

'Taming the tongue'

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[0:00] Well, if you've got an outline, you'll see right at the top there the saying that says, the pen is mightier than the sword. Right? Many of you have heard of that. But to that I'm going to add that the tongue is deadlier than a rifle. And some of you might even say, well, given the potential for widespread damage, the tongue is deadlier than a hand grenade.

Right? But you know, our words are more often aimed with precision, aren't they? At a certain individual or individuals. And that's why we have such a thing as character assassination. And did you realize too that when we speak, more often than not, unless you're hard of hearing, others don't really have a choice not to hear you. Right? Unless you go, I don't want to hear you. But otherwise, people can't help hearing what you have to say. And so in that sense, our words always hit their target as well. Now last week, we looked at the whole topic of faith and works. And I said that good works included what we say, not just what we do. And this week, James continues with that, the use of our tongue. The right use of words is part of good works, and outworking of our faith. But the way the section begins, it may seem at first that this passage is aimed, pun intended, at those who are teachers. Verse 1, not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. But you know, if you look closely, James is not just addressing teachers, is he? But all fellow believers, that's all of us. And so that includes those who aspire to teach, teacher teachers, those who don't have a choice, but have to teach, like parents of their children. And in general, I think James is addressing the body of believers, the entire church, who have to discern together who should or should not be made teachers.

[2:11] And although it's not confined to teachers of Scripture, I think that's the people that James has in mind, because he's addressing fellow believers. And then he goes on to state why this is the case.

Teachers will be judged more strictly. How so? Because a teacher in the church carries authority. And with it, a responsibly, not just for our own lives, but the lives of those we teach.

And furthermore, what's being taught is the revelation of God's mind, isn't it? What's in the Bible reveals what God thinks, the truth, what is right, and what is wrong.

And so teachers are God's mouthpieces, really, speaking on His behalf. And that's why you read throughout the Old Testament that God's condemnation of false prophets and false teachers is always severe.

Because when they teach what is false, they are misrepresenting God, aren't they? They're making Him out to be a liar. Now, by saying all this, James is not trying to restrict the pool of teachers, because the church needs as many good teachers as can be found.

[3:29] And many of you are kids' leaders and youth leaders and all that, and so teaching, that's good. James is not saying, you know, stop, quit.

Because otherwise, how do the young in faith and the young in age learn the truth about God? So, James is merely, I think, cautioning those who teach and those who aspire to teach not to take this responsibility lightly.

Don't be overconfident just because you think you have the gift of the gap. Be sober-minded. And then, of course, for the church as a whole, we need to take care who we appoint as teachers of the Bible.

Now, poor teaching often does not arise intentionally. Most people don't want to kind of deliberately spread false teaching. Many of the times, they do it without realizing it.

But such ignorance often can be blinded by pride. And so, the instruction here is actually to be humble, to listen to the feedback of others, because the very thing we need to use to teach our

tongue is the body part that's most prone to slip-ups.

[4:49] Or, as I say in the outline, it's our Achilles heel, the most vulnerable part that causes us to stumble. And yet, as teachers, that's the essential part that we need in order to teach, isn't it?

Without a tongue, you can't be a teacher. And I guess this point is true not just for teachers, but for all of us. Because James goes on to say in verse 2, Here, perfection comes, James says, by being able to keep our body in check.

And the Bible calls this self-control. Able to control one's body and do what's right. And if you think about it, you know, think, for example, stealing, adultery, murder, violence.

All such acts really occur when someone fails to keep one or more body parts in check. Now, of course, to be perfect is more than just that, isn't it?

Because we sin, not just with our actions, but with our thoughts as well. And so, hate, anger, lust, all these originate in the mind, don't it?

[6:10] And the heart. And here's where I think the tongue comes in, so as to betray our imperfections. Because some of us actually get very good at hiding our sinful thoughts, don't we?

We can control the rest of our body. But ultimately, it's the tongue that betrays what's going on in our heads. And that's why Jesus Himself says, Out of the abundance of our heart, the mouth speaks.

