

A Study of the Book of James

Sermon # 6

“Taming the Tongue.”

James 3:1-12

When was the last time your mouth got you in trouble? Have you ever said something that you wish you had not? Or have you have been on the receiving end of a biting or thoughtless comment, and have felt wounded or slandered?

“A man working in the produce department was asked by a lady if she could buy half a head of lettuce. He replied, “Half a head? Are you serious? God grows these in whole heads and that’s how we sell them!”

“You mean,” she persisted, “that after all the years I’ve shopped here, you won’t sell me half-a-head of lettuce?”

“Look,” he said, “If you like I’ll ask the manager.” She indicated that would be appreciated, so the young man marched to the front of the store. “You won’t believe this, but there’s a lame-braided idiot of a lady back there who wants to know if she can buy half-a-head of lettuce.”

He noticed the manager gesturing, and turned around to see the lady standing behind him, obviously having followed him to the front of the store. “And this nice lady was wondering if she could buy the other half” he concluded. Later in the day the manager cornered the young man and said, “That was the finest example of thinking on your feet I’ve ever seen! Where did you learn that?”

“I grew up in Grand Rapids, and if you know anything about Grand Rapids, you know that it’s known for its great hockey teams and its ugly women.”

The manager’s face flushed, and he interrupted, “My wife is from Grand Rapids!” “And which hockey team did she play for?” [Sermon Illustrations @ www.bible.org/illus/tongue, cf speech].

It is interesting to consider that one of the first things that a physician does when examining a patient is look at his or her tongue, since it is often an index to the health to the rest of the body. In the same way, that which is produced by the tongue – words – also furnishes an index to the health of the spiritual body – the heart. In Matthew 12:34 Jesus warned that “...For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”

Everyday, you and I speak thousands of words. Some are carefully planned and selected; others are spoken impulsively. Some are spoken quietly; others are spoken with more volume. Some of our words are spoken with the desire to help and encourage; some with the motivation to hurt, belittle and retaliate. However, most of our words are spoken with little, if any, thought about how they will affect others.

James speaks to us about the importance of every word we speak. For each word will make an impact – both on God who records, evaluates and will judge every spoken word and on those who hear our words. In Matthew 12:36-37 Jesus warns, “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. (37) For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

James tells that this problem is both universal and continual. In verse two he says, “For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.”

Every one stumbles and stumbling is embarrassing. You are walking along and your shoe catches on some uneven part of the sidewalk and you stumble. Your first thought, almost subconsciously is, “*I wonder who saw that.*” So you, put a little skip in your step and try to pretend that did in on purpose. But not all stumbles are just blows to our pride, some are moral or character stumbles, and the consequences are much worse.

One area in which we are most likely to stumble is in the area of speech. It is our tongues that reveal the conditions of our hearts. James makes three observation about the tongue.

First, The Tongue is Small But Powerful (vv. 3-5)

The tongue is small in proportion to the rest of the body, but it can do great things. James uses three images to make his point.

First in verse three James says, “Indeed,” we put bits in the horse's mouths, that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body.”

James says think of a powerful stallion standing 17 hands tall, he is turned to his master’s will by the use of a bit six inches long. Personally I find horses incredibly beautiful, incredibly powerful and healthier me at a distance of 50 feet.

Secondly, in verse four James says, “Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, yet are they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires.”

Think of a mighty vessel with sails filled with the wind yet the master of the ship with the aid of the rudder can change the direction it travels. The point again is that even though the size of the vessel can be quite large, yet it still can be steered by something proportionately very small.

So too our words can have a powerful impact upon the lives of others. Karen Carpenter died unexpectedly of heart failure at age 32 brought on by years of self-abuse from the eating disorder Anorexia Nervosa. Later CBS released a program called *The Karen Carpenter Story*. The USA Today in commenting on this program asked the question, “*But what brought on Karen’s fatal obsession with weight control?*” The answer given was that it seems a reviewer many years before had once referred to Karen as “Richard’s chubby sister.” It is hard to fathom that a single negative comment could change the course of someone’s life!

