

# The Challenge of Slander

## *Living in Unity:*

James 4:11-12, Ephesians 4:29-31

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God has created us to fit together and operate in unity. He has created us to enjoy and thrive on satisfying friendships. In Psalm 133 the Bible calls such unity and friendship the place of renewal and blessing. It makes sense, that if we want to live God-filled, Spirit-led, effective and satisfying lives, then we will need to do things that keep us in unity. The Apostle Paul wrote:

*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*  
(Ephesians 4:3, NIV)

Unfortunately, our tongue often works against God's own Spirit. Solomon wrote:

*A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends.*  
(Proverbs 16:28, NIV)

Even as the Spirit creates unity (as we sang moments ago), our tongue separates people and grieves God's Spirit. Most of us are unaware of how often we grieve the Spirit with our words. With our tongue we have the power to build up or tear down, motivate or discourage, heal or hurt, spread or squash rumors, delight or deceive.

Deborah Smith Pegues, a Certified Public Accountant and a Certified Behavioral Consultant, has written about the destructive impact of her words and what God helped her do. She would be late for a meeting and she might say, “Sorry, I am late, traffic!” Of course, the traffic was no worse than any other day, but she comforted herself that she hadn’t lied, she hadn’t said she was stuck in traffic. However, she purposely misled people to think that she had allowed enough time to make the meeting but unforeseeably was stuck in traffic. She was not developing trust, but eroding it with her speech. Indeed, she was offending God:

***Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who deal truthfully are His delight.*** (Proverbs 12:22, NKJV)

One day she finally acknowledged that whether her misrepresentations were half-truths, flattery, exaggerations, or blatant deceitfulness, they still were lies – plain and simple. Moreover, she found her reckless words wreaking havoc in a valued relationship. The moment she uttered them, she regretted it. Her words were like birds released from a trap. Once out, she could not recapture them and prevent the escalating damage. She determined to do something and she went on a 30-day tongue fast. She tried fasting from (1) gossip, (2) complaining, (3) deceitfulness and (4) negative words.

Many times she found herself saying the wrong thing. She found herself wanting to bond with people by agreeing with their complaints. She found destructive gossip coming in the form of prayer requests – “I want you to pray about so and so who appears to be cheating on his wife.” She began to ponder why juicy news or speculations about people’s flaws were so attractive to repeat. She confronted her judgmental thoughts when she disliked other people’s dress or choices; and she also addressed her under-the-breath profanity and vulgarities that were whispered or silently stated when she was hurt or upset. Deborah discovered that it was

impossible to tame her tongue. However, with Christ's Spirit at work, the impossible was unfolding. God was doing a mouth cleaning and also a heart-cleaning.

This past month Australia has suffered historic brushfires. Some 2000 homes have been destroyed and 210 have people been killed. Police are still trying to identify those who perished while seven fires continue to burn. Sadly these fires were preventable. People started them. But these fires are a wiener roast compared to the holocaust ignited by our tongues. James wrote:

***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, NIV)

The tongue doesn't merely get the speaker in trouble. It also devours many, many others. I think everybody age 10 and up has said things that have crippled the hearts and thoughts of others, and so there are people struggling today because of our words. I would not be surprised if Satan used the words of each of us adults to shove or nudge someone into eternal hell. Jesus paid for our sins so that we may enjoy eternal life, but do we want our mouth to be a pawn of Satan or an instrument of redemption?

Jesus taught that if we are angry with our brother, we are guilty of murder. How could we be guilty of murder unless we do irreparable soul damage to others when we express that anger with words of judgment and contempt? Jesus said:

***Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.*** (Matthew 5:22, NIV)

Benjamin Franklin said:

*I will speak ill of no man, not even in the matter of truth, but rather excuse the faults I hear, and, upon proper occasions, speak all the good I know of everybody.*

Despite his misgivings and unbelief, how much favor do you think Benjamin Franklin incurred with God simply because he resolved to treat others with compassion? The Bible says that love covers a multitude of sins. If we truly love and cherish others, why would we say anything about them or anything to them except what would help or encourage them?

Have you not experienced great damage from the tongue? The greatest damage occurs when we speak evil about our Christian brothers and sisters. Churches don't divide over conflicts. They divide over how we treat each other in conflicts. They divide when we place one another in dark light rather than do what love does – “keeps no record of wrongs” and “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 13:5, 7, NIV). The hope of salvation for a community is the church that Christ plants in it; and when it is broken, discouraged and disabled by the tongue, how many souls are neglected and lost before it recovers and engages in its mission? Haven't we as a church been injured and disabled by the tongue? Can you think of those who are no longer with us because of the tongue? Have you thought of the effect the tongue has had on our finances? Do you wonder who would be with us and how we would be doing if we had spoken only what would build and benefit one another? How different would our challenges be if we had shared our concerns directly with the responsible individuals rather than complain to one another?

The Bible teaches that our tongue not only sows, but it also reveals. Jesus said:

***Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*** (Matthew 12:33-37, NIV)

The tongue does express the emotions and thoughts in our hearts. Don't you think God is addressing our hearts when he is addressing our tongues? Jesus said, "*By your words you will be acquitted.*" Don't you think those words are our cry to Jesus and one another for forgiveness? "*By your words you will be condemned.*" Don't you think that is what we tell one another and ourselves as we continue to speak in rebellion? We access the fullness of God's mercy when we repent (change our mind) and believe what Jesus says. Are there people we need to apologize to? Are there people we need to forgive? Isn't it interesting that the Lord's Supper is a meal that is meant to be eaten together? Isn't it amazing that Christ offers his body and blood, his forgiveness and life, as we receive him together?

In Lent, we often give something up, perhaps a food. However, would a tongue-fast... from gossip, complaining, deceitfulness and negative words open our hearts more to the transforming work of Christ? Will you consider such a Lenten fast, and depend upon Christ to help you? God's Spirit is waiting for your faith to transform you and to transform the world through you.