Eventually, what's going on in your head will spill out through our mouths. Now, sometimes we can't avoid but show it in our facial expressions as well, you know, that grimace or that frown.

But those can be a bit vague, isn't it? Like, you know, why is Alex frowning? I don't know. But once he blurt something out, then we know what's going on in his head, isn't it?

And that's why James goes from teaching in particular, which is the Achilles heel for teachers, to the use of the tongue more generally. We all stumble with our tongue.

[7:17] Because what's going on inside us, in our heads, is still far from perfect, isn't it? And eventually, we'll slip out. But for teachers, the stakes are higher because when it does slip out, we are under stricter judgment for it.

So, there is a problem, isn't it? That of controlling our tongues. And we need to get to how we can actually get better at it, overcome it.

But before we do that, which will be later on, James now elaborates on two aspects of the tongue, which shows just how challenging that is to accomplish. So, if you look at the outline, but also on the slide, this is point two of the outline and point three, but on the slide here, the first aspect is the devastating power of the tongue relative to its size.

And the second is the inherent or inexplicable contradictions that arise as a result. So, verse 3, When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey, 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 small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but makes great boasts.

[8:38] Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. And then he goes on, The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.

It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. It's a very graphic picture, isn't it?

Of the devastating power of the tongue to cause damage. Now, here in this passage, I think there are three analogies. The first two, the bit of a horse and the ship's rudder, I think emphasize the same thing.

That is, the power of the tongue relative to its size. Just like a bit in the horse, which you can see on the left there, is small compared to the strength of the horse itself.

And a rudder, which is that little small flap just at the back of the ship, is tiny compared to the ship.

Yet, each hath the power to steer the horse or the ship, wherever the pilot or the rider wants it to go.

[9:47] Likewise, the tongue has the power through words that is disproportionate to its size. Did it stick out your tongue at the moment? How? Yeah.

Not very big, is it? I know some of you have really long tongues. But even so, it's not much longer than your palm of your hand, is it? And yet, it has got power that is disproportionate to its size.

And so, consider the Proverbs that was read earlier. I think it didn't get onto the screen, but here it is now. The words of the reckless pierce like swords, like a weapon, but the tongue of the wise

brings healing.

The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit. Crushes the spirit. Or this one, which I think is the most graphic. The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

Now, here in the Proverbs, of course, words, we are told, can be good as well as bad, isn't it? But James here is focusing, in his passage, on the negative aspects first. And so, with a few choice, malicious words, the tongue can totally crush the person it's directed against, can't it?

[11:04] Some of us are really good at that. The put down, right? It can destroy relationships. It can tear churches apart, or even families. Long-standing friendships can end as a result.

And I'm sure some of you have seen that happen with your friends or within your own families. Now, of course, it's even powerful so as to be able to change the course of history.

On the positive side, I mean, you've heard some of these famous speeches, but consider the Gettysburg Address by Abraham Lincoln, right?

President. It was given at a pivotal moment in the American Civil War, and it galvanized the army, the unionists, to the ideals of democracy. Or a bit closer to our time, there is the I Have a Dream speech in 1963 by Martin Luther King.

And again, that was another key moment in the American Civil Rights Movement. And if you Google it and watch it on YouTube, I mean, whenever I read it, I hear it, it still gives me goosebumps listening to it because it's so powerful.

[12:19] Now, conversely, consider the power of Adolf Hitler's speech. I don't know whether you've seen some of the videos, but he had the ability to mesmerize an entire nation, right?

And as a result, committed the whole country to the horrors of the Holocaust. That's the power of words and the tongue.

And to this, James adds the third analogy, that of the fire, because it says that the power is so devastating that, like a fire, all it takes is a spark, and then it sets off an entire chain reaction, the consequence of which spreads uncontrollably like fire.

And again, we've probably seen that, haven't we? Have you heard of the phrase, a war of words? Literally, right? There is the initial shot that's fired, and then the next thing you know, there's retaliation and escalation.

You know, everyone adopts a win-at-all-cost mentality, right? When you're in an argument, you're in it to win it, right? And no one stops, because you need to have the last word if you're going to win, right?

