

James: Faith Works

Sermon 6: Blessings & Cursings (James 3.1-12)

July 3, 2016

Since we are going to be talking about the tongue this morning, I dug around a little on the internet for some cool stuff about the tongue. So, here we go ...

- This article said that the longest human tongue on record is 3.86 inches. It also says that women typically have shorter tongues than guys do. But according to the Guinness Book of World Records, a guy named Nick Stoeberl shattered the longest tongue record – his measuring 3.98 inches. Believe it or not, he was featured on ABC news just this last week – the guy with the longest tongue in the world. That’s a little creepy, isn’t it?
- A guy named Thomas Blackstone has the record for the strongest tongue. He actually lifted a 24 pound weight that was hooked through his tongue. That’s just wrong!
- The animal with the biggest tongue ... That’s the Blue Whale. Its tongue is the size of an elephant and weighs 5,400 pounds – going on 3 tons! The animal with the fastest tongue in the world is my puppy.
- Here’s a new one for some of you. Way back when we were taught that our taste buds detect 4 tastes: bitter, sour, salty, and sweet. Believe it or not, they’ve discovered a 5th. They call it “umami,” which kind of means “savory” in Japanese.
- Here’s a disgusting one. You know the phrase, “The cat’s got your tongue”? Apparently it originated about 2500 years ago in ancient Assyria where prisoners had their tongues cut out and fed to the king’s cats. That’s disgusting.
- I didn’t know this one. Apparently our tongues have different shapes and different numbers of taste buds, so every tongue is as unique as a fingerprint. Someday you may get tongue-printed.
- We’re going to try this one together. Apparently the most difficult tongue twister in English is this one: “The sixth sick sheikh’s sixth sheep’s sick.” Ready? ...
- One more. Did you know that more than 600 different kinds of bacteria live in your mouth and that a single milliliter of saliva (that’s really small!) contains a million bacteria (that’s a lot!)

That stuff's kind of fun, but when the guys in the Bible write about the tongue -- which they did a lot -- they didn't care about any of that stuff. They were concerned about two big ideas.

- #1: The tongue is a window into a man's heart. Jesus says, "What you say flows from what is in your heart." (Matthew 15.18) So if you listen to a man's words long enough -- especially the unguarded ones -- eventually you're going to see his heart.
- #2: Our tongues -- which means our words -- are incredibly, amazingly powerful. They can do powerful good, and they can do monstrous evil. Every one of you has an incredibly powerful tongue. So a Jesus follower has to give it some serious attention.

Now, this summer we're studying through a little book written by James, the brother of Jesus. And we're right in the middle of the book. Chapter 3.1-12 are about the tongue. Now if you are not a Jesus follower, these verses will probably sound quite countercultural, although they are good advice, even for you. But for us Jesus followers, these really aren't suggestions, and they are very, very challenging.

James starts out by saying, "Dear brothers and sisters (you Jesus followers), not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly." (James 13.1) Let me tell you guys, I hate this verse. It kind of haunts me. I've been teaching and preaching for 40 years, and the Bible says that we who teach will be judged more strictly. And I believe it. And the very next line says: "Indeed, we all make many mistakes." (James 3.2) Which means, I have been teaching and preaching for 40 years and I have made a boatload of mistakes. I have said the wrong things (I've been wrong, many times) I have said things to the wrong people (many times), I have said things with the wrong tone, the wrong attitude (many times). And the Bible says I get to be judged more strictly! Isn't that cool!

My preaching partner, Randy, and I take this verse very seriously -- which is why we work so hard on what we say and how we say it. Because, sometimes when you teach, sometimes when you preach, people might actually do what you say. And if you are not pointing people to God, you might be pointing people away from God. And that's scary. I don't want to lead anyone away from God. Because someday I am going to stand before him, and in some way I'm going to have to give an account. And

guys, I am way more concerned about how he's going to judge me than how you do. In fact, I'm pretty sure that's what James means. When he says, "We who teach will be judged more strictly," I don't think he's talking about you judging me, I think he's talking about Him judging me, don't you think? Now I know you guys judge me. In a church our size I can't say anything without some of you guys judging me. But it's what he thinks that really matters, isn't it?

