

Russell Kelfer

Tiny Sparks and Great Fires

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Series: Living Lessons From Proverbs

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The story goes like this: It seems that Noah and his somewhat unusual contingent of four-legged friends had been afloat for some time, when the problem of “boatload boredom” began to set in.

Not one to incite mutiny, yet definitely not adverse to being the spokesman for the group, the big bear determined that it was time for something to happen that would break the monotony of this floating zoo. So Bobby the Bear approached Noah with his somewhat unique idea. (You know what a unique idea is. It’s when you sneak up on somebody and given them an idea.) Anyway, Bobby makes this novel suggestion.

“Noah,” he says, “Why not let us get up a football game... We’ve got lots of room and lot’s of players and a captive audience,” Noah concurred. His furry friends chose up sides, and the first “Ark Bowl” was about to become a reality.

There was, however, one small problem. It seems the big animals chose their friends to be with them, and the small animals chose their friends to be on their team. So the result was an inequity akin to the Dallas Cowboys playing Horace Mann Junior High School. Nonetheless, the die was cast, and the game began. Noah (somewhat dismayed by the unfairness of the team’s makeup) decided to coach the little guys.

The game began. The big guys kicked off to the little guys, and you can just guess what happened. The quarterback, a game buy outmanned mouse named Mickey, took the ball and handed it off to an equally game but ill-equipped poodle who tried a line plunge and was promptly plunged into the ground for no gain. Not to be daunted, the pee-wees ran the same play again and again with the same results. So it was fourth down and 16 to go, and Mighty Mouse punts.

Now the big boys get the ball, and on first down, Leo the Lion hands off to Harry the Hippo who romps through the line untouched for 80 yards and scores on the first play from scrimmage, with eleven pint-sized opponents hanging on for dear life.

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The big boys kick off, and the little guys try again—four downs—minus ten yards and punt.

Here go the big boys again. Lion hands off to Hippo. One play... one touchdown...and on and on it goes, until at long last what seemed to be an interminable first half for Noah's muscular midgets comes to an end. The score at the half was 90-0!

At half-time, a frazzled Noah calls his pint-sized pigskin scapegoats together and gives them the "Knut Rockne" pep talk. "It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game," and so forth. He gives them all a gold medal for effort and sends them back into the meat-grinder for the second half.

The crowd oinks and moos as Miss Piggy leads the cheering section in an assortment of unusual sounds and the second half begins. This time the mouse kicks off, and the big boys get the ball and prepare for round two of this merciless massacre. But lo and behold, a strange thing happened. Leo the Lion takes the ball, hands off to Harry the Hippo who heads for his usual romp to the end zone when SPLAT; he comes crashing to the earth for a two-yard loss.

The crowd cheers, and Noah grins. "It must've been something I said," he boasts.

Second down—12 to go.

Lion to Hippo. SPLAT—4 yard loss.

The crowd goes wilder. Noah struts the sidelines. "What a change. I know it was something I said," he utters, now a little louder.

Third and 16. Lion fades—hands to Hippo.

Crunch—an 8 yard loss. And the big boys have to punt.

"I wonder what it was that I said," an elated Noah muttered, as the diminutive defense swarmed around their Coach. "Who tackled the Hippo?" Noah asked, "Who tackled the Hippo?"

The excited centipede stepped forward. "I did, sir," he answered. "I did."

"You did!" a startled Noah replied. "Where were you in the first half?"

"I was in the locker room putting on my shoes," the centipede replied.

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And all that time Noah thought it must have been something he said, but it wasn't.

Now I know the tie-in is difficult, but I really wanted to tell that joke, so try to make it fit if you can.

The point is it really wasn't something Noah said, but so often it is. So often the tongue is responsible, either for healing or destroying for encouraging or discouraging for building up or tearing down.

Nothing we possess has greater potential for bringing sunlight into life's dark corners than does the tongue. But the problem is, conversely, nothing has more potential for literally destroying a man's spirit than does the tongue.

How many times have you walked out of a room leaving behind you the debris of wounded lives, scarred and injured by careless words and could honestly exclaim, "It must've been something I said. I know it was something I said. OH, WHY CAN'T I CONTROL MY TONGUE?"

