SLOW DOWN BUT DON’T STOP — TALK TO EACH OTHER

By David Diestelkamp

When James says we are to be “slow to speak” (Jas. 1:19), he doesn’t mean that we should not speak at all. Slow down, but don’t stop! Christians need to talk to each other. Whatever the issue, problem, controversy, or difference is we need to talk about it. We need to use words that are carefully chosen—“gracious, seasoned with salt” (Col. 4:6 ESV)—but we need to speak. There should be no passive aggressive silent treatment between disciples of Christ; no refusals to explain why we are angry or leaving; no ghosting discussions because we don’t want to (or can’t) give an answer or “reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15).

***Times for silence***

I’m aware that Scripture says that there are times for to be silent. We should not answer before we listen (Prov. 18:13). We should be quiet if all we just want to hear is our own opinions (Prov. 18:2). We should keep our mouths shut if opening our mouths will show us to be fools (Prov. 17:27-28). We aren’t required to keep talking to a fool or throw our pearls before pigs (Prov. 23:9; Matt. 7:6). We should push the mute button when we are tempted to vent (Prov. 29:11) and put our hands over our mouths when we find ourselves arguing with God (Job 40:4). But is this all there is to the righteous use of the tongue – silence?

***A deadly fire***

I know that James says that “…the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell…” and “…*It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (Jas. 3:6-8). Our mouths can cause a world of trouble and hurt through idle chatter, divisive words, gossip, being a busybody (1 Tit. 5:13), and whispering (Prov. 26:20), and meddling in other people’s affairs (1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:11; 1 Pet. 4:15). We can’t forget judging and condemning one another (Rom. 14:4; Jas. 4:11), lying, flattery, bragging (Prov. 26:28; 27:2), slander, arguing (Prov. 18:6; 20:3), and being a false-witness (Prov. 24:28). Swearing, obscenities, dirty words, and even off-color jokes are to have no part in us (Col. 3:8; Eph. 5:4). Is it hopeless? Is silence the only option?

***Bridling***

While it is true that we can’t *tame* the tongue (Jas. 3:8)—we can never trust it or let it run free – it can be controlled. James uses the illustration of a bit that makes it possible to turn a horse (Jas. 3:3). A bit is a piece of metal, rope, or leather that is placed in a horse’s mouth and attached to the bridle (the ropes or straps held by the rider). Pulling the bridle to the right or left causes the bit to put pressure on the horse’s mouth, turning the horse’s head and signaling the horse to turn their whole body in that direction. James is reminding us that something small (a bit) can cause a big effect (turn a whole horse). Not only does James warn that our little tongues can do a lot of damage, but also that bridling the tongue can “turn [our] whole body”. We can’t tame the tongue, but it isn’t hopeless. It can be controlled. This is what the wise writer refers to as restraining our lips (Prov. 10:19) and guarding our mouths (Prov. 13:3; 21:23). In doing this, it is possible to teach our mouths and add learning to our lips (Prov. 16:23).

***Give grace***

Why did God give us tongues and the ability to speak if it is so dangerous? Someone told me it is like giving razor blades to a baby to play with. I’ll confess that I probably spend more time preaching about the dangers of the tongue than I do about the blessings. Unfortunately, this may leave the impression that God made a mistake, that it would be better for us not to have tongues or just be quiet all the time. This would be worse than all the dangers of the tongue combined!

If it is dangerous and God gave it to us anyway, it must be worth the risk. Ephesians 4:29 says, “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.” We often stop at the “corrupt word” part and miss the “what is good” part. It’s not enough to “let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth.” Silence isn’t enough. “What is good for necessary edification” must fill the silence. Edifying words “impart grace to the hearers.” (Silence does not.) Imparting grace makes all the risks of the tongue worth it.

***What silence misses***

Here are a few ways that grace can be imparted with the tongue but can be lost through silence: verbal prayer, exhortation, encouragement, praise, glorification, sympathy, greetings, confession, teaching, correction, rebuke, speaking the truth, expressing forgiveness, invitation, singing, giving thanks, testifying, expressing love and relationship, explanation, apology, accepting responsibility, edification, answers, reasons, clarifications, mediation, peacemaking, advocacy, righteous judgment, wisdom, advice, preaching, speaking the truth… These are a few of the reasons for the very existence of our tongues! Proverbs 18:21 says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue…” It’s not *just* death! We can give *life* by what we say.

***Ungodly silence***

I’ve already shown that there is a time for silence. But silence should be the exception and not the rule for Christians. “*Let* your speech always *be* with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one” (Col. 4:6; cf Eph. 4:29). When we choose to be silent, we need to do some soul searching to make sure our motives for not speaking are pure because there is no way to “impart grace to the hearers” by speaking. It’s not about not whether we want to talk or feel like talking. It’s not about it being awkward or difficult. It’s not about whether or not people are approachable or we think they’ll respond well. We have grace to impart to the hearer—to “each person” (ESV)—not just the ones we choose. This is why we have tongues—and our Lord expects us to impart grace!

***Problems***

Not all differences between Christians need to be talked about. Paul begs: “walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:1-2). But let’s be honest—if we can’t bear it, can’t tolerate it, or can’t keep it from affecting our relationship or thoughts of one another, then we need to talk. We don’t resort to silent treatment or avoidance or breaking fellowship without talking. If it’s medicine, politics, styles, culture, friendliness, personality, sports, pets, or other matters of opinion—choose your words carefully (“seasoned”) and bear with each other. If someone sins against you, Jesus Himself says we must go and talk to them with the goal of gaining our brother (Matt. 18:15-17). This is the only option. And there’s no waiting around for the other person to reach out, even if he has a problem with us: “…if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Matt. 5:23-24). Communication is not optional.

Be slow to speak, but speak. Use no corrupt words but words of grace. The family of God should be able to talk at times and about topics when the world cannot. And talking can be beautiful, “like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Prov. 25:11). Let’s talk!