

Series: WORDS
1. A Flame of Fire - James 1:19-20

There is a phrase that says: "You're going to have to eat your words" and Proverbs 18:21 confirms it to be his true: **The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences.** The words we speak have power to influence our lives. Every time we open our mouths, we are ministering life or death, and what we say will impact others as well as ourselves.

It's possible for our mouths to get us into trouble with ourselves! Perhaps at this point you may be eating words you have recently said and that might be the reason why you are unhappy with your life. Words have the power to give life or to destroy, and many of our problems result from what we say, what we do not say, or because of the way we say things.

Some people get into trouble because they are silent when they should speak, but the problem with most of us is the opposite, we get into trouble because we are in a hurry to speak and with harmful consequences.

The Bible gives us some good examples of this and one of them is in the book of Judges: **And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. He said, "If you give me victory over the Ammonites, I will give to the Lord whatever comes out of my house to meet me when I return in triumph. I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."** Judges 11.30-31 Jephthah made a sincere but reckless promise. I think that in his mind he was probably thinking of offering one of his animals in sacrifice to God in gratitude for the victory over the enemy. But the first thing out of his house was his only daughter. We do not know what happened to her but what we do know is that Jephthah was quick to speak, and the fulfillment of his vow meant great pain and the loss of any hope of having children.

Another example is found in Mark 6.21-24 when King Herod was quick to speak **"He gave a party for his high government officials, army officers, and the leading citizens of Galilee. Then his daughter, also named Herodias, came in and performed a dance that greatly pleased Herod and his guests. "Ask me for anything you like," the king said to the girl, "and I will give it to you." He even vowed, "I will give you whatever you ask, up to half my kingdom!" She went out and asked her mother, "What should I ask for?" Her mother told her, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist!"** Herod was quick to speak and the result was that, because of his vow, he killed John the Baptist, a man who he respected and admired. Perhaps we will lose people we love and respect because of our own quickness to speak.

The third example is perhaps the best known of all and came from the Apostle Peter. In Matthew 26.31-33 we read: **On the way, Jesus told them, "Tonight all of you will desert me. For the Scriptures say, God will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." But after I have been raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there.** Peter declared, **"Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you."** Peter had too much confidence in himself and was quick to speak. What ended up happening was that he denied Christ not once, but three times, and when he remembered the promise he made he began to mourn bitterly. (Luke 23.62)

The reality is that it is very easy for us to make promises without thinking through what we are promising or without thinking about the consequences of what we promise, either to God or to other people.

a. For example on wedding days most couples make promises before God and witnesses. They promise *"to have and to hold from that day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from that day forward until death do them part"* but the reality is that over 50% of Christians couples do not follow through with those vows.

b. When we become members of a church and sign a membership covenant, we promise, among other things, not to neglect our own congregational meetings and to solve our problems according to what is taught in scripture, but soon we forget our promises or worse, we plainly decide that we are not going to fulfill them.

c. When we dedicate our children to God we promise to be an example and model a Christian lifestyle for them, but the reality is that they shouldn't imitate much of what we do and say.

d. We promise to serve God, but, for one reason or another, we do not find the time to fulfill those vows either.

Even worse, sometimes we make promises that we have no intention of fulfilling; we're just being friendly. But when we rush to speak and make promises we will pay a price. Like Peter, we end up mourning bitterly-we suffer and make others suffer.

Fortunately there are many Christians who take their promises very seriously knowing that the Word of God is very clear on this matter. In Ecclesiastes 5.2,4-6 we are told: **Don't make rash promises, and don't be hasty in bringing matters before God... When you make a promise to God, don't delay in following through, for God takes no pleasure in fools. Keep all the promises you make to him. It is better to say nothing than to make a promise and not keep it. Don't let your mouth make you sin. And don't defend yourself by telling the Temple messenger that the promise you made was a mistake. That would make God angry, and he might wipe out everything you have achieved.**

The good news is that James has the answer to our problem. He writes: **Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.** James 1:19-20

Notice the order of his advice: (1) **be quick to listen**, (2) **slow to speak**, and (3) **slow to get angry**. But what do we normally do? We are quick to become angry, immediately rush to speak, and finally we listen, usually after putting our foot on our mouth.

