

Loose Lips Sink Ships ...and churches too

Introduction:

- I. There are very few things in this world that are more powerful than words. A few well chosen words can almost instantly cheer us up, improve our outlook and add joy to our day. However, by the same token a few ill-advised and inconsiderate words can spoil our state of mind, darken our disposition and destroy our day just as quickly.

- II. With this in mind, let me ask you, "How carefully do you choose your words and watch what you say?" During the second world war, information was falling into the hands of enemy spies when soldiers on leave were inadvertently giving sensitive information to the enemy by talking too much once they got back home. As a result of this, the Navy coined the slogan, "Loose Lips Might Sink Ships." This morning, I want to borrow this slogan for my sermon title with a small addition to it. "Loose Lips Sink Ships...and churches too! In this lesson, I want to use James 3:1-12 as a text. If you have your Bibles, turn with me to that passage and let's read it together. From this text we want to look at three points about the tongue.

Lesson:

I. The Tongue Is Powerful (Jas. 3:1-5).

Prov 18:21

Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.

How many things can be said to have the power of life and death? Yet such is the case with the tongue. The tongue can bring either death or life to our spouse. The tongue can bring either death or life to our children. The tongue can bring death or life to our brothers and sisters in Christ, to our parents, our siblings, our co-workers, our neighbors, etc. Indeed the tongue has the power of death and life. Now obviously this muscle in our mouth can't literally kill or make alive, but the point is this, the tongue can either bring profitable production or devastating destruction. It all depends on how it is used. The problem is we too often forget how powerful the tongue is because after all it is but a small member of our bodies. But James reminds us that small things can sometimes boast great power. Let's turn our attention to the text.

James 3:1

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

The word *masters* refers to teachers in the local church. One problem that local churches have always faced is that too many brethren want to teach, many of whom just don't have the qualifications to do so. This evidently was a problem in the first century church too. You see, some brethren think that somehow if they teach or preach they will be more important, have more prestige and therefore have more power. But James tells the brethren that those who enter into the realm of teaching and instructing will be judged with greater strictness and so they better think twice about wanting to become a teacher.

James 3:2

For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

James is still talking about teachers in this verse. Yes we all offend in different ways. The word *offend* means "to cause to stumble," and there are many ways that we can do that, but the easiest way is by our words. If a man knows how to use his tongue in such a way that he doesn't constantly offend others, he has reached a level of maturity where he can control the rest of the body. Now this person is in position to think about teaching. Listen to me: James isn't indicating that every person who doesn't offend people in speech should be teaching, this is just one qualification. But it is an important qualification. Why? Because of the power of the tongue. Now James begins to demonstrate this power using some examples to help us understand.

James 3:3-5

Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. 4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor lists. 5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasts great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindles!

Horses are animals of strength and power yet they can be controlled by a small bit. Ships are vessels that are massive in size, yet, even when they are being driven by strong winds, they can be turned about by the movement of a small rudder. Even so, James says, the tongue is a little member, and boasts great things (**Jas. 3:5**).

The story of Karen Carpenter is illustrative of the power of words. Karen Carpenter, along with her brother Richard, formed a highly successful singing group in the 1970s called the Carpenters. She died unexpectedly of heart failure at age 32 brought on by years of self-abuse from the eating disorder Anorexia. Later CBS released a program called The Karen Carpenter Story. The USA Today in commenting on this program asked the

question, "But what brought on Karen's fatal obsession with weight control?" The answer given was that a music critic many years before had once referred to Karen as "Richard's chubby sister." It is hard to fathom that a single negative comment could change the course of someone's life but with Karen it did. Now who would have thought that the words "Richard's chubby sister" would lead to a life of self-destruction? But herein lies the power of words. We don't know, quite frankly, how our words will affect someone else; thus, we must choose them very carefully.

This is why Paul said, "*Let no corrupt communication proceed out of thy mouth*" (**Eph. 4:29**). This is why David once said, "*I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue. I will put a muzzle on my mouth...*" (**Psa. 39:1**). You see, these inspired men understood the power of the tongue. James uses one more example to demonstrate the power of the tongue in ver. 5. Did you see it? "*Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindles!*" The word *matter* here means "a forest." A forest is vast in size, sometimes covering many hundreds of miles, yet it can be destroyed in a short period of time by a fire that starts out as just a spark. Now, The similarities between a fire and the tongue are hard to miss. Just a few words, listen to me, just a spark from the tongue, can cause years of hurt and heartache. And once that spark turns into a full fledge flame, it's hard to extinguish. Now let me illustrate the power of words.

