

The Taming of the Tongue

By Leonard Ravenhill

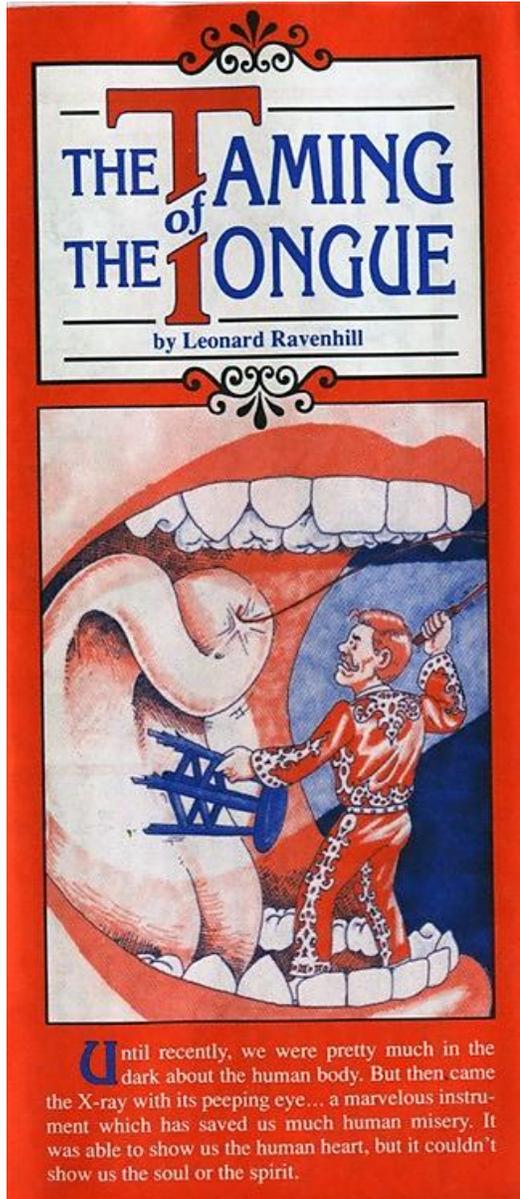
Until recently, we were pretty much in the dark about the human body. But then came the X-ray with its peeping eye... a marvelous instrument which has saved us much human misery. It was able to show us the human heart, but it couldn't show us the soul of the spirit.

It could show us the throat, but not the voice. The brain, but not the mind. Nevertheless, medical science has done much to help this outward man that perishes. If our eyes are getting dim, we can get glasses. If our kidneys or heart fail, we can have a transplant. But as far as I know, there is one member of the body that has never been transplanted. If we used our arms and legs as much as we use this part, we'd be incredibly stiff and sore. But this member never gets tired, and I've never seen one with a splint on it. As you get older you may get dentures - but you will always have the same *tongue* you were born with! There are artificial joints made these days, but no artificial tongues.

My mother was pretty smart when it came to the tongue. She sprinkled her daily conversation with wise sayings like "Keep your tongue between your teeth" and "Think twice before you speak once." The Scottish people have some proverbs, too: "Keep your tongue a prisoner and your body will go free" and "A long tongue shortens friendships." My mother would also tell us, "Remember, one day you'll answer to God for every word you say."

The Bible mentions many kinds of tongues. There is a flattering tongue (*Psalms* 5:9), a proud tongue (*Psalms* 12:3, 73:9), a lying tongue (*Psalms* 109:2, *Proverbs* 6:17), a deceitful tongue (*Psalms* 120:2), a perverted tongue (*Proverbs* 10:31, 17:20), a soothing tongue (*Proverbs* 15:4), a healing tongue (*Proverbs* 12:18), a destructive tongue (*Proverbs* 17:4), a mischievous and wicked tongue (*Psalms* 10:7), a soft tongue (*Proverbs* 25:15), and a backbiting tongue (*Proverbs* 25:23). James also talks about the tongue. He says it's a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. He calls the tongue a fire, the very world of iniquity. James says it is untamable, a restless evil full of deadly poison, used both to bless God and to curse men. But James also told us that a man who doesn't stumble in what he says is a perfect man. (*James* 3:2-10)

