

1-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Tippens, Darryl (2015) "James, the Wisdom Tradition, and the Power of the Tongue," *Leaven*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.

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James, the Wisdom Tradition, and the Power of the Tongue

Darryl Tippens

It was a day I shall long remember—January 8, 2007. At 5:00 p.m., as I was preparing to leave my office, I glanced out my window that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. Below the Pepperdine University campus a small fire had just begun to burn at the shoulder of Pacific Coast Highway. It was one of those dry, windy days. Winds, gusting to fifty-five miles per hour, quickly drove the fire toward the Malibu Bluffs. In minutes a tiny fire had morphed into one of those conflagrations for which Southern California is famous, spilling over the bluffs onto the beach homes below. When the blaze reached the home of Suzanne Somers, the house didn't just catch fire. According to the actress, her house exploded. "It was like a box of matches. . . . It just went *whoosh*," she said.

James, the brother of our Lord, understood this phenomenon well: "What a vast amount of timber can be set ablaze by the tiniest spark! And the tongue is a fire, representing in our body the whole wicked world. It pollutes our whole being, it sets the whole course of our existence alight, and its flames are fed by hell" (Jas 3.5–6 REB).

According to James, our world is like a drought-stricken landscape, and we are like careless motorists heedlessly tossing lit cigarettes into the brush along the roadway. James is saying to Christians in general and to church leaders in particular, "The tongue is as dangerous as any fire. . . . It can make the whole of life a blazing hell" (3.5–6 Phillips). "*Watch your incendiary words! Only you, by the power of God, can prevent forest fires,*" James seems to be saying.

James was qualified to articulate the dangers of an unchecked tongue. He knew the teachings of his brother Jesus on the subject; he was steeped in the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament; and there is strong evidence he knew the apocryphal literature of his day concerning the tongue, including a book of wisdom known as *The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach* (or *Ecclesiasticus*).¹

James and the other writers in the wisdom tradition understood that the well-being of the people of God depends on how people used their words. It's no exaggeration to say that for James language was a life-and-death matter. He knew that words kill—and so did Sirach before him, who wrote: "Many have been killed by the edge of the sword, but not so many as by the tongue" (28.18).² If James and Sirach saw the danger of an unleashed tongue in their day, one can only imagine their astonishment, and perhaps fear, if they saw our electronic devices which empower us to drop destructive words in a million different places at the speed of light. James and the wisdom literature tradition invite us to think deeply about risks and the opportunities inherent in our words.

James challenges the way we may have been taught to minimize, even deny, the effects of words. I was coached as a child to underestimate, even to deny, the potency of words, at least in certain circumstances. I

1. See David Arthur DeSilva, *The Jewish Teachers of Jesus, James, and Jude: What Earliest Christianity Learned from the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). DeSilva shows that James was steeped in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and apocryphal books like *The Wisdom of Sirach* (or *Ben Sira*). James's comments on the tongue parallel those of Sirach (82–85).

2. All quotations from Sirach come from the Revised English Bible.

heard remarks like, “Those are only *words*,” “He’s *all talk*,” or “That’s *just rhetoric*.” Many of us learned the well-worn (but untrue) cliché: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” I tried that incantation a few times, but with rotten success. I came to see that it was illogical: how could I invoke powerful words to disarm others’ words on the grounds that words have no power? Either words have power or they do not. I knew in my heart they did, no matter what the saying taught me.

British humorist Stephen Fry, a victim of bullying when he was a child, figured it out as well, revising the maxim to “Sticks and stones *may* break my bones, but words *will* always hurt me.” Fry agrees with Sirach, who said over two millennia ago, “*The lash of a tongue will break bones. . . . The death it inflicts is a horrible death*” (28.17, 21, emphasis added). Clearly, we need a more accurate understanding of the power of words. Let me draw a few insights from James, Sirach, and the wisdom tradition, which might guide our thinking.