Wives, you're going out for a romantic dinner with your husband and before you leave the house, he says to you with intensity in his eyes and tenderness in his voice, "You always look amazingly beautiful, but tonight you look especially gorgeous in that new red dress." Let me ask you, do words have power? Let's say you are on the job. You've had a long day dealing with a variety of issues and problems that quite frankly have left you mentally and emotional spent. You're not especially in the best of moods and you are ready to go home. All the sudden the head of your department, that would be your boss's boss, comes up to you and just in passing says, "You've done a great job today. I really appreciate your effort and value your work." And he walks away. Does that change your frame of mind? Of course it does. Why? There's power in words. Not convinced yet? How would these words make you feel? "I hate you." Or, "you make me sick." Or, "I wish you were dead." You see words are powerful. They can instill great joy or produce a mind-set of misery. Words, ladies and gentlemen, can turn loneliness into laughter, gloom into gladness and desolation into delight. Words can inspire people or they can turn people off. Words can lift people up or they can bury people under a avalanche of discouragement. Words can shift societies, move multitudes, and even fire up the family of God. You see words are powerful. And it is only when we realize how powerful they are that we will begin to be careful about what we say and the words we use.

II. The Tongue Is Destructive (Jas. 3:6-8).

James 3:6

And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

In October of 2007, fires raged through Southern California. When it was all said and done, 240,000 acres were wiped out, 665 homes were burned to ashes, 168 businesses were destroyed. 265,000 were told to flee their homes. Now let me ask you, if any of them were to read the words of James "*the tongue is a fire,*" do you think they would understand what he was saying? Fire is one of the most destructive forces on earth and so can be the tongue. James says the tongue is a *world of iniquity*. The word *world* signifies a mass or a great collection of something. We sometimes say, "*you're in a world of trouble,*" meaning an abundance of trouble. When used improperly the tongue contains an abundance of sin, i.e., the tongue can be an instrument of much evil.

Picture a husband who maliciously and in cold-blooded fashion continues to stab his wife with words that impale her heart and leave lasting scars.

Picture a wife unleashing on her husband a devastating discourse of insulting words, belittling him with such acrimony that it would crush the self-esteem of the strongest man.

Picture in your minds parents breaking the will of their children with constant criticisms, interminable insults and prolonged put-downs.

Picture in your minds local congregations that have been devastated by those who have carved and cut, chopped and chiseled and sliced and diced their way through the church with hurtful sarcasms and derisive language, never hesitating to engage in gossip or participating in backbiting.

I'm trying to get us to see how destructive the tongue can be if we don't use it properly. Who could estimate the amount of evil it has caused through the years? Think of the damage caused by all of the slurs and slanders made with the uncontrolled tongue. Think of all the heartaches caused by falsehoods and fabrications set forth by lying tongues. Think of all of the arguments and alienations and acrimony; think of the conflicts and controversies and contentions; think of the discord and dissension and disharmony; think of the friction and factions and fightings caused by the uncontrolled tongue. Think with me of all of the atrocities produced by the flattering words of the seducer or the religious error copiously churned out by the eloquent tongue of the false teacher. Think with me of all of the reputations that have been ruined, the lives that have been leveled, and

the people who have been poisoned by loose lips. Yes the tongue is a world of iniquity when it goes unchecked. No wonder David said, “*Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile*” (Ps 34:13).

David’s words indicate something that we do on purpose. We must determine in our minds that we will keep our tongues and control our lips. In others words, we must make up in our minds that we are going to watch what we say and how we say it. We must always be on guard.

James 3:7-8

For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: 8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

This is not a made-in excuse for misusing the tongue. It is instead an warning of the importance of always being alert to the dangers of the tongue and being on guard. No passage accentuates the importance of this more than Matthew 12:36 where we here from Jesus Himself. Listen to Him:

Matt 12:36

But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.

The Greek word for *idle* denotes that which is careless, and then uselessness. Thayer says it refers to “*things from which no profit is derived.*” Now, when it comes to our speech, usually carelessness and uselessness go hand in hand. When we speak carelessly, our words are usually useless and many times hurtful. Listen: hurtful words do always comes from a nefarious heart. In fact, most of the time when we hurt people with our words, it simply because we use our tongues carelessly. What’s the solution? I know this sounds simple, but the truth is we must train ourselves to think before we speak. I ran across the word think being used acronymically as follows:

True – The first thing we ought to consider as Christians when we talk to others or about others is whether or not what we are saying is true. One thing God hates is lying.

