

Learn to tame your tongue

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Is it great to spend time together worshipping our almighty God! I just love that song we've just sung about the way it focuses on the Holy One, the Lord Almighty.

! So, those of you who come regularly know that we've been doing a series in Proverbs, and today we're looking at Proverbs 25 to 27, or we'll be touching on that loosely to fit in with the theme, and I am going to read from elsewhere in Scripture. But I just thought I'd give you a little quiz, just to wake you up. It's not very difficult. Well, I hope it isn't anyway. Josh, could you just put the next slide up, please? Or Shelley, sorry, Shelley's doing the slide.

Okay, so there is a connection between these three pictures. Any ideas? Yeah, sticks and stones may break my bones, yeah. Brownie point for Deirdre. Promise I didn't tell her beforehand, yeah. Who's heard, anybody heard that expression before? Yeah, sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me. When I was growing up, my dad used to quote that at me all the time. Okay, how many people think that's a true saying? No? Anybody being hurt by somebody else's words ever? Yeah? Most of us, I think, if we're honest, would say yes. Actually, sometimes somebody else's words have hurt me, and often the words cause more damage than actually physical injuries might be, because physical injuries, on the whole, heal quickly, but words can stay and linger, and if we don't deal with them, they can keep on wounding us for some time.

So, if we just go on to the next slide, please, Shelley. As I said, we're in Proverbs 25 to 27. The theme is, learn to tame your tongue. Now, I don't know who picked me out for this one, and whether it's an instruction, but I'm going to assume it's meant for all of us, and not just for me. And if you think it's just for me, just please at least listen quietly. Okay, but the passage I'd like to read for you is actually in James, who had quite a lot to say about the tongue.

So, I'm going to read from James chapter 3, starting at verse 1. James said, Not many of you should presume to be teachers, brothers and sisters, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. Sorry, John. We all stumble in many ways.

[2 : 44] If anyone is never at fault in what he or she says, he's a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. 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, 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. 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. With the tongue, we praise our Lord and Father, just as we've been doing this morning.

But with it, we curse men who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? Brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives? Or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

[4 : 31] Amen. So, focusing on learning to tame our tongues.

It's a really difficult topic, but it's very important for us as Christians, and as we represent Christ to the world around us, it's really important that we think about how we use our tongues, how we use our words, and whether they are honouring to God or not.

And I think it's really challenging in that passage I read, the fact that it talks about, you know, with the same mouth, we praise God and then we curse our brothers. And James said, that shouldn't be

the case, we shouldn't be doing that.

But it's so easy to get into that, isn't it? We're going to look at that a bit. And I hope, I think this is quite, or I find it quite challenging when I was preparing it. But I hope some of it you'll find encouraging as well.

So if you feel like God's putting his finger on something, pay attention to that, but also listen to the encouragement in here, because there is lots that can encourage us in this topic.

[5 : 38] It's relatively easy to spot when we think someone else has been offensive or spoken badly. You only have to turn on the news and you think, you know, why on earth would you say that?

You know, why would that person use those words? But it's really important that we think about how it applies to ourselves as well. And if you're anything like me, it's easy to spot when somebody else has said something they shouldn't have done.

But it's not always as easy to focus in on myself and think, maybe I could have said that a different way, or maybe I could have just kept quiet. So we're going to think about things that define an untamed tongue, or recognising an untamed tongue.

Next slide please, Shelley. Going back to James again, and James chapter 1 verse 26, says those who consider themselves religious, and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues, deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

Pretty harsh words from James. He's saying, you know, if you think you're religious, you know, you do good works and all that, but you don't control your tongue, then what's the point of all those religious acts that you're doing?

[6 : 49] The sort of phrase that makes you stop and think, you know, does that apply to me? So we're going to look at some specific examples on the next slide, about things that we might recognise an untamed tongue by.

Sorry, it's a little bit small. I thought I could get them on one slide, which I did, but it's maybe a little smaller than I'd like. As I go through these, this is not meant to be a sort of thing of condemnation, you know, we've done this, and we've done that, and we've done that, but it may be, as I said, that God just puts his finger on something as we're going through, and just allow yourselves to sit with that.

First of all, betraying confidences. When somebody shares something with us in confidence, can they trust us? Or do we share information that maybe actually we should have kept to ourselves? Maybe not maliciously, but just carelessly. You know, somebody tells us something that they're struggling with, and the next person we meet, we say, oh, you know, I was chatting to Andy, and he was telling me he was struggling with X, Y, and Z.

And it's part of our conversation. Do we do that? Are we careful with the things that other people tell us? Are we wise about information that we share? It's really important that we don't betray confidences.

[8 : 10] Quarrelsome. If you read through the whole of Proverbs 25 to 27, there's that great verse, which I think maybe somebody had me in mind when they picked it out, says, it's better to live on the corner of the roof than share the house with a quarrelsome wife.

