

“Tongue in Check”

James 3:3-12

Series: Faith That Works Week 4. Taming the Tongue

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

October 23, 2022

This weekend, the world as we know it almost ended. Sixty years ago, October 22, 1962, President Kennedy announced on television the discovery of Soviet nuclear missile bases in Cuba – less than 90 miles from Florida. When completed, the missile sites can launch medium-range nuclear warheads capable of striking Washington D.C., New York and other cities. The President ordered a naval quarantine of the island to prevent Soviet ships from delivering more weapons. It would stand until all the nuclear weapons were removed.

Over 13 dreadful days, as the world teetered on the edge of Armageddon, letters flew back and forth between Washington and Moscow. Cuban leader Fidel Castor wrote Soviet Chairman Khrushchev urging him to make a first strike on the US if they attacked him. Kennedy and Khrushchev both feared the crisis was moving beyond their control. A single false step could ignite the highly tense standoff.

That moment came on October 27th. It would later be called Black Saturday. On the twelfth day of the crisis, as both sides feverishly worked for a solution, the U2 spy plane of US Air Force Major Rudolph Anderson was shot down over Cuba killing him. At the same time, the Soviet Submarine B-59 had been underwater and out of touch for an extended time. The commander was stressed, tired and on edge. When a nearby US destroyer dropped small harmless depth charges he believed the war had begun. Training his nuclear torpedoes on the US ship he prepared to unleash a holocaust equal to Hiroshima. Thankfully, one officer on the submarine talked him out of it. No one knew how close we came for another 40 years.

The Crisis was finally resolved when the Soviet Union agree to remove all the missiles and the United States promised to not invade Cuba and remove missiles in Turkey. The Cuban Missile Crisis is history’s most catastrophic example of what can happen from a breakdown in communication. As a result, the US and USSR installed the first hotline phone between the two leaders to head off a similar crisis in the future. But it’s no guarantee. Now, six decades later to the month, we hear of another breakdown between Moscow and Washington which is sending us back toward the nuclear brink.

What we have here is a failure to communicate. No other generation in history possessed so many methods for communication. We have smart phones, email, texting, and tablets, Zoom, Facetime, Facebook, Tik-Tok and Twitter. Some years ago a member of Woodside sent me a CNN study showing which parts of the country Tweet Church and which Tweet about Beer. Apparently in Philadelphia more people tweet about Beer while in Dallas more tweet about Church. Who sent me this survey? Texan Jimmy Balmer – the guy Linda Marr called an idiot in her sermon last week. I, of course, call him St. James. He’s moving back to Texas next month. I guess we are not holy enough for him. Don’t be fooled, I saw him last night in a bar with a beer. I guess Philly has rubbed off on Jimmy.

With so many ways to communicate, why are we still so bad at it? In my counseling experience, lack of communication lies at the core of many broken relationships. What cuts communication in your relationships? A tiny thing called the tongue. The other saint James knows improving communication is essential if we want a Faith that Works. He devotes a major part of his letter to taming the tongue.

Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. James 3:5-6

Those are strong words. Our whole communication problem, according to James, is an inability to keep our tongues in check. Here are four Communication Interrupters. Which of these cause a breakdown in one or more of your relationships?

1. **Shouting** – It might be a single outburst or a standard operation in your communication. Shouting always shuts down communication. You may think you’ve won the argument but you’re losing the relationship.

CNN reported a 73-year-old man named Vladimir in Berlin, Germany installed an old 220 volt air raid siren on his roof to stun his wife into submission. “My wife never lets me get a word in edgeways,” he told the police. “So I crank up the siren and let it rip for a few minutes. It works every time. Afterwards, it’s real quiet again.” The police confiscated the siren. His wife of 32 years said “My husband is a stubborn mule, so I have to get loud.”¹

2. **Sarcasm** – This is quieter than shouting but just as cutting. Sarcasm comes from a Greek word which means “to tear flesh like dogs.” That’s why we sometimes call it “biting sarcasm.” But it’s more subtle and has a built in defense. If the person complains we can say, “Hey why are you getting upset. I was just kidding.”
3. **Slander** – also known as Gossip. A single word behind someone’s back can destroy a reputation and assassinate a character. Sometimes we Christians even gather to talk about someone “because we are concerned about them” or “we need to vent” and then finish by saying, “we should pray for them.” Why don’t we just do the praying?
4. **Silence** – Your mother may have said, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything.” Unfortunately silence can cover over a lot of strong feelings and prevent real communication. Van Morris tells the story of a husband and wife who were giving each other the silent treatment.

A week into their mute argument, the man realized he needed his wife's help. In order to catch a flight to Chicago for a business meeting, he had to get up at 5 a.m. Not wanting to be the first to break the silence, he wrote on a piece of paper, "Please wake me at 5 a.m." The next morning the man woke up only to discover his wife was already out of bed, it was 9 a.m., and his flight had long since

¹ "Man Uses Air Raid Siren to Quiet Wife, CNN.com (4-19-03).

departed. He was about to find his wife and demand an answer for her failings when he noticed a piece of paper by the bed. He read, "It's 5 a.m. Wake up."²

Do any of these interrupt the communication in your relationships? How do you reconnect? How do you get your tongue in check?

First, **Listen More than You Speak**. James already gave us this helpful, easy to remember formula:

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. James 1:19-20.

In our rapid communication age we are often quick to speak and slow to listen. We often jump to conclusions.

