

Even YouTube Recognizes the Destructive Power of Words

The announcement sounded promising: “YouTube to Remind Users Not to be a Jerk in the Comment Sections.” The reality is that this initiative doesn’t have a chance of succeeding. That’s because the internet has proven to be the perfect place for us to act like jerks, with few consequences and almost no accountability.

Hiding behind the anonymity of our screen names, or using our real names but at a safe distance from those we speak about, we can insult, malign, castigate, accuse, belittle, mock and curse to our heart’s content. We can gossip, we can slander, we can speculate about motives, we can judge hearts, and we can throw around opinions that destroy people’s lives and reputations.

No wonder Jacob (James) wrote, “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6, NIV).

These are strong words, indeed, especially when you consider the billions of words being spilled everyday online and in texts and conversations. We really are setting the whole world on fire with our tongues.

No wonder Proverbs teaches that “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Prov. 18:21).

Do the words we post online, the words we speak, the words we text, bring life or death? Do they destroy lives, or do they save lives?

Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:29-30, not as a suggestion but as a

directive to believers: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

Yet day after day, with endless posts and comments (and memes), we air our negative opinions about everybody under the sun, from politicians to preachers and from celebrities to church members. How does this line up with Paul’s instructions? In times past, this would have been considered gossip and even slander. Does the internet somehow turn prohibited speech into permitted speech? Hardly.

We slice and dice people with our memes and graphics, all for a good laugh or a good put-down, all to spread the latest rumor or theory, all to get more shares and likes (the nastier the meme, the better), and all with little consciousness of God.

Yet Jesus said, “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36-37, ESV).

Can you imagine what that will look like when we give account for our idle, reckless, empty words?

A friend sent me this note as we were discussing this ever-present internet plague: “I think it’s vitally important to point out that with the tens of MILLIONS of sarcastic and damning memes, posts, articles, etc., most of which are slanderous lies, deceptions, exaggerations, personal opinions that have ZERO proof (because we have no intimate knowledge of the circumstances), how much we, as followers of Christ, have truly set not only the course of our own lives on fire, but have set the course of the entire world on fire. Our tongues have created immeasurable destruction ... AND WE ARE COMPLETELY

RESPONSIBLE. We have fundamentally ignored the warnings of God on this matter.”

But do we even care anymore? Do we even try to measure our speech? Or do we simply post and say whatever comes to mind? “No one is going to tell me what to say. I’ve got a right to speak my mind.”

Except we don’t. Not if we are followers of Jesus. Not if we have been bought with a price. Not if we have another master. We now live to do His will, not our own, and we are called to conduct ourselves based on His standards, not ours.

To fail to do so is not only to be reckless and irresponsible. It is to be downright disobedient.

That’s why Proverbs also stated that, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent” (Prov. 10:19, ESV). And, “Reckless speech is like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Prov. 12:18, TLV).

Consistently in Scripture, it is fools—meaning people who are morally bankrupt—who are unrestrained and destructive in their speech, while it is the wise—meaning people who walk in the fear of the Lord—who are quick to hear, slow to anger and slow to speak (James 1:19; Prov. 17:27-28).

The words of the wise are words of truth, words of love, words of integrity, words of justice, words of faith, words of courage, words of restraint. The words of the wise only hurt in order to heal. They only tear down in order to build up. The words of fools are reckless, unrestrained and destructive.

What about you and me? Are we fools, or are we wise? What does our speech indicate? What do our words say about who we are? Jesus said that it is out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45). What is in our hearts? {eo}