

Sermon for Sunday, August 14, 2011
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Who Can Tame the Tongue
James 3:1-12

1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. 3 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. 5 Likewise 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. 6 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 his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, 8 but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. 11 My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

1. Dangers of the tongue

It was a tedious meeting. I had let my attention wander, but snapped to attention when the leader made an assertion that was, in my opinion, so obviously wrong-headed that it had to be a joke. With the foolhardiness that can strike those who have just begun to pay attention, I said so. "You've got to be kidding," I said.

Alas, he was not kidding, as his body language made so very clear. He knew he was advancing a novel idea, but he held it sincerely and, as leader, he was prepared to argue his case. But I had dismissed it as a joke from the start. In one careless second, I had embarrassed everyone and offended the speaker. I wanted to vacuum the words that had just spewed from my mouth like a box of ashes. My speech felt like shattered glass on the floor. I wondered, "Why didn't I control my tongue?", but James asks: who can control the tongue?

"True religion" controls the tongue:

Control of the tongue is one of the tests of true religion: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue... his religion is worthless" (1:26-27). But proving our faith at this point will not be simple. It is too easy to offer kind wishes - keep warm and well fed - and do nothing to help. When James describes the man who utters kind words and does nothing, we squirm. But James 3 brings full focus to our tongue. James 1 says a religious man must "keep a tight rein on his tongue." Now James says, "No man can tame the tongue" (3:8).

The role of teacher: not many should be teachers (3:1)

James opens with an alarming warning, "Not many of you should become teachers [because] we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (3:1). Even as teachers explain this verse, we invite judgment on ourselves. Why does James say this? The church was troubled with false teachers from the beginning. Heretics, the self-indulgent and power-hungry all sought to gain power by their self-serving teaching. The vain seek the honor of the position of "teacher." Jesus warned about Pharisees who love to be called rabbi ("my teacher") or father.

So, teachers should be qualified. And some people get a misplaced thrill from standing before an audience. But James has another point. He says everyone **must** tame the tongue, but no one can do so.

Teachers make a good test case of failed speech. We should guard our speech because gifted speakers have influence that they must use well. Teachers are especially vulnerable to failures of speech because we talk so much. More words bring more errors. As we get used to public speaking, we can become careless.

Many are terrified at the thought of public speaking. Others drink the adrenaline of standing on center stage. We become overconfident, opinionated, self-important, we speak too freely when we don't have enough facts. Humor is a dangerous gift. It pleases the crowd, but easily wounds.

Public speech before a captive classroom audience "provides temptations to virtually every form of evil speech: arrogance and domination over students; anger and pettiness at contradiction or inattention; slander and meanness toward absent opponents; flattery of students for the sake of vainglory."¹ These problems are strong in the church since Christian teachers are supposed to be models of virtue. So teachers are subject to judgment. Let's take care!

Yet James doesn't say, "No one should teach" or "Beware the teacher," but "Not many should teach." It is God's call and our work, plus willing hearers make a teacher – whether in small groups or large. Of course, I would be glad to talk to anyone who suspects God may be calling them to gospel ministry.

Why we should not teach: We all stumble (3:2)

James does not accuse teachers of being especially wicked: "We all stumble in many ways." No one can control his tongue. If anyone could, he would be faultless and perfect, "able to keep his whole body in check." Every day, the tongue proves two things: We falter, we sin and cannot reform ourselves. Failures of the tongue are common, public, and undeniable. The Old Testament says the tongue proves human sin.

- When the prophet **Isaiah** met the Lord in the temple, he cried, "I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5).
- Psalm 34 says, "Whoever of you **loves life** and desires to see many good days, **keep your tongue** from evil and your lips from speaking lies" (34:12-13).
- Paul: "There is no one righteous. Their tongues practice deceit. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness" (Rom 3:10-14).

If anyone could control his tongue he would have complete self-mastery (Jas 3:2). Our mouth is our undoing. Proverbs: "A fool's lips bring him strife, and his mouth invites a beating. A fool's mouth is his undoing, and his lips are a snare to his soul" (Prov 18:6-7). Let us take care as we speak truth in love.

