

Taming the Tongue • James 1:26

A woman walked up to the pastor and asked if she could confront him about something that offended her. After some hesitation, he said, “Yes.”

She replied, “I want you to know that I’m really offended by your tie. I just don’t think it’s appropriate for a pastor to wear a tie like that and I hope you will never wear it again.”

With that the pastor reached into a nearby drawer and took out a pair of scissors. He offered the scissors to her and said, “If it offends you, then cut it off.”

Without any hesitation she reached under the knot and sliced that tie right off. Then she said, “Thank you, Pastor. I appreciate the gracious and non-defensive way in which you have responded to my criticism. Now, to be fair, I would like to give you the same opportunity. I want to know if there is any way in which I have offended you. If there is, what would you like me to do?”

He took the scissors and said, “Stick out your tongue!”

Now, a better approach would have been for that pastor to quote the words of James 1:26: “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.” So the taming of the tongue starts with self-perception, or what we think about ourselves: “If anyone considers himself religious”

Do you consider yourself religious? I don’t. I’ve never particularly liked the word “religious”. My idea of someone who is religious borders on a combination of self-righteousness, hypocrisy and the Church Lady from Saturday Night Live. It’s always seemed to me that religious people think they are so good. Religious people often come across as obnoxious. Religious people seem as though they don’t understand real life. They’re kind of fake.

So I don’t like to think of myself as religious, although I have found in some conversations that

there are people who think that I’m religious. I suppose it’s because I believe in God and I read the Bible and I pray and I go to church a lot on Sundays, or maybe it’s because I’m a pastor. They probably say, “How religious can you get?”

But the Bible isn’t talking here about what other people think. It’s talking about what we think about ourselves. And the Bible, in James 1:26, doesn’t mean “religious” the way I typically think of religious. Actually, here it means something quite good.

The Greek word here is *threskos*. It describes a person who holds God in awe and is very careful to worship God in just the right way. This is the person who truly wants to worship God. She is overwhelmed by the greatness and goodness of God. He gives attention to every detail of worship. And that’s a good thing to do.

I think if we translated that into our experience today in a worship service, we would say that we’re talking about a person who is never late to a worship service. He considers a worship service as an appointment with God himself. Just as he wouldn’t be late to meet his boss, close a business deal or honor any other important commitment, he would never be late for God. God is too important to ever make anything else seem more important.

She puts her whole heart into worship. She sings every word of every hymn. She prays along with every prayer. She lifts her soul to God with

the choir anthem. Never ever would she think of a church service as entertainment or of herself as a spectator. She cringes when praise goes to the people on the platform instead of to God in heaven.

He is careful and thoughtful about his behavior in a worship service. He writes a check for the offer-

ing before he comes to church. He never gets up to change seats or distract others who are worshipping. He is sensitive even about the distracting noises that could bother other people, so he

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turns pages quietly and avoids even a whisper of conversation.

All of this describes the “religious” person. And you say, “So what’s wrong with that? Sounds pretty good to me. That’s the way Christians should believe and behave. I wish there were more religious people like that at church!”

I’m not putting this person down. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this. It’s great to be religious. There’s nothing wrong with thinking that you are religious. The problem comes when the religious person who does all this walks out of the worship service and “does not keep tight rein on his tongue, because he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.”

Compare this to a person who thinks that he is healthy. He knows it is important to take care of his body. He goes to bed early every night so that he can go to the health club at 5:30 in the morning seven days a week. He belongs to an excellent health club and pays top dollar for dues. He runs around the track; he rides the Life Cycle; he uses the Nordic Track; he exercises every muscle in his body on the Nautilus and Cybex; then he swims 30 laps. And every other day he plays handball for an hour.

You say, “Sounds healthy to me. That guy is probably in great shape and will live to be 100 and look like a teenager until the day he dies. America would be a healthier and happier place if more of us would take care of our bodies and exercise just like that. So, why are you putting him down?”

There’s nothing wrong with this. It’s good to exercise. It’s good to be healthy. The problem is that this guy leaves the health club and lights up a cigarette that is the first of three packs a day. He eats so much fatty food that he measures his fat intake in pounds not grams. And he drinks three cases of beer a week. His cholesterol is 400; he’s 100 pounds overweight; and he will probably die young. “If anyone considers himself healthy and yet does not stop putting unhealthy things in his mouth, he deceives himself and his healthiness is worthless.”

Of course, James 1:26 isn’t talking about health. It’s talking about worship. And it says, “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives

himself and his religion is worthless.”

God wants us to know that we can completely undo very good worship of God by letting our tongue say the wrong thing and losing control of our mouths. The analogy used here is to a horse with a bit in the horse’s mouth.

When I was a teenager I worked at a ranch in New York State. The staff was required to arrive a week before the campers for training, orientation and preparation of the camp. We worked really hard for that week. But it was June and the days were long, so we had some time to play at the end of each day. Typically, that would include swimming or horseback riding.

One night a group of us went for a ride through the woods. When we came to an open field those of us in the front led our horses into a full gallop across the open field. Several riders back was a girl who was 18 and had just graduated from high school. She didn’t hold a tight rein and lost control of her horse. As she was bounced around in the saddle, her left foot came out of the left stirrup and she was thrown over the right side of the horse and was dragged along with her right foot in the right stirrup.

When the horse finally stopped, the rest of us gathered around her. It was obvious that she was seriously injured, including a broken leg. She was taken to a doctor and was transferred to a hospital in New York City. She missed the entire camp season. We learned later that she had developed a bone infection and other complications, and later that fall she died.

