

# Don't Let Your Tongue Lick You

Message for Sunday, February 16, 2020  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** James 3:1-12

**Children's Message:** *Before the service, I take a banana, insert a needle through the banana skin, and move it around so that it slices the banana. Do this in several places. The needle holes will be so small that it's not noticeable.*

I like to eat bananas, but I never want to have a banana for a friend, because they're so dumb. No one wants to be friends with a banana.

One time an apple went out with a banana. Do you know why? Because it couldn't get a date.

Ha ha! Bananas are good for nothing, except to eat.

How would you feel if I said those things about you? That no one likes you, no one wants to be your friend, that you're good for nothing? *Listen to responses.*

I wonder how the banana is feeling right now. Hmm, it looks OK. Let's take off the peel and look at it. *Peel it, so the cut pieces fall onto a plate.* Look at that! It's all broken up!

Let's remember to be careful with what we say. Our words can really hurt people. But our words can also help people, when we say good things.

Thanks for this idea to Harvey and Patsie Moore, in their book *The Droopy Flower Mystery.*

**Message** "Don't Let Your Tongue Lick You"

## 1) Your tongue is a deadly weapon

Wow! Talk about being gloomy! I highlighted all the negative parts in this passage, James 3:1-12. The tongue...

- can do damage
- is a flame of fire
- is full of wickedness
- can ruin your whole life
- can turn your life into a blazing flame of destruction
- is an uncontrollable evil
- is full of deadly poison
- pours out curses

There are parts of the Bible that are hard to understand. But not here! There is no subtle hidden message, no curious cultural quirk that doesn't translate into our language. This is like driving down the highway and seeing a warning sign about some danger ahead; but the sign is 100 feet high, blazing orange in colour, flashing off and on, with a loud siren to boot.

**James 3:5, New Living Translation:**

**So also, the tongue is a small thing, but what enormous damage it can do.**

The message is plain and simple: be careful what you say! Your words can hurt others, even destroy them, and yourself as well.

Verse 8 says that the tongue is "full of deadly poison." You know the saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me"? It's a nice thought, but it's a lie. There have been numerous stories in the news about young people committing suicide after being tormented with comments on social media. There was no physical assault, or even threats of getting beat up; just verbal abuse and ridicule to the point that the teens couldn't go on any longer. You may recall the names of two Canadian teens to whom this happened: Rehtaeh Parsons and Amanda Todd. So when James says that the tongue is "full of deadly poison," he's not exaggerating at all.

Words are incredibly powerful, and their effect can last forever. If you break someone's arm, it'll heal up in 2-4 months. But if you break someone's heart with your careless words, it may never heal. Long after you've forgotten all about it, that other person is still in pain.

Last month, when I preached on James 1:19 and the importance of listening, a few people pointed out that I had omitted something equally important: there are some things that are not worth listening to, that we should shut our ears and walk away from: especially gossip. [By the way, I love it when you criticize my messages; it shows (a) that you're actually listening, and even more, (b) that you're thinking about it.]

This passage in James gives us the negative message, what *not* to do. But your tongue doesn't have to be a wrecking tool. Other places in the Bible give the positive side of the coin.

## 2) Your tongue is a building tool

Ephesians 4:29, New International Version:

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

### a) “Helpful for building others up”

Have you ever heard anyone say, “Well, I just say what’s on my mind.” They’re kind of proud of it. They’re being frank, honest; and you know how important honesty is to me. They say what’s on their mind. The problem is, maybe there’s not a whole lot on their mind. Maybe what’s on their mind isn’t worth saying. James says, “That’s not frankness, that’s immaturity.”

When you talk you don’t just say things to build yourself up. You say things to build other people up. If it doesn’t build somebody else up, don’t say it. You may have heard the proverb, “If you can’t say something good about someone, don’t say anything at all.” That’s a mark of maturity. A mature person manages his or her mouth.

### b) “According to their needs”

The toughest example of this is, “How do I know what to say to someone whose loved one has died?” What does this person need?

I know people who will stay away from funeral homes because they feel they don’t know what to say. They think it’s better to say nothing than to risk saying the wrong thing.

