

Speaking Biblically

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Introductory Skit

Display a series of weapons (e.g. a knife, rope, slingshot) and show that each can be used to maim and to bless. Then announce a more potent weapon than those and disclose it by framing a volunteer's mouth.

Message

According to Scripture, the human mouth is every much a weapon as these other weapons and, just as with the other weapons, the mouth can be used both to hurt and to bless.

James 3:8-10 *"But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so"*

When the Scripture says that "no man can tame the tongue," it is referring to taming the way we tame animals – by conditioning them with rewards and punishments. The tongue does, nevertheless, need to be controlled:

Psalms 39:1 *"To Yeduthun I said, 'I will guard my ways, lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle, while the wicked are before me.'"*

Yes, the tongue needs to be controlled, but not by physical conditioning; yes, is a physical part of the body, but it is tied closely to the condition of its owner's heart. See in Matthew 12:34-37, how Yeshua admonishes the Pharisees about the improper use of their mouths, and what it has to do with their hearts:

"Brood of vipers!..."

Yeshua is not very happy with them!

"...How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the Day of Judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

I did not choose this subject for today's message for its theological interest. I chose it because the way we use our mouths – the way we speak to each other and about each other – can either build up or break down our Ohev community. By what it speaks, the mouth can either be an instrument for blessing or cursing – an instrument of provision and nurture, or a weapon that kills.

Before I go further in discussing the particulars of how we ought and ought not to use the mouths that God gave us, I would like to review some Scriptures on the subject so that we have an understanding of how God views this:

Proverbs 10:31-32 *“The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, But the perverse tongue will be cut out. The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable, But the mouth of the wicked what is perverse.”*

Proverbs 21:23 *“Whoever guards his mouth and tongue Keeps his soul from troubles.”*

Psalms 50:16-22 *“But to the wicked God says: ‘What right have you to declare My statutes, Or take My covenant in your mouth, seeing you hate instruction and cast My words behind you? When you saw a thief, you consented with him, and have been a partaker with adulterers. You give your mouth to evil, and your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother's son. These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought that I was altogether like you; But I will rebuke you, And set them in order before your eyes.’ Now consider this, you who forget God, Lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver...”*

Ephesians 4:29 *“Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.”*

Romans 1:28-30 *“And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, ...”*

And referring to the younger widows of the First Century community we read:

1Timothy 5:13 *“And besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not.”*

James 1:26 *“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.”*

1Peter 2:1 *“Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, ...”*

And God expects us to use our mouths properly even when confronted by our enemies:

Romans 12:14 *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”*

Many of us have heard the Hebrew term *Leshon Hara*. *Leshon Hara* is any negative speech about a person regardless of the truth of what is said, the justification of saying it, and even whether it is only said privately to the person who is the subject of the negative remarks. Consequently, *Leshon Hara* is not always prohibited and, in fact, it is sometimes required such

as when accusatory testimony is given in a court of law. That notwithstanding, Jewish understanding is that speaking negatively about a person is to be discouraged and only engaged in when necessary and under controlled conditions.

What makes this NOT SIMPLE, is that none of us consciously sets out to harm a person by our speech, and yet we sometimes fall into doing it; sometimes we catch ourselves and sometimes we are completely oblivious to our transgression. None of us is immune; not the young among us, nor the old; not the parent nor the child; not the elder nor the new disciple. Negative remarks made about a person can be accidental or driven by emotions such as anger and fear, or it can be deliberate such as when one seeks to punish or gain an advantage.

Here are some hypothetical cases that are realistic. A young man in the congregation has feelings for a young woman, and becomes emotionally desperate for reciprocation (translated – that means he wants her to say she feels similarly). But there is a problem. There is another young man in the congregation with the same affections, and the young woman knows it. So, rather than put it in God's hands and pray that the Lord's will be done in the matter, the first young man begins to make disparaging remarks to the young woman about his rival in the hope that she will be persuaded to lose interest in the rival. The second boy, the rival, finds out about it, becomes angry, and does similarly to get back at the first boy. I started out by calling them young men and have switched to calling them boys because they are now acting more children than like the men in the Lord they aspire to be.