Now these words would have sounded really weird to the people who got this letter. You see, most of them were Jewish Christians, they had been Jews. And for a Jew, one of the highest callings, one of the most prestigious jobs was to be a rabbi. Did you know that according to their thinking, if your rabbi and your parents were captured by your enemies, duty demanded that you ransom your rabbi first? That's how highly they were regarded. And James says, "Not many of you should become teachers." That's kind of weird, isn't it?

And did you know that teachers in the early church were given a whole lot of respect too? Way more respect than they get today, I think. In our churches we're always looking for great teachers. But in our culture teachers aren't given as much respect. In fact, if you teach you're kind of putting yourself out there as a target for criticism. And sometimes criticism hurts. In fact it's easy to become more concerned with the criticism of men, than the judgment of God. So James says, "Let not many of you become teachers, for we who teach will be judged more strictly (by God)."

And the next line is so big: it's a warning to those of us who teach, but it's also a warning to anyone who listens, I think. He says, "Indeed, we all make many mistakes." (James 3.2) The NIV: "We all stumble in many ways." No kidding!

Have you ever said something you wish you could take back? If you teach that's going to happen a lot.

- Sometimes you just say it wrong. Have you ever said something and realized it didn't come out the way you meant it? But now you can't unsay what you said. I have.
- Sometimes you are just wrong. I've gone back and looked at sermons I preached, or lessons I taught, and thought to myself: "Holy

cow, did I really say that?” Have you ever realized that what you thought and what you said were probably very wrong? I have.

- And as a pastor, that means I have taught people wrong about God. That’s not good!

James says, we all make many mistakes – all of us. That’s a warning to those of us who have the audacity to teach. But I think it’s a warning to you too. Why do we tend to be so mean when a teacher or a preacher messes up? We all stumble in many ways. One time they caught a woman in the act of adultery and they dragged her out into the street in front of Jesus. They said, “We caught her in the act. The law tells us to stone her – to death. What do you say, Jesus?” Do you remember what Jesus said? He said, “Whoever is without sin, you throw the first stone.” And the only one who could have thrown a rock, didn’t. Guys, every time you listen to a preacher or a teacher there is a pile of rocks under your chair. He’s going to mess up. If you are looking for a rock, they are always there. But remember, there are rocks around when you speak too.

When Randy and I were studying this stuff we read one guy who contrasted coaching and criticism. Did you know that a coach and a critic can both say the very same words, but God will judge those words very differently? Both of them criticize, but the difference between a critic and a coach is why you say it, and where you say it, and how you say it.

- A critic wants to tear you down, not build you up. So a critic will wait till you are vulnerable – most of them talk behind your back. And they will say it in public, because a critic is trying to get others to join them in their criticism. Right?
- A coach is so much different. He’s not trying to tear you down; he’s trying to make you better. A coach will look for a teachable moment, not a vulnerable one. His criticism is usually more private, to your face, not behind your back. Because he is trying to protect you from the digs of others, isn’t he?

Any of you guys ever had a great coach? Do you still have a lot of respect for them? I’ve had a few. They are great guys. They love you, and they want to help you be the best you can be. They root for your success, not your failure. Any of you guy ever had a critic? I’ve had a few. They test your grace, they test your faith.

My preaching partner, Randy, has a daughter who is a new teacher. She was out to lunch with some of the other teachers and the teachers began to do what teachers do – they began to gossip. Apparently there’s an aid at the school who isn’t very nice. She’s kind of negative, and critical, and not very good at what she does. And the teachers began telling stories about her. You know how we do. And there was one teacher who knew her better than anyone else. The aid had been in her classroom longer than any other. So they turned to her and asked her, “What do you think about her?” And very gently she said, “I think we can talk about something else.” Guys, she is a Jesus follower. She not only talks the talk, she walks the walk.

