

Tongues of Mass Destruction

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Date: 24 August 2008

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[0 : 00] All right, keep your Bibles open. We're going to work our way through that passage. My name's Chris. For those of you who I don't know, it's good to see you here tonight.

And before I get into this, I was just wondering if there's anyone out there who has an amazing tongue skill, like they can wrap their tongue in a knot or make it go like a wave.

No one? Clover. Come up and show us, Tully. Well, I'll be able to see.

It'll amaze me. Well, show the people. Wow. Well done.

There you go. There's a lot that can be done with the tongue, including making a clover shaped.

[1 : 01] And I'm just going to give you a few other facts about the tongue that you may or may not know, depending on how much you like your tongue. Close to 50% of bacteria in the mouth lives on your tongue.

Ew. Ew. And here's a fact that I needed for my last sermon on dating. When you kiss someone, you tend to swap around 256 colonies of bacteria. Ew.

That is a good reason for having a conservative kissing boundary. excuse me.

people's tongues. Relative to size, the tongue is the strongest muscle in the body. And as we saw tonight, not only is it the strongest muscle, but even though it's so small, it boasts of great exploits.

And so what I hope to do tonight is to unpack what the Bible is talking about when it says the tongue, even though it's small, is capable of great things. And look at what some of those things are that James tells us about. So I'm going to pray and then we're going to get into it. So let's pray.

Father God, the tongue is potentially a weapon of mass destruction. And so God, I pray tonight that you would use my tongue to speak your words, that you would speak through me, that you would tame my tongue and that tonight your Holy Spirit would move in this place and help us all to be people with tame tongues, not tongues of destruction. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So the idea that the tongue is a weapon of mass destruction, which James talks about in this passage, is not new to James 3. Earlier on in James, in chapter 1, he's talked about the importance of speech for Christians. 126, if any of you think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. And elsewhere in the New Testament, we see that speech is an important part of the Christian life. So in Ephesians 5.4, Paul says that it is entirely out of place to speak badly, but instead you should speak with thanksgiving. And then if you keep flicking backwards in your Bible, you'll get to Jesus in the Gospels.

[3 : 41] And he talks about the potential destruction that your tongues can bring. So in Matthew 12, Jesus says, how can you speak good things when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. And then a bit later on in that chapter, he says, for by your words, you will be justified. And by your words, you will be condemned. If you keep flicking backwards in the Bible, you'll get to Proverbs. And Proverbs is full of verses that talk about how the mouth and our tongue affects us. So just a few choice Proverbs for you. With their mouths, the godless will destroy their neighbours. A city is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked. A fool's lips brings strife and a fool's mouth invites a flogging. The mouths of fools are their ruin and their lips a snare to themselves.

And one more, death and life are in the power of the tongue. If you keep flipping your Bible backwards, you'll get back to Genesis and you'll see there that right back at the beginning of time, humanity is created. They sin, there's the fall. And then one of the first things we see is Adam in Genesis 3 with his tongue trying to weasel his way out of his responsibility for what he's done.

And so the tongue, even from the first human being, has always been causing us humans problems. And that is the picture you get of the tongue, of how we speak in the Bible. When you read all the way through, the tongue and the way we speak has power. And since the beginning of time, right through to when Jesus came and even after Jesus into the early church and up to today,

that our ability to speak, the power of our tongue has been the cause of a lot of our problems. So now we'll go back to James and look at what he says here in chapter 3 about the tongue. So he begins in chapter, verse 1, sorry, by saying, not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. So he's about to launch into this tirade against the tongue. And he just begins by saying, not many of you should become teachers. Why does he start here? How does this relate to the rest of what he says? And I think it's because that teachers, like I'm doing now, we use our tongues to tell you things, to educate you, to get you thinking, to get you feeling how you should be feeling. All of that teachers try and do by speaking and by using their tongue. And so I think James starts with this warning to us about teachers because the tongue is a powerful thing, something that's hard to control. He even says untameable. And teachers need their tongue. It's their weapon of choice. And the tongue is vital to teach. So we'll move on. Verse 2, for all of us make many mistakes.

Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. Hands up if you've done something, you've never done something you regret. Never, ever. Maybe, oh no one. There you go. I didn't think so. Even if you couldn't think of one, even if you had done, if you'd never done anything that you regretted, I bet that you would at least have said something that you, upon reflection, think was probably a little bit unwise, a little bit unhelpful to the situation. Even if it came out of good intentions, you've gone home and you've thought, hmm, probably shouldn't have done that or said that. I'm especially good at this, especially good at saying the wrong thing. I can be quite quick to form an opinion and I can be even quicker to express my opinion. In fact, maybe expressing my opinion can often be happening at the same time that I'm forming my opinion.

