

Have you ever said something that you regretted, something you wish you could have immediately taken back, and no one was the wiser? Probably! But once those words leave your mouth all you can really do is offer a quick apology, or say you didn't really mean what you said. Because, as we all know, there is really no way for us to actually take back what we say, unless, of course, we are using Twitter as our voice.

Twitter, as most of you probably know, is a social media platform that allows people to dump their thoughts on the world in 280 characters or less. It used to be 140 characters, but apparently back in 2017 the platform expanded the capacity for tweets because....well.....people wanted to have more opportunity to speak their minds.....And, to sometimes, put their digital feet in their mouths, either accidentally, or intentionally.

Even those who don't have a Twitter account know about it these days, because it seems like a lot of celebrities have gotten into some trouble using it. Actress Roseanne Barr was fired from the reboot of her famous television series because of some hurtful comments she posted on the social media platform. Director James Gunn was asked by Disney to leave the set of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Guardians of the Galaxy movie after some of his offensive tweets from 2009 resurfaced. And I believe that Spiderman's Tom Holland got in trouble for tweeting spoilers about the last Avengers movie before it was released in theaters.

Unfortunately, the instant nature of Twitter allows someone to run off at the mouth (er, keyboard) immediately in response to something they've read, seen, or experienced. Sometimes that means that one's fingers engage faster than one's brain. The result is often a major faux pas that is very public. If you're quick enough, however, you can immediately delete the tweet, and pull back your verbal misstep. This happened when the U.S. Department of Education posted a tweet in which a word was misspelled. Not a good thing, especially considering it was the

U.S. Department of Education! The tweet was deleted, and then reposted as follows: “Post updated — our deepest apologizes for the earlier typo.”

Efforts to delete a regretful tweet notwithstanding, we are often prone to saying things without thinking first, whether online or in person. In fact, the Apostle James addresses this human tendency to let loose talk run rampant in our second lesson this morning, and he was actually speaking to people living in a pre-Twitter world of the first century. He wrote his epistle to Jewish Christians in a tense situation.

Economic problems in the Roman world, in-fighting among different factions of Jews, and the growing revolutionary resistance of religious rebels in Judea, had put everyone on edge. In just a few years after James wrote today’s words, a powder keg of violence would be lit when Jewish insurgents revolted against Rome in 66 A.D. It was a disaster, culminating in the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. James’ concern was to help his brothers and sisters live with integrity and represent Christ in a world that seemed to be going off the rails. Like their ancestors in the Exile, those new to the Christian faith at that time needed to learn how to live as aliens in a foreign land.

It’s little wonder, then, that one of James’ primary concerns is the use of words. In a volatile environment, the wrong word can be the match that lights the fuse of violence, strife, and misunderstanding. “The tongue is a fire,” says James, that is “set on fire by hell.” Unlike a tweet that can be deleted, thus potentially limiting the damage; the wrong word said, in the wrong situation, can create an uncontrollable blaze that can consume a community and cause irreparable harm.

So James begins today’s narrative by warning teachers, who are really masters of words, about the potential for their words to cause problems that lead to error. “Not many of you should become teachers,” says James, “for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Teachers who use bad

grammar, who misspell words, and give false information reveal their incompetence and inattention to detail. Teachers are held, understandably, to a higher standard. Case in point, we expect tweets that come from the U.S. Department of Education to be grammatically pristine, don't we? Of course, mistakes do happen. All of us make them, and James acknowledges this.

Ideally, however, we should aspire to speak (and teach) with precision. When our words are sound, the whole "body" comes into line, just like a horse is controlled by a bit and bridle, and like a ship is controlled by a rudder. On the other hand, if these small controlling mechanisms are used incorrectly, they can lead the whole community to a destructive destination. Which, in turn can also lead to rumors, blessings, and/or curses.

