

## **Me & My Big Mouth: 1. Quick to Listen**

**James 1:19-21**

**October 13, 2019**

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Me and My Big Mouth. This is something we usually say to ourselves after we have said something we regret to someone. Have you ever said that? Let's say it together. Me and my big mouth! In preparation for this message today, I asked some friends and family to share with me some of their "me and my big mouth" moments and their permission to share them with you. Here are a few:

- I was complaining about my boss to a coworker, only to turn around and find my boss standing right behind me. *Me and my big mouth!*
- A pastor friend of mine ran into a member from a former church whom he had not seen in a few years. As they were catching up, he said, "How's your mother doing? Did she ever remarry?" To which the other person said, "Yes, she did. In fact, you did her wedding." *Me and my big mouth!*
- Another friend said, the first time I met my girlfriend's mother, I wanted to compliment her with something like, 'I can see where Jane got her good looks!' Instead it came out, 'Wow, I'll bet when you were Jane's age you used to be good-looking, too!' *Me and my big mouth!*

We've all had these moments. Right? Some of my worst "Me and My Big Mouth" moments came when arguing with my daughter, Elizabeth, when she was in high school. Now to be fair, she knew exactly how to push my buttons but I was quick to do the mom thing and assert my knowledge and wisdom over her that came with my age and experience. My arguments were all about me and how much I knew and how right I was. I was offering her good counsel. Why couldn't she see this? I knew I was right and our arguments usually ended with Elizabeth being sent to her room while Jerry and I discussed what her punishment would be. What I neglected to do most of the time was to try to understand her. I was not searching for a win-win solution. I was talking way too much and listening too little. In these kinds of situations, we can be so focused on being right that we right ourselves right out of a relationship with the people we love the most. Because people don't want to be lectured, they want to be understood.

In today's scripture passage, James offers advice around the dangers of talking too much and listening too little. James was the half-brother of Jesus. They had the same father, Joseph, but James only shows up in the Bible after the Gospel stories of Jesus because James thought Jesus was crazy. I mean, wouldn't you too if your brother went around claiming to be the son of God? But after witnessing Jesus' crucifixion on the cross and then only a few days later, having breakfast with him on the beach, James was convinced. So now believing that Jesus was indeed the son of God, James emerges as one of the leaders in the early church in Jerusalem. He was a believer in the resurrection, after all he had witnessed this first hand, but the high priest, Ananus, did not believe in life after death. Ananus was a Sadducee. The Sadducees were a Jewish sect that followed the written Jewish law and denied the resurrection and any afterlife. They believed that you lived and then died and that was it. So he was sad, you see, because he didn't believe in heaven. I know! That's an old, bad joke but it helps us remember what the Sadducees believed, no heaven, no after-life.

So Ananus, seeing James as a threat, decides he needs to get rid of him. And when the Roman governor of Judea dies, while waiting for the next governor to arrive, Roman law states that the high priest is in charge. So Ananus seizes this opportunity. He accuses James of

breaking Jewish law and has him arrested. Then he convenes what is equivalent to our Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin, and they convict James and stone him to death. But James' writings to the early church are still applicable and relevant to us today.

James said it important is for us to learn to listen to one another and to only speak at the right time. Let's look closely at this passage. Here's the opening line, "Dear brothers and sister." Now remember, in the first century, women were considered to be the property of their fathers or husbands. They had no rights. They could not testify in court. Their fathers decided who they would marry based on how it benefited their fathers financially or politically. But in this opening statement, James elevated the status of women to be equal with men. He had been impacted by how his brother Jesus treated people. Jesus accepted everyone. And in this opening statement, James is saying here, times have changed. This is a new day.

He goes on, "Take note." Pay attention. This is important. "Everyone should be quick to listen..." Quick to listen? We can't really speed up how we listen but we can make it our first priority. James is saying that before you do anything else, listen. If we're honest, don't we all want others to listen to what we are saying? Remember the Golden Rule, "Do unto others what you would want them to do unto you." Matthew 7:12. Quick to listen.

Then James says, "and be slow to speak." This doesn't mean speak slowly. It means "be late" to speak. Wait to speak. And when you do speak, don't start with a response, a reply or a comeback. Instead, ask questions. Be curious. I have a friend who is really good at this. She asks really good clarifying questions and if she runs out of good questions, she says, "Can you say more about that?" Because the more the other person talks and the more we listen, the more we learn. The better we understand what the other person is saying. Judge Judy says that God gave us 2 ears and one mouth for a reason. Quick to listen. Slow to speak.

