those six ounces of flesh which lies between the jaws. (1) We put a steel bit in the mouth of a horse and pressure on that small piece of metal turns the whole body of a great animal. (2) There is a very small helm which can guide a ship weighing many tons, even when it is driven by a violent storm. (3) One little spark from a smoldering match can start a forest fire which burns thousands of acres of trees. Just so the tongue is small among the members of the body, but its influence far exceeds its size.

In 1871 a cow belonging to a Mrs. O'Leary kicked over a lantern and started a fire which destroyed 17,450 buildings and killed 250 people in Chicago. Beware how you use your tongue!

B. The tongue can be used in the wrong way. Pity the poor king whose “*mother was his counsellor to do wickedly*” (II Chronicles 22:3). Pity poor Salome who danced before Herod and was instructed by her mother to ask for the murder of God's prophet, John the Baptist (Matthew 14:8). Pity them, but do not imitate them by either giving or receiving bad counsel.

“*Lying lips are abomination to the LORD: but they that deal truly are his delight*” (Proverbs 12:22). Beware of those whose words contain deceit and whose lips speak poison (Romans 3:13).

C. The tongue must be used in the right way. Say what needs to be said and that is enough. “*Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil*” (Matthew 5:37). Yet how many times have we been tempted to add to a story to make it sound more impressive?

“*Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man*” (Colossians 4:6). Pleasant speech

(free from flattery) is received by all people. It is our business to be always “*speaking the truth in love*” (Ephesians 4:15). We must so discipline our speech that we are able to say in truth, “*All the words of my mouth are in righteousness; there is nothing froward or perverse in them. They are all plain to him that understandeth, and right to them that find knowledge*” (Proverbs 8:8, 9).

What a delight it is for the mouth to be filled with praise to God (Psalms 34:1; 40:3; 51:15). It is a powerful testimony to the reality of knowing God in Jesus Christ.

Christian, give your words to counsel and comfort, to encourage and evangelize. “*By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned*” (Matthew 12:37).

III. CONTROL OF THE TONGUE (James 3:6-9)

A. Control of the tongue is possible, but it is not easy. “*The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: . . . it defileth the whole body, . . . and it is set on fire of hell*” (James 3:6). What a challenge that is to control such a monster among our members! “*The tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison*” (James 3:8). Emphasize the word “*man*” in that verse. No one can tame his tongue, but God can. Control of the tongue is possible to the person who is living in fellowship with God and who exercises constant diligence.

B. Control of the tongue is commanded in the Bible. “*Let your speech be always with grace*” (Colossians 4:6). “*Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile*” (Psalm 34:13). The psalmist suggested the proper response to God's requirement: “*I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle*” (Psalm 39:1). We must never return hard speech with hard speech (I Peter 3:10). “*If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain*” (James 1:26).

C. Control of the tongue is recommended from experience. What a burden it is to be with a person whose tongue constantly curses, gossips, or tells degrading jokes. It burdens the heart of a person who would be spiritually minded.

Let the evil speaker be touched with a coal from God's altar and he will find his iniquity taken away and his sin purged (Isaiah 6:6, 7). That is the only way the tongue can be subdued and made to honor God.

You are personally responsible to God for every word you speak. Jesus

said, *“Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned”* (Matthew 12:36, 37). Think about that! Therein is the basis of our discussion of the stewardship of the tongue.

What habits of speech does the Lord want you to eliminate from your life? Are you given to exaggeration, or perhaps even lies? Do you speak thoughtless words which may cause hurt? Do you repeat gossip without asking whether it is true, whether it will help solve the problem, or whether God would approve your repeating it? Do you boast as if all the good things life brings you are your own doing rather than God's blessings? Do you use cutting remarks in talking with (or talking about) another person? All such things grieve the Holy Spirit and should be forever rejected by a man or woman of God. Will you resolve to do it?

Questions

1. Why should you often pray the words of Psalm 19:14?
2. What does Luke 6:45 say about your speech?
3. What is the warning given in James 3:1?
4. What subjects of speech indicate spiritual immaturity?
5. How can the tongue have such a great impact on life?
6. What does Proverbs 12:22 say about your speech?
7. What do Matthew 5:37 and Colossians 4:6 say about your speech?
8. What is the warning of Matthew 12:37?
9. How does James 3:6, 8 make you depend on God to control your tongue?
10. What guidelines does James 1:26 give concerning spiritual maturity?
11. How can you be a good steward of your tongue this week?