[13:39] And so it goes on and on and on and on, right? And so the idea is like, it's just spreading. And then other people get involved as well, put in their two cents worth, and before you know it, the whole fire has started, isn't it?

Or what about an initial lie that you tell, which you hope, okay, just a small one, and I hope I'll get away with it. But of course, it doesn't end there, does it? Because one lie often leads to another. You have to cover things up until it gets too costly, so you think. To come clean. And so James is saying, this is the impact of our words, isn't it?

It takes on a life of its own, and it corrupts everything. Not just our tongues, but our whole life gets caught up with things we say that we regret.

And yet on the other hand, James also says that the tongue is capable of immense good. It has healing powers, as the proverb says. It can soothe the soul, which medicine can't.

[14:46] So just take up the words, I love you. You know, when you hear it from someone you love, it's magical, isn't it? Or, I'm sorry, please forgive me.

When you hear that as well, it's just got the effect of calming everything, doesn't it? Whether you like it or not, or whether you intend it or not. And yet, therein lies the inherent contradiction, isn't it? Which James now draws out in verse 7, because it says, all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures are being tamed, and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. So the first thing that James notes is, that as humans, we are ingenious, aren't we? We're just a master of creation.

The fact that we have zoos, and marine parks, kind of bears witness to our ability, to tame even the most fearsome creatures. Right?

[15 : 49] Bears, sharks, lions, killer whales, all have been tamed, or put into captivity. And some, like the killer whale, you know, Free Willy, we can even make to perform for us, at shows.

How good are we? Now, I know you think it's cruel, but that's the, that's not the point, okay, that's the movie. But the point really is that, although we are relatively small in size, like, compared to the elephant, got no hope, right?

Humans have the power, actually, to subdue everything on earth. And, you know, it's not just animals, but it goes for things like the forces of nature as well, isn't it? I saw a program recently, but I've been to Venice, although I didn't see it personally.

Around Venice, which is in a lagoon, there is actually a gigantic tidal barrier that comes up, right? So as to prevent the city from flooding when there's a high tide.

How amazing is that? We've been to the moon, multiple times, and back, safely. And then now with AI, right, we've created machines that are, you know, agentic, they call it, right?

[17 : 07] They can think for you. They can think faster for you as well. And yet, with all that human ingenuity, have you ever thought, why, given the damage that we know that it can cause to relationships and families and society, why has there not been more inventions to stop us saying things that we don't want to say?

There's no technology, is there, to help us to do that? I wish there were, right? An auto-correct, maybe, as I'm saying, something. And then it filters it through the Bible and goes, changes the word from do to don't, or whatever.

You're so mean, no, kind, you know. I wish there was something like that. But, you know, we've modernized everything, haven't we? Transportation, telecommunications, manufacturing. But when it comes to the use of the tongue, nothing has changed since the time of Adam and Eve.

Same way that Adam and Eve lied is the same way we still lie, isn't it? Now, I think, of course, we'd be horrified if somebody came along and said, you know, we've invented something that will control your speech.

Because, that violates our freedom of speech, right? And that's a human right. To speak our mind is what I think it means to be human. And therein lies the problem, isn't it?

[18 : 32] That we are able and we need to speak our mind to be human. But, for Christians, there's another added contradiction, isn't there, that James goes into because he says that we're so eager and rightly so to sing God's praises, you know, as the band is playing and we're saying, speak, oh Lord, I mean, wow, we love singing those songs.

And yet, at the same time, those very same lips from the same heart come curses for those that are created in God's image.

So, verse 9, with the tongue we praise our Lord and Father and with it we curse human beings who are made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth comes 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 grapevine bear figs?

Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. Twice, in this small little passage, he says, my brothers and sisters. That's, whenever James is earnest about telling you something, he says, my brothers and sisters.

[19 : 44] So, he's really trying to make a point here, isn't it? He's saying, this should not be and yet, it's happening. Right? And if you're a person of integrity, then this should prompt some reflection on our part, isn't it?

Make us ponder and perhaps repent. Why is this happening in the first place? When, especially when we so sincerely wish that we will not say things that would cause hurt to our loved ones.