First, words are important because they reveal who we truly are. The tongue is not really the problem. When James talks about the *tongue*, he’s employing a particular kind of metaphor, a *metonymy*. In a metonymy a term is used to stand for something closely related to it. An Englishman might say “the crown favors a new immigration policy.” However, while he says *the crown*, he means *the monarch*, the person who wears the crown.

So in James’s letter *tongue* is not referring to the fleshy muscular organ in the mouth, but one’s inner, essential being—one’s heart. The problem is the true *me*, the self that operates the tongue. Thus, Jesus links the mouth to the heart: “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure” (Matt 12.34–35 NRSV).

Another key insight from James is that *words are mind-bogglingly potent with a very long shelf life.* We might say words contain atomic power, yet this analogy is a bit feeble: words have more power than split atoms. This makes sense since the Creator, the Logos, the *Word*, brought atoms into being. The Word chose words to create and communicate with us. Human beings, images of the original Word, have been given a corresponding gift of language. That we can imagine, speak, and create through language may constitute evidence of God’s existence and our divine origin, some philosophers argue.³

Abraham Heschel beautifully articulates the rich connection between God, human beings, and language:

Some people may wonder: why was the light of God given in the form of language? How is it conceivable that the divine should be contained in such brittle vessels as consonants and vowels? This question betrays the sins of our age: to treat lightly the ether which carries the light-waves of the spirit. What else in the world is as capable of bringing man and man together over the distances in space and in time? Of all things on earth, words alone never die. They have so little matter and so much meaning. . . . It is as if God took these Hebrew words and breathed into them His power, and the words became a live wire charged with His spirit. To this very day they are hyphens between heaven and earth.⁴

Heschel invites us to take seriously the words in the Hebrew Bible—these “hyphens between heaven and earth.” But *all* words, not just those in the Bible, must be taken seriously because words are not fragile, ephemeral signals that evaporate into air. There is no delete button when it comes to words. Jesus says words are forever: “I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt 12.36–37 NRSV). Surely, this counts as one of the “hard sayings” of Jesus.

3. “Something must account for a universal, biologically hardwired disposition for humans to acquire and use natural language, as well as to think in some quasi-linguist matter. . . . Language may well provide surprisingly good evidence of the existence of God.” Jeffery L. Johnson and Joyclynn Potter, “The Argument from Language and the Existence of God,” *The Journal of Religion* 85, no. 1 (January 2005): 93.

4. Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 244.

According to a study reported in the *Scientific American*, American college students speak about 16,000 words a day.⁵ This word count includes spoken words only, however. Given how much students today communicate through electronic devices, the actual daily word count (including spoken, written, and texted words) is certainly higher than 16,000 words each day. If we use this approximation and multiply it by average life expectancy, you come up about 450 million to a half-billion words for a typical college-educated person! It's sobering to imagine being called to account for *every* careless word expressed—whether spoken, telephoned, handwritten, tweeted, or emailed—over a lifetime!

A third insight from James is that *words have a mysterious dual power—both negative and positive*. Intemperate words injure relationships and diminish one's effective leadership. Cruel rhetoric wrecks congregations, destroys families, and incites pogroms and terrorist attacks and even genocide.

We see effects of extreme language every day. The hate speech that filled the radio airwaves in Rwanda in 1994 helped precipitate the Rwandan genocide, inciting ethnic hatred, ultimately motivating the killing of one's own neighbors and even family members.⁶ The pattern continues today when virulent rhetoric on extremist websites precipitates the murder of Christians and other minorities in the Middle East.

However, one need not be a terrorist or a racist to be complicit in verbal destruction. All over the Internet you will find articles with titles like these: "6 Ways Social Media Can Ruin Your Life" or "7 Ways Email Can Get You Fired." Large numbers of America's companies have fired workers for email or Internet abuse. The tongue can ruin a career with lightning speed. "Happy are those who are sheltered from [the tongue's] onslaught, who have not been exposed to its fury, who have not borne its yoke or been chained with its fetters" (*Sirach* 28.19).