When we're in an emotionally charged conversation, we don't usually listen with the intent to understand. We typically listen with the intent to reply. We're either speaking or preparing to speak. Think about how much damage we do when we speak before we have all the facts. Think about how many people have been guilty in our minds, yet they were innocent. Add to that the fact that we often don't even wait for people to finish their sentences before we jump in and start speaking. We hear the other person talking, but we're not listening, instead we are busy formulating our quick comeback. When we do this, we can't begin to understand how the other person is thinking or feeling. So, as soon as they are done speaking, we are ready with our words. James says instead, be quick to listen. Slow to speak, so to understand where the other person is coming from.

So what does James say next? "And slow to become angry." Slow to become angry can be both a result and a decision. There's a marriage enrichment course that uses the comparison of a rhino and a porcupine when talking about conflict in relationships. It says that people tend to respond to conflict in one of two ways. They respond like a rhino or a porcupine. Some people, like rhinos, are aggressive and loud. When they feel attacked, they charge, leading with their horns. Other people, like porcupines, are more passive. When they're attacked, they withdraw; they curl up into a ball and put out their prickly quills. While a porcupine's behavior is more socially acceptable, it is equally as hurtful and controlling. True confession. When I'm angry, this is how I tend to respond. I roll up in a ball, go inward and try to get Jerry to say, "What's wrong?" To which I reply, "Nothing." Maybe you recognize yourself in this conversation, "What's wrong? What's wrong?" Nothing. Then Jerry says, "I know something is wrong." Nothing. I'm not proud of this. We all go one way or the other. We blow up and charge like the

rhino or we roll up and go inward like the porcupine. Which one are you? This could be an interesting topic of discussion at the dinner table tonight.

James is saying, the longer you listen, the more you'll learn and the less angry you'll be. The more you listen, the more you'll learn and the less angry you'll be. Because guess what? Everything that everyone **says**, makes sense to them. Everything that everyone **does** makes sense to them and everything that everyone **believes**, makes sense to them. If I do not understand why a person says what they say, or does what they do or believe what they believe, who am I to criticize them? In his book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families*, Stephen Covey's 5th habit is, "Seek first to understand then to be understood." Create an atmosphere of helpful give-and-take by **taking the time to fully understand** the issues."

When we're just listening to reply, we don't learn anything and if we are not learning anything, it's going to be very hard to build the relationship. Author, John Maxwell says, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Covey says feeling cared for is achieved through a skill called empathetic listening. It is human nature to listen through our own lenses of experience and beliefs. Our natural instinct is to evaluate, advise, probe and interpret. But empathetic listening authentically seeks to understand what is being said by getting inside another person's frame of reference. You look through their words to see the world in different ways, the way they see the world. You try to understand their paradigm. You seek to understand how they feel. The essence of empathetic listening is not that you agree with someone; it's that you fully, deeply, understand that person emotionally and intellectually. It is listening so to **produce an understanding response** to gain a greater understanding of how the person is thinking or feeling. It creates a safe space to share and open up and builds the relationship. How do we do it? Let's listen and learn.

**Cassandra:** Oh, mom. I have some bad news. Meg got kicked out of the school play today.

**Mom:** Why?

**Cassandra:** She was caught in her boyfriend's car on school grounds, and he was drinking. If you get caught drinking on school grounds, you get in big trouble. And actually, it's not fair. Meg wasn't drinking. Just her boyfriend was drunk.

**Mom:** Well, Cassandra. I think it serves Meg right for keeping bad company. I've warned you that people will judge you by your friends. I've told you that a hundred times. I don't see why you and your friends can't understand that. I hope you learn a lesson from this. Life is tough enough without hanging around with someone like that guy. Why wasn't she in class? I hope you were in class when all of this was going on. You were, weren't you?

**Cassandra:** Mom, it's okay. Mellow out! Don't get so mad. It wasn't me, it was Meg. Gosh, all I wanted to do was tell you something about someone else, and I get the 10 minute lecture on my bad friends. I'm going to bed.

Now, let's look what happens to this conversation when Cassandra's mother tries first to understand.