You know, how many times have you said something and then immediately you regret it because you know, ah, shouldn't have said that. And yet, we do. Well, if you ask the good doctors among us or the nurses, they will tell you that in order to apply the right remedy, you need to have the right diagnosis.

Right? A wrong diagnosis will result in the wrong treatment. And further, when it comes to treatment, there is a difference between treating the cause and treating the symptoms.

So, painkillers, they dull the pain, don't they? But, they don't cure anything. Antibiotics, however, they kill the bacteria that causes the infection and the pain.

[21 : 07] And so, when it comes to the tongue as well, we need to try and treat it at its cause and not just the symptoms. And James has already alluded to the problem that it's not really the tongue,

but it's where the words come from that is our heart that is the problem.

That's why Jesus himself said, out of the heart, the mouth speaks. That is the source or the spring from which all our words come from.

And that is therefore the place that we need to tackle all the cursing that we do. And so, the question now then is, if the heart is the problem, is it good or is it evil?

Well, just as all it takes is one drop of impurity to make pure water impure, so all it takes is one sin, one impure thought to make the heart evil.

Sure, it may not be pure evil and incapable of good, but as James said in verse 8, it is full of poison and restless evil which feeds the tongue.

[22 : 21] And I know it's hard for you to think about it like that, but when you look at your own heart and mind, do you realize that actually you're not as good as you think you are? That there are a lot of things in you that, you know, is a bit disgraceful, a bit shameful that you're capable of even thinking and doing.

But again, as Christians, if that's the truth, then where does our praise to God come from? Well, it has to come from God, of course, doesn't it?

Because remember in James chapter 1, we talked about the implanted word which can save us. That's the gospel of grace, the truth, the good news that Jesus came and died for our sins so that all the evil that's being generated in our hearts can be forgiven.

And that evil is not kind of learnt evil, it's original sin which has been passed down to us from the time of Adam and Eve. But the good news is that Jesus has paid for it, paid for the penalty of it. We're forgiven. We are right before God and therefore, we have God's Spirit living in us that is progressively transforming our character and lives to get rid of the remaining sin in our lives.

[23 : 39] That is the bit that allows us to praise God. The thing that the Spirit has put in us is the thing that causes us to praise God. Now, of course, this whole process called sanctification is a lifelong one, isn't it?

We won't complain it until Jesus comes again. But God's work has begun and God's Spirit is intent on doing that work in us. And we're invited, aren't we, to work with the Spirit in this process through humble repentance, through reflection, and then through applying God's Word.

Or, in the words of James 1, verse 23, let's keep looking in the mirror, which is the Word of God, and not be like that person who walks away and immediately forgets.

Instead, we are to do what's right. And next week, we'll see that when James talks about godly wisdom, he talks about just that, how to use that wisdom to apply it and do what is right in our lives. So, the first thing to say then is that to tame the tongue, we need to deal with the heart. Anything we're capable of saying is a true reflection of our hearts.

[24 : 53] And sometimes, I know, you know, we like to excuse ourselves and say, oh, you know, I've just had a bad day. It's not really me, you know. Well, you may have had a bad day and it may not normally be like you, be you like that, but it's still you.

Own it and repent. But even as we deal with the root cause, it's also important not to then just allow whatever is coming in our heads to go through our mouths, but rather, in tandem, we should try and limit the damage so that we don't slip up as much.

Now, how do we do that? Well, I think James has already given us some advice by being slow to speak and quick to listen. So, James 1, verse 19 says just that.

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. And that's like the other two Proverbs that was read at the start as well. Proverbs 10, sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent holding their tongues.

Right? So, when you've sinned, stop. Hold your tongue rather than to keep going and keep multiplying your sin. Or secondly, those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity.

[26 : 15] Yes, it's not always possible to remember this and not let our temper or sharp tongue get the better of us. But the more we tell ourselves, the more we're intentional about saying, look, I want to listen more and I want to speak less, then the less damage we will cause.

And you know, I've tried doing this over time myself by being prayerful, particularly when I know I'm going to get into a difficult conversation. Maybe someone I know always rubs me up the wrong way, maybe I know I can tell, you know, that it's going to be a difficult conflict that's about to rise.

