

The Power of a Gentle Answer

Galatians 5:22; Proverbs 15:1

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If there is any member of our body that we must train by God's grace to be gentle, surely it is our tongue. Even when we are able to restrain our hands and our feet from angry, harsh responses, it is that small, little member in our mouth that may yet reveal the bitterness and anger that is in our heart. As James so accurately states:

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! (James 3:5).

And let none of us think that we can walk as faithful Christians by simply holding to and professing the orthodox teachings of the Bible that are found in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, while our tongue spews out profanity, anger, vengeance, and harsh and unkind words. Once again listen to the inspired words of James:

If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain [or empty] (James 1:26).

A harsh and angry tongue reveals a harsh and angry heart. A kind and gentle tongue reveals a kind and gentle heart. For the tongue is the interpreter of the soul. As the Lord Jesus so truly taught, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matthew 12:34).

Remember what characterized Christ and the use of His tongue toward others: "A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench" (Matthew 12:20). What characterized Christ was not harshness, severity, or rudeness (though with those who were obstinate and rebellious in their sin/error, the Lord certainly was very direct and strong with His righteous judgment), but what characterized Christ was a gentleness and kindness toward the undeserving, toward sinners, and toward His stumbling and weak disciples. Dear ones, we may be exemplary in walking the narrow path of doctrinal purity, but are we also exemplary in gentleness by not breaking the bruised reed and by not quenching the smoking flax in our homes, at work, in our neighborhood, and in the church?

Let us consider today the inspired words of the wisest mere man that ever lived (Solomon) and what he teaches in regard to the tongue. The main points from our text are as follows: (1) A Gentle Tongue Turns Away Anger (Proverbs 15:1a); and (2) A Harsh Tongue Provokes Anger (Proverbs 15:1b).

I. A Gentle Tongue Turns Away Anger (Proverbs 15:1a).

A. In past sermons on the fruit of gentleness (or as it is also translated, kindness), we have learned that gentleness is a gracious fruit implanted within the Christian at regeneration. It is a tender heart that has been softened by the knowledge of God's infinite loving kindness in Christ Jesus shown to such an undeserving sinner as me. Gentleness is courteous (not rude or self-serving). Gentleness is not inconsistent with manliness, but rather the strongest of Christian men should be gentle giants for Jesus Christ. Gentleness/Kindness is not powerless, but rather harnesses its strength when it would be so easy to crush by words or deeds the one who offends you, so that the strength of gentleness (or kindness) is used to help and to serve others. And the goal

of gentleness is not to be liked (which is merely self-serving), but is rather to be Christ-like (who did not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax).

B. The adjective used by Solomon in Proverbs 15:1 to describe the answer or response of the Christian to some form of provocation is “soft” (“a soft answer”). This Hebrew adjective (*rach*) means tender or gentle. Thus, it is a gentle word that turns away the wrath of others, rather than going toe to toe (insult to insult) with one who offends you.

1. A gentle response will generally have the effect of turning back the anger in others, so that anger does an “about face” rather than an “in-your-face”. A gentle response tends to disarm the aggressor; it tends to suffocate the anger, so that it cannot breathe out its fiery threats. It’s a mighty blow that silences with a feather rather than with a sword. For, dear ones, it is very difficult to fight with someone who does not fight back with the same vengeful anger.

2. This is not pious advice or a mere practical suggestion issued by Solomon, but is the way of life (“Death and life are in the power of the tongue” Proverbs 18:21) and is the very DNA of Jesus Christ (for gentleness is the fruit of the Spirit). Consider some of the biblical examples of gentle responses that subdued the fury of giants with (as it were) the small stone of kindness.

a. The last time that Jacob had seen Esau, his brother, Esau had wanted to kill him for having taken the birthright by deception. But now (some 21 years later) as Jacob approaches nearer and nearer to Esau, he doesn’t defend himself with some form of self-justification or words of provocation, but rather sends a series of gifts ahead of himself and lowers himself before his brother, rather than exalting himself (Genesis 32:17-18; 33:4).

b. Consider also the words of David to King Saul when Saul (out of envy and hatred) was seeking to destroy David (1 Samuel 24:8,11,14,16).

c. What about Abigail who turned away the anger of David against her husband, Nabal (in 1 Samuel 25:24,32-33).

C. The one who turns away the wrath of others by a gentle word is by no means weak or cowardly or simply the doormat upon whom everyone wipes their feet. To the contrary, here is one in whom true strength resides.

1. Dear ones, it is easy simply to allow our emotions to rule over us in biting back with the same anger that was hurled at us. It is our sinful nature to do so. Where’s the strength of character or the fruit of the Holy Spirit in that kind of a response? That is simply fulfilling the lusts of the flesh (“hatred ... wrath ... strife” Galatians 5:20). However, when one can harness by God’s grace his/her emotions and offer a gentle answer with the intention of diffusing the short-fused bomb that is ready to explode, such a one actually demonstrates a tongue that is under the powerful control of the Spirit of God (and is exhibiting the fruit of gentleness, Galatians 5:22). What about your tongue, dear ones? Is it out of control or is it under the control of gentleness?

