

## Why can't we control our speech?



I wrote this post while on a transatlantic cruise heading to the Iberian Peninsula. It took seven days to cross the pond. I love the seven days at sea because they offer hours to read, think, write...and to observe people (2,100 passengers and 999 crew members).

One night after dinner, the entertainment staff led a group of about 30 passengers gathered in one of the lounges in a game they called "Yes and No." The rules were straightforward: individuals could volunteer to have a conversation with a staff member in which the volunteer could not say the words "yes" or "no"; nor could the volunteer shake his head up or down (indicating "yes" or "no" non-verbally). Any communication of "yes" or "no" disqualified the volunteer. If the conversation continued for three minutes the volunteer would win a prize.

A typical conversation sounded like this:

Crew member: Hi, what's your name?

Volunteer: Matthew

Crew member: Where are you from Matthew?

Matthew: Chicago.

Crew member: Chicago; great city; were you born there?

Matthew: No

end of game...

I watched 11 people try. They all failed.

Reflecting on the experience, I immediately thought of that bold statement made by the apostle James: “No man can tame the tongue” (James 3:8). In the “Yes and No” game, the *only* restriction was to avoid saying *two words*—that was all—but no one could comply.

A few hours after Mary and I observed the “Yes and No” game, I failed at a similar version of the game. Ephesians 4:29 says “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths” so the rule of that version of the game would be: see how long you can go without speaking an unwholesome word.

Mary and I had a tiff, during which I said some hurtful things...to the person I love the most. I was saddened by my words, I asked Mary’s forgiveness, and I vowed to do a better job filtering my speech.

Why is it so difficult to control our speech? My guess is, our speech is simply a verbalization of our thoughts and often we don’t filter our thoughts before they become sound waves. In James 1:19 we’re instructed to be “slow to speak,” but most of us are *fast* to speak. One way to slow down our speech is to simply understand that we need not say everything we *think*, so before we speak, we should take a millisecond to analyze what we’re about to say and when necessary, keep our mouth shut. In other words, before you turn your thoughts into words, run them through some filters:

- Are these words appropriate?
- Will they express grace and truth?
- Is this the right time and place to say these words?
- Will I regret saying these words?
- Are these words necessary?
- Will they be an improvement on silence?

It’s true—no man can tame the tongue—but that shouldn’t discourage us from trying. We’ll never gain total control but we can continually improve.