



Mind Your Tongue: Reflections on Christian Conversation

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One of the chief differences between human beings and others of God's creatures is that we humans can speak. I realize that dolphins and chimpanzees also seem to have a form of sound communication, but to our knowledge it has little correspondence to what we humans can do with our tongues. I realize also that some humans cannot speak, but the signs they use are substitutes for the same mental images that words symbolize.

I. A MIXED BLESSING

Yet speech appears to be a mixed blessing. Most of our figures of speech about speech, for example, are negative. "Mind your tongue!" "Keep your mouth shut!" "Button your lip!" "Motor mouth!" And since Archie Bunker, "Stifle yourself!" Even the word *rhetoric*, which once characterized the noble use of speech, now is used largely as a pejorative; words, words, words—which mean nothing. We even have a disease named after this negative view of speech: "foot-in-mouth disease!" Those who have it know the anguish of wishing they could take back something they said, but the inexorable movement of time makes this impossible. So they live with their regrets. Even the aphorism, "Silence is golden," is a *put down* of speech. Why not "*Speech is golden*"?

In contrast, the biblical proverb emphasizes the positive use of speech: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (Prov 25:11). We express the same sentiment in our colloquialisms: "She waxed eloquent!" "He knew just what to say!" Some of us think of just what to say after the opportunity for saying it is past.

II. SYMBOL OF EVIL

The Epistle of James has the longest section about speech in the Bible. In this section (3:2-12) James views this mixed blessing with an almost unmixed negativity:

²For we all make many mistakes, and if anyone makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they may obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Look at the ships also; though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our

members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell. ⁷For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grapevine yield figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

These are harsh words about the tongue. To James it is symbol of evil—“a restless evil full of deadly poison.” He is using the Old Testament approach of viewing specific organs of the body to represent human attributes. As the heart symbolizes human love, and the abdominal region human compassion, so the tongue symbolizes human evil. It is a symbol of evil because we use it to deceive others and even ourselves instead of to reveal ourselves. How often do we use our tongues to give the opposite impression of what is actually going on within us. We say we are not frightened when we are, not angry when we are, not bothered when we are. We pretend we are not embarrassed when we are; we act like we are agreeable when actually we are not. Bearing false witness in this manner was not God’s purpose in giving us a tongue.

We use our tongues also to berate others instead of to prize them, to cut them down rather than to encourage them, to deflate them instead of to uplift them. The metaphor “tongue-lash” well describes such attacks. If you have ever had a tongue-lashing or have given one, you have an idea of how it compares to a bloodied backside. There are also those awful words *gossip* and *slander*. Did anyone ever describe them more graphically than James? “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire. And the tongue is a fire...set on fire by hell.”

James says the tongue needs a guide—a bridle, a rudder. “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is vain” (1:26). While it may not be tamed, the tongue can be bridled. An unbridled tongue is subject to impulse. We talk and then think—and often what we say at these times is negative. We tend to confuse impulsivity with spontaneity. Actually they are quite opposite. When we speak spontaneously, we speak out of the unity of our person. On the other hand, when we speak impulsively, we are speaking from inner division. It is as though our inner parent—our conscience—is temporarily distracted, and our inner child sees the chance to act quickly before being detected. Our self is then divided between an “acceptable self” and an “unacceptable self,” and the “unacceptable self” is dependent on impulse to get through—with a quick jab or end run. Immediately after our impulsive speaking we tend to defend ourselves by rationalizing our

words. But later the guilt descends and we wish we had “bitten our tongue” instead.

The tongue already is a symbol of communication, but for James it is a symbol of the *failure* of communication. Communication, of course, goes beyond the tongue. In our intimate relationships we listen to *non-verbal* communication. We learn to interpret body language: facial expression, posture, eyes, even the rate of breathing. But we can “hear” wrongly. Therefore the tongue is at the heart of communication. We are well aware of this fact even on a global basis.

