

Taming the Tongue

James 3: 1 - 12

One of the reasons that Christians like reading the book of James, I think, is that he is practical and very clear in the things he writes. When we read, “*You say you have faith? Fine. I’ll show you my faith by my works*”, we ‘get it’! We know what he means.

Or, “*What good is it if we see someone hungry or lacking clothes and we say to them, ‘God bless you – be warm, and well fed!’*” We understand immediately that he telling us that our words can end up hollow and meaningless if there is no action backing them up.

James certainly understands the importance of words. He is a writer, so he knows how significant words can be in instruction, in lifting people up. He knows that words can inspire and encourage, and – again, he *knows* – words can inflict pain and hurt. We may say, ‘*sticks and stone may break our bones but words will never hurt me*’ but it’s not true...sometimes words hurt worse than sticks or stones.

So, the very practical James, brother of Jesus, devotes a sizable portion of his only letter to sharing some thoughts about words, or, as he puts it, ‘the tongue’. And he must have had some significant first hand experience, because he writes with passion: “*All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by human beings, but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*”

I can imagine that many here today can testify to the truth of those words, having been on the receiving end of a careless hurtful comment at some point in your life that you can still feel, or worse, a *deliberately* well-aimed verbal dart, that hit right on target.

...I had been in the ministry for just a little over four years, having been nurtured and encouraged in our first appointment; Dianna and I went with excitement into our second assignment. My District Superintendent had told us that the church was coming through a difficult time (in fact, their last three pastors had left the ministry for one reason or another), but we were ready to give

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it our best, and had every expectation of learning to love and serve these hurting people (which we did, by the way. But it wasn't easy.)

We arrived at the church in the beginning of July, and Brian (our first child) was born less than four weeks later. So, new church, new town, new family... lots of new stuff. Heady days!

About one week after Brian's birthday – i.e., about month after my arrival – I got word that the Church's SPR committee (which was supposed to be my support group) had been meeting secretly (and illegally, by UM Church Discipline) and they had made up a list of grievances against me.

I can still remember the feeling that I had when I heard that (they wouldn't share the list with me, so, you know how imagination goes. Especially when you're trying your best.) "What have I done wrong... already?" As I remember back about that time, I can see now something that I didn't quite grasp then, being only in my late 20's, without a lot of life experience. I think that what really hurt about that whole thing was not so much that someone had an issue with me. Even a few people. It was more that I realized that these people that I thought were my support, my family, even, had been talking *about* me, pretty extensively, in negative ways, and I had no clue about it until they came up with their document of complaints. I lost trust in all that.

[The DS, by the way, refused to even look at that document, and threatened to dismantle the committee if it happened again. Kind of a 'tough love' thing.]

And I appreciated that support. But I was shaken by this... my confidence took a hit. It really took awhile for me to stop leading that congregation defensively, you know, looking over my shoulder all the time, thinking not about "Is this a good path to pursue?" but more so, "what will be *their* reaction if I suggest this?"

All because some people decided that it was easier – or better – to talk *about* someone than to talk *to* them. The untamed tongue... finds many ways to inflict its fire.

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There is something generally attractive, don't you think, in people that are honest, and who are willing to talk about issues directly with you, and invite the same in return? Especially when they have a good grasp of what Paul termed, "Speaking the truth... *in love*." Because we all know that the other side of this, are people who may have their facts straight, [for the most part] yet they use 'truth' as a battering ram to attack. To break down, to maintain power over someone.

"I'm just telling the truth"... is not necessarily an example of 'loving one another' when that particular 'truth' may not have needed to be spoken in the first place. Solomon wrote that there is a time for everything. Including "a time to be silent and a time to speak". Wisdom – which is another one of James' themes in his letter – helps us to learn the difference.

In Today's Christian Woman, Ramona Cramer Tucker wrote about her friend Michelle, who admits to being caught in a nasty situation... At a restaurant after lunch, Michelle and her coworker, Sharon, stopped in the restroom to do whatever mysterious thing it is that women do in restrooms that takes so long... before returning to their jobs. Their small talk turned to the subject of people who drove them crazy. [Who hasn't had a conversation like that?] Immediately Michelle launched into a two-minute diatribe about Beth, a mutual coworker. As Michelle went on and on, a stall door opened. Out walked Beth, red-faced and angry.

In a split second, what had seemed like a pressure-relief session turned into an awkward mess. Michelle and Beth stared at each other in embarrassed panic. Michelle knew she couldn't take her words back. In the instant their eyes met, Beth fled out the door. That afternoon, Beth didn't return to work, and the next day Michelle heard through the grapevine that Beth had resigned. While other staff members openly cheered what seemed to be good news, Michelle felt miserable. She wished she would have talked *to* Beth instead of talking *about* Beth.