Okay? I'm hoping Andy will say nothing at this point. Largely because I know he wouldn't like living on the roof. But it's important to think about.

Are we people who argue for the sake of it? I'm sure we've all come across those people in our everyday life. People who just like to have an argument. And there's nothing wrong with having a good discussion, but some people just can't help.

Sometimes people can't help themselves arguing. And if that applies to us, we need to ask ourselves why we're doing it. You know, sometimes it's that we're always determined to be proved right, or we want to have the last word in every conversation.

And so we become quarrelsome and say, you know, you think that, but I think that, and I'm right, and we build up a quarrel. That's not glorifying to God. It's not to say that we shouldn't ever speak up about something, which we'll come on to later.

[9 : 22] But just being quarrelsome and argumentative for the sake of it, it's not glorifying to God. Foolish talk. Okay? Again, there's nothing wrong with a bit of banter, but when it becomes, when our talk becomes constantly foolish, we talk rubbish, we make things up, we quote something we've heard on the news or read in the newspaper without thinking about whether it actually makes sense.

it's not glorifying to God. And Paul brackets this in Ephesians with coarse joking and obscenities. They're all sort of linked together. Is that sort of conversation, those sort of words, helpful? No, they're not. Okay? We can all tell a joke, but if it's foolish talk, if it's coarse joking, if it's uttering obscenities, that's not speech and words that are glorifying to God.

Gossip. Now, John mentioned this last week in the course of his sermon. It's similar to betraying confidence, but it's more of an intentional thing sometimes.

Sharing information may be to discredit someone else or to steal their thunder, share some good news that really we should have left to them to share. It gives us a bit of a buzz, doesn't it? If somebody's told you a secret and you think, oh, that's really nice, I'd like to share that with somebody, and you're doing it just to give them a buzz rather than to be helpful or because it's appropriate, that's gossip.

[10:47] And sometimes it's hard to draw that line, you know, what's appropriate to share? What should we keep to ourselves? And we need to think about the intention between our words. Is it necessary to share this?

Are we just sharing this information because, you know, it's quite exciting or we like the idea that we know something that somebody else doesn't and we want to show off that we've got that sort of special knowledge? Stroking egos, giving false praise or overdoing praise.

It's good to acknowledge when somebody else does something well. I'm not saying that we shouldn't do that, but sometimes we can be a bit too keen to give honour to people who don't deserve it or because we want something return.

So you can see this a lot in politics, you know, politicians or people who follow politicians saying, you know, aren't they marvellous and they never do anything, da, da, da, da, da, da. And, you know, we see it on all sides of the political spectrum, so I'm not trying to point the finger at anybody in particular, but it's easy to see people who flatter others and stroke their ego because they want something out of it for themselves.

Where we need to be, I mean, we see it in celebrity culture as well, but where we need to be careful is we don't let it come into the church, you know, so with great respect to John, I really appreciate your preaching, but if I just go around and big you up all the time and say you never do anything wrong, I'm not really being, I'm not doing the church a good service.

[12:16] Lying and deception. We all know it's wrong to tell lies. We teach our children not to tell lies, but it can be very tempting to tell ourselves that a little lie won't hurt or, you know, if I don't admit that I did that, you know, nobody's going to know about it.

Boasting and self-promoting. Lots of these are in this passage in Proverbs. I'm not going to quote all of them because there's lots of different verses, but I did pick up on Proverbs 27, verse 2, who says, let someone else praise you, not your own mouth, an outsider, and not your own lips.

If we're just speaking out to make ourselves look good or, conversely, to make somebody else look small, we're not using our words well. A bit like when Jesus was in the temple and saw the widow putting her two coins in.

Okay, it wasn't about speaking out, but there were people there who were being very ostentatious about their giving, and there was the widow who put her two coins in very quietly. And Jesus said, that's how you should be given, not to show off, not to boast.

Unkindness. Another quote from my dad when I was growing up, anybody remember the film Bambi? Really old film now, do you remember Thumper? The rabbit, who apparently said, if you can't say nothing nice, don't say nothing at all.

[13:38] Or words to that effect. That was another favourite quote of my dad's. But being unkind to other people, saying things that are deliberately or even accidentally hurtful, if we are using our words to damage others, that's not glorifying to God.

And again, there may be times when we need to speak out, but we just need to sort of check ourselves. Are we saying things that are unkind? Being deliberately provocative or outrageous. Saying things to provoke a reaction. Okay, again, I'm sure we can all think of examples of that, but if sometimes we use our words to provoke our reaction, reaction to annoy other people deliberately, to appear outrageous because we get attention.

In social media terms, you might get it for likes and for clicks or whatever else social media does. But sometimes people can say things because they want to get a reaction and it's not about whether it's helpful or uplifting.