2. Solomon states in Proverbs 15:4 that “a wholesome tongue is a tree of life.”

a. I’m reminded how Israel (just powerfully delivered from Egyptian bondage) came to a place called “Marah, which means bitterness (Exodus 15:23), where all of the waters in that place were undrinkable due to bitterness. There was no life in those waters—only death. But the Lord commanded Moses to cut down a certain tree and to cast it into the bitter waters that they might become living waters—and so it was that the tree of life made the bitter waters sweet.

b. Dear ones, that pictures so clearly our problem—the wells and springs of our nature are corrupted with bitterness and death that spew forth from our mouths. And the only remedy to that bitterness is the cross of Jesus Christ. Only Jesus Christ through His atoning death, only the gospel of Jesus Christ can take those bitter, resentful, angry waters in your soul and upon your tongue, and make them gentle,

tender, and kind. No self-help program in the world can change the heart and sanctify the tongue; only the power of Christ (which is yours in the gospel) can accomplish that. That which was a cross or tree of death and cursing to Christ becomes (as it were) a tree of life and blessing to all who trust alone in Christ alone.

3. Beloved, we can make all of the excuses in the world and seek to justify ourselves for a tongue that returns anger for anger, that returns insult for insult, and for a tongue that only makes an emotional discussion more combustible by harsh words than by gentle words. Our tongues are to be characterized as a tree of life to others, not as a raging fire of destruction (whether in the home, in the church, or at work). Is your tongue defensive, cold, harsh, or bitter? Is your tongue through gentleness/kindness bringing life and health in your family or bringing death and destruction in your family?

D. The sin that prevents us from even desiring (let alone offering) a gentle answer is our pride which has been offended by the way one has angrily spoken to us. “How dare he/she talk to me with such anger or such painful words!” And so our pride and feelings are hurt and insulted and seek their pound of flesh.

1. We thus justify our angry words because of how we were treated. And a war of words ensues with painful wounds suffered by all who witness it (whether words that proceed from our mouth or words that proceed from our computer).

2. However, dear ones, if we will but subdue the pride by looking to the death of Christ (where our pride was nailed to Christ’s cross) and replace it with the love of Christ which is not easily provoked (1 Corinthians 13:5) and which suffers long with others and which is kind or gentle (1 Corinthians 13:4), Christ will begin to tame our tongue and make it a tree of life rather than weapon of mass destruction.

E. As I have said in previous sermons on the fruit of gentleness, there are those occasions in which the tongue ought to be used to rebuke, correct, and even to show a righteous anger (not a sinful anger, not a proud anger, not an uncontrolled anger, Ephesians 4:26; Mark 3:5). However, this is quite different from letting someone have it because they’ve offended you or hurt your feelings.

1. A righteous anger does not seek to destroy, but seeks the repentance of the offender (with reconciliation as the ultimate goal).

2. A righteous anger is not motivated by a selfish pride that has been hurt, but is rather motivated by a holy and merciful God that has been offended.

3. A righteous anger loves what God loves and hates what God hates (and is righteously angry with his own sins first).

4. A righteous anger is not out of control, but is in control of both words and actions.

5. Dear ones, let us not so easily dismiss our anger as righteous indignation without carefully evaluating our motives, actions, and consequences.

II. A Harsh Tongue Provokes Anger (Proverbs 15:1b).

A. The second line in Proverbs 15:1 simply affirms what is our response by nature: to utter grievous (or harsh) words which only tend to fuel the anger of others all the more. In this case, the bomb in a person is ticking—we can hear it and see it. But rather than acting like a bomb squad in dismantling the bomb, we act more like terrorists in pushing the button that sets off the bomb. And then we wonder what happened? Yes, the hostile anger or bitter words of another who comes at us may not be excused (it is sin), but our provocation (in pushing the right buttons with perhaps even a smile on our face) also makes us a party to his/her further anger (for we may not yell, shout, and scream, but our calculated response to push buttons that provoke the other party are not a soft or gentle answer in such a case).

B. Let us consider some of the biblical examples of how the tongue may sinfully provoke others to anger. The words of Saul provoked Jonathan, his son, to a fierce anger (1 Samuel 20:30,33,34; Ephesians 6:4). What about the words of Rehoboam, son of Solomon, who listened to the counsel of the young advisers rather than to the counsel of the elderly sage advisors of his father in 1 Kings 12:12-14,16?

1. But are we responsible for the further wrath and anger of others if we should sincerely seek to win them over by our gentle words? No, for in such a case either our very silence or the truth which we proclaim and defend may so incite others that they reveal their hardness of heart and obstinacy of will in closing their ears to the truth and in laying in to us with words and deeds (as the Pharisees did with Christ and as the Jews did with Stephen). In offering a soft answer to those who are angry, we must never sacrifice the truth, but must speak the truth in love to others, not in selfish anger and bitterness of spirit.