Although that situation happened some five years ago, but Michelle says she has never forgotten it. She tried to reach Beth several times by phone, then wrote her a letter of apology, but Beth never responded. Michelle says she, too, learned her lesson about loose lips—the hard way.

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What's worse is that Michelle is a Christian, and Beth, to her knowledge, isn't. ¹

James knew what he was talking about, didn't he?

I heard about three pastors were on a non-productive fishing trip when they began to discuss various topics to pass the time. One preacher said he thought it would be a good idea if they confessed their biggest sins to each other and then prayed for each other. They all agreed, and the first preacher said that his biggest sin was that he liked to sit at the beach now and then and watch pretty women stroll by. The second preacher confessed that his biggest sin was that he went to the horse track every so often and put a small bet on a horse. Turning to the third preacher, they asked, "Brother, what is your biggest sin?" There was quite a silence when he answered, "My biggest sin is gossiping."

You gotta' be careful. Your words can come back.

There's a Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, who has written Words That Hurt, Words That Heal, who has lectured all around this country on the powerful, and often negative, impact of words. Often in these lectures he asks audiences if they can go 24 hours without saying any unkind words *about*, or *to*, another person. Just one day. Invariably, a small number of listeners raise their hands, signifying "yes." Others laugh, and quite a large number call out, "no!" We can't do it.

Telushkin responds like this: *"Those who can't answer 'yes' must recognize that you have a serious problem. If you cannot go 24 hours without drinking liquor, you are addicted to alcohol. If you cannot go 24 hours without smoking, you are addicted to nicotine. Similarly, if you cannot go 24 hours without saying unkind words about others, then you have lost control over your tongue."* ²

James says that the tongue may be a small thing, physically, but it has a tremendous impact on others.

¹ Ramona Cramer Tucker, "Loose Lips," *Christian Reader* (March / April 2002), pp.38-39

² Rick Ezell, *One Minute Uplift* (7-21-06)

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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.*

Well, we've focused on the potential evil that can be caused by our words, and while I've only given a few examples, I think that's enough because we're all very familiar – firsthand – with this kind of thing. And since we're all under construction, we should thank the Lord daily for his patience with us, and try to reflect that patience with each other.

But I don't want to spend this whole message time talking about the negative, because I think it's worth nothing that inherent in James' warning about the potential evils of the tongue is a powerful expression of the potential good that can be done with it. He says, that a bit in the mouth of a horse 'can turn the whole animal' – it stands to reason that it can be steered on a road, or down a straight furrow, just as easily as veering off into the swamp. We have in our words a powerful source of good.

Just as readily as we can recall a time when a word from someone hurt us, I hope that we can just as easily recall a time when a word from someone lifted us up... when we were encouraged, accepted, or renewed. And I pray as well that we could recall a time – hopefully recently – when *our* words were words just like that.

In *The Whisper Test*, Mary Ann Bird writes: "I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

When schoolmates asked, "What happened to your lip?" I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

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There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored – Mrs. Leonard by name. She was short, round, happy – a sparkling lady. Annually we had a hearing test. ... Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back—things like “The sky is blue” or “Do you have new shoes?”

I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, “I wish you were my little girl.” God says to every person deformed by sin, “I wish you were my son” or “I wish you were my daughter.”³

In verse 9 – 10 James writes

“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 recognizes the main reason that it is so important that we learn to steer our tongue, (or our words) toward building up and good. Humans beings ‘have been made in God’s likeness’, he reminds us. It makes no sense then, to praise God with one breath and then ‘curse’, or tear down something that specifically has been made by that same God in his own likeness.

C. S. Lewis understood this, and wrote about it in his book, The Weight of Glory.

*Remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would strongly be tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.*⁴

³ *Leadership, Vol. 16, no. 1.*

⁴ *C. S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory (HarperOne, 2001), p. 46*

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We all recognize that ‘taming the tongue’ is going to be a battle. But it is one that needs to be engaged if we are to move on to a greater maturity in our faith, and represent Christ well in our world. We all know that we are going to have lapses... we are going to say things, participate in conversations that are not constructive, not healthy. And again, we thank the Lord for his grace!

But at the same time, let us never be satisfied with anything less than holiness in our speech...let us examine our words, be the kind of people that James wrote about in chapter one:

*(1: 19) My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this:
Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.*

Amen.

To paraphrase Psalm 19:14...

Now let the all the words of our mouths, and all the thoughts from out of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our strength, and our Redeemer.