Why do we have a hotline between Washington and Moscow? So we can get tongues going in the event that a non-verbal communication is being misinterpreted. When the survival of life on this planet is at stake with our nuclear arsenal, it is important that this line be kept open. Warren Christopher, the able diplomat whose patient work secured the release of all of our Iranian hostages, summed up well this need for verbal communication: “Without talking, an essential ingredient of our national security is lost.”

III. SYMBOL OF COMMUNICATION FAILURE

Communication failure plays its role in the stimulation of strife also on the domestic level. In marriage counseling, for example, the counselor is a facilitator of communication between—not strangers—but mates. The use of the tongue in the relationship has been counterproductive, and the goal now is to make it productive. In my own experience in this practice I have discovered that the partners want to talk to me rather than to each other. My challenge is to direct their communication to one another. It seems amazingly difficult for either husband or wife actually to turn and look at the spouse when there is conflict, let alone to speak directly to the other person. To test their ability to listen to verbal communication, I will on occasion ask a partner to share what he or she understood the spouse to say before giving a reply. It is not unusual for him or her not to be able to do this either to the spouse’s or my satisfaction. A productive use of the tongue depends on our listening also to the tongue of the other.

The failure to use words for communication accounts for much of the misunderstanding that occurs in families, churches, and workplaces. Fred is an example of a husband who failed to use words in his relationship with his wife, Laura. Laura complained that Fred never showed her any appreciation. Fred was incensed at this charge. “That’s not true,” he said. Laura challenged him to say when he had expressed appreciation. “Just yesterday,” he said. “Yesterday?,” she said incredulously. “What did you say yesterday that showed me any appreciation?” “For your information,” he said with exasperation, “I came home for lunch!” “Big deal,” she said. “So I have to fix you something!” “See what I mean,” he said, turning to me, “I can’t talk with her.”

“I think you have,” I said. “You as much as said you came home for lunch because you wanted to be with Laura. Is that correct?” “Of course,” he said, implying that I also was stupid. “Well, why didn’t you say so?,” Laura broke in. “Why do I have to say so?,” Fred shot back. “Fred,” I said, “you have already answered your own question. Because you didn’t say so, Laura obviously didn’t get the message.”

Fred’s non-verbal communication of coming home for lunch because he wanted to be with Laura would have enriched his verbal communication of appreciation if only he had said the words. Because he didn’t, his own nonverbal communication was misunderstood. It lacked a label. Fred and others of us like him need to heed the words of the prophet Hosea, “Take with you words” (14:2).

Our relationship with God is compared in Scripture to a marital relationship, and God as spouse communicates with us through word and sacraments. The Word becomes words in terms of Scripture. It is verbal communication. The sacraments are non-verbal in structure. Take the Lord’s Supper, for example. There is the symbol of the family table, of bread and wine as basic foods through which Christ’s body and blood are received through the mouth and into our total

person. The sacrament is a powerful drama of communion, of family, of unconditional love, of receiving to the deepest level the assurance of our forgiveness. Yet the simplest rubric for the celebration of this sacrament maintains that it is initiated by the words of institution. “Take, eat. This is my body which is given for you. Take and drink. This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin.” Why? Obviously to insure that the meaning of the non-verbal drama be understood. It is a protection against its possible distortion. Non-verbal communication enhances the verbal, but verbal communication clarifies the non-verbal.

IV. THE BRIDLE

James offers a structure for the use of the tongue which could serve as its bridle: “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (1:19). These are phrases familiar to the Old Testament. It may take courage to listen—to respond with our tongues in a way that encourages rather than hinders the other’s speaking. Being slow to speak means to see that our speaking does not get in the way of our listening. Rather, we use speech to draw others out—to assist them in expressing themselves so that they feel better about themselves.

Listening is particularly difficult when we are threatened by what we hear. Usually we do not like to listen to people with political, moral, or religious views different from our own. This resistance to listening is a source of much conflict between parents and their young adult children or in-laws. It is hard to let our children go if they are not going in the direction we had in mind for them. It is also difficult for children to leave unless they differentiate themselves in some way from their parents. Students have shared with me their reluctance to visit their parents or in-laws during vacation periods. “We don’t agree on religion, morality, economics, or politics. When these issues come up it ends in a hassle, and we all feel uncomfortable. So we limit our conversation to what’s been going on around the home place and the weather. After a couple of days these topics have been exhausted, and we feel the need to leave.”