Othering is quite a modern term. But using language that diminishes another group of people or sees them as less than. So, for example, take a silly example, but football teams, when you get rival football teams, you know, and somebody says, well, everybody who supports that team is obviously an idiot, you know, and then you start grouping those supporters together and you get violence outside football grounds and sometimes inside football grounds.

[15 : 09] And it's a silly example, but it's so easy to say, that group of people don't think like me, don't vote like me, don't behave like me, so therefore, I will diminish them.

And then you get into, well, you know, that person with red hair was rude to me, so everybody with red hair is horrible and, you know, you should never trust a person with red hair and it just gets ridiculous. But it's really serious because things like that lead to slavery, for example, lead to people who are on benefits being laughed at or put down because people say, well, you know, you shouldn't be on benefits, you should just work a bit harder or da-da-da-da and not, people don't understand all the issues around that.

And I think that ties in really well with that bit in the James passage I read out about with our tongue we praise our God and Father but with it we curse human beings who have been made in God's likeness and it's so important to remember that we're all made in the likeness of God.

I look round this church, all of you are made in God's image and I need to remember that when I speak to you. You know, I'm not speaking to somebody who's somehow less than me but I'm making, I'm speaking to somebody who God has created.

And it's really important we do that. And then critical, constantly using our words to find fault and belittle others. It's important that we acknowledge where these come from.

[16 : 40] So Jesus talked about in Matthew, the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. You know, so if we're constantly being critical we need to examine our hearts because that's where it's coming from.

if we're constantly judging others, constantly boasting, let's look at our hearts and see where that's coming from. And Jesus goes on in that passage in Matthew when he says the mouth speaks what the heart is full of and he goes on to say everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.

Scary stuff. Okay, and we know that God sent Jesus to cleanse us and forgive us but we still want to live in a way that honours him. I don't want to get to heaven and God say well why did you speak like that all the time?

You know, why were you always negative? Why were you always critical? That's not what I wanted. So, I'm aware that this can sound quite negative but they're important issues for us to wrestle with. So I'd like to flip it and look at it from a more positive perspective as well. So, I don't say oh no, I know I've been gossiping I shouldn't. Let's turn it around and think what godly conversation looks like and what a tamed tongue looks like.

[17 : 57] It's a good tongue twister for you. So, I asked if anybody had ever been hurt by anybody else's words. Has anyone ever been encouraged or comforted by somebody else's words?

I've got two hands up but I'm sure it's more than that. Okay. So, what does a tamed tongue look like? Two great verses in Proverbs one of which is in the section that we're looking at one of which comes early but it's worth going back to.

In Proverbs 15 verse 4 it says the tongue that brings healing is a tree of life but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit so our tongues can bring healing and then in Proverbs 25 and I love this verse a word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

I think if you can use your imagination think about a golden apple and it's got a silver set you know it's obviously a work that's been thought about and put together really carefully by a craftsman by an expert jeweller something that's beautiful and precious and a word aptly spoken a word spoken well or an appropriate occasion is like apples of gold settings of silver so when I use my words to encourage or to comfort others that's like something really beautiful and really precious to God. Okay so moving on to the next slide just some more thoughts about a tamed tongue is gentle. Think about the way that Jesus spoke to people he came across.

[19 : 34] Now I know sometimes he could be quite hard particularly with Pharisees when they're being hypocritical and challenging but most of his interactions with people you see him being gentle and encouraging we see him welcoming little children he's using words that will draw them in he's not being aggressive not being hard in his speech and that's a great example for us so when we speak to one another let's not be aggressive let's not have hard and difficult speech but let's use

words that are gentle and welcoming we need to be kind choosing words that will heal and not harm one another truthful it's important to speak truth to one another we need to do that not in a harsh way so let's speak the truth to one another and encourage one another in that way but just think about the way we do that as well so we're not sort of bashing people overhead with truth but we're encouraging them with it which leads me on to the next bit encouraging remember our motto text which John also quoted last week but it comes really well into this sermon says therefore encourage one another and build each other up just as in fact you are doing and that's in 1 Thessalonians 5 but it's really important to encourage one another to build one another up to help one another with our words to express our thanks and our appreciation appreciation of what people are doing know when to keep silence a tamed tongue knows when to keep silent that's really hard sometimes it's easy to let our mouth sort of get into gear and start spouting words without thinking about whether that's appropriate sometimes and there are occasions when it's appropriate to keep silent and for our tongue not to do anything but to be still if our words may not be helpful in a situation we need to have that self-control to be able to say actually I'm not going to say anything here it wouldn't be helpful it would be counterproductive