Is it possible to control your tongue? Is it possible not to live on a highway paved with regrets over words you wish you'd never said? Is it possible not to have to spend the rest of your life having, constantly to ask forgiveness for things you uttered in anger or frustration? *Is it possible to bring the tongue totally under control?*

If you're not a Christian the answer is "NO!" The tongue is a runaway freight train. You can slow it down occasionally, but you cannot bring it under control. Now I didn't say that, the Bible did.) But if you're a Christian the answer is "YES." The tongue can be brought under control. In fact, if you want to be effective as a Christian, the tongue must be brought under control. And thus we come to the final segment of our study of self-control, using as our roadmap "God's Precious Patterns from Proverbs".

Our title is "The Tongue (Part 1): Tiny Sparks...And Great Fires!"

Our outline takes this form:

- I- Self Control: The Acid Test
 - A- Internal Self-Control: The Test of the Emotions
(Internal Reactions—Impulsiveness, Anger, Envy, and Fear)
 - B- External Self-Control: The Test of the Appetites
(External Excesses—Adultery, Gluttony, Drunkenness)
 - C- The Tongue: The Test of Tests

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(An Unbridled Wild Animal)

II- The Tongue: Tiny Sparks...And Great Fires

A-The Problem Discovered (The Fire No Man Can Tame)

James 3:1-17

B-The Problem Defined (13 Sparks That Set Lives Ablaze)

C-The Problem Discussed

a- Ground Rules to Prevent Forest Fires

1) Is What You Say Necessary?

2) Is What You Say Meaningful?

3) Is What You Say Dependable?

b- Basis For Building (God's Word and Ours)

Our journey through Proverbs, you may remember, took us first to the land of humility, where we were forced to do battle with the perennial problem of pride and where we came to grips with the reality that what God is looking for is: humble, teachable, correctable, Christians

That brought us to phase two of our study, and the realization that just as the Christian way is one of humility, the Christian walk is one of self-control. Self-control can be defined as: "the will responding to the Word even over the objections of the emotions and the appetites".

We looked first at internal self-control—The Tests of the Emotions. And Proverbs had a lot to say about our internal reactions to such problems as: impulsiveness, anger, envy, and fear.

That led us, you remember, to the external evidences of self-control—The Tests of the Appetites. Proverbs has been equally and painfully clear about external excesses. So we have in the past few weeks been run over by a Proverbial freight train pulling such ruthless cargo as adultery, gluttony, and finally drunkenness.

That leads us now to the acid test of self-control. For a Christian can learn to harness his anger and his envy, his lust, and even his runaway appetites for food or drink, and still have perhaps the most dangerous weapon Satan possesses beyond his reach.

As we shall see in this lesson and in the weeks to come, *until you are able to control your tongue, your life is not really under control at all*, because the tongue is the door through which the heart reveals its contents. It is the video screen that replays the internal struggles of your life to a live audience which has gathered around

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you seeking to see and to hear the mind of Christ. And every time you lie or boast or gossip or argue or nag, you distort that picture and you mar that image!

Unless you can control your tongue, you have not brought your life under control at all. You say, “Who said that?” I say, “God said that.” In Proverbs 13:3, for starts, the King James says,

He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.

(Proverbs 13:3)

Another translation reads,

Guard thy tongue and guard thy soul. Thoughtless speech may bring ruin.

Perhaps Ken Taylor says it best,

Self control means controlling the tongue! A quick retort can ruin everything.

Oh, how true that is. So the acid test of self-control is controlling the tongue, and both Scripture and experience teach us that this is perhaps the most difficult task of all. It is so difficult, in fact, that only Jesus Christ in us can do it. But do it, He will, if we'll let Him. So we begin our look at this crucial area of self-control by taking a look at the tiny sparks that come from the tongue (and the awesome fires those sparks produce.)

Turn to James 3, and there we will begin our journey into the scriptural world of what we say and why we say it. This part of our lesson is entitled, “Tiny Sparks and Great Fires.”

In previous lessons, we have always attempted to look first at the book of Proverbs for principles, and then to seek our confirmation from the rest of the Scriptures. But because the book of Proverbs will be virtually the only text we'll need on this subject, we will reverse field and begin by looking rather at a New Testament passage of Scripture that lays the foundation for the problem. Then we will begin to journey through Proverbs for the revelation of how that problem affects our lives and what God intends for us to do about it.

THE PROBLEM DISCUSSED

Part one of our study, then, will be “The Problem Discussed” and James chapter three is our text.

