

Taming the Tongue

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[0 : 00] How's everybody doing today? Hope you're all enjoying the beautiful sunny day above the clouds. Yeah, for those of you that don't know me, I'm Jonathan.

I'm obviously a native of West Cork. No, I'm not, but I married in, so I'm a blow-in that will probably be here for a little while to stay, right?

How many of you guys have ever heard the rhyme, Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me? It's one of those rhymes that you guys hear.

It's the, or your parents tell you this rhyme to kind of teach you how to ignore it when people are trying to hurt you. In my case, it was oftentimes my siblings, but, you know, when somebody's saying something hurtful, your parents teach you this rhyme to kind of be like, oh, you shouldn't let it hurt you.

The problem with this is that it's a lie. Now, the first part is definitely true, so kids, please do not try this at home.

[1 : 05] I can assure you, Sticks and Stones will actually break your bones. Please do not try this. This is not something you should be attempting at home to see what happens if you hit each other with Sticks and Stones.

Oh, and Killian, I'm looking at you too. But the words can never hurt me. That is the lie. I'm not going to do this, but if I was to ask for a show of hands of those who had never, ever been hurt by words, I would be amazed if even a single hand in this room went up.

It's one of those things where we have all had somebody say something, oftentimes not even intentional, that is stuck with us far beyond what it was originally intended to be.

When I was six years old, almost seven years old, my family lived in Cyprus. And I attended the misnamed school called the American Academy in Limassol.

Now, this was my first full year in school. And I was in a class with a bunch of great kids. I remember my best friend at that time. His name was Nicholas Habibi. Great guy.

[2 : 23] Got to hang out with him. I mean, as you do at that age, you're like, I remember going and exploring with him. It was loads of fun. I also have really clear memories of my teacher.

Now, I have really clear memories of her, but the memories are not nearly as fond. She was young, maybe in her late 20s or early 30s. And her name was Miss Savage.

And no, I'm not exaggerating. That was actually her name. She was British. In this American Academy, I don't know if there was a single American teacher, but that's off to the side.

But anyhow, I still remember Miss Savage. And I remember her voice, the tone of voice she had as she said, You stupid boy!

When I'd forgotten my homework. I remember her calling me a liar when I'd answered a question that she had incorrectly. I want to be clear here.

[3 : 33] I'm not still angry about this. I've forgiven her, and I do wish her the best wherever she's at. But those words that she spoke, she spoke them over 35 years ago.

But those words that she spoke 35 years ago have stuck with me. They're as clear in my head now as the day that she spoke them. And they will remain etched in my memory until the day that I die. Unless I get Alzheimer's. So there is a silver lining there, right? I don't think Miss Savage intended for that. I don't think her goal, looking, I spent 15 years as a teacher.

I know what it's like to be trying to encourage your students, be trying to get them to grow. I don't think she ever intended for the words that she said, those words, to stick with me for 35 years.

But the reality is, they did. And they will. And they'll continue to. Now, being fair, she's not the only one that has said words that are hurtful.

[4 : 40] I have three siblings. And any of you guys who have siblings, whether young or old, you know what it's like to have siblings say hurtful things. And I know this is a shocker for those of you that know me, but I said hurtful things to my siblings too.

I know, I know, you guys are like, how could you do it? I know it's crazy, right? And I know, being real, that there have been times that I've said hurtful things to my wife, to my children, to those, oftentimes it's those we love the most, that we'll say the hurtful things to.

And so we're going to be looking in the book of James, chapter 3, starting in verse 2. We'll stumble in many ways.

Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

Now, guys, I want to stop and digest that for a second.

Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect. I can't claim that about myself.

[5 : 48] I don't know if anybody can claim that about themselves. But that is a huge, huge thing to say. So let's continue. 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're so large and are driven by strong winds, they're steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.

My wife and I did one of the late night kayaking things with my brother and his wife as they were visiting a few weeks back. And it's the first time I've ever been in a kayak with a rudder.

It was, you know, you're in this two-person kayak and there's like these foot pedals and you turn the rudder. The rudder is this tiny little thing. You know, you're on a kayak that's taller than I am.