Did you know that when we love someone, we focus on their best days? And when we don’t love them we focus on their worst? Guys we all have our worst days – because we all stumble in many ways. So what do you say when someone asks you about someone you love? Well, you tell them how they are at their best. You encourage others to see them at their best. What do you when someone asks you about someone you don’t love? Well you are tempted to give them all the dirt, aren’t you? You’re tempted to get them to measure that person by their failures, aren’t you?

Now ... my words this morning probably sound to some of you a bit self-serving. And they may be. But I said them anyway for two reasons. (1) Because we won’t just be judged by how we teach, we’ll also be judged by how we listen. And sometimes we’re not very good listeners. And that annoys God. He doesn’t just judge what we say up here, he judges how you respond. This is a spiritual issue we’re talking about. And here’s the second reason: (2) I suspect that most of you guys are teachers too. Maybe you are not a pastor, but ... Any of you guys ever been an elder, or a ministry team leader? How about a leader of one of our life groups? Any of you guys ever been a Sunday School teacher? Let’s take it out of church. Any of you guys school teachers? How about a coach? Ever coached? A counselor, a trainer, a tutor? Any of you guys ever been a mom, or a dad? Then you’re a teacher, like it or not. Any of you guys a grandma, or a grandpa; even an older sister or an older brother? Are you a trusted friend to anyone? You are teacher, like it or not.

James tells us, “Let not many of you become teachers, for you who teach will be judged more strictly. For we all stumble in many ways.” So these reflections are for you too. You have to realize that teaching is an awesome responsibility, and we’re all going to have to answer to God for what we teach, and how we teach it. I’ve listened to people give advice to their kids, or their friends. And sometimes it’s awful. I’ve listened to people who are way more critic than coach. And guys that’s awful.

Here’s some advice. I think it’s what James would tell you.

- When those times come that you have to teach, be careful. Think hard about what God would have you say. People don’t need your wisdom; they need his. Did you hear that? People don’t need your wisdom; they need his. If we are going to teach in a way that points people towards God, we’re going to have to be serious about learning how God thinks, and what he wants.
- And then, be humble. Recognize that we all stumble in many ways. We’re going to mess up; we’re going to say the wrong thing; sometimes we’re going to say the right thing in the wrong way – and that can be just as bad. Be humble enough to admit it when you are wrong.
- And then, be gracious. Our job is to coach for God. It’s not to be a critic for God, it’s to be a coach for God. Guys, if you don’t love someone, don’t take it on yourself to teach them. I used to put it like this, when I was more rude. I’d say, “If it doesn’t build up, shut up.” If you can’t say it with love, you’re probably better off to keep your mouth shut.

Be careful, be humble, be gracious. That’s what James says first about the tongue – and that part has challenged me for decades. But I think what he says next goes even deeper. I’m going to read you a whole bunch of verses, and then I’m going to laser in on where the rubber hits the road. Starting with the second half of verse 2. James says, “For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way. (But we can’t; or we don’t.) We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. (Because sometimes tiny things have great power.) And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. (Because sometimes tiny things have great power.) In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches. But

a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. (And here's where James starts to bear down. He says,) And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself. (Holy cow! James is not a fan of the tongue. It's hard to tame, and untamed it does monstrous damage. Do you buy that? He says,) People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. (Are you the exception? Have you ever met the exception? He says,) It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. (And here's the part that is so powerful. He says,) Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. (Do you get that? Do you get the irony, or the hypocrisy of that?) And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring."

One time Jesus said, "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Because it is better to go into heaven with one eye, or one hand, than go to hell with both." Now Jesus was speaking metaphorically. The disciples didn't go around plucking out eyes and cutting off hands. But Jesus was trying to tell us – you need to take sin a whole lot more seriously. I suspect he could have said next, "If your tongue causes you to sin, cut it out and feed it to the king's cats. Because it is better to go to heaven silently, than go to hell because of your words." I mean that metaphorically. He doesn't want us to mutilate our tongue, he wants us to use it with more grace.