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

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For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.

Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind:

But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?

Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. (James 3:1-17)

MERCY! What this passage is saying is earth-shaking or life-

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shaking at best. It bears careful scrutiny, for its message forms the foundation for the remainder of our study on the tongue. If we were to outline this passage, the outline would take this form:

“Controlling The Tongue” (James 3:1-17)

I- The Essence (vs. 2)

II- The Evidences (vs. 3-4)

III- The Excesses (vs. 5-6)

A- Capability to Destroy

B- Capability to Contaminate

C- Capability to Unleash Satanic Cycle

D- Origination—Hell Itself

IV- The Exception (vs. 7-8)

V- The Enigma (vs. 9-12)

A- A Double-Minded Fountain

B- An Olive-Bearing Fig Tree

VI- The Expression (vs. 13, 17)

This passage begins with a somewhat strange admonition. It says, don't be too anxious to be a teacher—don't “crowd in” to become a teacher, one translation puts it, because those who teach (who use their tongue to lead) will be judged by a more severe standard. The Amplified Bible says, “Teachers will be judged with greater severity, and thus have greater accountability.”

Now I try not to read that passage very often. It is a very sobering promise. With teaching goes acclaim, with teaching goes attention, with teaching goes acceptance. The dangers are great. For with the acclaim, the attention and the acceptance goes the responsibility that what you say is being absorbed and applied by many lives. So God has a built-in balance to sober teachers. He holds them more accountable. He judges their conduct by a more severe standard. This is true of preaching, teaching, disciple-making, and other forms of spiritual instruction in the church. We mustn't be afraid of it, but we must be aware of it, and we must then seek to teach only with an awesome sense of dependence on God relative to the awesome responsibility God has assigned to us.

But God isn't looking for perfection. Verse two acknowledges that we all stumble. We all offend on some occasions when we speak. In fact, the verse concludes that any man or woman, who never offends with his tongue, never slips in his speech. One

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translator puts it,

The same is a perfectly mature believer. He is able to bridle or control his whole body

The Amplified Bible says, the one who is able to perfectly control his tongue

...is a fully developed character, and a perfect man, able to control his whole body and to curb his entire nature.

(James 3:2c)

So none of us has perfect control of our tongues, but it ought to be our goal. For when our tongues are perfectly under control, the Scripture says our whole life is under control, and that's God's goal!

The essence of control, then, is that it is essential. James says if you are able to control your tongue, you are in control of your life. Your whole body has been bridled. The word "bridle" here means to exercise total control, the way you do when you bridle a horse. You control when he stops, when he starts, and which way he goes by bridling him. To bridle your tongue, then, is to control when it starts, when it stops and exactly what it says.

Verse three gives the evidences of control. It tells us about two graphic examples of control, in which we can control great problems with seemingly small instruments.

The first illustration is the horse. We control great big strong horses with a will and a mind of their own by placing a tiny bit in their mouths. That bit is just enough of a reminder that they are not in control of their own destiny. You can actually control the very movements of that huge animal by exerting the slightest pressure on the reigns that move that bit.

The second illustration James gives is that of a huge boat, awesome in its greatness, moved with great power by great winds, and yet a tiny rudder allows the pilot of that ship to maneuver that great boat in whatever direction he chooses. These are evidences of the principles of control, and the excesses that require that control are no better seen anywhere, James goes on, than with the tongue. The Holy Spirit goes back in verse five to draw the analogy.

"Even so the tongue is a small member, but it, too, boasts of great achievements." The course of history has literally been altered by words.

The words of statesmen

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The words of kings
The words of preachers
The words of enemies
The words of fools

Words of encouragement have stilled anxious ears and caused the faint to rally. Words of love have motivated men to scale the heights of success and given them courage to face uncertain futures. Words of caution have caused the reckless to alter their course and avoid certain destruction.

Words have saved the multitudes and stayed the hand of would-be murderers.

Ah, but words have, as well, ignited the flame of anger, provoked the hearts of men to jealousy and revenge, and stirred the spirits of kind-hearted men to perform acts of violence and deceit.

Words... What power exists in the spoken word! Ah, the tongue...

It boasteth great things.

(James 3:5a)

But verse five adds,

Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

“What a great forest a spark can set on fire,”

(as one translator puts it.)

