

Sermon: Mind your tongue
Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38
Rev Dr Jos Strengholt

As a young boy - maybe I was 6 years old or so - I needed an operation. My appendix had to be taken out. Nowadays they hardly keep you in hospital for this, but then, I had to stay 6 days.

I must have irritated the head nurse of the ward, because when I left, being picked up by my mother, as a farewell greeting the nurse whispered in my ear - so that my mother did not notice - that I had been a very childish boy.

This is 50 years ago and I still remember.

I am sure you have a few memories of good and bad things people said to you that really impacted you. Words can be very powerful. They can make you, and break you, especially if spoken by people who are important for you.

1. Truth and lies about our Lord

What we say about God and Jesus Christ is important. The words we choose reflect our mind and our heart. St Paul says in Romans 10:9,

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

So, what we say about God and Jesus, as an expression of your heart, is of utmost importance. It saves us. At least, if we believe and say what is right.

Jesus once asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

Peter was right. But then Jesus began to explain that he was to suffer and die, and that did not go well with Peter. Peter spoke to Jesus and he "began to rebuke him".

Now that is unacceptable. To say to God that you find it hard to believe all things, and to live as he tells us to, that is one thing. But to think that we know better than God,

and to even rebuke Jesus, that is blasphemous. Just as blasphemous as looking down on poor people, creatures of God - we looked at this last week.

What we say about God and to God is important. A wrong theology is even called satanic by Jesus. Peter rebuked Peter, but Jesus then rebuked Peter. Jesus said:

"Get behind me, Satan! you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

That was not kind of Jesus. Why did he react so strongly? Because a wrong theology, wrong ideas about God and man and salvation, can be disastrous. That is why we must speak out, when possible, when we hear blasphemy about God.

What are the blasphemies we hear about God these days?

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And how wrong ideas and words about God are directly related to our daily life, Jesus made very clear. Peter did not want the cross for Jesus, because he believed good people can avoid problems in life - God will make the life of his followers easy, nice, comfortable.

Jesus knew that this was behind Peter's words, and therefore he told him and the other disciples:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Jesus continued,

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

So, it is urgent for us to not be ashamed of Jesus, rather to embrace him. And to not be ashamed of his words, but to use and chew on them, to accept them, and to also take them in our mouth and speak them to others.

And in what we say of God, I like us to follow the wisdom of the great classical scholar Thomas Aquinas, who in the preface of his book on systematic theology, writes the wonderful words that he,

simply seeks to express the one mind of the believing church that has always been attentive to that apostolic teaching to which consent has been given by Christian believers everywhere always, and by all.

That is how we should speak about God and Jesus Christ. We do not need new ideas, new visions, new approaches. We carefully reiterate the words chosen by the church in obedience to Jesus Christ and his apostles.

What we say about God matters; and therefore if we are not sure, we better be silent.

2. Praise for God and curse for man?

What we say about these people also matters.

James, in his letter, speaks of people who praise God - they say the right things about God - but with the same mouth they vilify other Christians.

With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

Last week we saw that it is blasphemy to look down on poor people made in God's image; today we see that James also speaks against the blasphemy of badmouthing others - who are made in the image of God.

You cannot praise God and badmouth the image of God. That is inconsistent, and it simply means that your praise for God is hollow. Empty. It shows a serious problem with the source of our words - our heart, our mind, if we talk badly about these people.

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?
Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

In this context, James warns people about the danger to be a teacher in church:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

Those who teach in church, speak all the time about God. Even if all they say about God is perfect - still, if they cannot refrain from evil speech about these people, they are a shame. We all know examples of church-leaders, famous or just local - who created shame on God, shame on the Gospel, shame on the church, because of their words or behavior.

Lots of people have left the church, or even the faith, because the people who praised God used the same mouth for evil.

To stop believing in Jesus Christ because of bad leadership is not logical, but it is understandable. The conclusion is easy: if someone speaks bad about people, if someone is a bad example, then what he says about God is probably also all nonsense.

But whether teachers in church, or whatever we do as Christians, people look at us. If we speak evil of others, if we gossip, if we use foul language, we blaspheme God. We dishonor him who created all people in his image and who loves them.

If you speak bad of my children, you speak bad of me. If you speak bad of God's children, you speak bad of him.

So mind your words. What you say about God and what you say about people really matters.

3. Tongue as a danger - and a blessing

God created us, with this tiny little instrument in our mouth, and that tiny body part can be deadly. Ships have a small rudder, and if that rudder is misused, it drives giant ships onto the rocks. With our speech, with the tiny words we whisper, we can destroy ourselves and others.

It is like a match, we can use it for lighting a fire to warm people and to cook them a good meal, or we use it to set a building ablaze that destroys lives.

And, James says, it seems as if the tongue cannot be tamed! It seems it always leads to disasters.

Every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue-- a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

James says, it is set on fire by hell.

That hell in our heart and mind. That is the source of what we say. So the heart and the mind need renewal and healing.

The great healing process was begun by God - through Jesus Christ. He has taken your heart and your mind, he infused it with his Spirit, he speaks his words to you.

Our hearts and minds are in the process of renewal. But they still need much work. That is clear from the language we use. The gossip. The badmouthing. The negativisms. The curses. The foul language. Maybe we are able to keep me of this inside - but then it echoes in our hearts - louder and louder - and then it comes out anyway.

I am sure you have been hurt by what other people said to you and about you. I am sure I have hurt people with what I said. We are all to be pitied. In spite of all our good intentions, look at the reality.

So what to do!

Well, pray heart, and ask God and people for forgiveness for the wrongs we do.

And decide that as we bless God with our mouth, so we must bless his images - other people.

Henri Nouen, a well known writer, said some wise things. He wrote,

To bless means to say good things. We have to bless one another constantly. Parents need to bless their children, children their parents, husbands their wives, wives their husbands, friends their friends. In our society, so full of curses, we must fill each place we enter with our blessings. We forget so quickly that we are God's beloved children and allow the many curses of our world to darken our hearts.

There is much darkness in our world, and there is much darkness in our hearts. And part of the darkness is because of how people have spoken to us. The temptation to then do likewise to other people is great - but we must break that cycle.

Conclusion

Even if we are sometimes the victim of others who speak bad of us, let us try to not imitate that what hurts us most. Whatever people say, we have to be reminded of our belovedness by God

And with that encouragement, we can begin to bless others, either in words or in any other solemn or informal way.

Question yourself - do you often speak badly about others? It is blasphemy - badmouthing the image of God. So do something about this habit. You are the image of God so you deserve words of kindness and encouragement. But so are the people around you - images of God who need your encouragement.

Let us be conscious about the impact of the words we use - and build each other up with positive and encouraging words, words that we have learned from our God who encourages us.

Amen