Even gifts of the tongue are dangerous. The persuasive tongue can convince people of many things. It takes discipline to wield a sharp tongue wisely. The witty tongue grants the gift of laughter, but humor often hurts someone. If anyone could control the powers of persuasion and humor, he would be almost perfect.

¹ Johnson, 263.

2. Traits of the tongue: It is a rudder, a flame, and a window on the soul (3:3-5)

James compares the tongue to a horse's bit, a ship's rudder or a fire among trees.

- The tongue rests in the human mouth much as the **bit** is in the horse's mouth. In both cases, a **small thing** moves and **controls a large body**.
- The tongue is like the **rudder** of a ship. Just as a small part of a ship turns the whole, so the tongue influences or turns the whole person.
- The tongue is like a spark of fire in dry woods, fields. As a small spark can start a great conflagration, so the tongue can set fire to relationships or communities.

Today James might compare the tongue to the steering wheel on a car. The tongue directs human life. What we do follows what we say. Both our internal speech (our thoughts), and our spoken words direct our actions.

One writer says James' purpose is not to warn against the hasty or lying tongue, but to focus on our efforts: If we can control the tongue we can control all of life. "Winning this battle is in itself a winning of all battles."² We should work hard to master the tongue because it is the key for self-mastery.

This idea is appealing, since it directs our effort to one central task. But the core idea is not biblical. Jesus doesn't say, "control the tongue and you control all." He says our heart controls our tongue and speech.

A tree is recognized by its fruit. For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him" (Matt 12:33-34).

James seems to say that the person who controls the tongue, unruly as it is, can surely control the other members of the body. Jesus agrees that control of the tongue is important, but he also says the heart controls the tongue. But look carefully at James' illustrations. They seem to have two parts: the bit and the horse, the rudder and the ship. But look again and notice a third part - an agent who controls the bit, rudder, and tongue.

- A **rider** uses the bit to direct his/her horse.
- The **pilot** uses the rudder to guide the ship.
- A **person** uses the tongue for speech that guides action.

James and Jesus agree: the heart moves the tongue. We don't simply decide, by an act of the will, to control the tongue. The heart - our deepest convictions - controls our resolutions.

The tongue as a fire

James is concerned about the tongue's reckless power. A small fire can start a great fire that rages through the countryside (the community) (3:5). When we were boy scouts, my brother and I started a fire in the woods one day. We did everything right – cleared a space around the fire with a ring of rocks. But we got enthusiastic when gathering firewood. We found a small dead tree, uprooted it, carried it back to the fire, and found that a wind had blown sparks into a stand of dry trees that were now on fire. A moment

² Motyer, 120-1

of carelessness can cause terrible damage. The tongue is like a fire when rumors spread. The Bible links gossip and fire:

- "A scoundrel plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends" (Prov 16:27-28).
- "Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. As... wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife (26:20-22).

How often the Bible warns about gossip. Before we speak, be sure you aren't gossiping – passing off a guess as the truth. Even telling the truth is wrong if a topic is confidential. Sometimes it's best to be silent. When someone tells you something doubtful, ask "Are you sure? Do I need to hear this?" James says "The tongue... is a fire." It sets all of life on fire "and is itself set on fire by hell" (3:6).

Today the tongue can extend its fire through blogs, twitters, e-mail, face book. I posed the question: What rules? Never blog, tweet or email when tired, angry, or upset about anything. Read what you've written out loud and imagine that your entire audience is in the room with you. Never reply to anger in anger. Meditate.

James describes the character, the influence and the allegiance of the tongue. Its character: The tongue is a concentration point of evil. No part of the body is more sinful than any other, but speech is involved in every form of wickedness. Words themselves are often evil, but we also add wicked words to wicked deeds. Before we strike someone, we curse them. Before we rob someone, we plan it with words. Yet the tongue is not simply "involved" in evil. It also has influence.

Its influence: It corrupts "the whole body," or person. The tongue plans evil deeds and utters hateful thoughts. We say someone is selfish or lazy because we think it, but when we say it, we think it all the more. The tongue is a fire because it causes fresh evils. When young, we whine, complain. When old, we criticize. When we fail, we excuse ourselves and blame others. When we succeed, we boast.

