

The Power of the Tongue

by Peter Maiden

The tongue has the power of life and death, and can be used to build up or tear down others, but with control and self-discipline, it can be a powerful tool for good.

Duration: 24:38

Scripture: Proverbs 8:7, Proverbs 10:32, Proverbs 15:23, Proverbs 16:28, Proverbs 17:9, Proverbs 18:13, Matthew 5:37

Topics: "Tongue"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the power of the tongue and its potential for both life and death. He urges listeners to speak truthfully and to restrain themselves in conversation, allowing reason to rule over emotions. The speaker highlights the issue of disunity within the fellowship and how the indiscipline of the tongue can contribute to it. He references the book of Proverbs, which emphasizes the importance of thinking before speaking, listening to others, and avoiding gossip. The speaker also shares advice from his mother about considering the impact of our words on others before speaking.

Transcript

And says, James, what is happening here is the very tongue that you've just been praising God with, you're now cursing God with, because you're speaking in an infamatory manner about someone who is made in the image and in the likeness of God. That's why I want to speak to you this morning about the control of the tongue. I choose the subject because I also think it's a crucial subject for Operation Mobilization.

At our field leaders meetings, I gave a kind of annual report of what God has been doing around the world in OM. And I suggested that one of the problems we face constantly is the great potential for disunity in our fellowship. And we've been close, I think, in a number of occasions this year to major disunity.

We've beaten the devil each time, I believe, but we've been close. And very often what takes you so close is the indiscipline of the tongue. So let's think of the book of Proverbs together, but keep your finger in James chapter 3. In Proverbs 18 and verse 21, we read these amazing words about the tongue.

The tongue has the power of life and death. Ever thought of the tongue like that? Such a small organ in your body. And yet, says the writer, the tongue has the power of life and of death.

And many other scriptures underline for us the immense power of the tongue. We saw some of them here in James chapter 3. James writes of the stallion, the raging horse. And yet he says that horse can be brought under control by the small bit in the horse's mouth.

And it's the same with the great vessels of the sea. They can be controlled by the comparatively small rudder. And then James says the man who can control his tongue can control the whole of his life.

He can keep the whole of his life in check, just as that great stallion can be kept in check by the bit. So I can keep the whole of my life in check, and so can you, if somehow we can just control the tongue. That's absolutely true in experience, isn't it? So often it's the angry, the careless word that ruins our lives.

We have to invest many, many hours just clearing up the damage caused by one careless word. One careless commitment made in the heat of the moment that you have to spend many hours dealing with the consequences. The opposite is equally true.

Whilst the controlled tongue can control the whole of our lives, the uncontrolled tongue can destroy everything. Did you see that powerful little illustration there in James chapter 3? The illustration of the forest that is set on fire by that minute spark, and the whole forest can be destroyed. Think about that in experience as well.

Think of a local church. Generation after generation have invested their time and energy in building up the church, and then one gossip is let loose in the congregation. He drops a word here, a word there, a little spark here, a little spark there, and before you know what's happened, the whole church, which like that forest has taken generations to bring to maturity, the whole church is destroyed by one careless spark, one careless word.

Such is the power, says James, of this small organ in our bodies. It has the power of life and the power of death. Rabbis at the time of Christ used to teach often on this subject, and I want to read to you one paragraph from one of the rabbis who taught at that time.

Life and death, he said, are in the hand of the tongue, but has the tongue a hand? No, of course not. But as the hand kills, so does the tongue, but there is a difference. The hand can only kill at close quarters.

The tongue is called an arrow because it can kill at a distance, but I say more. An arrow can kill at, say, 40 or 50 paces, but of the tongue, it is said in the 73rd Psalm, their mouths lay claim to heaven and their tongues lay claim to the whole earth, and that indeed is the peril of the uncontrolled tongue. A man can ward off a blow with the hand because the striker is at close quarters, but you can drop a malicious word, repeat a scandalous story, and a man can be devastated thousands of miles away.

Do you see how the tongue is much more powerful than the fist or even the arrow? It has the power of life and of death. Well, let's look at four things very briefly from the book of Proverbs. First of all, let's see the tongue as a power for good.

Now, I'm going to throw out many verses. Don't try and look them all up, but you can scribble down notes if you please. In Proverbs 10 and verse 21, or verse 11, sorry, we read these words, the mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life.

And then in chapter 15 and verse 4, the tongue that brings healing is a tree of life. Now, those are just two of a great number of verses in Proverbs which show how the tongue can have a healing influence in our

lives. Chapter 16 and verse 24 also emphasizes the point.

Pleasant words are a honeycomb. They are sweet to the soul and they bring healing to the bones. Let's think of how the tongue can heal.

Think for a moment of human relationships. Consider how the use of that one little word, sorry, can have such a healing balm in people's lives. You take the man and wife who are living at Loggerheads.

