

Bridling Our Tongues

'If anyone among you considers themselves religious while they do not bridle their tongue but deceives their heart, this person's religion (Christianity) is worthless' (James 1:26).

'I will guard my ways so I do not sin with my tongue. I will muzzle my mouth as with a bridle while the wicked are with me' (Psalm 39:1).

'Let no unwholesome speech proceed out of your mouth but only speech encouraging to others, as the need may be, so it may give grace to those who hear it. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God in Whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, outcry and evil speaking (slander) be put away from you with all malicious speech and deeds' (Ephesians 4:29 to 31).

'Let your speech at all times be gracious, pleasant and winsome, seasoned as it were with salt, so you may never be at a loss to know how you ought to answer anyone who puts a question to you' (Colossians 4:6).

'The tongue is a tiny part of the body ... See how a little spark sets a large forest ablaze. The tongue is a fire ... the tongue no one can tame. It is an unstable and evil thing, full of deadly poison ... Out of the same mouth come forth words of blessing and cursing. These things ought not to be so' (James 3:5 to 10).

'Put away all wickedness, all deceit, hypocrisies, envies and all evil speaking' (1 Peter 2:1).

Slandering and malicious gossip and speech grieves the Holy Spirit. Nasty comments, even if they are true, should never pass our lips. We are to speak the truth at all times, but sometimes the whole truth is so hurtful and destructive, it is better to bridle our tongues and leave some things unsaid. We need to be mindful of the above verses and say what is needed to encourage others, and we must speak in such a way, we impart blessings and edify our listeners. In short, we need to bridle our tongues. We need to control what we say and not wound others with our words. That does not mean we should lie about anything, just not cause unnecessary pain by 'speaking our mind'. We need to use tact and let our speech be gracious, while still being honest. When we are dealing with a non-Christian, it is important we do not hurt their feelings. Our job as Christians is to lead people to Jesus not turn them away. If we have wounded them with unkind words, that could make them stumble and turn away from God. If we are dealing with a fellow Christian, we must consider their feelings or our Christian service is deemed worthless. There are thousands of believers who will not attend church because they have been hurt by unkind words spoken to them by other Christians. We need to show them God's love in action. Sometimes, Christians are the only examples unsaved people have of God, and we need to keep in mind God is watching us. He will hold us accountable if we make new Christians or children stumble and fall away (Matthew 18:6). Blasphemy is evil speaking against God.

We tend to think what we say does not hurt others but we usually remember the hurt another person's words have caused us. Unkind words cannot be taken back once they are spoken. Slander and gossip are like tossing feathers into the wind then trying to pick them up again. The Hebrew words for lies, slander, gossip, criticism or evil speaking are 'lashon hara'. That includes telling an evil truth about someone unnecessarily. For example, there may be a genuine Christian in the church with a very colourful past. Once we have repented and all our sins are under the blood, the sin should never be mentioned again. Some people might 'chat' about someone's past openly, when the said person is trying to put the past behind them. To reveal to others the sins of the past is telling an evil truth. The person whose past has been revealed is hurt. The gossipier is hurt because they have polluted their thoughts and have sinned, plus their reputation is tarnished far more than the original victim of the gossip. The listener has had their mind polluted so they are also hurt, so three or more people are hurt by speaking an unnecessary evil truth.

When Absalom spoke critically about his father King David, it caused a war in which 20,000 men were more than hurt – they died. The evil speaker Absalom died and King David was so hurt he wept (2 Samuel 15:2 to 10; 18:7 & 15; 19:1). Aaron and Miriam spoke evil words about Moses because he married an Ethiopian woman who had dark skin. On this occasion the Lord God became involved and caused Miriam to suffer from leprosy for a week (Numbers 12:1 to 15). It is likely serious skin conditions are brought on by the sin of malicious gossiping or evil speaking. We are told strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, slander or backbiting, whisperings, proud conceited thoughts and rebellion are not acceptable (2 Corinthians 12:20). When we focus our thoughts on thinking and saying evil about other people, we self-destruct, both spiritually and physically. A root of bitterness enters our hearts and that defiles many people. 'Look carefully lest there be anyone who falls short of the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness springs up and troubles you, and many are defiled by it' (Hebrews 12:15). The only way a root of bitterness can defile others is by evil speaking. Jesus said, "You offspring of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak good things? Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man out of his good heart speaks out good things. The

evil man out of his evil heart speaks out evil things. I tell you, every idle word men speak, they will give an account of it on the Day of Judgment. By your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:34 to 37).