If you dig through the Bible a bit, there are so many ways we sin with our tongues. This list is not comprehensive, but it is long, and it is convicting. These are sins of the tongue.

- Sometimes we lie. Sometimes we lie to protect ourselves. The book of Proverbs puts it like this. It says, "There are six things the Lord hates — no, seven things he detests: #1 haughty eyes (arrogance), #2 a lying tongue (he hates lies), #3 hands that kill the innocent, #4 a heart that plots evil, #5 feet that race to do wrong, #6 a false witness who pours out lies, and 7 A person who sows discord in a family."

Proverbs 6.16-19) Seven things God hates, he says, and lying is in there twice! You ever lie?

- Sometimes we lie to protect ourselves; sometimes we lie to hurt someone else. That's called slander; and slander is a sin. Proverbs says, "Telling lies about others is as harmful as hitting them with an ax, wounding them with a sword, or shooting them with a sharp arrow." (Proverbs 25.18) Have you ever slandered anyone, told half-truths about them because you wanted to take them down a notch?
- Did you know that it's a sin to break a confidence? Someone tells you a secret, and you use it as gossip. Here's another proverb: "A gossip goes around telling secrets, but those who are trustworthy can keep a confidence." (Proverbs 11.13) Have you ever broken a confidence? Now there are times when a good man might have to break a confidence, but it had better be to protect someone.
- Or just this gossip... I think gossip is one of the most damaging sins, and we do it all the time. Listen to this proverb: "Gossips can't keep secrets, so never confide in blabbermouths." (Proverbs 20.19) Or this one: "Troublemakers start fights; gossips break up friendships." (Proverbs 16.28) And you've seen it happen. Do you gossip? Do you ever gossip in church? Don't lie!
- And did you know that it is a sin against God to be divisive? To cause division. To stir up fights. That's serious stuff. The apostle Paul says, "If people are causing divisions among you, give a first and second warning. After that, have nothing more to do with them." (Titus 3.10) We tend to be way more tolerant than that; but I doubt God is pleased with our tolerance. Are you ever divisive? At church, or at home?
- Here's another big one we blow off: it's called nagging. Did you know that nagging is a sin? You keep on complaining, you keep on badgering, you keep on grumbling. Very few naggers will admit they're nagging. Proverbs says, "Better to live alone in a tumbledown shack than share a mansion with a nagging spouse." (Proverbs 21.9) Do you ever nag – your husband, your wife, your kids, your friends?
- Are you disputatious? I like that word, it means you're argumentative, you kind of like to argue, it seems. I have been called disputatious, argumentative. I'd like to think I'm not; but I've been in a whole lot of arguments. The apostle Paul tells Timothy, "A servant

of the Lord must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone, be able to teach, and be patient with difficult people.” (2 Timothy 2.24) That’s really hard. Are you disputatious?

- How about flattery? Do you ever butter someone up because you want something from them? Or boasting? Do you ever brag? Are you ever just full of yourself? Are you ever more concerned with your reputation than His? Listen to these two verses from the Psalms. It says, “Neighbors lie to each other, speaking with flattering lips and deceitful hearts. (And then it says,) May the Lord cut off their flattering lips and silence their boastful tongues.” (Psalm 12.2-3) That’s pretty hard! You ever flatter? You ever boast? I’ll bet you do.
- Do you ever speak too quickly? Are you ever talking when you ought to be listening? Did you know that can be a sin too? Here’s Proverbs: “Spouting off before listening to the facts is both shameful and foolish.” (Proverbs 18.13) Here’s James. He says, “You must all be quick to listen, and slow to speak.” (James 1.19) You ever violate that one? If you’re thinking you don’t, you’re probably lying again.
- This one is epidemic: a sharp tongue. Are your words ever harsh, or bitter, or sarcastic, or unforgiving, or hypercritical? What would your husband or your wife say? Or your kids? Or your close friends? Proverbs says, “Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing.” (Proverbs 12.18) Do you have a sharp tongue?
- Long list, isn’t it? Did you know that sometimes we are careless when we talk to God? Listen to this one; this is from Ecclesiastes: “Don’t shoot off your mouth, or speak before you think. Don’t be too quick to tell God what you think he wants to hear. God’s in charge, not you — the less you speak, the better.” (Ecclesiastes 5.2-3) That’s part of what our Saturday Spiritual Retreats are designed to do: to teach us to talk less and listen more when we pray.
- Here are a couple of no brainers. You ever cuss? You ever use gutter language? Now you need to be gracious with this one. What you consider cussing someone else may not. And you are not the judge; He is. But here’s what the Bible tells us. It says, “It is not fitting for you to use language which is obscene, profane, or vulgar.” (Ephesians 5.3-4) So, do you cuss? Are you vulgar? Be honest. What would He think?
- This is one of the worst in the Bible: Do you ever use God’s name without reverence? In the Bible that’s one kind of ... blasphemy, and