It is a dangerous thing to not hold tight to the reins; and it is dangerous not to keep a tight rein on our tongues. The consequences can be equally dangerous and deadly.

What is a tongue supposed to do? Our tongues are designed and created by God and are intended to be instruments to praise God and to bless others. They are to be used to say what God would say. They are intended to help and to heal, to encourage and do good.

We all know from experience that with the tongue we can inspire a person to greatness; we can lift the emotions of the discouraged; we can dispense wisdom to the uncertain; we can introduce a person to Jesus Christ. With the tongue we can pray and have direct communication with

God himself. The tongue is a powerful instrument for love, kindness, goodness, gentleness and peace. Like the head of a horse the human tongue can be reined in and directed to do marvelous good.

But what is a tongue not supposed to do? It is not supposed to speak God's name in vain or utter words of profanity or obscenity. It is not supposed to hurt or harm anyone else. It is not to be used for gossip or for cutting criticism or to put people down. The tongue is never to speak lies of any kind. It is never to go in any direction that does not honor the God who created it.

How do we learn to keep a tight rein on our tongues? Again, it is much like having a tight rein on a horse. A tight rein means that you always make sure that you have an extra good grip. You are always thinking about it. You never let the reins down or divert your attention.

You practice the reining of a horse in a corral, riding a hundred times around the barrels until you know that the animal will turn in the direction that you pull the reins.

The same goes for our tongues. We give them our constant attention. We must always be on guard, never saying something so quickly that we have not thought it through. Sometimes we need to practice what we say before we say it to make sure that our words do good rather than cause harm. When we do misuse our tongues, we learn a lesson from it so that the next time we are very careful to speak in a different way. We always listen to what we say and the way we say it so that it sounds like something God would say and the way God would say it.

Let me give you a personal observation. I have known thousands of Christians and have heard millions of words. I have concluded that the majority of Christians I have known do very well at keeping a tight rein on their tongues. They may even have been people who were especially profane and obscene in their speech, but when Jesus Christ took over their lives and the Holy Spirit came in, they were transformed. It became clearly evident that this is someone whose tongue is un-

der control in a new way.

Of course, I have also heard loose tongues. I have been hurt by the words of other Christians, and I have hurt others with the words I have spoken. But my observation is that this is the exception more than it's the rule. I have heard tens of thousands of words of kindness. I have been blessed again and again. I am convinced that there is a lot of very good "tongueman-ship" in the church of Jesus Christ.

My concern when I share something like this is the way some Christians hear the Bible. Sometimes the people who are walking examples of Jesus Christ take the Bible's strongest words directly to heart while those who really need this word, whose tongues are out of control, seem to assume that it's for somebody else and don't apply these words to themselves. What we need to do is get the Bible's message straight and simple. If the reins of your tongue are tight, that's good; don't loosen up. But if your tongue is loose and sinful, get a grip and rein it in.

What if we don't know? I think theoretically that's possible, but most of the time that's just not the case. We do know when our tongues are out of line and whether we have a problem in this area. If we really don't know then we need to ask some people who know us well and who will speak the truth in love and tell us what we say that is good and what we say that is bad.

One of my favorite "tongue stories" comes from a southern seminary professor named Fred Craddock. He and his wife were on vacation when they stopped for dinner at a restaurant with win-

dows looking out onto the Great Smokey Mountains of Tennessee. They wanted to be alone but an old man insisted on striking up a conversation. He asked what Dr. Craddock did for a living and when he said he was seminary professor that brought on a story.

The old man said he was raised in one of the "hollers" of Tennessee. He had a very difficult childhood because his mother was never married and he didn't know who his father was.

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He had no friends. The children called him ugly names. But the worst part was the adults who would stop him in the street and look at his face and try to guess which man in town he looked like so that they could figure out who his father was.

Lonely, hurt, humiliated, one day he found his way to a little country church outside the community. He arrived late and sat in the last row and heard the gospel of Jesus Christ for the first time in his life. He was enthralled — enthralled with the message and enthralled with the preacher up front. When the service was just about over, he sneaked out because he didn't want anyone to talk to him. But he came back week after week, always arriving late and leaving early so that no one would talk to him and hurt him with their hateful words and terrible names.

But one week he became so engrossed in the message that he stayed too long and the service ended and he was caught in the crowd. Wiggling his way through the crowd, he felt a large, strong hand on his shoulder and heard a booming voice that said, "Just a minute, who are you, boy?" He recognized that preacher's voice, and he turned around, struck with fear, as this huge man looked intently into his face and said, "Let's see, you must be a son of Yes, I see a striking resemblance" This little boy's heart just sank. Not again. Not him. Not here too.

But before the frightened boy could speak a word the tall man finished, "Yes, indeed, I see a striking resemblance. Why, you must be a son of God!"

The boy was now an old man retelling this distant memory. He said, "I was born anew that day. With a single sentence he transformed my life."

His story finished, the old man left the couple to dine alone. But as he walked away Dr. Craddock asked, "What's your name, old man?" The old man looked back and said, "It's Ben, Ben Hooper." And he left.

Fred Craddock turned to his wife and said, "Why, I remember that years ago there was a man named Ben Hooper who was born illegitimate and who the people of Tennessee twice elected to be their governor."

This morning we have worshipped God, so there is nothing wrong with our saying that we are religious people in the very best sense of the word. What God wants to hear is what we say next — in the car, at the office, in school, all week long. Will we speak words of hurt or words of help, words of hate or words of love?

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