We can speak the truth kindly and without hurting anyone's feelings or causing a situation to grow into bitterness. The following twelve examples are situations where we should bridle our tongues, and are all possible real life scenarios. Some of these scenarios are absolutely accurate and some have been altered to protect the identities of the people involved.

Example # 1: Jeni and Steve. A close but unsaved friend named Jeni is about to go out for dinner with her new husband Steve. She is looking forward to the dinner and comes to visit you to show off the new dress she bought especially for the occasion. As Jeni twirls around, she is expecting a compliment. The trouble is, although Jeni loves the dress, you regard it as the ugliest dress you have ever seen. As a close friend, you would not want to destroy her happiness by telling her the whole truth about how you feel concerning the dress, but you do not want to lie to her either. What could be said in all honesty without hurting her feelings? The dress might be ugly, but it might actually suit Jeni. You bridle your tongue and say, "That dress really suits you, Jeni." "The red in it brings out the highlights in her hair, doesn't it, Steve?" "The material is so soft." Then to prepare Jeni for what may be a few strange looks; "I guarantee other women at the restaurant will be checking your dress out! Have a wonderful time and God bless." So you have still told the truth without destroying her joy. She will leave your house feeling happy and with your friendship intact, and there is the chance you may be able to lead Jeni and Steve to Jesus one day in the future.

Example # 2: Lily. A friend named Lily has suffered a series of major tragedies. She has been a Christian for many years, serving the Lord faithfully, but within the space of three years she has lost her four children and two grandchildren to an inherited illness, and after a couple of years is still sad. You do not understand her ongoing sadness and feel she is living in the past and should get over the losses and get on with things. What you should never say is, "Just get over it." "You have brought this on yourself." "You are reaping what you must have sown." Those words would be cruel. No matter what anyone thinks of the situation, common sense tells us that nobody would knowingly put themselves in that situation; nobody would deliberately sow destruction into their lives, and especially not a committed Christian. Death is part of this fallen life and we can accept the loss of parents, siblings and friends, but the one death that is the hardest to bear, is the loss of one's child. When a child dies, the parents have to live with the emptiness that lost child has left; the lost little kisses and hugs; the lost birthday parties; the lost Christmases with that child; the lost Mother's/Father's Days with their child and the loss of potential future grandchildren. Adjusting to those enormous changes can take several years. Multiply that six times and you have someone who struggles to cope for many years. That is not living in the past. Lily's present life is without her children and her ongoing sadness is that of someone trying to cope with a childless future, when it had previously been filled with the joy of the children now gone. It would take a very heartless person to say glibly, "Get over it. I think you are just living in the past." And it would take an even worse person to blame Lily for her losses. That is what Job's 'friends' did and the Lord was not pleased with them (Job 42:7). So what do you say to someone in a situation like that, when you know words are inadequate? You bridle your tongue but speak honestly. "I do not know what to say to you?" "How can I help you?" "I cannot begin to imagine what you are going through." If you cannot visit, you could telephone every day so they can hear a voice. Even as a committed Christian, deep grief is a very, very lonely place to be; multiple griefs are overwhelming. We are to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). Allow them to talk even if they repeat the same thing over and over. Be supportive, compassionate, let your comments be gracious, encourage where possible and keep all negative thoughts to yourself. Do not unload any of your problems onto them; they just cannot take it at that time.