I wonder how startled James would be today to find out how much man has "conquered." We've put men into big, fancy tin cans, and shot them off into space. We've sent men into submarines without coming up to the surface for months. Man has had the moon under his feet and he's left his footprints on the ocean floor as well. We've also put some fantastic canisters up into the sky, bouncing our voices off these satellites to countries around the world. Look at how we've harnessed the wind with giant windmills, and made the rivers and waterfalls drive our turbines. What incredible power man has over his world! And yet, he has still not conquered his own tongue.



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A Damaging Sword

In *Psalms* 64:3 the tongue is called "a sword." This sword has certainly damaged, bruised, wounded, and killed more people than all the swords in all the wars since history began. You've seen it many times. That newly married couple - so lovey-dovey for days and days on end. But one day the fellow lost his temper and slashed into the heart and affections of his wife with uncontrollable anger and with words he might regret forever. But it was said. The damage was done. How often we need to remember that old saying: We cannot call back the arrow we've shot into the air, the water under the bridge, or the spoken word. One of the earliest poems I ever learned was:

*Angry words, O let them never
From the tongue, unbridled slip.
With the soul's best impulse
Ever check them,
Ere they soil the lips.
Angry words are quickly spoken,
Bitter thoughts are rashly stirred,
Fondest links of life are broken,
By a single angry word.*

Is there something that could be numbered greater than the incomprehensible amount of stars in the heavens? What about the sands by the sea, every blade of grass, or the leaves on the trees? I believe if we could add all of these things together, there would still be something that would exceed them in number! It's the things said by this little monster called the tongue. This uncontrollable little red rebel that lives in a red cave guarded by two rows of white soldiers called teeth. Think about how many words are being spoken today just over all the telephones worldwide. And how about all the words

slung around the globe by our TVs and radios? The tongue has done more damage than any other instrument in the human body.

We are responsible for the words that we speak. *"And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned."* (Matt. 12:36-37) Our own words snare us. (Prov. 6:2) We are ensnared by vows and promises spoken, but not kept. By reckless criticisms and rash judgments. *"How can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil."* (Matt. 12:34-35)

The human heart can be a snake pit, a dungeon of devilry, a foxhole of filth, a pit of perversity. Actually, it's the manufacturing place of all uncleanness and all sin. The showcase of the heart is the tongue. My simple words cannot exaggerate the corruption of the heart. And the filth that comes out of a filthy heart comes through the lips. But when I've said all I can about it, the strongest thing is surely said in Proverbs 18:21 - *"Death and life are in the power of the tongue..."*

A Rolling Story

A rolling stone gathers no moss, but a rolling story gathers something fresh every time we say it. Every time we repeat it, something is added and something is taken away until it's nothing like the truth. Some little bit of gossip starts with a whisper, then it swells and becomes a tumult, and somebody's left heartbroken. Do you wonder that Proverbs 10:19 says, *"When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise"?* Or Ecclesiastes 10:14, *"The fool multiplies words..."?*

How often we sing (full of self-pity) "Oh what needless pain we bear..." Someone should write a verse about what needless pain we *cause* when we lacerate people, wound them, and bruise them with our tongues. I want to sound a word of caution about the flippancy of our language, and the carelessness and exaggeration in the language used by preachers. What awful things come from their lips these days that cannot be justified by Scripture!