They haven't been speaking for a day or two or maybe a week or two, and one person takes the initiative. That little word, sorry, and almost immediate healing can be brought into the situation. The tongue, in a simple way like that, can be a healing influence in our lives.

Or consider a word of comfort, a word of encouragement in the right place at the right time. I often think of Jonathan's ministry in David's life. Think of David in the desert as he's trying to escape from Saul.

He describes his lifestyle for us. He says, I was like a flea in the desert. I was like a partridge in the wilderness.

And it's obvious both from the narrative in 1 Samuel and from the book of Psalms that David went through immense emotional turmoil in those days. And time and time again, Jonathan would come alongside and he would minister encouragement to his friend. One verse I love is 1 Samuel 23 and verse 15.

Just listen to this. While David was at Horesh in the desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and he helped him to find strength in God.

Isn't that beautiful? Jonathan coming alongside at that crucial moment to bring that word of comfort, that word of encouragement which helped David to find strength in God. Well, I could give you many more examples from the book of Proverbs of how the tongue can be a positive power for good, bringing healing into the lives of others. But the book of Proverbs also tells that the tongue can be a positive power for good in our own lives.

Listen to Proverbs 12 and verse 14. From the fruit of his lips, a man is filled with good things. Now, one example of this which Proverbs gives is that the tongue is a great means of self-protection.

Listen to chapter 14 and verse 3. A fool's talk brings a rod to his back, but the lips of the wise protect them. You all know Proverbs 15 and verse 1. It's famous and its advice is beautiful and practical. A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

I wonder how much trouble would have been saved for the world and for the church and certainly for Operation Mobilization if we just learned that little practical secret. A gentle answer, it's a self-protecting thing. It turns away wrath, whilst a harsh response just stirs up further anger.

The control tongue, it can be such a powerful good in the lives of others, and you'll find it such a powerful good in your own life. But look at the opposite because Proverbs equally tells us that the uncontrolled tongue can be an immense destructive power. Chapter 12 and verse 18, reckless words pierce like a sword.

Chapter 15 and verse 4, a deceitful tongue crushes a man's spirit. Now one example of the evil of the tongue in Proverbs is that the uncontrolled tongue can destroy the very closest relationships. Think of chapter 16 and verse 28.

A perverse man stirs up dissension. Listen to this, listen to this, a gossip separates the closest of friends. Listen to the lovely advice of chapter 17 and verse 9. You know it, but I wonder if we're practicing it.

He who covers an offense, promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter, what does he do? He separates the closest friends. Gossip is utterly deadly, utterly destructive. You know, my mother gave me one piece of good advice.

No, I shouldn't say that. She gave me tremendous advice throughout my childhood, but one piece I remember. She said, if you're going to tell a story about someone, if you're going to pass information on about someone, just stop before you do it and ask yourself three questions.

Son, ask yourself the question, will what you're going to say do the hearer any good? Number one. Number two, will it do the person whom the story concerns any good? You're telling somebody about something or someone, will it do him any good? Will it do the person you're talking about any good? Number three, son, will it do you any good? And I'll always remember her saying, if the answer to those three questions is no, keep your mouth shut, son. Now the advice isn't found in the book of Proverbs, but I don't think it would be out of place there.

Gossip is the most severely condemned of all the offenses of the tongue in the book of Proverbs, because it has such a devastating effect, separating the closest of friends. But you know, almost equally condemned is the use of flattery. Listen to chapter 29 and verse 5. Whoever flatters his neighbor, he is spreading a net for his feet.

And of course, if you want a biblical example of that, you need to go no further than the book of Daniel. He is King Darius, being flattered by his administrators. Anyone who brings or prays to any God or man during the next 30 days, except to you, O King, should be thrown into the lion's den.

Flattery. But that flattery is a net for the feet of King Darius. He is tripped by it, and the result is not what he wanted or intended, as David or Daniel, through the flattery of others, is led into the lion's den.

Tremendous damage can be done by not paying the price of being honest with each other. I wonder how many times I've failed this year, failed to have the courage to be really honest. Chose the easy road of flattery rather than paying the price of honesty.

The tongue, which can be such a positive, powerful good, out of control, can be such a destructive power for evil. Let's close by looking at four ways in which Proverbs therefore says the tongue must be used. Very simple things.

Number one, the tongue must always be used to speak the truth. Nothing is condemned more commonly in Proverbs than the perverse tongue. Listen to wisdom speaking in chapter eight, my mouth speaks what is true because my lips detest wickedness.

All the words of my mouth are just. None of them are crooked or perverse. And of course, the rest of Scripture confirms the importance of truthfulness and openness and transparency in our conversation.

I always find Paul's words, because they're simple, so challenging. Let your yes be yes, and let your no be no. In other words, no innuendos, no hinting to try and make the point.