Tiny sparks set great fires. That’s what the passage is saying, and verse six then gets to the heart of the matter. There it says this, “The tongue is a fire.” That’s what the tongue is—a fire. It is a machine that sets off sparks, and remember, verse five said tiny sparks cause great fires.

Then verses five and six make four amazing statements about the tongue when it’s out of control. They are statements that seem so extreme that if I made these statements apart from the scripture you would say, “Those are wild comments. How can you say such things?” But the scripture says them so they have to be true.

Statement 1: The tongue is a fire capable of destroying whole forests. (Verse 5)

Now if you’ve ever seen a forest destroyed by a raging forest fire, and then read in the paper that it was caused by a stray cigarette thrown out of the window by a passing motorist, you say to yourself, “What destruction! What devastation! What a waste! How could a tiny spark do so much damage?”

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But that tiny spark ignited a patch of dry grass, and the grass began to burn, and the fire began to spread. The wind blew, and it spread and spread. You can't call a fire back once it's started. You can't stay, "STOP." It's gone—sentenced to fulfill its ugly course of devastation.

James says that's what the tongue does. You start a rumor... (it's just a rumor), but you pass it on... and on it goes until it spreads like wildfire taking with it innocent lives. You can't call back that word you uttered in a moment of thoughtlessness any more than you can call back that spark that now is a raging inferno, indiscriminately claiming lives, possessions, and helpless creatures like a mad-man on a spree of death.

James says, "Your tongue is a fire." And the fires it starts don't stop until they've destroyed forests of lives.

Statement 2: It is a world of iniquity that contaminates the entire soul. (Verse 6)

The tongue not only damages others, it's misuse releases into your bloodstream a venom of Satanic activity and guilt that actually poisons your whole body spiritually. One translator put it this way, "It contaminates the whole body." Another said, "It pollutes our whole being."

You let your tongue run wild, and your spiritual life craters. The lies or the gossip or the filth that passed from your heart to your lips leaves the mind tainted and your fellowship with Christ strained.

You lie and see if your prayer life remains the same. You damage another's reputation needlessly and see if your spiritual power doesn't wane. It's a fact of life; the tongue contaminates your soul.

Statement 3: It sets on fire the course of nature. (Verse 6)

The Amplified Bible says it sets the cycle of man's nature in motion.

Another version says it sets the wheels of life on fire.

In other words, not only does what you say affect others, not only does what you say pollute your own spirit, what you say sets in motion a series of events that are the natural result of a life gone out from under the Spirit's control.

One lie leads to another.

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Gossip leads to self-justification.

Murmuring leads to actual discontentment.

Judging leads to self-exaltation.

Sarcasm leads to insensitivity.

The cycle goes on. The circle widens. The sin multiplies, so says James of the ever-widening consequences of the sins of the tongue.

Statement 4: We are in no doubt about where the sins of the tongue originate. (Verse 6)

We need not use our imagination. Verse six concludes,

...it is set on fire by hell. (NKJV)

It is a direct result of Satan's working in your life. We are not wrestling against flesh and blood, but against spiritual activity in the heavenlies. When your tongue goes out of control the source of the problem is spiritual, and the source of the spirit is Satan. The source of his efforts springs forth from the gates of hell itself.

That's how excessive are the sins of the tongue. They destroy men's lives, pollute our own, and set in motion a series of satanic domino-like results that come from Satan and from hell itself. Is it any wonder we are commanded to learn to control our tongues?

Verses seven and eight are there to remind us that the tongue is the exception to every other problem of control. There we are told that every form of beast, every form of snake, and every creature of the sea, has been tamed and can be tamed. Man has dominion over them and thus can bring them under control. But verse eight begins, there is one exception—the tongue. Listen to this devastating statement in verse eight.

But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of
deadly poison. (James 3:8)

If you see what I see in that verse, you see that apart from God it is impossible to tame the tongue. The tongue is the fire that no man can tame. But of course, God can. That's why we're told that as Christians we must. And remember, anytime God can do something man can't, that activity becomes imperative for the Christian, for that activity demonstrates through the Christian a miracle only His indwelling Spirit can perform. Man can't control the tongue...period. God can. Therefore, only the Christian has that option and, therefore, for the Christian, it can be no option.

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Now in verses nine through eleven, we read of the enigma,

With it (the tongue) we bless our God and our Father...