Just this week I spoke with a big strong professional football player who has now become a full-time evangelist...a very godly man. He broke into tears as he told me about the slander and deceit used against him among Christians. He said through his tears, "Mr. Ravenhill, I've suffered character assassination." I said, "Friend, you're under a delusion that most Christians are under. There's nobody that can assassinate your character. Character is what God *knows* you are. Reputation is what men *think* you are. They might have lied, wrecked your reputation, and made it almost impossible for you to get into other pulpits, but remember this" (as you read this, you remember it too): "The only one who can wreck your character is you. God doesn't listen to gossip except to judge it. The only one who can lower or higher you in the estimation of God is you - by your obedience or by your disobedience."

Products of the Tongue

Have the Christians of today improved over the Christians in Corinth? They didn't have a Bible to read but Paul wrote boldly to them, *"For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there may be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances."* These are all products of the tongue. Hey, friend, before we go any further, make out your checklist. Have you been in unprofitable, ridiculous debates, arguing just to win someone over? So very often we win the debate and lose the friend. Paul said that among these professing Christians there was strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disturbances.

After Jesus Himself, I believe that Paul was the greatest preacher who ever lived. But when writing to the Corinthians, he said, *"And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling."* (I Cor 2:1-3) That doesn't sound like the Apostle we think of, clothed with all the armor of God, pulling down strongholds and putting the devil to flight.

But then he goes on in verse 4, *"And my message and my preaching weren't in persuasive words of wisdom..."* I doubt he was a fascinating preacher, juggling with words that sparkled. His job was to glorify Jesus. If we preach and people remember us, we've missed it. He says that his preaching was not with persuasive words of wisdom, *"but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power."* He didn't spend hours like some preachers, selecting the most fascinating and flashy words. Maybe we might say "fleshy" words. His concern was to project Jesus Christ only and Him crucified. There was nothing flippant or fleshly about what he said, and certainly nothing foolish.

Paul warns us, *"In reference to your former manner of life, lay aside the old self... be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth... Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice."* (Eph. 4:22-31)

Paul also exhorts us, *"There must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting..."* (Eph. 5:4) I've heard preachers eating dinner together get into borderline jokes, and then someone pushes it further until it's totally disgusting. I like humor, but I don't like stupidity, filthiness, or coarse jesting. Oh how many silly, stupid things are said. Dr. Tozer used to say to me, "Len, be careful. Remember, never, never, speak lightly of the devil. Don't tell any jokes about hell." The devil is not *almighty*, but we must not forget that he is *mighty*. All too often Christians speak too lightly of the kingdom of darkness, as if to treat the whole thing as unimportant. (Jude 9)

Muzzle Your Mouth

David says, "I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle." (Psalm 39:1) We usually think of other parts of our body as being agencies of sin, but not our tongue. David says "I will guard my mouth."

Colossians 4:6 says, "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt." Not pepper! Sometimes anger gets in our speech and spoils everything that we've said. Psalm 12:3 says, "May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that speaks great things." These surely are stern warnings to believers.

Psalm 15 asks, "Lord, who may abide in Thy tent? Who may dwell on Thy holy hill? He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, and speaks truth in his heart." So there you have it: walking and talking. Walking uprightly, speaking the truth in your heart. And in verse 3, "He does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend." I believe we sabotage a lot of our prayers because we're doing what James says one minute we're blessing God, and then afterwards we're cursing men. Not blaspheming or using vile language, but criticizing them. One minute our tongues are speaking about holy things, and the next, unholy things. You see, the tongue is an index of the heart.

Do you wonder that I shudder when I look at a large congregation singing, "Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise..."? Goodness me, if they *did* have 1,000 tongues, there would be 999 times more gossip and criticism and slander than there is now! Earth would be hell and the Church would be as bad. Oh no, if we can't control the one we have, how could we manage 999 more? How often *do* we sing our great Redeemer's praise? For five minutes in two Sunday morning hymns? And the rest of the week it's careless and silly talk. Talk of anything but the deep things of God.