The danger has been compounded by the advent of ubiquitous social networking. In ancient times for a bad speech to get you into trouble it had to be spoken loudly enough for someone to hear it. There were no microphones hidden or left on inadvertently to broadcast your idle mutterings to the far reaches of the planet. In order for one's remarks to travel widely in former times someone had to go to some effort to repeat them or record them on vellum, papyrus, or wax or clay tablets. Disseminating someone's thoughtless insults was possible, but it was not always easy.

But today! Those 140 tiny characters in a tweet can circle the globe in a flash and render one's life a shambles. Recent events illustrate the point. Consider what happened to Justine Sacco who sent one ill-advised tweet, presumably meant only as a harmless joke, before her departure for South Africa. Before her plane could land, her tweet had gone viral. She suffered global humiliation, and she was fired from her job.⁷ Apocalyptic judgment came quickly, mercilessly.

These verbal mini-massacres inflicted on others and ourselves occur daily, most without ever making the news. They still happen in the old-fashioned way too, without electronic assistance. Who doesn't know the pain of being the target of thoughtless words? George Steiner observes, "In words, as in particle physics, there is matter and anti-matter. There is construction and annihilation. Parents and children, men and women, when facing each other in exchange of speech, are at ultimate risk. One word can cripple a human relationship, can do dirt on hope."⁸

My father was a high school teacher, and I was his student. I can vividly recall my father's negative critique of me as his student. Though I was an outstanding student, I never seemed to measure up to his expectations. Over time my father mellowed. He became a more loving, supportive father; but his severe words left their mark. "The knives of saying cut deepest," says Steiner.⁹

5. Nikhil Swaminathan, "Gender Jabber: Do Women Talk More than Men?" *Scientific American*, July 6, 2007, accessed May 18, 2015, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/women-talk-more-than-men/>.

6. For an account of how radio broadcasts were used to incite mass murder, see Immaculée Ilibagiza, *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* (New York: Hay House, 2014).

7. Jon Ronson, "How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco's Life," *New York Times Magazine*, February 12, 2015 (accessed May 19, 2015).

8. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 58.

9. Steiner, 58.

Yet there is good news: the redemptive power of words supersedes their capacity to harm. If words can maim, they can also console and heal. Steiner expresses the profound duality, the blessing and the danger, of words: “Speech that can articulate the ethics of Socrates, the parables of Christ, the master-building of being in Shakespeare . . . can, by exactly the same virtue of unconstrained potentiality, blueprint and legislate the death camps and chronicle the torture chamber.”¹⁰

While James’s letter dwells on the *dangers* of the tongue, perhaps the greater insight in the letter, though less obvious at first glance, is the *positive* power of language. After all, by their very survival James’s words (these “hyphens between heaven and earth,” as Heschel called them) shout the truth that words can encourage and save—across vast expanses of space and time, received and understood in myriads of cultures and languages. As we read, meditate upon, and respond to James’s enduring words of wisdom, we are nourished in our time, in our own language. Isn’t this a kind of miracle? Steiner observes that language, when used well, becomes an instrument “of revelation, of ecstasy, of the wonder of understanding that is communion.”¹¹

Not only are revelation, ecstasy, and communion possible through language; so is *creation*. Just as God spoke the universe into being in the beginning, we who bear his image are called to speak creatively, productively, too. Language has *performative* power, which is to say that it changes things. Just as the minister’s marriage service speaks something into being (a new union), the language of *blessing* changes lives. The right words, spoken in faith and love, become vehicles of grace: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful *for building up*, as there is need, so that *your words may give grace* to those who hear” (Eph 4.29, emphasis added). Note the parallel between what God does for his creatures through words (he creates and grants grace) and what we are to do for each other through language (we build up and also extend grace). How might we do these godly things better? I conclude with four practical suggestions:

(1) We can speak less. The ancients knew that “less is more” when it comes to speech. Be “slow to speak” James advises (1.19). Bridle the tongue, he says (1.26). The Psalmist says, “I will keep a muzzle on my mouth” (39.1); “A flood of words is never without its faults,” says Proverbs (10.19). Sirach expresses it colorfully, “Do not make long-winded speeches in the gathering of the elders, and do not repeat yourself at your prayers” (7.14); “make for your mouth a door that locks” (21.25). In brief, renounce verbal profligacy.