**Cassandra:** Mom, I have some bad news. Meg got kicked out of the school play today.

**Mom:** Oh, honey, you seem really upset.

**Cassandra:** I feel so bad about it, Mom. It wasn't her fault. It was her boyfriend's. He's a jerk.

**Mom:** Hmm, you don't like him?

**Cassandra:** I sure don't, Mom. He's always in trouble. She's a good girl, and he drags her down. It makes me sad.

**Mom:** You feel he's a bad influence on her, and that hurts you because she's your good friend.

**Cassandra:** I wish she'd drop this guy and go with someone nice. Bad friends get you in trouble.

Notice how the mother's desire to understand was reflected in the way she responded to her daughter the second time. She didn't attempt to share her own experiences or ideas. She didn't evaluate, probe, advise or interpret. She responded in a way that helped her to clarify her own understanding of what Cassandra was saying and communicated that understanding back to Cassandra.

This is bigger than just you and me getting along. There's a God agenda here. "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, **because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.**" Human anger does not produce right-ness (righteousness) that God desires. We want to be right AT each other but God wants us to be right WITH each other. There's a big difference! When we consider the WE more important than I, when we consider others more significant than ourselves, when we seek to understand the other's perspective, **it changes us**. And when that happens, we are better able to communicate with others and build our relationships. It shines the Christ is in us. Jesus gave a new commandment, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." John 13:34

Our goal in life is not to be right. It is to do what Jesus did and love each other. He came to reconcile us to God and to one another, to restore relationships. So how can we do that? James goes on... "**Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent.**" The Greek word here for "get rid of" literally means to "take off" like we'd take off a coat or a hat. We have to take off that name tag that says, "I'm right," hit the pause button, take off malice, harm, the "getting even", the quick comebacks, "**and humbly accept** the word planted in you, which can save you." Humility says, "We are more important than I." You are more important than me. Being right with you, reconciling with you, restoring my relationship with you, is more important to me than being right. That what humility looks like. It makes us able to "**receive the word that is planted in you.**" The Word. If you're a Christian, you know THE WORD means Jesus. God sent his son into the world to redeem the world. He put you, and me and everyone else ahead of himself. And now he's asking you to do the same for others. The Word has the power to save you, to save you here and now. The Word has the power to save your relationship, save your job, save you from speaking hurtful words, save your marriage, and even save your life.

**Grow, Pray, Study for Week of October 13, 2019**

**Weekly Prayer:** God, help me be curious about what others do, say, and believe. I want to begin asking questions before drawing conclusions. Help me make things right instead of trying to be right. Amen.

## Monday, October 14

### Scripture: James 3:13-18

Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above. Instead, it is from the earth, natural and demonic. Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil. What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.

**Observation:** The letter of James is a New Testament Book of Proverbs in that it has a major interest in wisdom. Wisdom is a kind of knowing how the world, or the Kingdom of God, works, and then living accordingly. According to James, the qualities of a wise person come from above (vs 17-18). This is in contrast to qualities found in earthly wisdom (vs 14-16). Wise people are “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to grow angry.” (1:19)

**Application:** What is James warning against harboring in our hearts? He tells us not to pretend it is not there, if it is (v. 14). But if we do harbor these feelings, how do we rid ourselves of them?

**Prayer:** Pray over today’s verses, asking God to remove that which may need to be removed in your heart (or to protect you from it in the future) and then asking for God to form the characteristics of true wisdom in your heart. *God, give me the wisdom that I need to listen and understand. Amen.*

## Tuesday, October 15

### Scripture: James 3:2-12

We all make mistakes often, but those who don’t make mistakes with their words have reached full maturity. Like a bridled horse, they can control themselves entirely. When we bridle horses and put bits in their mouths to lead them wherever we want, we can control their whole bodies. Consider ships: They are so large that strong winds are needed to drive them. But pilots direct their ships wherever they want with a little rudder. In the same way, even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly. Think about this: A small flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives. Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell. People can tame and already have tamed every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish. No one can tame the tongue, though. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God’s likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn’t be this way! Both fresh water and salt water don’t come from the same spring, do they? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree produce olives? Can a grapevine produce figs? Of course not, and fresh water doesn’t flow from a saltwater spring either.

**Observation:** If you have ever wondered whether there is some kind of test to see how your walk with God is progressing, the answer is yes. The tongue is a strong indicator of not only where you are in your relationship with Jesus but also what kind of person you are. With your words, you can bring out both the good in your heart as well as the fires of hell themselves.