Showcase Of The Heart

Our words reflect what's in our hearts. If a man loves sports, he talks sports. If he loves money, he talks money. If he loves art, he talks art. I marvel at the slackness of speech among Christians and at how often preachers are guilty of gross exaggerations in their reports about their meetings, and at how carelessly they slander others. I was at a ministers' conference some years ago and we drove back and forth in packed buses all week between the hotel and the conference center. But never once among all those ministers was the conversation about God or holiness or the coming of Jesus. It was sports, or golf handicaps, or how big their Sunday School was. It was just senseless chatter even among preachers. But preachers aren't the only ones guilty of conversation which is unprofitable and unedifying.

Do you wonder that the psalmist in Psalm 51 cries "Create in me a clean heart"? We've already considered the foulness of the human heart, yet God can take that heart and make it pure and beautiful and eloquent for Himself. There's nothing that gives us away as much as our speech. Our speech shows where our hearts are.

You can't cover up your heart. If there's bitterness in our hearts, it will come out through what we say and how we say it. If there's hatred, hatred will come. If there's anger, anger will come. No wonder James says that the tongue can't be controlled. The heart is engineering all that the tongue is going to say.

The heart is the factory that produces all these vile things, and the tongue is the showcase of the heart. Surely one of the most amazing things about the transforming grace of God is, that man loses his filthy language, lying tongue, and unholy anger when he gets saved. There's little use carrying a big Bible and wearing a lapel pin saying how spiritual we are, if we explode at the office, speak unkindly to our children, or if we're critical and bitter and become known as somebody who carries on.

Stick Out Your Tongue

In the springtime my mother used to say, "Put out your tongue and let me see what it's like." She'd say, "Oh no, you're not in good condition," and then she had some horrible concoction that we had to take. I wonder, if we had to put out our tongues at the end of each day if they would be unclean with gossip, slander, criticism, or bitterness? Or do we have them under control, as Paul says, "sound in speech which is beyond reproach"? (Titus 2:8) Is our speech always with grace, seasoned with salt?

I helped at a funeral once where there were several teenage children. They sobbed and groaned and carried on as I'd never seen anyone do at a funeral. I said to my senior pastor, "Oh, how much they loved their mother!" He said, "No, they're just crying in remorse. They were the most disobedient, backbiting, sarcastic children ever. They always abused their mother with their words. They gave her an awful time. They just cut her to pieces with their tongues." Many of us suddenly feel this same unbearable guilt when someone dies and we can't take back the words we've spoken or heal the wounds we've made.

This is a day when people are screaming about ecology. We want pure rivers and pure air. What about pure hearts? It's a pity we don't raise our voice in the Church and call everyone to recite Psalm 51 and cry with David, "Create in me a clean heart!" Or, as Wesley put it,

*O for a heart to praise my God,
A heart from sin set free.
A heart that always feels the blood,
So freely shed for me.
A heart resigned, submissive, meek,
My Great Redeemer's throne,
Where only Christ is heard to speak,
Where Jesus reigns alone.*

If Christ were speaking internally all the time, we wouldn't come out with the rubbish that we utter so much.

When you get to my age, you look back and it's an awesome thing. I think about the millions of words I must have said in 60 years of preaching. Speaking at least 120 words a minute, I can speak 1,200 words in ten minutes. In 60 minutes I've spoken 7,200 words and I've done this twice a day sometimes and done it for years. Then there's all the words I've written.

What a day when all the great orators stand before the Lord. Oh, that we might find men today whose hearts are burning with love and devotion, and because their hearts are burning, their speech will burn - with love, with adoration, and with hatred for sin. My prayer is, "Lord, teach me to hold my tongue. Teach me to do as the psalmist says, set a watch at the door of my lips that my speech may always be seasoned with grace. My tongue never a sword. My speech always edifying, uplifting, and that which glorifies God." Amen.

For further study:

Psalm 12:3-4	Proverbs 20:15
Psalm 34:13	Ecl. 5:6
Psalm 37:30	Romans 3:4,13-14
Psalm 39:1,3	II Cor. 12:20
Psalm 120:2-3	James 3:2

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