How lamentable! Parents can become friends with their adult children and sons- and daughters-in-law only if they can let them be who they are. Then they can listen to each other even when they disagree. In this atmosphere of mutual respect they may learn something from each other. Otherwise instead of listen-

ing there is interrupting, speaking at the same time, with each seeking to set the other straight. As tempers rile, our tongues get going so fast that our ears cease to function.

Here is where “slow to anger” completes the bridle. Human anger, says James, needs to be slow in emerging because it “does not work the righteousness of God” (1:19). James’ style makes use of hyperbole to emphasize a point. Certainly anger in most cases is at cross purposes with the righteousness of God. But anger is indigenous to our nature. We are created in the image of a God who has anger. Anger is a legitimate reaction to an injustice. If we are aware of people being oppressed and abused, we should be angry. This is prophetic anger. We probably do not have enough of this anger, considering the amount of injustice in human society. Yet in our egocentricity we are more likely to be angry about an injustice to *ourselves* than to others, to *our* family rather than other families, to *our* community, *our* nation, rather than other communities, other nations. The further away the injustice, the less likely we are to be concerned.

Anger is also a secondary passion, being a reaction to our own hidden fear, hurt, or guilt. This is the form in which it is most likely to erupt in domestic relationships, including those within the family of the congregation. The anger in family arguments is often expressed in abusive and arrogant ways as each accuses the other and defends himself or herself. The intensity of volume with which we speak in our anger is for purposes of intimidation.

Anger in those instances distorts our perception. As James would say, our tempers at these times go counter to the rhythm of nature. While a spring cannot pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish, the opening of the mouth can pour forth blessings on God and curses on people who are made in God's likeness. There is no listening to the feelings of others—only to our own. Whatever empathy we are capable of is all turned inward. No wonder that the bridle for the tongue includes slowness to anger.

But slow does not mean *never*. Anger is not destructive in itself; however, the way in which we express it may be destructive. We leave James to go to another biblical source for help at this point. In Ephesians there is a rough quotation from the Psalms (4:4) that sums up the biblical perception of anger: "Be angry and do not sin" (4:25). I believe many Christian pieties would rearrange these words to read, "Do not sin by becoming angry." Yet the biblical imperative is *be angry*. In other words, affirm your anger—do not deny it.

People who deny they are angry when they obviously are evidently believe it is wrong for them to be angry. When we deny our anger or otherwise repress it, it may come out indirectly in digs and jabs. Have you known people who continue to smile while they make cutting remarks? They probably are not even aware that they are letting out their hostility. It is as though they were anaesthetizing the spot with their smile before they plunge in the dagger. Only later does the "victim" realize that he or she has been hit.

It is as we acknowledge our anger that we can direct it. Otherwise it manages us, and either we repress it and abuse ourselves or we express it and abuse others. Repressed anger can make us physically ill or emotionally depressed. Expressed anger can hurt others and destroy relationships. As we learn

to recognize our own anger, we can acknowledge it to ourselves and to God—and if the situation is opportune, to others.

Anger is a precarious passion. It needs a healthy means for expression. What are such healthy constructive ways? Some people take it out on things. Former Detroit Tiger's manager Fred Hutchinson had a violent temper and knew that he abused his players when expressing it. So he worked out a signal with the team that allowed him to enter the clubhouse alone after a game before he met with the players. There he would throw chairs and push tables until he was utterly exhausted. He had discovered that when he thus exhausted himself physically he could talk with his players with respect so that they could profit from his suggestions rather than having their self-confidence undermined.

Some may view this attack on the furniture as a childish reaction. Perhaps it is. Children may beat up on their toys instead of on their baby brothers and sisters, perhaps intuitively sensing that it is better to hit things that do not feel than persons who do.