**Application:** Have you ever said something that created more of an uproar than you ever thought possible? How did that affect you? Has your walk with God been tested this week by

unexpected frustrations, financial insecurity, or something else? When have you failed? When have you succeeded?

**Prayer:** Merciful God, you know when my thoughts and words have done harm. I have also brought harm to my relationship with you when my words have not honored you. Forgive me. Draw me close so that your image will be seen and heard through me. Amen.

### **Wednesday, October 16**

**Scripture: James 1:19-20, 3:1**

Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness.

My brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers, because we know that we teachers will be judged more strictly.

**Observation:** As you read today's scripture, ask God to help you put these verses into practice in your life. The theme of potential wrongful use of our tongues is found throughout James. The most detailed discussion of it comes in James 3. Here James warns that one potential for misusing our tongues is in teaching or leading others. The placement of this verse at the beginning of the section on misusing the tongue may indicate that the leaders in the churches were struggling with problems related to the tongue.

**Application:** Consider the various metaphors James uses to describe the tongue in chapter 3 (refer to yesterday's reading). Does the tongue corrupt us, or does our heart corrupt our tongue? How might our words serve as a concealed weapon?

**Prayer:** Do you need to ask forgiveness for any carelessly spoken words that did not reflect the love of God? Ask for God's mercy and help. Remember, God is also ready to offer forgiveness when we approach God in honesty and humility.

### **Thursday, October 17**

**Scripture: James 1:19; Proverbs 18:21; Proverbs 12:18**

Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue; those who love it will eat its fruit.

Some chatter on like a stabbing sword, but a wise tongue heals.

**Observation:** When something is on fire the rule is to stop, drop, and roll, and the same can be said of the tongue. In order to change the tongue from an instrument of hurt and destruction to a power agent of healing, you first need to stop, think, and become slow to speak. Words have power to shape your reality both good and bad. Before speaking, engage the Spirit - before engaging your mouth.

**Application:** Are you more positive or negative in your speaking? How can you change for the better? Has anybody ever hurt you with words? What happened? Your words have the power to shape your reality.

**Prayer:** God, grant me the will to stop and the patience to listen before a word is on my tongue. Help me to listen to you and how you want me to build others up. Let me be your instrument of healing. Amen.

### **Friday, October 18**

**Scripture: Matthew 12:34; 2 Corinthians 10:5**

Children of snakes! How can you speak good things while you are evil? What fills the heart comes out of the mouth.

...and every defense that is raised up to oppose the knowledge of God. They capture every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

**Observation:** Once you stop, it is time to drop - which means seeking God's perspective and understanding. This actually is a heart issue, because your words reveal the content and priorities of your heart. When you begin seeking God's perspective and take on God's priorities, it will affect both what you say as well as how you love and prioritize the people around you, which is God's main concern.

**Application:** What two or three things do you talk about the most? Do they reveal your life priorities? Are you more inclined to try to understand others thoughts and opinions or speak your own mind first? How much do you seek God's understanding and thoughts each day? How does that affect what you say to other people?

**Prayer:** God, open my heart and my mind to your will and ways. Grant me the patience to listen and to understand so that relationships become more important than being right. Help me to love. Amen.

### **Saturday, October 19**

**Scripture: Romans 4:17; Proverbs 12:25; Ephesians 4:29**

As it is written: *I have appointed you to be the father of many nations.*<sup>[a]</sup> So Abraham is our father in the eyes of God in whom he had faith, the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that don't exist into existence.

Anxiety leads to depression, but a good word encourages.

Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say.

**Observation:** After stopping and dropping, it's time to roll which means only speaking faith and God's purposes into your life and into the life of others. To do so, you need to guard yourself from saying divisive and negative words as well as those people who speak them to you. See Matthew 17:20. Jesus said when confronted by a mountain don't talk about the mountain or complain about the mountain, but speak to the mountain and watch God move it.

**Application:** *Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.* (Proverbs 4:23, New International Version) It is easy for us to carry around one negative word and let that shape our reality and then ignore one hundred positive words. How do you guard against destructive words or divisive remarks of other people?

**Prayer:** God, help me to hear the truth that you speak. You give life each day. You claim me as your own each day. Your love for me is unconditional. Let this day begin with gratitude for your acceptance and let this day end with gratitude for your unfailing love. Amen.