

Words we can't take back

How do we retool after we speak irreverently or caustically?

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [February 14, 2018](#) issue



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My least favorite part of sitting in a dentist's chair doesn't involve the drilling, suctioning, or poking. It's the moment when the dentist wraps my tongue in gauze and starts yanking it left and right. That hurts. I know it's part of oral cancer screening, but wincing anxiously under the exam light, my mind goes straight to a medieval torture chamber.

"No one can tame the tongue," declares the writer of the Letter of James, which suggests the writer had never been to a dentist. But presumably he had more than physical constraint of the tongue in mind. Is it true that the tongue can't be trained to keep coarse and brutal language at bay? Is there no way to hold off lies and propaganda? What about the self-serving images or words of deceit that roll off our tongues? Is taming all of this impossible? These are worthwhile questions to ask, especially in an era when many are wondering where public civility went.

President Trump's reported use of a vulgar word while speaking to legislators in the White House last month aroused the ire of the public. I'm not sure it was the vileness of the word itself—though the word is packed with contempt—that people responded to as much as the disdainful reference to the people of entire countries and continents. These would be real people, breathing human beings, worth loving and knowing.

The lingering tragedy of the utterance was that there was no retraction or apology, apparently no mechanism with which to reevaluate the statement. That raises a related question for all of us: How do we retool after we speak irreverently or caustically? How do we compensate others whom we've hurt, even when we thought our language was considerate? Should we pay each other monetarily when we're crass, like the café in Nice, France, that charges rude customers double what polite customers pay?

I think a great deal about language, particularly given my vocation. When I climb into the pulpit, I regularly contemplate the responsibility. All I have are words. I don't have a paintbrush, welding torch, or stethoscope. Only words. Once those words leave my tongue, they're gone. There's no retrieving them. Either they form people into creative and faithful beings or they fall flat and merely inform. Or worse, they take down.

Recently, a church member scheduled an office visit to discuss a sermon point that wounded him. I listened humbly to what was clearly failed speech on my part. I am,

admittedly, a flawed messenger. What struck me about the conversation was the vital role that Christian community plays in helping us reflect on our speech. Language is a gift that determines how we care about each other. How we speak and listen bestows either life or death. Communities of faith exist, among other reasons, to maintain a quality of discourse that denies a place for coercive, dismissive, or manipulative language.

Theologian Richard Mouw believes that outer politeness is a requisite for civility. But since outer displays of polite speech are not always evident, either by intent or accident, there is an inner politeness that must be formed over time as well. This inner civility, best shaped by being in community with others who think reverently about language, is precisely what we all need to reevaluate our worst moments of speech.

A version of this article appears in the February 14 print edition under the title "Can the tongue be tamed?"