And you've got this tiny little rudder that's about yea long and about that thick, you know, that high.

And it just kind of sticks out the back and you're like, how is that going to steer anything?

[6 : 55] And yet when you press the rudder, sorry, when you press the whatever it is that turns the rudder, the kayak would turn. 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 body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

You guys, I read this every time I read this.

I'm like, this is insanely intense. If you were to ask me which part of the body is the most evil, I'm not sure that the tongue would be my first answer. I'm not sure for any of us that we'd be like, yeah, my tongue is the most evil part of my body.

And yet as you look at this, as James goes on, you can see why he's saying this, why he's emphasizing this. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind.

[8 : 11] But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who have been made in God's likeness.

Out of the same mouth comes praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?

My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. And James is highlighting the root problem here.

See, this morning, I used my tongue to worship God. And I'm here speaking from his word. And you know what?

Yesterday, we were driving back from Wicklow. And this same tongue that I'm using today for what I think is good, I used multiple times to insult people on the road.

[9 : 15] Because I didn't like how they were driving. What's wrong with me? And the answer is, it's what James said there.

No human being can tame the tongue. I'm human. So if I can't tame my tongue, who can? And the answer, as it always is, comes back to the one who created my tongue.

The one is, as I was being knit in my mother's womb, he formed my tongue. Tongue has been corrupted by sin, but God created it for a purpose.

James, in this passage, highlights the dangers of the tongue. But the tongue is also what we're meant to be using to encourage one another and build each other up, as Paul tells us to do in 1 Thessalonians.

See, the next teacher I had, the next full year that I was in school, we had moved back to the U.S., and her name was Mrs. Olson. And you know what I remember about her?

[10:21] I remember how kind she was. I remember that she was always encouraging, and there were times I drove her nuts. You know, I'd like to think I was a little angel in school, but sometimes those little angels are the ones who drive the teachers the most nuts.

And you know what? Even as she was correcting me, even as she was trying to, you know, put me on the right path, you could tell she was thinking through what she said.

I had an opportunity this last summer to read some of the journals. She had to write things that we were dealing with in a journal, and she would always respond to everything that we wrote.

And as you look through what she wrote, you know, I was still really young, and she's here replying to me, treating me with respect, and using words that were kind, that built me up.

I know she messed up sometimes. But she was someone who used her words to build her students up. And I will remember, in the same way that I remember Miss Savage, I will remember Mrs. Olson.

[11:29] But the difference is, I'll remember both of them for the rest of my life, but whereas Miss Savage, I remember for the words that she used to tear me down, I'll remember Miss Olson for the words that she used to build me up.

So what does this mean for us? For me, it's a reminder to be aware of how I'm using my words. To make sure that as I'm stressed, as I'm angry, that I am thinking before I speak.

Because the words that I say in a split second, the words that I say that were just intended to relieve a bit of stress, are the words that might be sitting with my children for the rest of their lives.

The words that may have sat with my students for the rest of their lives. And so I need to be thinking about what I say. I need to be thinking about ways to build people up, rather than tearing them down.

I need to think twice. And I need to apologize when I mess up. And above all, I need to go to Jesus and say, Lord, I can't do this on my own.

[12:54] I cannot control my tongue on my own. As James said, it's something that you just can't do. And so, Jesus, I need your help.

Help me. So, Father, I just pray today that as we, as we are here, as we talk to each other, as we are a congregation that is looking to be an example of you, a reflection of your love, I pray that you would help us to tame our tongues, because we cannot do it on our own.

Lord, help us to build each other up, to encourage each other, to speak words of life, words that will show your love and your heart.

And Lord, I pray that you would remind us that you would be speaking to our hearts, that you'd be pricking our conscience the moment that an unkind, hurtful word, a word that is fire, comes out of our mouths, prick our consciences.

And Lord, I pray that our hearts would be open, that they would be soft, hearing your reminding, hearing your voice speaking to us. And Lord, I pray that with those we love, we would be speaking words of love to them.

[14:26] In the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. Thank you, Jonathan, for sharing that with us.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.