Example # 3: Charlie. An artist you are friendly with shows you his new paintings. He is excited because he has arranged a public exhibition and wants your opinion. To you, Charlie's art looks like a monkey could have painted them, but you could never say that. So what do you say? You bridle your tongue, speak honestly and tactfully. If you like the colours in one of them you could give him the gentle truth. "Hey Charlie. I love the colours in this one." "I can see you put a lot of time into these paintings." "Tell me what this represents." When none of his paintings are sold, you could gently suggest he try 'another angle'. Take him to an exhibition where several paintings are being sold and suggest he 'try that out and see how he goes'. The whole truth in this situation could stop a potential masterpiece being painted and destroy a friendship. It could also keep the person from coming to Jesus because unsaved people look to Christians as being God's representatives.

Example # 4: Nicole. As a Christian, you teach your children about love and forgiveness, encouraging them to forgive each other rather than argue. Your daughter Nicole has just been very naughty and you have sent her to her room for time out for the both of you. Before you have the opportunity to let her out of her room, she comes to you with one of your prize-winning orchids, torn up by the roots, dropping dirt all over your

clean floor. With tears dripping down her little cheeks, Nicole says with a tiny hopeful voice, "I'm sorry I was naughty Mummy. I brought you a flower to say sorry. Can you forgive me like you told us?" What can you do? Scream at her for destroying your award-winning orchid or show her the love and forgiveness you have been telling her about? Do you love the orchid or your child more? Children should be treated with gentleness. You bridle your tongue and thank her for the flower and hug and forgive the little child who needs it right at that moment, then suggest the flower is probably much happier in its pot and ask her to help you replant it – and hope it does not die. You have not told Nicole she has possibly destroyed something you cherish – which would be the whole truth – but you have hedged around it by re-potting your flower and your child's tender young heart is still intact – and so is your relationship with her, and Nicole's relationship with Jesus. You have also learned a lesson in forgiveness and patience.

Example # 5: Blaze and Ize. You have noticed a girl sitting alone in your church and she is as rough as they come. Tattoos, multiple earrings, nose rings, rings through the navel which she delights to show off, rings through the eyebrows, studs in the tongue, dreadlocked hair dyed jet black, fingernails painted black, black lipstick, black skimpy clothing, dirty bare feet, foul mouthed, foul smelling and very obviously on drugs. Do you walk away with your nose turned up like everyone else has and ignore her? Would it be wise to tell her you do not want people like her in your church? You would love to, but you do not tell her the truth about how you feel concerning her clothes and piercings. You would love to tell her to take a good bath. The whole truth in this case could end up causing a lost soul who is seeking, to stop seeking and end up in hell. What do you say to someone like that? We need to realise Jesus died for her too, and loves her as much as He loves everyone else. She is seeking God or she would not be in church in the first place. As much as you would dearly like to tell her the truth you know it would not be appropriate, so greeting her with a smile, bridling your tongue and speaking to her like you would any other new person, would be the Christian thing to do. "Hello. I have not seen you before. I am Sue. What is your name?" If she tells you her name is Blaze Fury, you probably would not believe it but you would not say, "Oh yeah right. I do not believe that. What is your real name?" What you could say is, "Wow, Blaze Fury is unusual. Do you live around here?" You do not like to say since the church is in the prestigious Northern Beaches area of Sydney, then she is way out of place and could not possibly be actually living there! The following week you shudder when you see her with an older version of herself, but you swallow the feeling of nausea and welcome the smelly new arrival who introduces herself as Ize Angel. Feeling as though bacteria are crawling all over you, you hug the gum-chewing girls and invite them to come the following week, but inwardly hoping they would disappear. Week after week the girls come to church and to your horror, embarrassment and revulsion they spy you out and sit with you, uninvited – and they smell. One day you suggest they go forward for prayer and are amazed when they go. Gradually they stop the gum chewing; they wash before church; they have their hair cut extremely short because it was the only way to rid themselves of the dreadlocks and head lice. You suggest they go to the youth group; the multiple rings and studs slowly go; the tattoos are covered up with long sleeves; in fact the girls are covered with raggy but decent clothing but they never wear shoes. That Christmas, against your better judgement, you buy them some nice clothes, socks, sports shoes, soap, a loofah, shampoo, toothbrushes and toothpaste. They appreciate your generosity so much their reaction is exaggerated and embarrassing. You do not like to tell them you did not buy the things for them, but to save yourself from being uncomfortable because they always liked to sit with you and they smelled so bad. One day they take you into their confidence and tell you their tragic and sad life story of how they lost their drug-addicted mother as young girls then their father abandoned them, leaving them to fend for themselves in the streets of Sydney along with other abandoned and rejected street children. To get away from the sordid life-style and to try to better themselves, they managed to secure jobs as cleaners of the local public toilets and leased a tiny flat not far from the church, just to get themselves off the streets. Blaze and Ize were just their street names. Your stomach turns over with compassion and love for the lost girls, and guilt because of the way you initially regarded them. Then to make your feelings of shame and guilt worse, they take a microphone and in front of the whole church, they thank you personally and publicly for being patient with them, treating them with love and kind words, and being 'like a mother' to them, buying them the first Christmas gifts they had received since they were young girls. You can only sit there and weep because in your heart you know that was not how you felt. Treating lost teenagers just like 'Blaze' and 'Ize' with love and kindness could bring them right into the Kingdom of God, saving lost souls for Jesus. You would have the joy of watching them grow in grace and eventually learn their real names.

