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James 3:1-12

Sixth Message

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THE POWER OF OUR TONGUE

SERIES: FAITH THAT WORKS

There was a discussion in the media last week about a recent report stating that men and women use about the same number of words each day. It seems each of us speaks about 16,000 words every day, enough to fill a few books in a week. In our lifetime, you and I could fill an entire library with the words we have said. I wonder what kind of books they would be. There would be a few comedies and horror stories, maybe a little poetry, and definitely some high drama. As we browse through this library I wonder how many of our books we will be proud to have authored and how many we would prefer carried a “pen name” instead.

I regret many of the words I have spoken. I wish I could take them back, but like toothpaste out of the tube, I can never put them back. The Chinese proverb says it well: “A word rashly spoken cannot be brought back by chariot and four horses.” It’s unfortunate, but true: our words have a life of their own. So as we continue our studies the book of James, it should come as no surprise that of the nearly sixty commands found in this letter, over half address the issue of our speech.

James is particularly concerned about the quarrels dividing the church community. His basic guideline to them is laid out early on: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless” (1:26). Like the prophets of old, James cries out to us as the people of God to live faithful and true to our calling to love God and our neighbor in all that we say and do.

In chapter 1 we read that the word of God is like a mirror that shows us who we really are, blemishes and all. Some of us tend to avoid mirrors because we do not like what we see. But Pastor James won’t allow us to avoid reality. He loves us too much for that. The process of examination can be painful, but his purpose is redemptive.

With that in mind, let’s look into that mirror and see what it says about the power of our tongue.

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. Those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 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. 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. 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 one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. 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. 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. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. (James 3:1-12 TNIV)

Let’s take a closer look at these very convicting words from James.

Our tongue has the power to direct James 3:1-5a

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. (3:1)

It’s strange that James would seem to discourage his listeners from becoming teachers. A strong teaching ministry is vital to a healthy and growing church. A teacher in the early church held considerable authority and prestige, so many individuals were tempted to seek after the position for the honor it conferred. This issue was so common that we find a similar exhortation by the apostle Paul when he warns Timothy that there will be many in his congregation who will “want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm” (1 Tim 1:7).

Teachers played an extremely important role because they were entrusted with the crucial task of imparting Christian doctrine to a congregation where few people could read. Teachers had a great deal of influence on the direction of the spiritual formation of their flock. If they were in error, they could lead astray an entire congregation. Therefore, says James, teachers are “judged more strictly.”

James is saying that those who are teachers in the church are subject to a greater scrutiny because of their influence over the lives of others. As Jesus warned, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48) Those who have been given the teaching gift bear an awesome responsibility for the exercise of that gift in directing and nurturing people in the faith.

This warning by James does not prohibit people from exercising the spiritual gift of teaching. Rather, he is cautioning against rushing into the ministry of teaching without understanding the potential dangers and pitfalls. The task of teaching others the Scriptures is a serious responsibility, one that should be taken on with humility and caution. It must not be entered into lightly or for selfish reasons.

James issues his warning on teachers not only because of their position of influence, but also because the very means by which they exercise influence is fraught with danger. In the following verses he says that not only is the tongue the hardest of all parts of the body to control, it is also the one most prone to sin.

These words apply not only to teachers, but to all of us. Whether we are a teacher, student, homemaker or engineer, we must never forget that with our tongue we have the power to direct and influence the destiny of others. As James goes on to say, our tongue also has the power to direct the course of our own life.

We all stumble in many ways. Those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. (3:2)

There is a wide variety of ways in which all of us stumble and sin, says James, but most often we sin by what we say. So powerful and influential is the tongue that the person who is able to keep in check what he says surely has the ability to keep in check other less powerful and influential members of the body. If we can bridle our tongue, we can bridle our whole body.

To make his point, James gives two examples:

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. (3:3)

The rider of a horse can steer this large and powerful beast simply by controlling the small bit in its mouth. He has the power to turn the whole animal in whatever direction he chooses. James continues:

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. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. (3:4-5)

Though ships are huge and mighty, a relatively small rudder can turn them in whatever direction the pilot wishes, even against the push of forceful winds. James is saying, if you control the bit, you control the horse. If you control the rudder, you control the ship. Likewise, our tongue, though a small member of our body, can influence the path of our life. It is incredibly powerful and, as James says, “can boast of great things.”