Big Ed goes to the revival meeting. After the sermon the preacher asks anyone with needs to come forward for prayer. Big Ed gets in line. When it's his turn, the preacher says, "Big Ed, what do you want me to pray about?" Big Ed says, "Preacher, I need you to pray for my hearing." So the preacher puts one finger in Big Ed's ear and the other hand on top of his head and shouts, hollers, and prays a while. After a few minutes, he removes his hands and says, "Big Ed, how's your hearing now?" Big Ed replies, "I don't know preacher, it's not until next Wednesday at the County Courthouse."³

Before you jump to conclusions, before you prepare your response, before you build your defense, listen. Everyone can be better at listening. How? One simple rule: before you respond, ask questions. "I don't understand. Is this what you mean? Did I hear you correctly? Tell me more." Listen more than you speak and you won't cut communication.

Second, when you do speak, **Let the Lord Tame Your Tongue**. Coach Jim asks, 'Who is in charge of what comes out of your mouth?'

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. James 3: 3-4, 7-8.

So the question is: who is piloting your ship, who is directing your words, who is taming your tongue? You and I should be the ones to tame our own tongues but we all know

² Van Morris, Mt. Washington, Kentucky

³ Submitted by Marshall Shelley, editor in chief, Leadership Media Group, Christianity Today International

things slip out which we later regret. When shouting, sarcasm, slander or silence rule, anger often pilots our tongues. Pastor Bill White recalls a time when he lost it.

It was one of those evenings when everything goes wrong. The kids were cranky while I was making dinner, so I gave them some hot chocolate to tide them over. Timothy threw his marshmallows at his little sister, knocking her hot chocolate all over her. As she began screaming, the phone rang *and* the doorbell rang and I foolishly answered both with two screaming kids in the background. I returned to the kitchen and hollered at Timothy, and promptly had two crying kids.

As dinner began to burn I loudly announced that I was so angry I might do anything, so I put myself in timeout. I closed the door, none too gently, and tried to get dinner to be the only thing simmering in the kitchen.

Everything changed about ten minutes later when I caught sight of a yellow piece of construction paper sliding under the door. Scrawled in a child's handwriting was a message of grace that pierced my heart and turned me around: "From Timothy. To Dad. I still love you even when you're angry."⁴

James gives us a way to put God instead of anger in charge of our tongues. He says,

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. James 3:9.

Speak to someone as though you were speaking to God since they are made in His image. Jesus died to save that person. If that is how much He loves them, then so should we.

Third, **Let Your Actions Speak for You.** James asks:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. James 2:14-17

We all know the phrase, "Talk is cheap." It's easy to say "I love you." It's harder to show it. Yet often our actions leave a more lasting impression than our words. For example, think of your favorite teacher in school. Now try to remember one of their lessons. Usually, what we recall is not so much the content they taught as the care they gave. That's what made her or him such a great teacher of content. Your family and friends will recall your actions of love and care more than your words. They will also remember your

⁴ Bill White, Paramount, California

angry or hurtful actions. They will remember your lack of action – what you didn't do or when you weren't around. So use your actions to communicate your love.

What is true for individuals is true for the church. If you want a faith that works you can't stop at creeds. James tells us you must live it out with deeds. Since 2009 I am grateful to say Woodside has hosted our homeless neighbors every winter with Code Blue. Now they are desperately searching for two more churches to host our neighbors. Yet few churches are willing to open their doors even though they have large facilities. Woodside you have a faith that works. Whether it is Code Blue, the Recovery services and cafes, the Dinner Ministry, Operation Christmas Child, Faithful Clubz, Fusion, Ignite, Mission trips to the DR, Bahamas, Haiti, Appalachia, Urban Promise, Cast Your Cares, Family Promise, Habitat and mission causes literally around the world.

One way you do God's deeds is to give. Next week we will ask you to put your Faith to Work, to make a commitment, a plan, a pledge for what you will give to God's work in 2023. You know prices are going up, you know the economy is tough, you know inflation is raising costs. That's why we need to step up and do more for those who have so little, who have no hope. It's easy to say someone should do something. It costs more to be the person who does it. Please pray about increasing your giving by 1 or 2% of your income. James tells us: don't be the person who simply says, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical or spiritual needs. Do something about it. That's the best way to communicate.

Of all the places in the world where it is hard to communicate, Baghdad must be near the top of the list. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Ghassan Thomas was the leader of one of the few public churches in the city. His congregation put up a sign on their building which declared, "Jesus is the Light of the World." Later, bandits broke into his church and left behind a simple piece of cardboard. It read, "Jesus is not the light of the world, Allah is, and you have been warned, signed The Islamic Shiite Party."

What would you do in that situation? Break into their headquarters? Run away? Hide? Take down the sign? Pastor Ghassan did the unexpected. He loaded a van with children's gifts and medical supplies – which were in critically short supply at that time – and drove to the headquarters of the Islamic Shiite Party. After offering the gifts and supplies to the Sheikh, Ghassan told the leader, "Christians have love for you, because God is a God of love." He then asked permission to read from the Bible. Ghassan turned to Jesus' words in John 8, "I am the Light of the World." Then he showed the cardboard note to the Sheikh. The Muslim leader, astounded by Pastor Thomas' actions, apologized.

"This will not happen again," the Sheikh vowed. "You are my brother. If anyone comes to kill you, it will be my neck first." The Sheikh later attended Pastor Thomas's ordination service at the church.⁵

Now I'm not asking you to go talk to the head of the Islamic Shiite Party. But you can listen to and love the ones near you. Will you?

⁵Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity* (Zondervan, 2009), pp. 61-62