Example # 6: Miranda and Keturah. A young lady in the church has recently had a baby daughter. When you ask Miranda what her new baby's name is, she says something that sounds unintelligible to you; Keturah. After repeating the child's name three times, you still do not understand what it is. You feel like telling the young mother what you really feel about the silly name she has given the baby but you bridle your tongue, smile sweetly and ask her how it is spelt, then tell her what a beautiful baby she has, because you still cannot work out the name. Telling the whole truth and giving your opinion would hurt the young mother's feelings unnecessarily and could cause a break in fellowship. That would be sad, especially if you find out

later the name she chose for her new baby is an Old Testament name you had never noticed before (Genesis 25:1). The truth is, little Keturah is beautiful and her name means scent or fragrance.

Example # 7: Debra. You and your wife Debra have made plans to enjoy your wedding anniversary over dinner. You arrive home from work to pick Debra up for the anticipated evening out and nearly faint. Debra has taken the time to buy a new dress and she has just spent hours at the beauty salon and hairdresser getting herself all dolled up especially for you, but she looks like a mannequin, heavy make up makes her look like a panda, her new dress is too tight and her hairdo looks as though she has been struck with lightning – but she did it for you. Do you tell her the whole truth about what you really think? You cannot without ending up in divorce! What do you say? You bridle your tongue and speak the truth. “You must have spent hours at that hairdressing salon, Darling. It is lovely you would put yourself through all that just for me, and I love you for it.”

Example # 8: Alex. Your teenage son has no idea what to buy you for Mother’s Day so you give him a few subtle hints. Your husband gives him enough money to buy you a nice gift. Mother’s Day comes around and you wait to see which of the gift ideas he has bought you. He hands you the chosen gift with bright eyes. It certainly is heavy! When you open it you are stunned to see your dear son has bought you a spear gun. You look at him dumbfounded! What could he be thinking? Do you say, “You silly boy. What am I supposed to do with this?” Before you can get a word in, Alex tells you since he loves spear fishing so much, think of all the fish you are going to have for free! Then Alex asks if he can borrow it. You take a deep breath, bridle your tongue and graciously hand him the spear-gun, telling him to be very careful when he is out catching fish for you and thank him for the thought, knowing full well Alex bought it for himself with the money his father gave him to buy your gift.