Just let your yes be yes. True, open, forthright speech is what the book of Proverbs calls for. Then secondly, the book of Proverbs says on a number of occasions, don't speak too much.

The book says you will get into trouble if you talk too much. In chapter 10 in verse 8, and again in verse 10, the fool is described as a chattering or a gibbering fool. He talks too much.

Now, why should we be careful about not saying too much? Well, the book of Proverbs offers two answers to that question. Firstly, the less we say, the less ammunition our enemies will have against us. Think about that one.

The second one we've already looked at. Caution in speech can save relationships. Listen to chapter 11 in verse 12.

A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue. A gossip will betray a confidence, but a trustworthy man will always keep a secret. Do you fall into that category? You're a bit of a gibbering or chattering fool in the words of Proverbs.

In other words, you talk too much. You don't think before you speak, and you're constantly having to pull back your words or wish that you could, but you never can. We need to pray that God will give us control over how much we say.

And then thirdly, the book of Proverbs says, don't chatter or shout. Don't chatter or shout. Chapter 9 in verse 13, the woman folly is loud, and throughout the book of Proverbs, calm speech is encouraged.

We've seen its importance in a heated engagement. It's the gentle, the calm answer that will turn away wrath. One of the most convicting verses on the tongue in the whole of Proverbs for me is chapter 18 in verse 13.

I suppose it's convicting because I've so often at this point. He who answers without listening, the same is his folly and his shame. Doesn't that go like an arrow to your heart? It does to mine because I can recall how many times I failed at that point.

I'm not really listening. I'm not really thinking. I'm just gibbering, chattering.

What the book of Proverbs is saying here is don't allow emotion to rule in your conversation, but give reason a place. Think before you speak. Listen to the person that you're speaking to.

Don't shout. Don't chatter. Be calm in your conversation.

Now just in case you think the calm conversationalist is a kind of weak person, listen to chapter 25 in verse 15. Through patience, a ruler can be persuaded, but a gentle tongue can break a bone. Look out for that quiet, calm individual who has controlled his tongue.

He's not necessarily a weak person and his ministry to you will not necessarily be weak. The calm conversation, the calm response, in fact, can break a bone. Look fourthly and finally at what Proverbs says about choosing words which are suitable for occasions or words in season, as we put it these days.

Listen to chapter 10 in verse 32. The lips of the righteous know what is fitting. Chapter 15 in verse 23, a man finds joy in giving an apt reply.

And how good it is when you receive a timely word. Can you remember ministry like that in your own life? I can. When I was at a point of need in my life and someone came along and they were obviously not thinking of themselves, they were thinking of me.

And they had just that apt word, just that choice morsel that I needed at that time. The book of Proverbs says the man who is thinking about his mouth, the man who is really seeking to control his tongue, when he's in conversation will always be thinking not just about himself, but he'll be thinking about the person that he's communicating with. And he'll be looking for that word which will be apt, timely, which will build up and encourage rather than destroy.

In that situation, the tongue has the power of life and of death. It's true for us as individuals, I tell you. It's true for this movement.

Your tongue in this movement has the power of life and death. There's power for healing. There's power for ministry.

There's power for nourishing others in your tongue. There's power for self-protection as well. But there's such destruction potentially in that small organ, you could destroy the closest of relationships by just a little spark which will ultimately destroy the whole forest.

So brothers and sisters, as we move into a new OM year, can we commit ourselves unitedly to new efforts in these four areas that Proverbs points out for us? Let's commit ourselves to speak truthfully. Just let your yes be yes and your no, no. Let's commit ourselves to try and restrain ourselves in conversation.

Not to be gibbering fools, not to speak too much, but to allow reason to rule and not to allow our emotions to run completely out of control. Let's speak truthfully. Let's not speak too much.

Let's be gentle in our conversation. It doesn't mean you're always going to be going about quiet and with your head drooping, but it does mean that you're going to have that gentle answer that turns away wrath rather than meeting wrath with wrath and obvious destruction being the result. And let's be interested in ministering to one another, looking for that word in season, that wording of encouragement, because this tongue has such a power for healing, for life, for nourishment.

And surely that's what we want to be involved in, isn't it? Building up each other rather than being involved in Satan's work, the work of destruction. Let's pray together. Lord, deliver us, we pray, from the inconsistency that James refers to.

Lord, the very lips, the very tongue we use to worship you, we could be using in a few moments to curse you as we speak in a derogatory way about those who are made in your image and in your likeness, about those for whom you died. Lord, help us to set a guard over our mouths. Help us, O God, to know more and more.

We're not going to know it completely today or tomorrow, but Lord, help us to see, help me to see some progress in this year ahead in the control of the tongue and the positive use of the tongue for your glory and for the building up of others. Lord, we pray for your help in Jesus' name. Amen.

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