I'm going to keep shtum but equally we need to know when to speak out we need to be prepared to speak out against injustice and a tongue that's tamed doesn't just shout at random but it thinks about issues and then it speaks out on behalf of the vulnerable and those who are downtrodden inclusive I put here are we a welcoming church well I think that we are and I hope that we are but it's something that's really important to keep in mind because otherwise we think oh yeah we're welcoming and then you know two years down the line we've forgotten all those things that made us a welcoming church it's really important to keep re-evaluating ourselves on that apparently when I was a tiny baby about four months old or something my mother went to church with my grandmother at the village she grew up in and she pushed me into church in the pram and a woman there said oh I hope that baby's not going to cry I can't remember what my mother did I'm sure she told me but whether she went home or whether she sat there feeling anxious all the way through the service about whether I was crying or not I mean I'm fairly sure I would have cried because that's what babies do at that sort of age but that's not those are not welcoming words you know do we welcome people in do we accept people as they are appreciative expressing our thanks to God and to others you know it's easy to get into a frame of mind where we just pick up on things that go wrong Adrian Plass if you've read his diaries had a group called spot it and stop it you know it was very negative you know they'd see something that was wrong in the church and say shouldn't be doing that let's not be spot it and stop it people let's be people who encourage and give thanks and are appreciative of what other people are doing so just a bit more on how do we tame our tongues on the next slide I'm sorry to say this is an ongoing process or usually it's an ongoing process we're not discounting the idea that God can do miracles and change us in an instant but actually because we live in relationship with him transformation is usually an ongoing process and that includes the way that we use our words going back to James again and I'd encourage if you've got time not just to look at the passage in Proverbs but to read through James because as I said he's got lots to say on the topic of the tongue James said we should be quick to listen and slow to speak but often we get that the other way around don't we we're quick to speak and slow to listen so let's go back to thinking about am I quick to listen am I making an effort to really hear what people are saying to me or have I actually got half a mind on what I'm going to say next or I want to jump in and make my point or tell people what they should do without listening to them first let's be proactive look for opportunities to be thankful to encourage to build one another up this isn't just about being thankful to God although we should do that but let's be thankful to one another let's appreciate one another let's encourage one another let's build one another up and be creative in that you know it might be spoken words but it might be that we send a text or a whatsapp or an email or be old fashioned and write a letter all sorts of things but let's be creative in the way we use our words to bless one another and be proactive in that let's turn negatives into prayer prompts so when we catch ourselves saying you know I can't believe so and so said that rather than just sort of ruminating on it and letting it fester let's say well you know I'll pray for them you know it might be that I need to forgive them it might mean I need to pray for you know maybe there's just a sense that when they shouted at me there was something else going on behind but let's turn that into prayer prompts and I think that's really helpful particularly in terms of politics if you follow politics when you see a politician saying something

outrageous turn it into an opportunity for prayer but let's do that for one another as well as I said before sometimes controlling the tongue means choosing to speak out so William Wilberforce and others spoke out about slavery because they knew that it was wrong and they used their voices and their words to bring about change and it's really important that sometimes we do use our words to speak out to defend others but as we do that let's ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom in when and how we should do it

[26 : 40] I put think T-H-I-N-K when I was working in schools I often saw a poster up in schools for the kids to look at and this was in to try and encourage them to be careful in the words they used but I think it's a really helpful idea a really useful acronym and think basically means before you say something consider is it true?

is it helpful? is it inspiring? is it necessary? is it kind? and if you're coming up with lots of no's to those answers then probably it might be better not to say it so just bear in mind is it true? helpful? inspiring? necessary? kind? and then a couple of scripture passages which could be really helpful with this Galatians 5 22 23 fruit of the spirit love, joy, peace and so on are our words loving joyful peaceful are they self-controlled are they gentle and so on and Ephesians 4 29 which is another verse I often come back to but Paul writing here says do not allow any unwholesome talk to come out of your mouths but only as what is helpful for building others up according to their needs that it may benefit those who listen so don't use your words poorly but think about how you can build one another up so that we can benefit and help one another and that's I'd encourage you again if you want a verse to take away and pray through that's really helpful in thinking about how we use our words so I just want to leave you with a couple of questions for reflection first of all when we're thinking about our words

I can put these in the chat later if that's helpful do my words bring honour to Jesus when I say something is it giving glory to him will people look at me and think yes I understand more of what Jesus is like and if not why am I saying that do I need to just shut up or apologise for my poor choice of words so do my words bring honour to Jesus and then secondly how can I use my words to encourage someone else is there somebody I need to reach out to this week and say you know just been thinking about you I've been praying for you is there anything else anything specific I can be praying for or you know thanks for doing that I really appreciated that it was really helpful and so on so think about how I can use my words to encourage someone else let's pray Jesus thank you that you came as the living word thank you that you demonstrated by the way you spoke to and dealt with others how we should use our words to bless others and to honour you Father I pray that you'd encourage us this week just to think a bit more about the words we use to consider how we can honour the name of Jesus in the words that we speak and how we can encourage and build one another up so that the name of Jesus is glorified in our community in his precious name Amen Amen