So our mouths corrupt us and cause evil. Yet evil ultimately comes from the heart. Jesus said, "But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean'" (15:18).

Its allegiance: Evil speech flows from a corrupt heart, but James says Satan himself gives the tongue its fiery power. Hell sets the tongue on fire (3:6). Why does the tongue causes such trouble? James says, "Because it's set on fire by hell."

What do your words say about your character? Your soul? Your allegiances? James asks these questions, questions we should ask of ourselves. But let's examine our deeds, too. Among other things, we need to think about technology. For most people, it's hard to be harsh, to criticize, gossip, or slander, when someone is in the room, but easy when they are out of the room. And easiest when we are writing an email or a blog.

George Orwell said that's easy to attack something you read – until you meet the author: "When you meet anyone in the flesh you realize immediately that he is a human being and not a caricature embodying certain ideas." Once he meets someone, he can no longer "show any intellectual brutality towards him, even when I feel that I ought to..." That is, it's easier to be savage at a distance. That's why emails and blogs go astray. Therefore pause and think hard before you send them.

We can tame anything but the tongue (3:7-8)

James said the tongue is enflamed by hell. Worse, mankind can tame anything – any creature - but not the tongue. Every sort of animal "can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human can tame the tongue" (3:7-8, English Standard Version (ESV)).

The tongue is restless, unstable. At an aquarium, we see whales, dolphins, and seals heeding human commands. At the circus, birds, horses, camels, elephants, and even tigers perform their routines. The trainer barks commands and the beasts fall in line. But who can force the tongue back into line? No one.

Humankind subdues every kind of animal, but we cannot subdue ourselves. The literal phrasing is awkward: "No one is able to tame the tongue – among humans." The stilted language makes us think. No human can control the tongue, yet the tongue must be tamed. Who then, will tame the tongue?

Augustine: James "does not say 'no one can tame the tongue,' but 'no man,' so that, when it is tamed, we know it is by the mercy of God." The tongue has vast influence, so we must control it. Yet no human can control it. Paradoxically, James says we must do something that we cannot do.

Some people want to soften James' message. He means it's almost impossible to tame the tongue, therefore we must redouble our efforts. They say: Since the tongue is the key to holy living, we must bend every effort to control it. If we do, we control all. The tongue is a rudder. So if the tongue is under control, there will be no sin – no lies or self-pity or anger. The tongue forms and controls thoughts and plans. So control the tongue.³

Rudders certainly are important. During World War II, the German navy launched its mightiest battleship, the Bismarck, to attack Allied shipping. When the British navy intercepted it, the Bismarck sank the Hood, the pride of Britain's navy, in less than ten minutes. The British attacked the great destroying ship while the Bismarck, lightly damaged, steamed to harbor. But one plane dropped a torpedo that wrecked the Bismarck's rudder so it could only go in circles. Within hours, dozens of ships and planes brought their firepower against the Bismarck until it sank. Rudders are crucial. A bad rudder can make a corporation, school, or team go in circles until it sinks. But is the tongue the rudder for human life?

No, the heart controls the tongue. It would be good if the heart could tame the tongue, but James says we can't. Therefore, we must seek help. No one has sufficient self-control to govern his tongue: "We all stumble in many ways" (3:2); "No one" – no human – "can tame the tongue" (3:8). The tongue is hopelessly inconsistent. It blesses God one minute and curses mankind the next (3:9-12).

The tongue is a window on the soul, even its inconsistency (3:9-12)

One minute we use the tongue to bless the Lord, the next we use it to curse our fellow man, even though God fashioned mankind in His likeness. That's as absurd as having one faucet that pours out fresh water and filthy sludge, as absurd as a single tree that bears both apples and grapes (3:11-12).

Faucets are consistent. They pour out the same clear water all year. Apple trees keep putting out apples. Yet the tongue is like a faucet that vacillates between sludge and clear water, like a tree that bears peaches one day and papayas the next. James says, "My brothers, this should not be" (3:10).

³ Motyer, 121.