Let's take a look now at the pattern of sin and destruction that has been sown into the congregation. It is clear to us, looking at it from the outside, that the backbiting and tale-telling engaged in by the two young men are sin, but interestingly, neither of THEM are conscious of it, nor are they conscious that they are waging war against each other with the weapon of their mouths. To them it is natural to blurt out disparaging remarks about the other because they are fixated only on achieving their desired end result – winning the lady's affections. What they are also unaware of is that they have placed the young woman they profess care for in a position of temptation to fall into sin herself by allowing them to fill her ears with poison about the other. The only right thing for her to do is to refuse to hear either of them, chastise them for their unbiblical conduct, and call them to repentance. But is she mature enough and secure enough to do it? If not, she has become a facilitator of the young men's sin and is now herself in sin, and three young people are now sinning. But it does not stop there. It does not take long before each of their friends hears about what is going on and begins to take sides. Now it is the entire congregation that is in sin because sin lives in the camp.

Here's another hypothetical case that is all too common. A woman in the congregation believes she is not liked by another woman and, to support her contention, she holds on to the memory of several incidents where the other woman either ignored her or was short with her. Her discomfort about this grows over time, and she feels she cannot contain it any longer so she confides in her friend about how disrespectfully she has been treated. Now she has chosen this particular friend to dump on because she knows her friend is largely undisciplined and will sympathize and agree with her complaint rather than call her to repentance. We now have two women who are gossiping about the character of a third woman who is unaware that this is happening.

The first woman's offense has now been transferred to the second woman who has now internalized it as her own, using the logic that an offense against her friend is also an offense against her. As she becomes increasingly uncomfortable thinking about how the first woman behaved toward her friend, she begins to avoid the first woman and acts strangely when she cannot avoid her. She now reveals all this to yet another woman, besmirching the first woman's character in the process, but does not think to explain that her complaint is second-hand and that her angry attitude has been caused by her having taken up her friend's offense. This third woman receives the bad report, so we now have three women involved in the sin of gossip. Relationships are broken, and once again the congregation is in sin because there is unrepentant sin in the camp. And by the way, two weeks later, it is no longer three women but six, because each talked to another. As in the case of the two young men and the young woman, there was a way that this could have been short-circuited and the spread of sin stopped, but none of the women had the boldness of character to do it. What had to be done was for each woman who found herself receiving a bad report to stop the story-teller from finishing, refuse to hear the rest, and direct her to comply with Matthew 18:15 which states:

"Moreover if your brother..."

(in this case your sister)

"...sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly do that," she will say, "I wasn't the one who was originally offended!"

Then you should tell her: "Well, that makes a difference! Now a different Scripture applies – it is 1 Peter 4:15:"

"But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters."

It seems harsh to associate being a "busybody in other people's matters" with the horrendous sins of murder, thievery, and doing evil, but I don't think this Scripture is a mistake. It highlights how serious and damaging God considers gossip to be compared with how casually we have come to regard it. And you notice that, once again, there was a way to stop the gossip, and that was to refuse to receive it, and immediately direct the gossipier to Scripture that defined her sin and called for her repentance.

Do you doubt your strength and conviction to stop gossip by refusing to receive it? It is one of the obligations of a disciple of Yeshua, and God will help you. I sometimes have congregants come to me hoping that, as Rabbi, I will take over their complaint and do the hard work of confronting someone, leaving the actual complainer anonymous. I can tell you now that if you come to me with that expectation, I will stop you from relating the story to me as soon as I understand where the conversation is going, and I will direct you to go to the person that you have a complaint against as the only person who can properly do it.

There are so many ways that we can use our mouths to hurt and so many ways that we can use our mouths to bless. We could never cover them all or even think of them all, so that's why it is so important to know the Scriptures that define the categories. Let me leave you with these few:

TaleBearing

Proverbs 11:13 *"A talebearer reveals secrets, But he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter."*

Proverbs 18:7-8 *"A fool's mouth is his destruction, And his lips are the snare of his soul. The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, And they go down into the inmost body."*

Proverbs 20:19 *"He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; Therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips."*

Whispering

Proverbs 16:28 *"A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends."*

Truth-telling and Backbiting

Psalms 15:1-3 *"LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks uprightly, And works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart; He who does not backbite with his tongue, Nor does evil to his neighbor, Nor does he take up a reproach against his friend;"*

Psalms 34:12-13 *"Who is the man who desires life, And loves many days, that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil, And your lips from speaking deceit."*

Let's bring this message to an end by recalling an earlier Scripture spoken by Yeshua to the Pharisees:

Matthew 12:34-37 *"...For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."*

And so the prayer of all of us here who have heard this message should be the words of Psalms 19:14:

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer."

Please repeat it with me:

Psalm 19:14 *“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.”*

AMEN.