(2) We can practice verbal etiquette. Sirach offers some very practical ways to achieve linguistic courtesy: “Do not answer without first listening. And do not interrupt while another is speaking” (*Sirach* 11.8). How talk radio and cable TV news shows would change if all commentators were bound by such principles!

(3) We can offer classes in our congregations in “the proper use of the tongue,” guided by the teachings of wisdom literature. Courses could cover how to communicate via social networks; how to avoid inflaming hostility; how to participate in difficult conversations; and how to use words to encourage others. Class members might learn the dying art of handwritten notes, personal phone calls, and even face-to-face conversation.

(4) We can practice the art of blessing. Blessing is not some quasi-magical, antiquated practice. According to Walter Brueggemann, a blessing is “an act—by speech or gesture—whereby one party transmits power for life to another party. This act of transmission, which occurs in a world of intense interpersonal relationships, is not explainable in any positivistic terms. . . . Viewed theologically, the transmission takes on the quality of the sacramental, so that more happens than can be explained.”¹²

A blessing is not merely wishing someone well. It is a bestowal of something of value. When Jesus blesses a sick, culturally marginalized woman, calling her a “daughter of Abraham” (Luke 13.16), he confers dignity and freedom upon her, making her equivalent to a princess. Christians today must be known for speech that confers dignity and worth upon others, especially on the weak and the powerless. This, I think, is the real point of James’s discourse on speech—to ensure that we are known for *eulogia*, that is, blessing others and celebrating the good.

10. Steiner, 58–59.

11. Steiner, 58.

12. Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 18–19.

Conclusion

One should consider that verbal blessings of many types are all around us. They need not have a churchy feel at all. I find blessing in the rich language of George Herbert and John Donne; in the hymns of Charles Wesley; in the litanies of *The Book of Common Prayer*; in the essays of Simone Weil and Blaise Pascal; in the letters of Flannery O'Connor; in the fiction of Leo Tolstoy and Marilynne Robinson.

Biography and autobiography can do this as well. Louie Zemperini is the subject of a remarkable biography, *Unbroken*, written by Laura Hillenbrand. A few months before Zemperini died, I was invited to a reception in his honor, but was not able to attend. A friend who was able to attend asked Mr. Zemperini to inscribe a copy of his biography to me. This World War II hero simply wrote in my book, "*To Darryl, Be hardy! Louie Zemperini.*"

What a curious imperative: "Be hardy!" Yet—considering Louie's arduous journey from teenage delinquency, to being lost at sea, to suffering unimaginable torture as a POW, to falling into alcoholism before coming to know Christ—those two little words, "Be hardy!" struck me as more than pithy advice "to hang in there." It was more like a friendly invitation to practice steadfastness in my life—to follow his example. It is exactly as Brueggemann says. In a blessing "one party transmits power for life to another party. . . . The transmission takes on the quality of the sacramental, so that more happens than can be explained." Often Louie's words, linked as they are to the witness of his example, mysteriously come to mind and encourage me.

As my father lay dying last October, many years after I had heard his harsh judgment, it was I who was able to bless him as he made his journey into the next life. In the end all I could offer Dad was my presence and my blessing, a gentle touch and a good word. In James's terms, we can "bless the Lord and Father," and we can give thanks for "those who are made in the likeness of God" (Jas 3.9). That seems to me the office of true religion and faithfulness at the very core.

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