But there may be better ways. Biblical people like the psalmists and Job let out their anger to God. They were assured by their faith that God can take it and take them when people

may not be able to do either. Some of these angry prayers are so violent in their language that we hesitate to read them in public worship. Yet they are healthy expressions of anger and probably reduce the possibilities for a destructive expression with people. Only God has no fragile ego; only God's acceptance is perfectly unconditional. Before we speak on impulse, we need to retire to the lavatory or some such safe place, and let our feelings out to God. Then we may be better able to express these feelings in a constructive way—that is, without sinning—in our conversation with people.

V. FULFILLING THE TONGUE'S PURPOSE

We can also use our tongue at these times of anger to tell people how we feel. We can “speak the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). A good way to do this is through an “I message.” Instead of using a “you message” in which we attack or accuse others, using an “I message” expresses the same feelings but with a different purpose. Consequently its effect on the other may likely also be different. If I say to someone with whom I am annoyed, “You make me angry,” I not only stimulate this person to become defensive and perhaps even to return the accusation, I am also not being honest. Can I really lay all the responsibility for the way I feel on someone else? Do I have no responsibility for my own feelings? Am I an automaton under the control of the other? If so, whom do I control? According to critique of the tongue in James, the “you message” is a way of using our tongue to deceive not only others but also ourselves. In contrast, an “I message” reveals to the other where we are—what is going on within us. It is a way of being an open person.

Our children had the good fortune to have had as a first grade teacher a woman who was open with the children and expressed her feelings in a constructive way. When she came to school in a bad mood she would say so, rather than try to hide it behind a smiling facade. “Children,” she would say, “I am in a bad mood. It has nothing to do with you. But I don't want to jump on you

today. So please be careful, because I am in a bad mood.” Then if a child should step out of line and “get” it, he would be likely to say, “She's right; she *is* in a bad mood!” But if she had said nothing or even had tried to hide her feelings, and an unsuspecting child got the “load of anger,” that child would more likely say, “She doesn't like me. I must be bad.” The difference between these two responses on the child's development is significant.

David and Vera Mace have long been in the forefront of Christian marriage counseling. They give every appearance of being a well adjusted couple. Somebody once asked them if they ever became angry with each other. “Oh, yes,” Vera replied, “but we have learned through the years a way of dealing with this anger. When I am angry with David, I let him know: ‘David, I'm angry with you and I don't want to be. When can we talk about it?’” This is not only a good example of how to be open in our relationships and of the use of an “I message” to express our anger; it is also an example of seeking a consensus regarding the time when we talk about our conflicts with the other. Too often we want to do this when *we* are ready, and fail to take the other's timing needs also into consideration.

An “I message” helps us to communicate our own awareness of our self as an expression of ourself. It opens the way to “talking out” our conflicts without laying the blame on others—

and by accepting responsibility for our own feelings. Since anger is frequently the secondary emotion in our conflicts, we can be even more candid if we express the primary emotion. “When you drive too fast, I am frightened.” “When you cut me off when I try to explain, I feel hurt.” “When you imply I didn’t do a good job, I feel guilty.”

Children can also learn to express their basic feelings. Instead of the frequent charge, “You always let *him* have his way,” they could say, “I’m feeling that I don’t count around here.” Instead of “You’re always *on* me!,” they could say, “I feel like I’m not being trusted.”

Even positive feelings often go unexpressed. Like Fred who went home for lunch because he enjoyed being with his wife, but who could not say so, we may withhold the support and reinforcement people need because we find it hard to be honest about how we feel about them. For our own integrity as well as for the other’s confidence we need to put words to these feelings. “I appreciate what you’ve done.” “I like being with you.” “I care about you.” “I feel comfortable with your driving.”

Putting words to our feelings with an “I message” breaks down the barriers that isolate us and encourages a sense of belonging. We know where each of us is and therefore we can make intelligent decisions regarding our behavior toward each other. Communication thus fulfills its God-given purpose—to facilitate our *knowing* one another.