We sing hymns, pray out loud, witness of God's mercy, invite others to taste His goodness. Our tongues are instruments of praise and of prayer. THAT'S INCREDIBLE.

But, wait, verse nine goes on. This same tongue which moments or hours before was praying and praising, also curses men which have been created in the very image of the God we are praising.

from the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. (James 3:10 NASB)

They shouldn't happen. No wonder the world is confused. No wonder our unbelieving friends shake their heads in disbelief. They hear us witnessing and declaring our righteousness, then moments later hear us cursing or lying or gossiping, and they don't understand. Neither does God.

He asks the question in verse eleven,

Does a fountain send forth [simultaneously] from the same opening fresh water and bitter? (James 3:11 AMPC)

Then in verse twelve He poses another riddle,

Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine figs?
(James 3:12 NKJV)

NO!!! And the same fountain can't issue forth sweet and bitter water simultaneously or intermittently. Then how can we expect men to honor what we say when what we say is just as inconsistent as that? How can we praise God one minute and curse men the next? How can we intercede one minute and judge the next? How can we worship one minute and gossip the next? "Beloved," the scripture records, "these things ought not so to be." No, verse thirteen goes on. Men ought to be able to see your wisdom by the way you live, by your gentleness, your humility, the considerate way you use your tongue.

Verse seventeen defines that kind of life and that kind of tongue.

It is pure.

It is peaceable.

It is courteous.

It is congenial.

It is full of mercy.

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It is full of good fruits.
It is impartial.
It is sincere.

And its every word demonstrates it.

That's what God says about the tongue. He says it is a fire no man can tame. It destroys other lives, contaminates our own, sets in motion a cycle of destruction, and has as its base of operations hell itself. We can control every other form of life created, but we can't control our tongues. One minute we're praising God, the next we're spewing forth Satanic venoms of impurity, sarcasm, lies, and bad reports. But, my friends, this ought not so to be.

As Christians, we have within us the Spirit of truth; therefore, there is no longer a need to lie. We have within us the Spirit of love; therefore, there is no need for needless arguing or strife. We have within us the Spirit of patience; therefore, there is no need to nag.

For the next few lessons, we must make that journey through the pathways known as Proverbs seeking out principles and patterns to put a stop once and for all to the runaway locomotive in our lives known as the tongue.

Our goal is a God-controlled tongue. Dare we settle for anything less? If that is our goal, then we must take a look at the sparks that God says issue forth when our tongues are out of control. Sparks that set on fire the lives of men. And when we define what those sparks are, our job is then to make clear-cut choices before those sparks fly from our lips. The gateway of the tongue must be guarded. It's God's plan for fire prevention.

In this lesson, we'll only list and define them. In the lessons to follow, we'll seek to find in Proverbs just what they are and how we're to deal with them.

Let's look for a moment at thirteen sparks that set on fire the trees of men's lives.

THIRTEEN SINS OF THE TONGUE

1- AN ARGUING TONGUE: A tongue that thrives on its right to be right! It would rather win its case than win a heart. It would rather change a mind than change a life. An arguing tongue is a little spark that starts great fires.

2- A BAD REPORT: A tongue that burns brightest with negative news. You know the kind. It sees a rainbow as a sign we're in for

more heat. It always has a reason that whatever it is won't work. It is filled with the paranoia of the persecuted. A tongue guilty of bad reports is a little spark, but what great fires it starts.

3- A BLASPHEMING TONGUE: A tongue that compromises the character of God. You may be surprised at what blasphemy is. A blaspheming tongue attributes the sins of men to God and the glories of God to men. A little spark? Perhaps, but what a great fire a little spark can bring.

4- A BOASTFUL TONGUE: A tongue that glows with self-exaltation. A tongue that rewrites the alphabet until it begins with the letter "I". What I did. What I said. What I bought. What I sold. It robs God of His glory. Just a spark? Perhaps, but it sets ablaze a whole forest of fury.

5- A FLATTERING TONGUE: A tongue that exalts another for personal gain or acceptance. It says what they want to hear to get what it wants to get. It is barbed wire clothed in satin, honey-coated poison, but it's prevalent in Christian circles. Just a little spark, but whole houses have burned beneath its wrath.

6- A GOSSIPING TONGUE: A tongue that communicates unnecessary information at the expense of another's character. It's the tongue broadcasting as an underground radio station. It often wears spiritual clothes. But it's a flame of fire, and it sets on fire the reputations of men until it has destroyed their very souls.