Just think of two of the smallest words we speak in the English language, ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ Think about the course your life has taken based solely on those two words. What was the result after your ‘Yes’ or ‘no’ to that first date? ‘Yes’ or ‘no’ to that marriage proposal? ‘Yes’ or ‘no’ to that job offer? ‘Yes’ or no to having children? How about your ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to Christ’s invitation to follow him? Indeed the tongue has every reason to boast.

In verses 5 and 6, James informs us that the tongue can be wielded for destruction as well as for direction. Not only does

the tiny tongue possess the power to direct the course of our life, it also has the potential to destroy us.

Our tongue has the power to destroy James 3:5b-10

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

Whereas the bit and rudder are passive and benign, fire is an active and extremely destructive force. As James says, “a great forest is set on fire by one small spark.” The recent South Lake Tahoe fire, with 200 homes in ruin and over 3,100 acres destroyed, gives evidence to this truth. A tiny spark easily and quickly grows into a flame that consumes everything it touches until all is ablaze.

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 one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. (3:6)

Our tongue is a fire, says James, expressing all manner of evil. And the flames we speak are set on fire from hell itself. The word he uses for hell is Gehenna. This was the name of a valley just outside of Jerusalem that was used as a garbage and waste dump, where all the filth of the city accumulated. Fires smoldered there continuously. It was a repulsive, ugly and foul place. It is a fitting metaphor for hell, the source of evil and filth that inflames our sinful desires and is spewed out our mouth. Lies, slander, gossip, innuendo, malice, jealousy, greed, lust, bitterness, anger, blasphemy – these are all sins of speech that stain and corrupt us, setting the whole course of our life on fire.

Every circumstance and stage of our life can be set on fire with our tongue. With our speech we can humiliate our friends, embarrass our teachers, disrespect our parents, ruin the reputation of a co-worker, embitter our relationship with our spouse and crush the spirit of our children. One ill-timed, slanderous word from our tongue spreads spiritual pollution and corruption deeply not only within us individually, but also to a whole community.

Other sins might diminish with age, but our speech is a constant battle our entire life. A wise man once said: “Other vices are corrected by age or by the process of time, they drop-off from our lives, but the tongue blazes away from cradle to grave.” When other sins are tamed and subdued by the infirmities of old age, the wild nature of the tongue rages on. It is this wild and unpredictable nature of the tongue James warns about next.

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. 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. (3:7-10)

We train falcons to land on our wrists, pigeons to carry our messages and dogs to fetch the paper. Elephants can be trained to stand on balls and tigers to jump through hoops of fire. When I visit family in San Diego, I enjoy going to Sea World and witnessing how animal trainers can get dolphins, sea lions and even killer whales to do truly amazing things. It seems we can train almost every kind of animal there is, but we cannot train our tongue.

One minute we are praising the Lord at church, the next minute on the highway we are cursing those made in his image. Our tongue is little, but it is also lethal. Like a wild animal, it is unpredictable and restless, liable to lash out at any moment, always looking for the next opportunity to poison and diminish another person. James echoes the words of the Psalmist describing men of evil intent, “They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent’s; the poison of vipers is on their lips” (Psa 140:3). Like a deadly viper, our tongue is always coiled and ready to strike, eager to release its lethal venom upon an unsuspecting victim.

I find no truth in the childhood taunt, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” The wounds caused by sticks and stones are usually only skin deep and heal quickly, but the wounds caused by our words cut deep and go straight to the heart, doing serious damage. I have learned this lesson the hard way. Some years ago on a Sunday morning in our youth group, I invited a girl who was a first-time visitor to stand up in front of her peers and tell us a little about herself and her family. She said she attended a local high school, she loved music and horses, had a younger brother, and was the daughter of a professional hockey player. In an effort to be sharp and witty, I asked her if her father had a toothless grin from all the hockey pucks flying in his face. It was a careless and unkind comment. I could tell she didn’t appreciate my words at all. I apologized to her afterwards, but she never came back to church. I’ve always wondered if my words were the reason why. It has been a very painful lesson for me on just how wild and destructive my words can be.