[8 : 24] And so over the last few years, I've had to master the art of trying to reel back in what I say and to go into damage control because I've been known to dig some massive verbal holes and then to jump right in them and to keep digging before I've gone, oh man, I'm really in trouble here. And then try to dig my way out, but I keep digging, digging, digging. And anyway, thankfully, often, most of the time, it's usually just kind of superficial stuff and it's a bit funny and, you know, me and my friends, we can laugh about the fact that I'm always digging these holes.

But sometimes it's not that funny. Sometimes I do actually let my tongue off its leash, say something that's a bit mean, say something that I would rather not have said. And I can remember when I was in about year 11 or year 12, there was, we had this friendship group back in Hobart and there was this guy who kind of annoyed us a bit. But we, we hung out with him a lot. And eventually we started to just get really annoyed by him. And he went away and we were like, praise the Lord. And then he came back and he started hanging out with us again. And we did a very bad job at controlling our tongues. And eventually we said some things behind his back that actually wasn't behind his back that he heard. And then this suddenly, this friendship group was devastated. And this guy was no longer our friend. He sort of seemingly struggled to sort of stay in touch with churches. And that was all because of the power of our tongues and the way it, we chose not to control what we said. So I would, I would think that there is no one here who's not ever spoken and not made a mistake. And, and the words that we say have power. And James goes on to say that this, this much. So in verse three, if we put, if we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies or look at ships, though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them. Yet they are guided by a very small rudder, wherever the will of the plot pilot directs. I just want to take a moment to help us get our heads around these verses because perhaps like me, you're not familiar with horse riding or sailing. So according to Wikipedia, the source for all things good, a bit is used in equestrian activities and is a piece of metal or similar synthetic material that is placed in the mouth of a horse and allows a rider to control the animal. So hopefully, there we go, looks a bit like that thing on the right there and gets shoved up in the horse's mouth in that picture on the right. So it looks like a bit like the thing on the left. Oh, see, I'm confused because I'm looking.

That's the bit. That's the picture of the horse. So, there you go. You can see how it works. That's embarrassing. Don't know my left from my right.

And I don't know if you've ever watched a movie or been walking through the bush and seen a wild horse. I think they have wild horses here on the mainland in Australia.

[12:49] That's what it looks, that's what they look like. Big, powerful beasts. And there's a reason why when you talk about your car, you talk about it having horse power because horses, wild horses are big, powerful beasts.

And they can go wherever they want and you probably don't want to be standing in front of one. You certainly don't want to be standing in front of like a whole massive herd of them as they're charging down on you.

But by placing that small bit that we saw on the other side, other slide, into their mouth, this allows the rider to control the horse and become like that.

And so, we get to see great things like dressage. So, maybe you wish like I do that there was no such thing as a bit.

Similarly, we've got big, tall ships. And they're quite impressive things. When I was a bit younger, I can remember they had this tall ships race that went from Sydney down into Hobart where I'm from.

[14:04] And we went to someone's house who had a good view of the water to watch the ships sail in. And I can remember thinking that's pretty awesome. These are big boats with big sails being blown in.

Little did I know, I probably did know, but it didn't occur to me that their rudder, comparatively speaking, was so small. And it was the rudder that was helping them to sail.

And so, this picture here, whilst it's not a sailing ship, it does give you a good kind of picture of the comparative size of the rudder, which is that thing, that kind of white thing in the middle of the boat compared to the rest of the boat.

And that boat's quite long as well. And so, that little rudder, just turning left and right, left and right, is the thing that ultimately determines where the ship's going.

Sure, it needs the wind to get there. Oh, obviously, that one doesn't. It needs the engine to get there. But, ultimately, it's not going to go anywhere without its rudder. And so, James is saying that our tongues are a bit like the bit in a horse's mouth or the rudder on the ship.

[15:20] Even though they're little, even though they're so small, they can determine the direction that our lives take. You see, if we keep using our tongue to say bad things about people, if we keep slagging people off with our tongues behind their backs, if we're stirring up rumours, if we're gossiping, then the direction that our tongue is taking us is not in a direction that's making us more like Jesus.