7- THE IMPURE TONGUE: This is a tongue that doubles as a garbage dispenser. It issues forth filth and pollution from a stream that has a sign by its banks, "God's Territory—Pure Water Within." It's a little spark that sets on fire forests of holiness.

8- A JUDGMENTAL TONGUE: This is a tongue that usurps the authority of God. Only God has the right to be a judge. The judgmental tongue demonstrates what a convicted criminal looks like in the robes of a judge. This spark is a flame-thrower. Whole churches and whole families lie in its wake.

9- A LYING TONGUE: A tongue that defiles the truthfulness of God through compromise. It is the fire of a Satanic torch that tries to bend the truth of God. But God's truth is brittle. It does not bend. It either stands or breaks, and the tongue that lies sets in motion sparks of devastation, for it speaks of a God who lies, and thus attributes to God the attributes of Satan. God help us tell the truth.

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10- A MEDDLING TONGUE: A tongue that becomes a tool to interfere in the lives of others. In other words, when the tongue becomes nosey, it loses its rightful place on the face. Meddling tongues release sparks that burn deeply into the fabric of men's souls.

11- A MURMURING TONGUE: A tongue that defies the sovereignty of God by sowing sparks of discontentment. It may quote verses loudly, then grumble softly about its lot in life. Murmuring lips are contagious. One grumbler attracts another, and soon God's mercies are buried in a sea of complaining. The result is a forest fire, flames of unhappy lives.

12- A NAGGING TONGUE: A tongue that takes on the characteristics of sandpaper to wear down another's resistance. It's a child's insistence and impatience in an adult's mind. It grinds down your spirit until it smokes and explodes.

13- A SARCASTIC TONGUE: (The Crown of Evangelical Christendom) A tongue that destroys under the guise of humor. It's a murderer in a clown's clothing. It's that knife in your back while you're laughing. It burns the sensitive hearts of men and leaves scars that nothing but deep wounds can leave.

These are the thirteen sparks that the tongue uses to start fires in the lives of men. In the next few weeks we'll be looking at what the scriptures in general, and Proverbs in particular, has to say about them. It may hurt, but no more than we've hurt others as we've casually, and sometimes even deliberately, burned the lives of those around us with the sins of the tongue. Little sparks—perhaps, but “behold what great fires they set.”

Now, in closing, I believe that while we are preparing to examine these thirteen sins of the tongue, that perhaps we would be missing the mark if we did not share the three basic principles that underline and underscore the value of every word we speak. The Bible outlines them clearly, and if we honored these three principles, those thirteen sparks would never have a chance to burn.

I pose them in the form of questions; and I am proposing that each of us for the next seven days apply these three questions to everything we say.

Question 1: Is It Necessary?

Or do we talk too much? Do we enjoy hearing ourselves? Are

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we too busy talking to listen? Do we bore people with our endless chatter?

The scripture clearly addresses the issue of “Motor-Mouth Christians.” Listen, I’ll read these verses paraphrased from the Living Bible. They say all you need to say about saying too much.

Is It Necessary? (You may want to memorize some of these.)

A wise man holds his tongue. Only a fool blurts out everything he knows; that only leads to sorrow and trouble.

(Proverbs 10:14 TLB)

Don’t talk so much. You keep putting your foot in your mouth. Be sensible; turn off the flow.

(Proverbs 10:19 TLB)

The man of few words and settled mind is wise; therefore even a fool is thought to be wise when he is silent. It pays him to keep his mouth shut.

(Proverbs 17:27, 28 TLB)

Those who love to talk will suffer the consequences. Men have died for saying the wrong thing!

(Proverbs 18:21 TLB)

Keep your mouth closed and you’ll stay out of trouble.

(Proverbs 21:23 TLB)

Wherefore my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear slow to speak, slow to wrath (to get angry)

(James 1:19 TLB)

Oh, how the world longs for listening Christians who are quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. Learn how to ask yourself, “Is what I am saying necessary?”

Question 2: Is It Meaningful?

Is there value in what you are saying? Ask, “Will this conversation be of any eternal significance? Would it be good conversation in heaven?” Or are you characterized by trivia, by surface conversations that could be tape recorded and played in any setting?