2. What about those who repeatedly take advantage of our gracious responses to their angry attacks? Is there not a time to set a person straight for their own welfare? Absolutely! There will be times when we must be very firm with those who repeatedly offend and will not listen nor learn by a gentle answer. But even on those occasions, we do not use our firmness to retaliate, to avenge ourselves, to get even, but rather in humility to help them, to speak the truth in love, to show them love and mercy, to edify not to destroy, to show the kindness of the Lord (who is gentle/kind even with the wicked, Luke 6:35; Romans 2:4).

C. How do you practically prevent your own harsh response when you are attacked with arrows from the tongue of another which have hit their target in your very heart? You stop, look, and listen before you say anything.

1. **Stop** your mouth and say nothing until the anger of the other has finished erupting (James 1:19-20).

a. Ask the Lord to give you a quiet, peaceful heart rather than a warring spirit. Call upon the Lord to use this trial for His glory and for the good of all those involved. Put your hand over your mouth, for once words have left your mouth, you cannot retrieve them.

b. How many words have we uttered in anger that we have lived to regret? They may be forgiven, but they may never be forgotten because they are so painful. The pain of harsh words can cause more damage and destruction to a wife/husband, to a child/parent, to a brother/sister, to a co-worker, or fellow student, than a punch in the gut (and can be even more long-lasting).

c. God has given us two bars to keep in angry words: our teeth and our lips. Seal them both, count to 100, cry out to the Lord, but stop the flow of words (whether spoken or written on the computer).

2. **Look** in faith to Jesus Christ who was on the receiving end of many angry words and who did not respond in like manner.

a. Look to Christ who has not repaid you as your sin deserves, for all your angry words spoken against Him and others.

b. Look to Christ who freely suffered the eternal anger of God against you in order that He might show you His everlasting gentleness/kindness.

c. Consider that you are certainly no more deserving of Christ's mercy than the one who has offended you is of your mercy and pity.

d. Look inside of yourself and reflect to yourself, who do I think I am that I do not need this dose of anger for my own sanctification (I am suffering with Christ if I am suffering for righteousness and truth).

3. **Listen** to the Word of God in seeking to diffuse the bomb, rather than to explode the bomb. "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city" (Proverbs 18:19; James 1:19-20).

a. Listen carefully to the words of the one who is angry in order to see whether there is any truth to what he/she says. Even if anger and malicious words may make it difficult to hear what is being said, try to look behind the anger to see what is truly bothering this person. We may find out that there is some truth mixed in with all that anger that we should hear or a sin that we need to repent of.

b. If that is the case, the first thing out of our mouths should not be a rebuke of his/her sinful anger, but a sincere and genuine expression of sorrow over our own sin and fault (take the beam out of our own eye first).

D. Dear ones, the issue is ultimately not the tongue of man, but the heart of man—for there is where the battle is either won or lost. If your heart has been humbled by the amazing grace, gentleness, kindness, and love of Christ which has so abundantly and freely been poured out upon you, you will likewise approach your neighbor with the same humility, gentleness, kindness, and love in seeking to help him/her by whatever you say and do. It all begins with your earnest desire to use your tongue to profit others rather than to destroy others.

1. Dear ones, the fruit of gentleness is not something you must earn or deserve any more than forgiveness of sins. Everything you need to be justified and sanctified before the Lord has been already purchased for you by Christ. You do not have to ascend into heaven to obtain it. You do not have to go to the remotest parts of the earth to secure it. It is yours in Christ. Believe it, receive it, pray for it, and practice it. For our religion is worthless and vain without it (James 1:26).

2. What will you find if you turn to the Lord today in faith and repentance to be right with God or to subdue a harsh tongue? An avenging God who is consumed with anger toward you? A God who delights to afflict and punish you? No! No! No! To the contrary, you will find a God of “great kindness”. You will find a God who delights to show His “great kindness” to undeserving sinners and even to the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). God’s character and nature is one of “great kindness” and is manifested in offering His only begotten Son for sinners who come in faith to Jesus Christ.

Charles Spurgeon tells the story of a senator that sat as a ruler in the senate in ancient Athens. On one occasion, the senate sat out in the freshness and beauty of the open air. As they sat, it was noticed that a sparrow above was being pursued tenaciously by a hawk, seeking to elude its destroyer. All of a sudden, the sparrow (seeking refuge and safety) flew into the lap of one senator, who with great harshness threw the poor sparrow to the ground with such force that it died. His fellow senators rose in an uproar and judged the senator unworthy to rule over man who could not show gentleness/kindness to such a weak and helpless creature.

Dear ones, will the Ruler of all the universe (whose very nature is that of gentleness/kindness even to the underserving) cast the poor sinner that flees into His lap for help, gentleness, and loving kindness from those enemies (within or without) that would destroy him/her? Will the Lord (who has revealed gentleness and kindness that is beyond description in the sacrifice of Christ for undeserving sinners chosen in Christ Jesus before the world began), will He forget to be gentle and kind when you come to Him with all of your burdens, cares, sins, pains, and heartaches? Absolutely not! Those who flee to Christ for refuge from destruction will never be cast out (John 6:37; Psalm 27:10). Dear ones, we will only grow in gentleness as we grow in our resting in God’s gentleness.

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