

The Tongue Is a Fire

Bullying has become a problem in schools across the country. It is talked about by the news media. Many books are available on the topic. Almost every state has passed anti-bullying laws and many schools are mandated by the state to adopt anti-bullying policies.

Despite all this attention and even legislation, bullying continues. As Christian young people and children we understand that this bullying is sin. We also understand that we must be lights of charity in the midst of this darkness of bullying. We must be sure that our schools are marked as different from the world, that they stand as places of proper conduct toward one another. Of course, the same charity must prevail in our relationships toward one another outside of school.

Over all, I hear good things about the way our young people and children treat each other. For that we thank God. But we are sinners and therefore need to be on guard against this sin so it doesn't begin to develop among us. There are also, no doubt, occasional instances of bullying that do occur in our midst.

So let's spend a few moments hearing from God's Word with regard to our calling toward one another. First let's be clear what we mean when we refer to this sin. Let's understand what forms it can take.

Most directly it involves the sinful use of the tongue against someone. One chooses a person, for whatever reason, and speaks cuttingly to them to their face. Maybe the person spoken to is different in some way from the person who is doing the sinful speaking. Maybe the one speaking just wants a target and picks the person that appears most vulnerable. So he uses his tongue to mock his target to his face. He criticizes in a belittling way. Jokingly he says things that tear down.

But we remember, too, that the tongue can be used sinfully against someone even when that person is not present. Mocking, criticizing, joking about someone behind their back is still sin against them. It destroys their reputation and if they hear of what was said, it wounds them sometimes more than if it was said to their face.

This sinful use of the tongue is prohibited by Scripture. But we must beware, for each of us has a tongue that can be used in this way. James says "the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity." The tongue is not innocent then, or harmless. Rather, every tongue is connected to a dreadfully sinful nature and when used by this sinful nature destroys like fire. In this connection, James also says, "Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth!" (James 3:5, 6). Let us watch our tongues, then, lest a little iniquitous fire

from them ignites a great matter among us or a great painful matter in the heart of even one of God's elect children.

We need to be reminded, too, that the use of technology for sinful communication is also referred to by these verses in James (and in similar passages in Scripture). When James writes of the tongue, he means anything we use to communicate. Today there are many different types of technology we use to communicate and these can easily be used to "speak" sinfully to or about one another. In fact, it is often much easier to be cruel through these means than with our actual tongue. Though easier to do, it is just as sinful to communicate something hurtful using our cell phones or the internet as it is to use our actual tongues.

We must be careful as we speak on our cell phones. We must think twice (or thrice) before sending that text message. We must pause after writing an email and before we click "send," to re-read what we've written and compare it to what James has written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We must ask if God would approve before we post our thoughts about someone on Facebook or another social networking site.

Such guarded carefulness must characterize all of our communication because the tongue is a fire and only a fool is careless with fire. As children of God, we don't play with fire. For we know that the fire of an uncharitable tongue destroys. And destroying another is sin, hatred, murder. It's not just what kids do. It's not funny. It's evil. And it kills.

The fire of a sinful tongue does not burn and kill the body. In most cases it does not kill in ways that we can see. But it kills something within the person who is sinfully spoken to or about. It lights a destroying fire within their heart. A fire that destroys their self-esteem. That burns down their confidence. That tears away their happiness, reducing it to ashes. That causes deep, and sometimes abiding pain. In fact, such deep damage can be done that a person may live with the effects of it all his or her life.

What further helps us to see the seriousness of the sinful use of our tongue against our Christian brothers and sisters is the consideration that they belong to God. James points to this too, when he writes about using our tongues sinfully against those "who are made after the similitude of God" (James 3:9). If we claim to love God, then how can we use our tongue against one who has been re-created to bear the image of God?

And this reminds us, also, that Christ died for each of his children so that they can bear that image of God. Christ valued them so much that he died for them. Then how can we act as if they have no value by speaking critically or mockingly to or about them?

Let's also bear in mind that the fellow saint is a member of God's covenant and therefore is a friend of God and a friend of Christ. What if Jesus were still on earth in his body and he stood next to the one that we were tempted to speak sharply to and Jesus put his arm around the shoulder of that person and said to us "This is my friend." Would we dare to say the slightest thing against that person? And yet, by faith, that is how we always ought to view every one of God's people. Remember Jesus' warning about our brothers and his friends in Matthew 5:22 "Whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire." Our Lord takes the sin of the tongue very seriously, and so, if we are wise, will we.

Have you fallen into this sin? Repent before God. Sincerely ask him for forgiveness and you will be forgiven. But then, too, apologize to the person you've sinned against. Put out the fire you've started in their heart. And if others are aware of what you've said, do what it takes to put out the fire with them, too, so it spreads no further. And finally, don't continue in this sin. Pray daily for strength to guard your tongue.

Has it happened to you? Are you the object of someone else's bullying and sinful speaking? Don't retaliate. So often those who bully others have been bullied first themselves. Don't become one of them. Rather follow God's way for dealing with someone who has sinned against you. Go to them and talk to them privately, seeking to forgive them. If they apologize, forgive them. If they don't, follow the steps of Christian discipline found in Matthew 18. Yes, it's that serious.

Do you know of a situation where this sin is taking place, but you are neither the bully nor the bullied one? Then God has placed on you the solemn responsibility to help the one who is being picked on. Help him or her to deal the right way with the one who is hurting them. And talk to the person who is using their tongue as fire against a child of God. Help them see the seriousness of their sin and their need to make things right with God and the offended brother or sister. (Perhaps you could also give them a copy of this article if you think it would help.)

In the end, the best way to guard against using our tongue for sin is to use it for good. When we are actively looking for opportunities to use our tongue for the good of others, it is much less likely that we will fall into the sin of communicating sinfully to or about others. Let's speak, personally and through the use of technology, in love toward one another. Let's speak to build up one another in Christ. "Let all bitterness and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice: and be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:31, 32).

The world continues to be tortured with the problem of bullying and cannot find a solution to their problem. But let us thank God that he has revealed to us that the problem is sin, serious sin. And that the solution is grace—grace of forgiveness, and grace that enables us to guard against and fight against this tongue of fire. By that grace of God, let's continue to make sure that our schools and our circles of friends are safe, blessed places in which all of us can live.