Is yours a politician’s vocabulary, memorized words for mesmerized audiences? Or do you pray constantly to have just the right thing to say at just the right time to just the right person?

God asks you to ask yourself before you speak, “Is it meaningful?”

When a good man speaks, he is worth listening to, but the words of fools are a dime a dozen.

(Proverbs 10:20 TLB)

A wise man’s words express deep streams of thought.

(Proverbs 18:4 TLB)

Tiny Sparks and Great Fires

Timely advice is as lovely as golden apples in a silver basket
(Proverbs 25:11 TLB)

Everyone enjoys giving good advice but how wonderful it is to be able to say the right thing at the right time!
(Proverbs 15:23 TLB)

Question 3: Is It Reliable?

Can men entrust their lives to your word?

Do you repeat what you've heard accurately?

Do you share spiritual truth clearly?

Do you apply spiritual truth fairly?

Is your word solid gold?

If you say you'll do something, can men bank on it?

If you say you'll be somewhere, can they set their watches by your arrival?

God asks this about your word: "Is it reliable?"

To trust a rebel to convey a message is as foolish as cutting off your feet and drinking poison.

In the mouth of a fool a parable becomes as useless as a paralyzed leg.

A rebel will misapply an illustration so that its point will no more be felt than a thorn in the hand of a drunkard.

(Proverbs 26:6,7,9 TLB)

Do you understand the value of those three questions? The Living Word lives in you and your words thus are an expression of His to a world that is longing to see it and hear it. Have you ever noticed these three things about God's Word?

1- Every Word God Speaks Is Necessary

God could have written 10 trillion books, and they never could have contained the whole of His nature. So He wrote only what was essential. And every word is essential.

All scripture is God breathed (all scripture-every word of it) and useful for is useful (profitable) for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

(II Timothy 3:16 NIV)

God wastes no words. We're not to add to it nor take from it, because every word He spoke was necessary. What a pattern to follow!

2- Every Word God Speaks Is Meaningful

It's profitable for doctrine
It's profitable for reproof
It's profitable for correction
It's profitable for instruction

By it we become mature, thoroughly equipped for everything God asks us to do. God wastes no words, and every one is meaningful,

A lamp for our feet; a light for our path.

What a pattern to follow.

3- Every Word God Speaks Is Dependable

The grass withers the flower fades but the word of our God stands [abides] forever. (Isaiah 40:8 NAS)

Every word of God is pure: (Proverbs 30:5a)

Seek ye out of the book of the LORD, and read: no one of these shall fail... (Isaiah 34:16)

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return to me void... (Isaiah 55:11)

My friend, every word God speaks is necessary. Every word God speaks is meaningful. Every word God speaks is dependable. God, in us, will speak no differently. Thus, as we place a guard at the doorposts of our lips we can with assurance ask before we speak:

Is it necessary?
It is meaningful?
Is it dependable?

Only after answering those three questions must we allow the sentry of the Holy Spirit to grant permission for our words to pass and enter into the lives of those about us. You say, "If I do that, I won't have much to say." Then listen! Pray! Worship!

Quiet isn't bad, you know. Oh, how this world could use some quiet; and how this world could use some quiet Christians. God says that it is essential that you and I learn to tame our tongues. James said it again.

Anyone who thinks he is spiritual but cannot control his tongue is a self-deceived fool and all of his religious pursuits are in vain. (James 1:26 paraphrase)

God's Word is very clear and very beautiful. It is necessary; it is meaningful; it is dependable. May ours become the same, and

Tiny Sparks and Great Fires

may those tiny sparks that set such great fires no longer fall from our lips.

TINY SPARKS

Tiny sparks they seem to be,
We let them fly so needlessly.
We let them fall on one and all
With no concern for where they fall.

And then we wander on our way
A few more sparks fly every day
Not even glancing back to gaze
Upon the lives we've left ablaze.

Just tiny sparks—the tongue requires
To start aflame ten thousand fires.
An idle word, a vengeful slur
Not even knowing they occur.

We act as though we're playing games,
While leaving countless lives in flames;
And all the while men cry and pray
“Is that what Jesus Christ would say?”

Tiny sparks they seem to be
We let them fly so needlessly.
“Oh, God”, my cry to heaven's flung...
“Teach me how to tame my tongue!”

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10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230
210-226-0000 or 1-800-375-7778
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