There are two problems with this. The first is that there is no such thing as “saying nothing.” Your absence is communicating a message, and probably not the message you want to send.

The second problem is actually an opportunity. You’re worried about talk, when quite possibly what the person needs most is touch. A warm hug can be the purest poetry to someone who is afraid or grieving.

When you don’t know what to say:

- Your presence is the most important thing
- Sometimes a hug is worth a thousand words

- “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” What would be helpful to you, if you were in that situation?

I want to go back to the idea of the tongue as a building tool, about how our words can help and even heal.

Sister Helen Mroska was a teacher in an elementary school, with the usual assortment of kids. One that stood out was Mark Eklund, because he was always talking in class. One day she threatened to tape his mouth shut if he spoke again.

Well, habits are hard to break, and less than ten seconds later, without even realizing what he was doing, Mark was talking again. Sister Helen made an “x” across his mouth with masking tape. When she got back to her desk, Mark winked at her, and she couldn’t help but burst out laughing. The whole class laughed with her, and she took the tape off again. After that year she was transferred to high school, where she taught math.

Some years later, Mark Eklund was again her student, in the Grade 9 math class. I’ll let Sister Helen tell the story from there.

One Friday, things just didn’t feel right. We had worked hard on a new concept all week, and I sensed that the students were frowning, frustrated with themselves - and edgy with one another. I had to stop this crankiness before it got out of hand. So I asked them to list the names of the other students in the room on two sheets of paper, leaving a space between each name. Then I told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down. It took the remainder of the class period to finish their assignment, and as the students left the room, each one handed me the papers.

That Saturday, I wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper, and I listed what everyone else had said about that individual. On Monday I gave each student his or her list. Before long, the entire class was smiling. “Really?” I heard whispered. “I never knew that meant anything to anyone!” “I didn’t know others liked me so much.” No one ever mentioned those papers in class again. I never

knew if they discussed them after class or with their parents, but it didn't matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and one another again.

That group of students moved on. Several years later, after I returned from vacation, my parents met me at the airport. As we were driving home, Mother asked me the usual questions about the trip - the weather, my experiences in general. There was a lull in the conversation.

Mother gave Dad a side-ways glance and simply says, "Dad?" My father cleared his throat as he usually did before something important. "The Eklunds called last night," he began. "Really?" I said. "I haven't heard from them in years. I wonder how Mark is."

Dad responded quietly. "Mark was killed in Vietnam," he said. "The funeral is tomorrow, and his parents would like it if you could attend."

To this day I can still point to the exact spot on I-494 where Dad told me about Mark.

I had never seen a serviceman in a military coffin before. Mark looked so handsome, so mature. All I could think at that moment was, Mark I would give all the masking tape in the world if only you would talk to me.

The church was packed with Mark's friends. Chuck's sister sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Why did it have to rain on the day of the funeral? It was difficult enough at the graveside. The pastor said the usual prayers, and the bugler played taps. One by one those who loved Mark took a last walk by the coffin and sprinkled it with holy water. I was the last one to bless the coffin. As I stood there, one of the soldiers who acted as pallbearer came up to me. "Were you Mark's math teacher?" he asked. I nodded as I continued to stare at the coffin. "Mark talked about you a lot," he said.

After the funeral, we all went to someone's house for lunch. Mark's mother and father were there, obviously waiting for me. "We want to show you something," his father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it."

Opening the billfold, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had obviously been taped, folded and refolded many times. I knew without looking that the papers were the ones on which I had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him.

"Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it."

Mark's classmates started to gather around us. Charlie smiled rather sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. It's in the top drawer of my desk at home." Chuck's wife said, "Chuck asked me to put his in our wedding album."

"I have mine, too," Marilyn said. "It's in my diary."

Then Vicki, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. "I carry this with me at all times," Vicki said without batting an eyelash. "I think we all saved our lists."

That's when I finally sat down and cried.

I'll close with this verse from an earlier chapter in James.

James 1:26, New Living Translation:

If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are just fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.

### Next Steps:

- Pray: Ask God to help you control your tongue. Psalm 141:3 "Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips."
- Use your tongue to build up. You can make a huge difference in people's lives with your thoughtful words.