



More Important Than You Think

How Do You Impact Others Most?

You may have heard that comedian Chris Rock told a joke about actor Will Smith's wife Jada at the Oscar's Ceremony this past year. Will Smith got up from his seat, went on stage and slapped Chris Rock in the face. It was labeled "the slap heard around the world". Despite the fact that Will Smith later won an Oscar for best actor, no one cared about that. All that was talked about was the slap. This was a classic example of actions vs. speech. Chris Rock said something, and Will Smith did something. Now you could argue which of the two was most "impactful", the joke or the slap. Would Smith have slapped Chris Rock if he had not told the joke? Of course not. Now, did Chris Rock know he would be slapped for telling the joke? Most likely he didn't. Both were responsible for what they did, each has been impacted negatively by what took place that night. Yet if you did not know anything more about the details than this, Chris Rock told a joke at the Oscars, Will Smith slapped a man at the Oscar's, you would most likely decide Will Smith made the most egregious mistake. Yet did he? Was the joke not painful also? Did it not hurt perhaps as much, if not more than the slap? As social beings made in God's image, we can make our biggest impact through what we say as opposed to what we do. We state rather confidently that actions speak louder than words, but I wonder, and you may also, if that is always the case.

James, in a rather long commentary on how we use our words to impact others, labels the tongue as a controlling power, much like a bit in the mouths of animals and a rudder on a ship. He doesn't stop there though; James calls the tongue a tiny spark that sets an entire forest on fire. The tongue is according to James, a great storehouse of potential, both for great good as well as horrific evil. Winston Churchill used his tongue to stir up a collective surge of courage in his country when many had fallen into despair. Adolf Hitler made his tongue the tool for generating a national frenzy of hatred. The tongue can whisper a juicy bit of gossip into the ear of a potential murderer and with the genius of a well-placed comment inspire generosity and kindness. Words have led to both marriages and divorces. James sternly warns us about the way we use our words and what we say. **The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.** (James 3: 6 NIV)

This is interesting phrasing that James uses. The Greek word translated "course" is "trokos" and describes anything made to revolve and to keep running such as a wheel. What is rendered "life" is the Greek word "genesis" and describes the beginning of life: birth, existence. The sense of this is that James is talking about the wheel set in motion at birth, the continuing of one's life. The tongue he says is an evil that corrupts completely a person's life and continues to do so. What is fascinating is that the possibility is here that he is not just talking about one person but generations that follow. Corrupted words can leave a lasting impact upon a social order, a culture, a nation. Let me use an example from the Bible to illustrate this phenomenon. Paul the Apostle cites a commonly held belief among many Jewish people that incited racial hatred. **Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons."** (Titus 1: 12 NIV) Anger, hatred, racism, and jealousy almost always are brought to life by a spoken word either in a conversation or a comment made. Sermons and speeches have led to wars. Even today we see the head of the Russian Orthodox church fanning the flames of hatred toward the people of Ukraine through his words..

Racism isn't created in a vacuum. It comes to life in people's hearts when one person passes the thought along that others are inferior through jokes, offhand comments, and assumptions. Your life has been altered many times over by what has been said to you either about you or someone else. You are shaped by words, and you shape others by what you say. None of us are impermeable to the opinions and comments made by someone else. The more we value or respect the person speaking, the greater the impact.

Sometimes we say things that are hurtful or tempt the heart of someone else to turn away from the good of God and we insist that we meant nothing by that. James however makes a profound statement about human nature and personality. **With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.** (James 3:9-12 NIV) We do say things we later regret. Sometimes we come to hate the very words that come out of our mouths. But the inane comment often made now when someone's words become public knowledge and they create an uproar is simply not true. "That is not me" or "That is not how I am." Of course it is you who made that ridiculous, hateful statement. Who else is it? James insists that if you are saying hurtful, foul things, it is a reflection of who you are, and it is a sign of what is you deep within. You cannot claim you are a good person if you lie, curse, gossip or talk badly about people when they aren't there. Our words are very much a mirror reflecting what lives in the soul.

I want to share five pillars of speech found in the Bible. There are many more you could perhaps name but these stood out to me as I was praying about this aspect of the message. 1. Encourage others. Make your comments uplifting and supportive. **Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.** (1 Thessalonians 5: 11 NIV) 2. Make certain that what you are saying is truthful and honest. It is tough sometimes to respond to a question that will lead you to say something you don't want to express. Be forthright and say you don't want to answer the question. It is better to do that than tell a "white lie". Proverbs 12: 22 makes it clear God wants us to be honest people. **The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful.** (Proverbs 12: 22 NIV) 3. Never use swear words. Strike them from your thoughts as well as your conversations. I remember when I was starting college I came across this verse during my quiet time and realized my normal conversations at school and on the basketball courts needed to be cleansed. **But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.** (Colossians 3: 8 NIV) Swearing is just not an option for those who want to walk with God. 4. Admit your mistakes and the ways you have acted badly toward those you have hurt. In other words, confess your sins as soon as possible. **Admit your faults to one another and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous man has great power and wonderful results.** (James 5:16 TLB) What I especially like about this statement is the connection between admitting our faults and praying for those with faults. Rather than criticizing, belittling, or talking badly about how someone has wronged you, pray for that person to gain a special touch of God. Isn't that much better for our mental health and wellbeing? 5. Praise the Lord. What a great way to use your words to bring honor and glory to God. Compliment God. Show your faith in Him by what you say. Let it be clear you are proud of Christ and happy to have Him as your Savior. David the ancient king gives us this wonderful admonition. **Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good; sing praise to his name, for that is pleasant.** (Psalm 135: 3 NIV)

Make good use of the opportunities God gives you to speak. Wouldn't it be great to be the one who others look forward to hearing what you have to say? Always remember that what you say is who you are and that is always the case. May your words shine like gold and bring comfort like the streams found in the desert.