Prov 12:22

Lying lips are abomination to the Lord: but they that deal truly are his delight.

Eph 4:25

Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.

Col 3:9

Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds.

Rev 21:8

...and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.

Helpful – The second thing a Christian should always ask before he or she speaks is, “Is what I’m about to say helpful or hurtful.” In Eph. 4:29, Paul had this to say about our speech:

Eph 4:29

Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good...

Mothers used to tell their children, “*if you don’t have anything good to say, don’t say anything at all.*” Think of the problems that would be avoided and the heartache averted if we would all follow that advise. It’s not just advise given by wise mothers, it is the advise of an inspired apostle of Christ and we ought to follow it.

Inspiring – Do our words tear people down or build people up? Listen to the rest of what Paul said in Eph. 4:29:

Eph 4:29

Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the USE OF EDIFYING, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

To edify means to build up and that’s what we ought to be about as Christians. We should speak with a purpose and our purpose should be to encourage others to live better. Paul once said, “*Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another...*” (1 Thess. 5:11). In 1 Cor. 14:26, Paul said, “*Let all things be done unto edifying.*” I know he was talking about our assemblings in that place, but wouldn’t the principle be applicable to our speech? The Hebrew writer said we should *provoke one another unto love and good works*. I know that the word *provoke* can sometimes carry the negative connotation of irritation, but the Hebrew writer is talking about positive provocation. The word in the context of Hebrews 10:24 means to stimulate, motivate and incite; it means to inspire. That’s how we should use our tongues, ladies and gentlemen, i.e., to inspire and motivate others to a higher ground spiritually and morally and to better service to God.

Necessary - Remember the word *idle* as used by Jesus denotes uselessness. Listen to me: some things just don’t have to be said. Some have developed the devilish mentality that says, “*I must speak my mind.*” Who

told you that? It's not always good to speak your mind, especially when your mind is not in the right state. And if your mind is saying "I have to get this person told," or "I have to have the last word," or "I just have to get this off my chest," your mind is in the wrong place. It might make you feel better to say certain things to certain people at certain times, but the question you need to stop and think about is, "Is it really necessary for me to say this?" Calvin Coolidge said, *"I have never been hurt by anything I did not say."*

Abe Lincoln said, *"It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."*

Proverbs 10:19 puts it this way:

"When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise."

This reminds us of the admonish given by James in Jas. 1:19:

"Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath."

Sometimes our words get us into trouble simply because we are talking too much and end up saying things that aren't necessary in the first place.

I recently read this week about a woman who had a very serious throat condition. The doctor told her that her vocal cords needed total rest so she was forbidden to talk for 6 months! With a husband and 6 kids, this seemed impossible, but she did what she was told. When she needed the kids she blew a whistle. Whenever she needed to communicate she wrote things on pads of paper. After six months, her voice came back. When asked what it was like to communicate only in writing, she said this: "You'd be surprised how many notes I crumpled up and threw into the trash before I gave them to anyone. Seeing my words before anyone heard them had an effect that I don't think I can ever forget."

King David, after seeing how his words got him in trouble wrote this in Psalm 39:1, I said, "I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth with a muzzle." Let's learn to think more and talk less.

Kind – There is never, ever, ever a justifiable reason for speaking unkindly to anyone. Yes sometimes people need to be rebuked. Yes sometimes error needs to be exposed. Yes sometimes people need to "get told." But listen to me: controlling the tongue is not only about watching *what* we say, it is also about watching *how* we say what we say. I don't care what the circumstances may be! Whether we are talking to a waitress at a res-

restaurant who messed up an order, or a spouse that we are not seeing things eye to eye with at the moment, speaking kindly is what God expects of us. ALWAYS! Why? Because kindness is a fundamental trait of a Christian.

1 Cor 13:4

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.

Eph 4:32

And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

Some people use harsh and invective speech and call it constructive criticism, but unkind words, no matter who you are talking to, is never constructive. They never build up, they always tear down. They never encourage, they are always discouraging.

So, in order to restrain the tongue, we must think before we talk. If we don't, our tongues become instruments of destruction used by the devil to ruin souls, including our own. Now what are some specific ways that the tongue might be used destructively?