And when that happens, I try to remember to prepare myself. I say to myself, Mark, your blood pressure will rise a bit.

But, instead of getting upset with that person, pray instead. say to yourself, as you look at that person, image bearer of God, child of God, just like me, sinner, just as I am.

Now, it may not always work, but even if it works half the time, you've halved the damage that you've caused, haven't you? And that's worth it. But second, to the extent that the damage is done, then let's be quick to say sorry, to confess.

[27:48] And if we are on the receiving end of those hurtful words, then let me encourage you to be forgiving when people repent. because James has already said that we all stumble in many ways.

That's a given. Right? It's not that some stumble in many ways or all stumble but only in some ways. No. James says that all of us stumble in many ways.

No one is perfect. Not me, not you. You expect the pastor to be more perfect? No, don't expect that. Although that doesn't excuse the pastor from then just being kind of careless with his words.

So we shouldn't be using that as an excuse for ourselves when it happens and say, oh yeah, it happens to everyone so yeah, whatever, let's keep going. But on the other hand, when others do it, let's also be quick to forgive them.

Right? Show mercy just as God has shown all of us mercy. And some of you have prepared in marriage as couples, Elissa and I, and often when we go into those sessions, we say to them that fights and quarrels in marriage are inevitable.

[29:00] It will happen. But during such times, you know, we say to them, just remind yourselves that you still love each other. You do, really. That the words that are said are said in the heat of the moment.

And that's when the sinful self has gotten the better of your spirit-filled self. But then, at that point, you need to know that God is still working in the life of the person you've just married.

So, forgive them, even though they're not perfect. And I guess what is true in marriage is also true for us generally, isn't it, in church.

Because, you know, sometimes when we kind of hang out with each other and we get to bond, you know, we get comfortable, don't we? And we let our guard down. And that's a good thing, right?

We trust each other. So, we start having a bit of fun and, you know, we start teasing each other, right? That's the Aussie way, isn't it? Anyway, kind of, we have a go at those we love.

[30:02] The more you love them, the more of a go you have. You know, it shows we love you kind of thing. Teasing you, rubbing you, ribbing you up. But, unfortunately, it can easily go too far, isn't it?

And I've seen it happen. One moment, everyone's ha ha ha ha ha and then next one, someone's in tears, right? Now, it doesn't make it right but, you know, often, it's not malicious, isn't it?

We're just, yeah, we went a bit too far but, you know, we weren't trying to be cruel or anything. So, in those cases, let's, you know, say sorry and let's forgive and let's kind of grow closer together and, you know, learn from it and try not to do it again.

Now, doing all of these things, as I said, it's just treating the symptoms, isn't it? It's limiting the damage. It's not really kind of dealing with the heart but I think it's still important to do because when we practice these things, we actually build trust in our relationships and what we show is grace which is a hard matter.

We show grace to one another and we allow grace to flourish in our church and all the while as that is happening, that is, we're treating the symptoms, God's Spirit is doing the deeper work, isn't it?

[31:21] As we expose ourselves and accept humbly His Word, it then deals with what's in our heart where the problem truly lies so that in time, what will happen by nature is that what comes out of our mouths are the words that honor and praise God.

That is, when your heart is pure, you don't have to control your tongue, right? Because if your heart is pure, what comes out will be pure. It's only when it's slightly not pure that you kind of have to have a little bit of filter here to stop the damage.

But the more we grow in godliness, the less we would think, ah, okay, I need to keep watching my words. Of course, we continue to be on guard to listen more and speak less, but we will find that actually, hey, the pure thoughts come more naturally than the impure thoughts.

And that's because God's spirit is working right here, deep down in our hearts and that's where we want it to be. Let's pray. Father, forgive us for the evil, the sin that still resides in us, but thank you that by your grace we are forgiven by Jesus' work on the cross for us.

And I know and we know that even now his spirit is shaping us to be like him. Help us to do our part to humbly receive and accept your word so that it can guard our hearts and our tongues and so live to praise your name.

[32 : 58] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.