James chides our inconsistency, even though he knows no one can control the tongue. He rebukes us because the duty of watching our words remains. Since a small statement can cause great harm, we must guard our speech. We must strive to bless God and mankind with our tongues.

3. God must tame the tongue, for no human can

We must, yet we cannot. No human can tame the tongue. For the moment, James leaves us in tension which he relieves a chapter later (4:6-10). James, like Jesus, was willing to let teachings dangle without resolution.

The Sermon on the Mount says, "The wise man builds his house on the rock." All who build on a foundation other than Christ will see their house fall "with a great crash" (Matt 7:26-27). But what is the rock? Ten chapters later, Jesus tells us that He is the sure rock and foundation for life. James waits one chapter. In 4:10, he promises that God will exalt all who humble themselves before him. If we humbly admit our inability – including inability to control the tongue - he will graciously forgive and renew us.

Scriptures say: We cannot control the tongue, but God can. We should try hard to make progress. We should think before we speak. Not: "Talk so you know what you think." Think, so you know what to say, words that love God and neighbor. Keep some things to yourself. Ask a question instead of criticizing, if you can. Drop the sarcasm. Pray. Before you criticize, make sure it's true. Make sure it has to be stated. Go to the person who is upsetting you before you tell others that you are upset. These are the biblical principles. Make whatever progress you can, even if it's only partial. Our efforts count.

God can do what we cannot. How can we properly face the failures of speech that reflect the failures of the heart.⁴ James and Jesus say, "Humble yourself" (Jas 4:10, Lk 18:14). But the proud deny their sin and need for God's redemption.

- We deny our sins. Our spouse says, "You're grouchy today. What's the matter?" and we reply, "I'm only grouchy when you heckle me with questions like that."
- We claim we are no worse than anyone else. We say, "I admit I'm grouchy occasionally, but I'm Mr. Congeniality compared to some."
- We claim our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds. We say, "Yes, I get grumpy when I'm exhausted, but I'm usually very agreeable."
- We offer no self-defense, but rather condemn ourselves and give in to despair.

There is a better way. First, admit that God is holy and that we should aspire to holiness. Second, since God is not satisfied by mere aspirations, ask him to forgive our failings. Third, receive the loving mercy of God. He loves us as a father loves his children, flaws and all.

God loves us as a husband loves his wife, flaws and all. A good husband hears his wife lament that she doesn't feel so pretty. Her skin is blotchy or loose. The good husband says, "I don't love your skin, I love you." Physical beauty is attractive, but a beloved wife doesn't fear fading beauty because she knows her beauty is not the final cause of her husband's love. God's love is purer than that of any husband, so we have hope. His love also gives us direction. Jesus said, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (Jn 13:35).

⁴ Chapell, Holiness by Grace, 17-65.

Good works and holiness please God, even as the traits of an excellent wife please her husband. But God loves His people, flaws and all. In this vital way, our moral achievements count for nothing. They neither earn God's love nor guarantee it. No deed, no accomplishment, makes God suddenly notice us or favor us. He loves us for His own reasons, not for our merits. Yet, if we love the Lord, we do aspire to holiness. As Moses said, "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples... But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery..... Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to. Therefore, take care to follow the commands I give you today (Deut 7:7-11).

We all stumble. If you happen to be that rare person who does not struggle with your tongue, you struggle with something. Everyone has a flaw, a flaw we cannot beat. If not speech then pride, fear, anger, lust, greed, envy, stinginess, contempt – something. We all stumble and need God's mercy, grace, and restoration.

Yet we strive to please God, whom we love. We do this even if our failures don't jeopardize that love. When we fail, we ask for grace to renew and purify us. We try to lay hold of his grace. We live without fear, for He will never disown us. Even in failure we remain confident that if we believe in God, he has given us life by the gospel (James 1:18). The gospel, implanted in us, saves us (1:21). Our tongue may be inconsistent, but our status is not. Our "performance" does not affect God's love for us.

By faith, God delivered us from bondage to a misguided tongue. Our speech only fitfully adorns our profession of faith. We are not totally new, but we are genuinely new. By God's grace, let us use our tongues to bless the Lord and to bless mankind, whom he made in his image.