In fact, James most likely was referring to rumors when he wrote, "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire." A misplaced word by the "tongue" can incite an individual or a whole "body" of people to violence, despair, or fear. When our speech is out of control, it has the potential to upset the entire created order. To emphasize this point James even refers back to the creation story itself in verses 7 and 8 when he reminds his readers that God gave humanity dominion over all the animals of the earth, and all of them have been "tamed" (not meaning "domesticated" but put in subjection to humanity).

In contrast to this, however, James mentions that no human has been able to tame the "tongue" because it's like trying to tame a venomous snake with a forked tongue. Out of the same mouth we can bless the Lord one minute and, in the very next, curse another fellow human being made in the image of God. Like mindless reptiles, we tend to be driven by the reptilian parts of our brains that are driven by fight or flight; thus we often speak (or tweet) without thinking about the implications of our words on others.

James declares, “My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” Instead, he says that, we need to pay attention to the *source* of our words — to consider our internal thought processes from which our words spring forth. If a spring is full of fresh water, it won’t be pumping out nasty, undrinkable liquid. A fig tree doesn’t produce olives, nor does a grapevine produce figs; and you can’t automatically get fresh water from salt water. Everything follows after its kind, James implies, and our words are the product of what’s going on inside of us.

So, how do we learn to “tame” our tongues to speak in ways that edify, instead of sparking dissension and destruction? Well, as James implies, it begins with us making an attempt to actually think before we speak. That’s an especially important skill to have in a world where Twitter storms, and nasty rhetoric, seem to be the norm. As Christians, we need to uphold a different way of speaking that is controlled, and that emerges, from the deep well of God’s wisdom. In other words, we need to engage the brain, and the Spirit, before we engage the tongue.

A book written by Alan Jacobs, a professor at Baylor University, provides great advice for how to repair the connection between the brain and the tongue. When someone posts an outrageous tweet, we’re prone to wonder, “What were they thinking?” Chances are, they weren’t. Jacobs suggests that we all need to relearn how to think before we engage the process of how to speak.

In his book, *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds*, Jacobs seems to be building on James’ advice when he offers a “Thinking Person’s Checklist” of good things to remember before we engage our tongues. While Jacobs offers his readers a list of 12 ideas for better thinking, those ideas can be boiled down to three main categories.

First, be slow. In a world of instant messaging, Twitter, and Facebook posts, it’s tempting to react quickly when confronted with an idea or a provocation. Our reptilian brain wants us to immediately fight or flee (or, in the case of Twitter,

retweet or bang out a 280-character response). But Jacobs suggests that when we are tempted to respond quickly, we should, instead, give it at least five minutes. Take a walk, make dinner, do some deep breathing — whatever it takes to get your body involved. **When our bodies are moving, our brains tend to have time to process.** Forgo the need for an instant response to that nasty email or “foolish” tweet. Or as James says earlier in his letter: “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”

Second, be teachable. Jacobs suggests that one of the reasons we are so quick to respond to things, in a Twitter culture, is that others are watching and we want to impress our like-minded friend group. He calls this group our “Inner Ring” and we get good vibes from those folks when we trash an opposing group. The truth, however, is that we can learn a lot from others, even from those with whom we disagree. The key is found in choosing good conversation partners.

Of course, there are plenty of “trolls” out there, particularly on social media, who simply want to stir the pot. But as the old adage says: “Don’t wrestle with pigs. You only end up getting dirty while the pigs enjoy it.” Avoid those who fire off ideas like missiles and, instead, seek out the best and fairest minded of people with whom you disagree. Although you may believe they are wrong at times, that doesn’t mean you get to categorize them as evil, after all, remember, you are often wrong, too.

Finally, be honest. When you do speak, state what you think and believe with conviction, but make sure you draw from the well of God’s wisdom and love when you do so. As James says, “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” When we speak out of wisdom, “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” So...let’s be slow, let’s be teachable, and let’s be honest. I’m certain we can agree that’s helpful advice for

us in an age where good thinking and speaking are in short supply. As James reminds us today, and anytime we read his letter, our words matter, so let us take time to think and speak clearly, whether it's with our mouths, our phones, or our keyboards! Amen. Thanks be to God.