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|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| A. By gossip | B. By lying |
| C. By cursing | D. By rudeness |
| E. By being flippant | F. By being sarcastic |
| G. By being too playful | |

III. The Tongue Is Revealing (Jas. 3:9-12).

James 3:9

Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

One of the amazing things about the tongue is how it can be used in radically different fashions. We have been saying that the tongue is an instrument of destruction because that's the point of emphasis of James in our text. But the tongue can also be used as an instrument of great good. The effects of the tongue can produce either great good or enormous evil.

Prov 25:11

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.

Prov 16:24

Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones.

So it is amazing how different the effects of the tongue can be, producing either great good or horrific devastation. Let me demonstrate it like this.

On August six, 1945, the awesome and devastating power of “Little Boy,” the first atomic bomb, was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. The destructive power of the atomic bomb resulted in over 140,000 deaths. As he looked down at the explosion, Robert Lewis, the co-pilot of the Enola Gay said, “What have we done?”

On December 20, 1951, in Arco, Idaho, 6 years after Hiroshima, the sky was brightened once again. This time it was brightened by light bulbs powered for the first time by electricity produced from nuclear energy. Today, 20% of America’s electricity comes from nuclear energy. Electricity that powers homes, businesses, schools, hospitals and church buildings like this. The uranium that is used in the nuclear reactor that produces that electricity, is the same uranium that is used in the atomic bomb. The exact same science is used in the reactor and the bomb. The exact same atoms and electrons and reactions and physics are used in each. So what’s the difference? It’s how they’re used. When used one way, nuclear energy produces tremendous good. But when used another way, it produces death and devastation.

This is the point of James in our text. The small instrument we call the tongue can be used for great good or enormous evil. We can bless God with the tongue or we can curse man with the tongue. We can build people up with the tongue or we can tear people down with the tongue. That’s just the power of the tongue. But listen to me: the same tongue shouldn’t be used for both. Did you get that? The same tongue shouldn’t be used for both.

James 3:10

Out of the same mouth proceeds blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

James did not say that God shouldn’t have created an instrument that can both bless and curse. James didn’t say it’s too bad that the same instrument can be used in such different ways to such different ends. James is saying the *same mouth* shouldn’t be used in such different ways. If you are going to praise God, don’t curse men. If you are going to curse men, don’t praise God. Why? Because it is hypocrisy. This is where James’ illustrations come in.

James 3:11-12

Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? 12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

A fountain produces either sweet water or bitter, but not both. Why? Because of its source! The source of the water that flows through the fountain can't be both bitter and sweet, it can only be one or the other. If the water is bitter, it is because the source is bitter. A fig tree cannot produce berries. Why? The source. So, the kind of water produced by a fountain depends on the source. The kind of fruit that is borne, depends on the source. Now, James doesn't draw a conclusion about his illustrations in the text but the application is self-explanatory. Just like fountain water has its source and fruit has its source, the words of the tongue have their source too. The source of fountain water is its water supply. The source of fruit is a tree or a vine. The source of our words is the heart. How do you know the nature of the source? It's determine by what it produces. If the water in a fountain is salty, the source is a salt water sea. If the water is fresh, the source is a fresh water river. If the fruit is a fig, the source is a fig tree. If the fruit is an grape, the source is not a tree, it's a grapevine. Now what about our speech? Let's allow Jesus to make the obvious application:

Luke 6:43-45

For a good tree brings not forth corrupt fruit; neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. 44 For every tree is known by his own fruit. For of thorns men do not gather figs, nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes. 45 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

The tongue is revealing. How you speak and what you say reveals whether your heart is corrupt or pure, period! Listen to me: It doesn't matter how we view ourselves, or even how others view us, if our words are rotten and corrupt our heart is corrupt. Let's drop all of the self-deception and be real with ourselves. If our words are unkind, we have an unkind heart. If our words are bitter, we have a bitter heart. If our words aren't right, our hearts aren't right. If we cuss and curse; if our words are rude and reckless; if we gossip and spread lies, then our hearts are evil in the sight of God. If we chatter callously about our co-workers; if we talk badly about our brethren; if we speak severely to our spouse, our hearts are corrupt no matter what else we do. Listen to me: the worse lie we can tell is the lie we tell ourselves. We convince ourselves that all is right with God even though the venom of vipers is under our lips. James warns us about this:

James 1:26

If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridles not his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is vain.

Conclusion:

Yes the tongue is a powerful instrument that can do great good or enormous evil. Let's put forth a concentrated effort to control the tongue. While the tongue can never be tamed, it can be guarded and it's our responsibility to do so. Remember, loose lips sink ships, and churches too.