Example # 9: Keith. There is a big, tall man in your church who loves to sing as loudly as he can. The trouble is he sings way off key, all the time, at the top of his huge voice. There have been many times when you have tried to broach the subject with him – as have other parishioners – but you do not quite know how to. His size is a little intimidating. Your opportunity arises one day over a fellowship coffee when Keith happens to mention to you just how much he loves to sing and worship God. His sparkling eyes are full of love for the Lord. Now is your chance to tell him exactly what you think of his singing! Telling someone the truth is always the best is it not? What words would you use to destroy this man’s love of worship? The gentle truth would be better. You bridle your tongue and say, “I can see how much you really love worshipping our Lord. I do too.”

Example # 10: Mia. Your ten-year-old daughter wants to try to cook something she has made at school in cookery class. She spends a couple of hours making something that smells delicious. As everyone sits down to eat, you take a mouthful of something that can only be described as road kill. Without anyone being aware, you leave the room and spit it out. When Mia giggles and says, “Daddy. Take a bite,” do you speak the whole truth and say, “That is too disgusting. What did you put in that mixture?” Or do you bridle your tongue and say softly, “No Honey. You made it, you deserve the first bite,” and let her discover for herself what she has done wrong, without you hurting her feelings. Then Mia would need a comforting hug when she realises she has mixed in the wrong ingredients, and may need encouragement and help to try again and get it right.

Example # 11: Anne. There is a woman in your church who has always been friendly to you, even though you really do not like her. You try to avoid her, turn down her invitations for meals using every excuse you can and once in the shopping centre, you even hide from her, but Anne keeps on asking anyway. You nickname her Miss Dislike and tell all your friends about how and why you can justify disliking her. One day you are going through a very tough time in your life. Miss Dislike comes to you and shyly says, “I have a word for you from the Lord.” Well that really is the last thing you need – Miss Dislike telling you something she thinks is from God! Before you can get away from her, she tells you the Word of Knowledge. The word she delivers is 100% accurate, then she sweetly says, “I have always liked you. I knew you were going through this tough time and I have been praying and fasting for you. That is when God gave me this message for you.” You feel as though your stomach is turning inside out with shame and guilt. Talk about having coals heaped on your head! She has been praying and fasting for you while you have been ignoring her, avoiding her and not showing love to her! Do you tell her the whole truth? “That’s nice, but you know I have never really liked you. I have been avoiding you and made fun of you to my friends.” Of course not. If you are a genuine Christian, you would hug her, thank her and look beyond her weaknesses to the committed Christian and sister in the Lord she is and then go quietly and repent of your sin. It is never kind to tell someone you did not like them when you first knew them. That piece of whole truth may make you feel good, but is devastating to the person you said it to because they were probably unaware of it. In that situation it is always better to bridle your tongue.

Example # 12: Helen. There is a new baby Christian in your church who has come from a very sad childhood. For the first time in her life Helen feels loved and accepted. Helen tells everyone how special she is to God and how much she loves Him and how much He loves her. You are tempted to tell her the whole truth and say, "You are not alone in this you know, you are just one of millions. God loves everyone equally. You are not singled out." To tell a new Christian that whole truth would be too devastating and rob them of their new-found joy. Helen feels loved and special, something she has never known before, so allow her to enjoy that for as long as she can because in time she will see that she is one of a huge body of unique individuals. Gentle truth would work here. You would bridle your tongue and say, "It is truly wonderful to know God's love. I am happy to see you so filled with joy."

Yes it is true we need to speak the truth but sometimes, some things are better left unsaid. Sometimes it is better to remain silent than cause someone unnecessary hurt. We really do need the Lord's wisdom, we need to bridle our tongues and we need to be sensitive to other people. We need to put ourselves in their shoes, so to speak, to understand fully what our unkind, unthoughtful words will do to the other person. Let us never give an evil report, a slanderous word, a bitter word, an angry word or any 'lashon hara'. May your words always be gracious, wise, loving and give blessing to your brothers and sisters in the Lord and lead the unsaved to salvation.

Amen and God bless you.

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