Learning to control our tongue is central to our faith. If we don't learn to do it we won't grow as Christians. That's why James 1.26 says: **If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.** When we think of spiritual maturity we might associate that with spiritual experiences, however, James teaches that a mature person is one who is able to master their tongue and master himself.

God wants us to have our tongue under control and he wants to help us achieve it. Why? Because the tongue is like a flame of fire, and, when out of control, it will result in destruction, pain, the separation of many marriages, families, friends, churches, etc.

Although we all have made mistakes and will continue to make mistakes, we can take steps to control our tongues.

THREE STEPS TO CONTROL OUR TONGUE

1. Quick To Listen

There is a story about President Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what he said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not until the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. The ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming!" Clearly the others were not listening! Although the President spoke to people, few were really listening and the same happens in our lives. We talk to many people, but how many are really listening? Many times instead of listening, people are just waiting for us to shut up so that they can talk. But perhaps we are the ones doing that.

Someone once said, "listening is like tuning a radio station. If you want to get good results, you can only listen to one station at a time". It doesn't work when we try to hear many things at once. To really listen, we have to choose to put aside all that divides our attention. That's why so many people have difficulties listening to God.

A man placed an ad in the newspaper saying: "Call me and I will listen!" He was surprised with the amount of people that actually called. He found out that people need someone to listen.

Dale Carnegie says: "You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you". Demonstrating interest in what others have to say helps us win friends and helps us control our tongue.

In Proverbs 18.13 we read: **To answer before listening that is folly and shame.** We'll be embarrassed and regarded as foolish when we respond before listening. It is important to hear both sides of the story before judging, and it is important to know the facts before responding.

Proverbs 15.28 says: **The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.** The righteous things are harder to reach, so we must think about them before speaking up; that's why God gave us two ears and only

one mouth. If we want to control our tongue we must be willing to listen more than we talk, and the second step is to be...

2. Slow To Speak

Proverbs 10.19 says that **When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.** This truth alone should be enough to make us want to be slow to speak.

The person that says, "*Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me*" is obviously deceived or in denial. Proverbs 12.18 says that **The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.** Words can hurt immensely, especially when they are spoken without thinking. But, as stated in the verse, words can also be used to heal wounds. So if you want to use your tongue to heal, do not use it as a sword but instead take your time to think about what you say and how you say it. You need to take the time to find wise words that heal, thus we ought to be slow to speak.

The third step is to control our tongue is to be...

3. Slow To Get Angry

A lady was trying to rationalize her outbursts of anger and said, "*There's nothing wrong with losing your temper, I just explode and it's all over.*" It was then that someone said: "*You know what? That's exactly what happens with a shotgun and look at the damage it leaves behind!*" We try to justify our anger but the reality is that it leaves damage behind. Our anger not only hurts but also it "kills".

If we are to be mature Christians we must be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for anger does not achieve the purposes of God. You might delay a problem with anger but you will not solve it. You can even get away with it, but you will never accomplish God's purposes. Proverbs 17:14 says: **Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.** After we give place to our anger it is very difficult to control the consequences and the flow of what comes out of us. Anger grows and feeds on itself, and eventually devours more and more things.

Proverbs 16.32 affirms that: **It is better to be patient than powerful; it is better to have self-control than to conquer a city.** Self-control is more important than conquest. Success in business, at school, or at home, can be ruined by someone who can't control his anger. When you feel you're about to explode, remember that losing control can make you lose what you want the most!

Maybe you're desperately looking for a response to what is happening in your life and perhaps the answer is right under your nose. Do you think there is a chance that your answer may be to change the way you talk, the way you communicate? Go and try it. Ask those whom you love and allow them to tell you the truth. This will reveal if you need to change.

I have experienced in my own life the truth of Proverbs 18:21. I'm sure that if you start talking in a positive manner, speaking encouraging, life-giving words, you will not only be a blessing but you will see your life blessed!

Our tongue can get us into a lot of problems, and because of that, we'd be wise to embrace the advice that James gives us. Great things are hidden in small steps and by following these 3 simple principles we'll begin to control our tongues and our lives.