it's one of the 10 commandments. Here's how the Message puts it: "No using the name of God, your God, in curses or silly banter; God won't put up with the irreverent use of his name." (Exodus 20.7) Do you ever blaspheme, using God's name frivolously?

James says, "The tongue is a fire, a world of evil." (6) No kidding. I don't think he's exaggerating. He says, "It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." (6) No kidding. I think he's dead on. He says, "It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." (8) But that's not the part that convicts me. He says ... "Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God." (9) He says, "Blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth." (10) No kidding! We've done it this morning. We used these tongues badly outside these walls, and then we use these same tongues to sing and pray to Him inside these walls. And James says, "Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!" (10)

I think most all of us have violated these verses already, this morning. That was a long list, and I suspect you are guilty of at least a few of those sins: We lie, we slander, we break confidences, we gossip, we're divisive, we nag, we're disputatious, we flatter, we boast, we talk when we should be listening, we speak harsh words to each other, thoughtless words to God, we cuss, we blaspheme ... You ever hear the phrase, "Do you kiss your momma with that mouth"? How about this one, "Do you kiss God with that mouth?"

I'll tell you what some mommas do when their children use their tongues badly. Did you ever get your mouth washed out with soap? My kids did, and Julie was mean. She'd kind of rake the soap on their teeth so it would be harder to rinse out. But the soap meant we were serious about sins of the tongue.

Well, God doesn't use soap. He uses ... blood. He uses the blood of his Son. Guys, Jesus went to the cross to pay for the sins of our tongues. Which means, our God washes our mouths out with blood, the blood of his own Son. Which means, our God washes our mouths out with ... grace. We may treat cavalierly the sins of our tongues, but God doesn't.

I opened up this morning with this big idea: The tongue is a window into a man's heart. Jesus says, "What you say flows from what is in your heart." (Matthew 15.18) So if you listen to a man's words long enough – especially the unguarded ones -- eventually you're going to see his heart. Here's the deal, guys: the sins of the tongue reveal how much of our heart we have yet to surrender to Jesus. You'll know the Holy Spirit is transforming you when someone hurts you and you're not even tempted to use that curse word anymore. You'll know the Holy Spirit is working in you when you have an opportunity to lie, and it doesn't even tempt you anymore. You'll know the Holy Spirit is maturing you when someone gives you gossip, and you don't run with it anymore, when you are tempted to be a critic, and you bite your tongue, when you choose to listen, instead of talk ... You get the idea.

The tongue, James says, is nearly untamable ... by us. But God is good at that stuff. I suspect the taming of our tongues will be a project God will be working on till the day we die. But guys, are you seeing progress. I don't think we'll achieve perfection, in this life. But if you are a Jesus follower, I hope you're seeing some progress.

Proverbs says, "The tongue can bring death or life." (Proverbs 18.21) Is yours killing, or healing? Just a couple closing suggestions ...

- I think we need to listen more ... before we talk.
- I think we need to think more ... before we talk. Specifically – what would He want me to say.
- I think maybe we need speak less.
- And then, most of all: I think we need to speak truth, with grace. You can't lose with those two, guys: truth, with grace.