

YOU TEACH VOL.4 STUDY GUIDE

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

YOU TEACH: THE MAIN POINT

All of us get angry from time to time. But when we do, we need to be careful about what comes out of our mouths—and more than that, *think* before we *speak*.

YOU TEACH: THE BIG PICTURE

In 2002, America was introduced to a 34-year-old New Yorker named Paul Marcarelli who would verbalize a question virtually every cell phone owner has asked at one time or another: “Can you hear me now?” Marcarelli’s simple question connected with millions of cell phone customers.

The problem of dropped calls or lack of reliable coverage has caused such aggravation that an entire Web site has been devoted to locate and remedy such coverage areas under the name www.deadcellzones.com, complete with maps and blogs. According to this Web site, some days the registered complaints reach quadruple digits, with users noting new areas of annoyance after a dropped call or a click straight to voice mail.

Who among us hasn’t had to fight back curses when something as simple as a bad connection or technology malfunction caused a cell phone call to run afoul? But it’s likely that for most of us the issue of our mouths and the words that come out of them runs even deeper. Do critical barbs, mean-spirited poison, and hateful gossip fly out of our mouths as if someone turned on a faucet? Is regret and damage control too frequent because we speak before we think?

Controlling the tongue and learning to become people who bless rather than curse is clearly spoken about in the Bible. It was an issue for those who walked closest with Jesus. His half-brother, James, devoted a good portion of his letter to the importance of taming the tongue. James certainly must have seen the way Jesus used words to encourage rather than tear down.

Another individual was almost like family to Jesus—Simon Peter. The Lord’s right-hand man, Peter was the one on whom Jesus said he would build his church. But Peter had a problem with his tongue. Some biblical scholars have given him the nickname “the Apostle with the foot-shaped mouth.” Time

and time again, we see Peter putting his foot squarely into his kisser because of the things he said and the way he said them. However, at the end of his life, we see Peter conveying the wisdom of a man who's learned the hard way that what a person says (or chooses not to say) is a mark of spiritual maturity.

Both James and Peter write to other followers of Jesus in a way that demonstrates passionate truth and an understanding of how to use words constructively.

YOU TEACH: THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

During Jesus' earthly ministry and investment in his closest followers, he said things that marked for life the people around him. His words made a lasting impression, especially when those people reflected on Jesus' words after his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. When thinking back on the times they spent walking with their rabbi, men such as James and Peter must have played over and over in their minds the words Jesus spoke to the Pharisees:

You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. Good people bring good things out of the good stored up in them, and evil people bring evil things out of the evil stored up in them. But I tell you that people will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

(MATTHEW 12:34-37)

Both James and Peter write explicitly about the importance of watching what you say and getting a grip on the difficult challenge of taming the tongue. James wrote a letter to followers of Jesus scattered among the nations due to persecution and other challenges that came with being a faithful follower. He included in his letter these words:

We all stumble in many ways. Those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect, able to keep their whole body in check...the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell...no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

(JAMES 3:2, 5-6, 8-10)

James must have grown more and more amazed at his oldest brother, Jesus, whom the Bible records as perfect in all his responses, never having a deceitful word found in his mouth.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

(HEBREWS 4:15)

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

(1 PETER 2:21-23)

We’ll examine the author of the latter verses for the remainder of our study. Although Peter didn’t spend an entire childhood in the same family environment as Jesus (like James), Peter did spend three years with Jesus. These years must have been filled with memorable moments with the Messiah, experiences that likely informed what Peter wrote in his letters.

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, “whoever among you would love life and see good days must keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

(1 PETER 3:8-12)

These are not words written by a stuffy, know-it-all religious expert; they’re penned in humility and with an ever-present awareness of his own sinfulness. Peter was beckoning his audience to learn from his mistakes when it comes to the tongue. Jesus corrected Peter more than any other disciple. Peter had such an issue with his tongue that he actually rebuked Jesus to his face.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things at the hands of the elders,

the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

(MATTHEW 16:21-23)

Ouch! But they weren't thoughtless words Jesus spoke to his friend; they represented loving truth used intentionally and would stay with Peter for life. Jesus wasn't into being politically correct with those he loved; he “shot straight” with them. Note the conversation between Jesus and Peter beginning a mere seven verses before the verbal rebuke took place.

“But what about you?” he [Jesus] asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of death will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

(MATTHEW 16:15-19)

We can imagine that conversation never left Peter's memory, either. One moment he's being blessed and honored by Jesus, and the next Jesus is rebuking him and referring to him as Satan. In a heartbeat Peter's mind had gone from the wisdom of God to the foolishness of man. This is a lesson every follower of Jesus would do well to remember. Apart from the power of the Holy Spirit controlling our lives, we too will become eligible for a harsh rebuke from Jesus.

Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

(MATTHEW 16:23)

Those faithfully wounding words of his master and friend helped to bridle Peter's untamed tongue. But Peter was still known to “spit the bit” when it came to his words. Consider these snapshots in Peter's portfolio, ones for which Peter would most certainly have welcomed a “do over”:

At the last supper, Jesus spoke directly to Peter.

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” But he replied, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.” Jesus answered, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.”

(LUKE 22:31-34)

Fast-forward a few hours. Jesus has been arrested on the Mount of Olives, where he was in a garden with his friends, including Peter. This scene again reveals how quickly Peter’s words could swing from one end of the spectrum to the other.

“Then seizing him [Jesus], they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, “This man was with him.” But he denied it. “Woman, I don’t know him,” he said. A little later someone else saw him and said, “You also are one of them.” “Man, I am not!” Peter replied. About an hour later another asserted, “Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.” Peter replied, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word that Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.

(LUKE 22:54-62)

The look Jesus gave Peter after the rooster crowed must have made Peter’s heart sink. He had done it again. His words had betrayed not only his master, but he had broken the pledge he made over dinner only a few hours earlier. All he could do was weep. No words could now express his heavy heart and sorrowful spirit. A hard lesson had been learned. Perhaps through the sobs his soul cry went something like, “Lord, did you hear what I just said? Can you even hear me now?”

Without the blessing on the shores of Galilee by his risen Savior, recorded in John 21, Peter’s heart may never have completely mended. But Jesus knew the power of words and had just the right thing to say to Peter, blessing and commissioning him to feed and take care of Jesus’ followers, those who would change the world with the spread of the gospel.

In the latter years of Peter's ministry, as a leader of the church he wrote about the power of words and how they can be used as a blessing or a curse, leading to good or evil. We've already seen the following passage, but it bears repeating:

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, "whoever among you would love life and see good days must keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

(1 PETER 3:8-12)

YOU TEACH: THE QUESTIONS TO PROCESS

Feel free to moderate the dialogue in directions pertinent to your group. Encourage your group members to practice active listening when others are speaking. As the leader of your group, be proactive in asking others for feedback, insights, or different perspectives as people respond to the questions.

1. The video may have made you a little uncomfortable. Describe what you felt at the end of the video.
2. When you get angry, what seems to happen as a result?
3. Have you ever "fast-forwarded the tape" on someone without thinking first? (In other words, you figured out what you thought was the truth but then found out you were wrong.) Describe an example—but no names, please.
4. Have you lost a friendship because of your words? If so, what was the circumstance?
5. Would you say you have a "conniving tongue," a "careless tongue," or a "controlled tongue"? How have these types of tongues helped or hurt?
6. Our words show what's in our hearts. True or false?
7. What would people say about your words and what's "stored" inside your heart?
8. Is there someone—because of your words—you need to ask forgiveness from? Will you?

9. Read Matthew 15:18. What needs to change inside your heart? If this doesn't change, what will your next 20 years look like?
10. Name one area concerning your mouth you need prayer for: Gossip, little white lies, slander, perverse talk, sarcasm, cussing.

YOU TEACH: THE PRAYERS TO PRAY

Throughout the history of the church, followers of Jesus have recorded their prayers. May the recorded and preserved prayers here be echoed again by those who call on the name of the Lord. May they be used as examples of how to pray authentically. May they stretch our vocabulary and enrich our time of prayer.

The final prayer is intended as a prompt for you to finish in your own words.

“O God our Father, we would thank thee for all the bright things of life. Help us to see them, and to count them, and to remember them, that our lives may flow in ceaseless praise; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

—J.H. JOWETT, 1846-1923

“Is not sight a jewel? Is not hearing a treasure? Is not speech a glory? O my Lord, pardon my ingratitude and pity my dullness who am not sensible of these gifts. The freedom of thy bounty hath deceived me. These things were too near to be considered. Thou presented me with thy blessings, and I was not aware. But now I give thanks and adore and praise thee for thy inestimable favours.”

—THOMAS TRATHERNE, 1636-1674

“O Lord my God, most merciful, most secret, most present, most constant, yet changing all things, never new and never old, ever in action, yet ever quiet, creating, upholding, and perfecting all, who hath anything but thy gift? Or what can any man say when he speaketh of thee? Yet have mercy upon us, O Lord, that we may speak unto thee, and praise thy Name.”

—JEREMY TAYLOR, 1613-1667

“O God, what I really need to tell you today is...”

YOU TEACH: THE HOMEWORK

1. Conduct a “word fast” in which you intentionally don’t speak unless you need to answer a question or give someone information. A word fast can help bring new awareness of the many mindless words we say in any given day. Pray that God would help you measure your words in ways that bring blessings to others rather than hurt.
2. Be intentional and bless a specific number of people each day with spoken or written words of encouragement and blessing—especially with those who cause you the most frustration. (You may find that after the exercise, they become less frustrating to you.)
3. Create some “I appreciate you because...” videos and post them on YouTube so that your friends can have a tangible reminder of your positive words of blessing and encouragement.