

## The Power of a Word

By Linda Rex

**September 15, 2024, Proper 19 / After Pentecost**—When we are in a situation that requires tact and diplomacy, it is so easy to say the wrong thing. We so often create problems for ourselves by the things we say to other people, and to ourselves for that matter.

As I've grown older, I've had to deal with the consequences of many a misspoken word—whether from me or from someone else. As the Message Bible says, *"It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell"* (James 3:5–6). I'm sure you can identify with this, because this is a common human experience. Every one of us is guilty at some point of saying the wrong thing, or saying something that cut, hurt, or shamed someone. Many an adult reflects back to that word from a parent or a teacher which framed the rest of their life in a positive, or a negative, manner. And many a relationship lies broken and severed today, due to hurtful or destructive words which were spoken and soon regretted.

In our New Testament reading for this week, James 3:1–12, the apostle James addresses this issue of the misuse of the tongue. James wanted all of those who were seeking to elevate themselves to a place of teaching within the Body of Christ to reconsider their motives and the consequences that went with being in this position of responsibility. No doubt, James was quite familiar with what happens when people do not guard what they say, and wanted the peace and unity of the Body of Christ to be maintained rather than disrupted.

Looking at the indicatives or spiritual realities within this passage, we are reminded that we each are made and are being remade by the Spirit in the likeness of God, our Lord and Father. Because this is the truth of who we are, and who every person around us is, there is an innate dignity and worth in each person we encounter. Even the worst person to be around is still someone who bears a reflection of the divine Trinity, albeit hidden or obscured by the sin which so easily darkens our glory as image-bearers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the psalms for this Sunday is Psalm 19. Notice what the psalmist says about God's creation: *"The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world"* (Psalm 19:1–4 NASB). Isn't it interesting that all that our Father created through Jesus in the Spirit tells of the glory of God. The creation is simply being what it is—a creation which speaks of the glory of God. It's not speaking a bunch of other things. No, it is simply speaking that which it was created to speak—of the glory of God.

So often, we as human beings go way outside what God created us to be and to do. We are ever eating of that tree where we decide for ourselves how things are going to be, and what is right and what is wrong. With this going on in our hearts, it is no wonder that what comes out of our mouths ends up being not helpful, but destructive or hurtful. We desperately need God's wisdom (Proverbs 1:20–33), but we often resist or ignore it, and willfully choose our own way. Is there any hope for us sad humans?

The good news is that God "has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all this and through whom he made the universe" (Heb. 1:2 NASB). God's Word to us is Jesus Christ, and

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he has taken all our words and our unruly mouths up into himself, cleansing them and making them new. He speaks even now in and through us by his Spirit, as we yield to his lordship over our tongues. And his grace covers all our failures, offering us healing, restoration, and renewal as we turn to him in faith.

This is a journey we take with Jesus, inviting the Spirit moment by moment to take control of our tongues. The Spirit reminds us that those people we are talking to are also taken up in Jesus. When we speak to them we are speaking to Jesus—by God's grace our words will reflect this reality. As Jesus is the source or wellspring of our words, we draw from the pure source, the Spirit, so that our words are healing, helpful, and holy, whenever we speak. It is Jesus, then, who is our words to God and others, as he is his Father's Word to us. Thanks be to Jesus! And, best of all, he gets all the glory!

*Thank you, Father, for speaking to us through your Son, Jesus. And thank you for giving us your Spirit so that we can participate in Jesus' own conversation with you and others. Please grant us the grace to submit our speech to your Spirit in every moment, so that we always tell of your glory. Amen.*

*"Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh."* James 3:1–12 NASB