

Hold That Thought

"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

James 1:19

How easy is control of my tongue? Well, it all depends on the circumstances. For example, when I'm asleep, the danger of loose words is pretty much nonexistent, and by morning all my tongue wants is to taste that first cup of coffee. But when the day is new many events lie in wait. Though my mind and spirit want to be patient and even-tempered, my flesh renders me susceptible to facing some emotional tsunami. Then my tongue is wide awake and able to roar like a tiger roused from slumber.

It might be a bad driver that solicits me to sound the verbal alarm, not unlike a kitchen timer set to ring when a hard-boiled egg is cooked. Or someone in person who issues a perceived slight that tempts me to snap back without forethought. Yet as enticing as a good tongue-lashing might seem, I've learned that heated words can be very dangerous. Therefore, if an emotional surge should befall me, it best serves as a great big stop sign for my tongue; though I've regretted plenty of times speaking before thinking, I've never regretted thinking before speaking.

There was one such instance years ago when I was enlisted to share a project with an intelligent but high strung, PhD at work. Since he was smarter and outranked me, I understood why his judgment trumped mine. However, it soon became apparent that his lofty, obfuscated ways were, well frankly, grossly impractical. After all, we worked in a business, not in a research institute. Our aim was to turn a profit while providing a quality service, not to win the Nobel Prize.

Yet the cloud of this experience bore a silver lining; our collaboration was temporary and would end at the project's completion. Until then I'd just have to grin and bear it...and control my tongue.

The situation, and my tongue, seemed pretty well in hand until one day when this edgy PhD barked out an unbelievably ridiculous order at me. I didn't know what bothered me more, his request or his tone. Dumfounded and not knowing whether to laugh or cry, I felt that "emotional welling" and an instant urge to snap at him. Yet in spite of my inward turmoil, I somehow responded civilly so that by the day's end I claimed a minor victory at having harnessed my tongue (though my husband certainly got an earful that evening).

Thankfully, the project wound down and so did my daily associations with this man. The frustrations were no longer renewed, and so our working relationship became cordial and professional again.

But some weeks later a bombshell dropped one Monday morning. This high-strung scientist was dead. Well-familiar with toxic chemicals, he came to work on the previous weekend, mixed up a solution of poison and drank it (it followed some sort of domestic dispute). His sudden demise seemed surreal and shocked more than a few coworkers.

Of course I too pondered this tragedy. Indeed it was terrible, but among the thoughts that reverberated back was relief at having reigned in my tongue not long before. What a burden it could have been had we exchanged nasty words not long before his death! I realize this man had deep emotional issues that transcended any work squabbles, but death is funny; it can tease out unexpected, haunting recollections for those of us left behind. Just like after my mother died I experienced waves of memories, including a few unexpected flashbacks of times I spoke sharply to her. But thankfully, we were on great terms throughout our lives up until the end so that now I can enjoy guiltlessly the remembrances of our relationship.

But still, I've regretted speaking amiss to people, whether it was cross words, gossip, or just something insensitive or inappropriate. Whatever I was thinking at the time, it obviously wasn't James 1:19 and taking heed to be slow to speak. It's very easy to ring a bell, though impossible to un-ring it and it's hard to learn firsthand that the consequences of wrongly-placed words aren't easily, if ever forgotten.

So it's infinitely better to avoid saying the wrong thing rather than trying to fix the damage done from toxic words once out of the bag. In other words, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. I can appreciate this concept daily on a technical level, in policies adopted in the lab industry known as Preventive Maintenance. Equipment and instruments aren't just operated ad infinitum until a breakdown happens; rather, they're continually monitored and serviced so that they always function properly and won't crash in the middle of running tests. Though maintenance isn't cheap, breakdowns are more costly, not only from repairs but also from lost time and worse, possible faulty information. Maintenance schedules, though inconvenient, are vital to an organization where others' physical welfare is integral to its mission statement.

And likewise, because others' spiritual welfare is integral to our divine commission, we have a preventive maintenance schedule for our tongue--that we be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to wrath (James 1:19). And this schedule isn't monthly, weekly or even daily, but rather a momentary evaluation starting with our thoughts. Because preceding the tongue's words are the mind's deliberations. Yet whether thoughtful or thoughtless, every cogitation that begets a verbal utterance is non-retractable, potentially powerful and hence not to be taken lightly.

Therefore, it's not just certain thoughts, or periodic thoughts, but every thought that's to be captured unto the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). It's the key to taming the tongue because really, when we're filled with the Spirit there's no way our tongue can become a "world of evil among body parts (James 3:6)."

Just as freshwater flows only from a fresh spring (James 3:10-12), only the good heart pours out wisdom from above. Moreover, the good heart reveals the genuineness of its love for its Creator by its words to His creation, our fellow man. And wherever the Fruit of the Spirit is found, there will also be a heart that listens and a mouth that speaks thoughtful words.

Even so, the good heart also manifests itself by the words it withholds, such as lies, gossip, or malicious and deceitful things. Or snapping back when provoked by seemingly justified circumstances, because unsavory verbiage can easily be words hastily seasoned by a bitter tone. But regardless, once spoken by the mouth, they can never again become unspoken. Yet they certainly can return to haunt their sender, these vile and sour words destined to be eaten with remorse. I know that kind of nasty heartburn is something never to be desired, and is infinitely better nixed than fixed.

Winston Churchill observed a timeless truth, "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." Therefore, fitting to the righteous who are as bold as a lion (Proverbs 28:1) is also the taming of our tongue.

- By Mary Nixon