James uses on more word picture in the second part of verse five, “... See how great a forest a little fire kindles!” Paul says it only takes on tiny spark to ignite an entire forest.

The similarities between a fire and the tongue are hard to miss. James says that the tongue also has that kind of power, verse five, "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things." Just a few words, just a spark, can cause years of heartache. "Look" the tongue struts and brags. "I can ruin a reputation. I can rupture a friendship. I can spoil the most tender of moments. I can embarrass, humiliate and shame. I can cut and I can curse and I can destroy."

The Tongue is Small But Powerful and...

Secondly, The Tongue is Small but Dangerous (vv. 6-8)

First, in verse six James compares the tongue to fire. "And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. (7) For every kind of beast and bird of reptiles and creature in the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. (8) But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."

In verse eight James says that words can be like poison. Our words can even poison the minds of others. A British nursery rhyme says,

"I lost a little word only the other day.

It was a very naughty word I had not meant to say.

But, then, it was not really lost, when from my lips it flew,

My little brother picked it up, and now it says it too." [William Varner. "A Subject in Everyone's Mouth." Israel My Glory, April/May 1999, p. 22.]

We need to never underestimate the power of the tongue to do harm. Ask God to help you guard what you say. David prayed in Psalm 141:3, "Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth: keep watch over the door of my lips." The Lord has to give you the power to control your tongue.

The Tongue is Small but Dangerous and...

Third, The Tongue Is Small but Revealing. (vv. 9-12)

James not only tells us that we sin by what we say, but that what we say reveals how sinful we are. In verse nine he says, "With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the similitude of God. (10) Out of the same mouth proceeds blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so."

Doesn't it bother you that we can be praising God right now and in less than an hour we can be cursing the driver who just cut in front of us? It should. We should listen carefully to ourselves and then we should determine to do something about what we hear.

In verse eleven, James compares our tongues to a fountain. "Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?" Strange and paradoxical words come from the tongues of

men. The same tongue both blesses and curses. This however never occurs in nature. A spring of water is always either sweet or bitter.

Finally James compares the tongue to a fruit tree in verse twelve. "Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh."

James draws no conclusions from his illustrations, because the conclusions were so obvious. What James is saying is that the tongue only reveals what is at its source. Jesus stated it very plainly in Luke 6:43-45,

"For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. (44) For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. (45) A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."

Application

We need to understand if we speak long enough we will say something that we should not have. Scripture says, "In the multitude of words there sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips is wise." (Proverbs 10:19)

Three truths

1. *Never say anything about someone that you would not say to their face.*
2. *Never say anything about someone unless they are there to respond.*
3. *Refuse to listen to someone else gossip.*

Gossip has been called the favorite indoor sport of many who call themselves Christians. In the Christian's arena we sometimes cloak our gossip as "sharing prayer requests." But the truth is that we do not need details in order to be able to pray and God already knows the details.

Another convenient excuse is that we don't start gossip, however if someone wants to share something with us how can we stop them. "To carry gossip is as bad as starting it." *Most gossip would end if we refused to hear it.*

Pastor and author Charles Swindoll has this advice he says, "Perhaps like me you've received a phone call from someone who says 'I want to tell you about so and so.' And I'll say, "Wait a minute, May I quote you on that.' There's usually a long pause. And then they say, 'Well I am not sure that is such a good idea.' Invariably my answer would be, 'Then I'm not interested in hearing what you have to say. If you're not interested in putting your name on it, if your not interested in being there when we confront the individual, I'm not interested in listening to what you have to say.'" [Charles Swindoll. The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart And 1501 Other Stories. (Nashville: Word, 1998) p. 575]

If you would like to get someone to stop telling you gossip, next time they begin just say, *"If I am not a part of the problem, or a part of the solution, I would rather not hear this!"* I can almost guarantee you they will not feel led to "share" anything else with you.

Three Questions.

We may find it helpful when we are in doubt to ask ourselves three simple questions.

1. Is What I am About to Say True?
2. Is What I am About to Say Necessary?
3. Is What I am About to Say Helpful?