In summary, the tongue is very powerful. It has the ability to direct the course of our life, and left to its own accord will destroy anything in its path. But there is more: the power of our tongue is found not only in what it does, but also in what it reveals.

Our tongue has the power to divulge what’s hidden deep within us James 3:11-12

Dr. James has invited us into his office for a check-up. And like most good physicians, he asks us to open our mouth and say “aaah.” He wants to take a close look at our tongue. If we want to get an accurate diagnosis of our spiritual health, a good place to begin is with our speech. If we are spiritually unhealthy it will often show up somewhere in our mouth. He knows that our words come from the depth of our heart and mind and are therefore a very strong indicator of our spiritual health.

We might be able to deceive ourselves and others for a little while, but sooner or later our tongue gives us away. Our tongue reveals what has been stored up in our heart. James uses illustrations from nature to make his point.

Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. (3:11-12)

Does a spring send out from the same opening both fresh water and salt water? Of course not. Can a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Impossible. A tree will produce fruit according to its nature, and a spring will pour forth whatever

source feeds it. A bitter and salty spring cannot produce sweet fresh water. A bad source cannot produce good.

James doesn’t elaborate on his metaphors, but I believe he is alluding to the words of Jesus, “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars. Good people bring good things out of the good stored up in their heart, and evil people bring evil things out of the evil stored up in their heart. For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:43-45).

Our speech was never intended to be destructive and deadly. It was meant to be a refreshing and fruitful source of life, just like the source of a spring determines what kind of water it produces and the nature of the plant determines what kind of fruit it will bear. So too our words are the fruit of what is stored up in our heart. They do not originate from our tongue, they spring forth from the soil of our heart. They are created and shaped in our heart and mind long before they spill from our lips. The tragedy of our tongue is that it produces both good and evil. Proverbs sums it up well, “The tongue has the power of life and death” (Prov 18:21).

I’m sure these words from James are very convicting to all of us. The truth he speaks penetrates deep within us. So what can we do? Where do we begin? How do we transform the power of our tongue from death and destruction to life and restoration?

I would like to share with you a few reflections. First, we need a new nature. A self-help seminar will not cut it. A vow of silence will never work. Our resolutions to simply bridle our tongue are shallow and ineffective because what we say proceeds from deep within us. In the Book of Acts (2:2-4) we read of a fire far different than that which comes from Gehenna. On the day of Pentecost, tongues of fire descended from heaven and came to rest upon Christ’s disciples, filling them with the Holy Spirit. A new speech was given to their tongues, and they immediately began to declare the wonders of God. Their speech was changed, and the world noticed.

The only way for our speech to change is for our heart to be changed. Our heart, and our speech, can only be transformed by the presence of God within us. Our tongue can never be tamed unless we first submit our life to Jesus Christ. If he is our Lord and Savior, and his Spirit dwells within us, we are a new creation. We have been transformed from the inside out. We have a new nature and a new heart. The old has gone and the new has come.

Yet many times it does not seem that way. So my second reflection is this: Though we have a new nature and a new heart we are still called to put off our old self and any speech that defiles us. This is what Paul is getting at in his letter to the Colossians: “You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (3:7-10). Like removing dirty old rags that no longer fit us, we must “strip off” our old corrupt way of life.

The third thing I would say is this: If what we pour into our heart can become words at any moment, then we must be steadfast in drinking from the fountain of that which is holy and good. The secret of good speech is the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. He not only changes us from within, but also guides us to delight in and meditate on the word of God. His word is able to renew, enlighten and cleanse us on a daily basis. As Peter says, "Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1 Pet 2:1-3).

My fourth and final reflection is good news for those of us who have burned others with our words: No damage we cause can prevent us from being restored to God's service. Peter denied that he knew the Lord at an hour when the Lord needed him most, yet Jesus sought him out, embraced him and re-commissioned him to feed others with his Word. Forgiveness and restoration are available to all of us in Christ.

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col 3:16-17).

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