
² We all stumble in many ways. ⁵ Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. ⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ My brothers and sisters, this should not be. From James 3

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. Psalm 19:14

A pastor has told the story of wanting to preach to remind people of the shortness of life. In order to emphasise his point he took a long pause, and then said, "Every member of this church is going to die." To his surprise, a man in the back row responded to this statement with a big smile. So, the pastor repeated the phrase with even greater volume. This time he noticed that the man crossed his arms and looked even happier than before. This rattled the preacher that he literally shouted the words a third time, "Every member of this church is going to die!!" But the person in the back seat just kept grinning from ear to ear. Later, after the service, the pastor tracked down the man and asked, "Why in the world did you smile so big when I said 'Every member of this church is going to die?'" The man erupted with a huge smile and said, "Because I'm not a member of this church."

Have you ever had an experience in life where you believe you were misunderstood – where it seems the person you have spoken to didn't 'understand'? There are times when the words we use don't have the effect we want. Sometimes words meant to spur people on toward action, fall on deaf ears and immobilise people. Sometimes the words we use to try and encourage are interpreted as patronising or condescending. Sometimes we don't know what words to use, and we choose ones that end up doing more harm than good. These are mistakes that all of us make – because we're human. We're not perfect. Even with the best of intentions, we will still mis-step in our choices of words from time to time.

But there is another level to the words we use – and the reality we all need to acknowledge is that here are times in our lives when we use words in a way that is not 'accidental' or 'poorly chosen', but downright wrong. This is the poor language and cursing and swearing of our world, or the words that are spoken that are nothing more than gossip. Have you never spoken about someone 'behind their back'?

However, today, I do not wish to give a lesson on what words you should or should not say. Most people know this and do not need to be reminded of a 'better way of speaking' (although, at times, we may need to 'relearn' our way of speaking with the words we hear in the workplace or the sporting ground,

or the playground, and especially in the home, as well as the words we hear on TV, and in other public forums). Most people do not need to be reminded that swearing is not a sign of intelligence or toughness, or that gossip is somehow a way to 'win friends'. Most people will avoid the gossip because they know that the one who gossips about others will in all probability gossip about them. We do not need to be reminded about being careful in our speech. But, maybe, we need to be reminded about *why* it is good to be careful in what we say. In this regard there are three levels we may explore. First, the way what we think and say can orientate our lives. Second, we care for other people in the way in which we think and say. And the third way is that what we think and say, says something about our relationship to God.

First, the way we speak helps orientate our life. The tongue is only around one tenth of one percent of the total weight of your body, but that little bit of muscle in your mouth can control the whole direction of your life. The tongue is so small but powerful part of your personality. Counsellors understand this. Counsellors tell us that if you can change the words that a person uses, you can change the feelings inside of that person. If you can change the language you use you can 'change' as a person. For example: if you have a bad habit of cursing and swearing; if you have a person problem with your mouth and it spews out bad language; if you start to change those words, that will actually begin to change the way you feel as a person on the inside. Or, if you have a problem with being critical and being negative about people, being picky their faults; if you change the words that come out of your mouth, you will start to change the way you feel about other people. And if you practice 'mindfulness' and speak more well of your own self, you will actually start to feel better about your own self. James was right. He said that a small rudder controls a large ship; a small bridle controls a big horse; a small muscle like the tongue controls our whole personality.

Second, the way we speak of others indicates our love for others. You know that at times we do need to speak about others when they are not present. There are times when we will speak of others because they have faced some illness or accident, and we ponder what we may do to help. There are times when we will speak of others because they are going through some personal difficulty, and we are wondering what we may do to support them. There are times when we will speak of others because what they have done inspires us, and we wish to learn something from them. But sometimes we may need to ask ourselves three well-known questions before we speak of others: (1) Is it necessary? (2) Is it true? (3) Is it kind? Words that are spoken with bad motives (or anger or hatred or resentment in the heart) can have a devastating effect on others. But words – spoken in love – can be a means of helping people, and building and sustaining communities of love.

But there is a third aspect to 'wise speaking', and it has to do with James says in James 3:9: "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness". And the 'likeness' that we 'look like' here is not that we 'look like God', or that we are to 'reflect God's love' (although this latter part is important, as Genesis 1:27 suggests). But the 'likeness' we are to reflect is the 'likeness' of God's love that God has shown to us in Jesus. What better thing is there in life to think about than God's love and life to us in Jesus?! What better thing to think about than 'God says your sins are forgiven' (that means other people's sin as well!). What better thing to think about than an amazing love that comes from God in Jesus! What better thing to think about than God's gift of eternal life, and hope and health and healing, in Jesus!

What is the 'purpose' of our 'tongue'? Is it simply to help us eat? James says, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father." In this regard, the Psalmist's prayer is, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer." St. James is realistic. He knows that that none of us can control our tongue. He knows that all of us are guilty of name calling, hostility, judging others and gossip. James knows that it is difficult to live out the law of love. But James speaks on the basis of knowing God's love and forgiveness in Jesus.

The Bible teaches that words are generative and they wield power to renew our minds. Science backs this up as we're always learning more about the plasticity of our brains and how thinking new thoughts can have a positive effect on overall health. People who have been hurt in some way, and keep mulling over in their minds what has been done to them, allowing bitterness to build up in their hearts, are probably going to talk about it to everyone they meet. How much better to take it to the Lord in prayer, let Him heal the hurt and fill our hearts with forgiveness, and put it in the past. Meditating upon negative things, brings turmoil and pain. But meditating upon good things brings joy and at peace. We can choose how we want to feel today by what we think about. Most important we should let our thoughts and our words be pleasing to the Lord.

As David wraps in Psalm 19:14, imploring God to make him blameless through searching and forgiving him, he seeks a right relationship with God. As he sings to God "may these words of my mouth and this meditation on my heart be pleasing in your sight," he is surrendering to God's guidance, and praising him as his Rock and Redeemer. The psalm relates the voice of God to a treasure more precious than gold, and sweeter than honey straight from the honeycomb. David is asking in Psalm 19:11-14 for this God of unmatched worth to warn, search, forgive, and keep him. Psalm 19:14 concludes that when we praise and meditate on the wonders of God's creation and redemption, the gratitude we feel creates words that bring forth joy.

Because the world is always warring for your attention, and troubles can stir up things in your heart that you wish weren't there...remember you can always ask God for help. He forgives your "hidden faults" (Psalm 19:12) and keeps you from wilful sins. Ask God to reveal what needs healing, and to keep you "blameless and innocent of great transgression." (Psalm 19:13).

God knows we all can misspeak, say hurtful things, or harbor ungratefulness in our hearts. He is showing us in Psalm 19 that He is faithful to save us from these things. And if we want what's in our hearts to produce pleasing words, we can ask God to give us the words He desires for us to say. Remember, God has given us His Word – His gift of love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus. So let us meditate on this Word, and let Him purify the words we share...so that they may draw others to the glory of God.

Measuring your words can help love others. Measuring your words can help shape your life. Measuring your words can help guard your life. James says: "We have been made in God's likeness." We are 'made in God's likeness', but this is not the 'likeness' of Adam and Eve walking happily together in a Garden. Those days are gone. Now we live under the 'likeness' of God's love to us in Jesus, under the cross. God has spoken a word of love and forgiveness to you in the cross of Jesus. Jesus' cross enables each day to be a new day, a new start, a new beginning, a new way of thinking and speaking. Let us always rejoice in God's word of love to us in Jesus, and seek to live life on that basis toward God and others. Amen.