But, if we're building each other up, if we're encouraging one another, if we're stopping rumours, if we're not gossiping, if we're giving praise to God, if we're speaking up for our non-Christian, for our friends who are getting paid out, if we're telling our non-Christian friends about Jesus at every chance we get, then it's probably quite likely that we're heading in a good and a godly direction. And that's our tongue, the way we speak, that's taking us there. And both the horse bit and the small ship rudder are small, yet they can do great things.

And that's what James says after these two analogies. The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits, verse 5. But these great exploits are not always great.

So James continues in the second half of verse 5 and 6. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire. And the tongue is a fire.

[17:00] The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity. It stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

It could be pretty hard to get your head around what he's saying here, but the tongue, even though it's small, it directs us and it can direct us in ways that are devastating and damaging.

Like a spark that falls off a cigarette butt into the forest floor and then bang, 400,000 hectares of forest are gone.

the tongue can also cause us to sin and if we don't stop it, if we don't step it out, then that sin can draw us away from Jesus.

And we know that the tongue is hard to control just from our own experience. It's hard to control what we say. And James, I think he's saying here in verse 6 that our tongues are so hard to control because by our very nature our tongues are sinful.

[18:18] We say sinful things. That's the nature of humanity. And because words are so powerful, because the way we speak has such power, then that is why evil can be so focused on our mouths because of the power that words have.

The devil chooses to use our words to bring mass destruction into our lives, into the lives of other people who we're speaking to badly because it's so easy for him to get hold of just that little little tongue and to use our words for bad.

And there's no other part of the body I think that wreaks so much havoc on us living good and godly lives. And so James continues in verse 7 for every species of beast and bird of reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species but no one can tame the tongue a restless evil full of deadly poison.

So not only is the tongue a place where evil is focused and where and it's so easy to do and say bad things because of your tongue but it's untamable James is saying.

He's saying you can practice all you like at saying the right things you can try really hard to say nice things but that's not going to work.

[20 : 07] You're not going to be able to tame your tongue. When you get tired or a bit annoyed at someone your tongue is probably going to slip. maybe you'll get tempted to say something unfair to slag someone off behind their back.

Maybe you'll be playing sport and the ref will make a terrible decision in your opinion and you'll just bang just tell the ref exactly what you think in a very ungodly kind of way.

You'll be living your life and you'll find out that no matter how hard you've humanly been trying to tame your tongue things are going to happen that are going to mean and going to show you that those efforts you've had to tame your tongue are going to be worthless.

There's good news and that is that as people who follow Jesus we believe that we're given the Holy Spirit and so I think that it's by the power of the Spirit that we are able to tame the tongue and so the Holy Spirit it can take us on a process of transforming us and transforming our tongues into something that instead of cursing instead of speaking badly of others is something that transforms that speaks words of love into other people's lives and that speaks blessing and praise to God doesn't mean that we should leave our tongue unchecked that we should just go well God's going to change my tongue it doesn't matter what I do but it is only through the work of the Holy Spirit in God's people in people who believe and trust in Jesus that we're going to be able to transform our tongues so James continues with it our tongues we bless the Lord and Father and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God from the same mouth comes blessing and cursing my brothers and sisters this ought not to be so does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water can a fig tree my brothers and sisters yield olives or a grapevine figs no more can salt water yield fresh and in these verses

I think James is warning us about the reality of our sinful humanity last week if you were here you would have heard Jono talk about how it's our faith that saves us but that our faith is only genuine if it gives birth to acts of love and so what he meant by that was that real faith will change us and real faith will make us behave in a way that's noticeably different so back in James 2 verse 17 faith by itself if it has no works is dead and I think one of the works that faith is going to produce in us is change speech and I reckon this is what James is getting at here in these last few verses of the passage you say you have faith James says look at your speech are you praising God one moment and then cursing other people the next you say you have faith well can the same spring produce both fresh and distasteful salty brackish water you know even if there were some fresh water being produced it's going to be polluted by just that little bit of salt that's coming out in your words making the spring useless

[24 : 08] I think James is encouraging us to use our speech as a way to check how our faith is going a fig must have at its source a fig tree and a grapevine has to produce grapes loving speech which brings glory to God must have at its source God and a heart that is changed by the Holy Spirit is going to be the source of speech that builds up that encourages that praises God and on the flip side speech that tears down which is deliberately harmful which is full of bitterness has at its source an unchanged and a sinful heart what does your tongue say about you from your speech what does your tongue say about the direction you are heading are you getting better at praising

God at speaking love into other people's lives or do you keep bringing people down tearing people down with vicious words maybe you've done some sort of major damage in a relationship or some context that you're in at work at school by the words that you've said that you need to go and you need to go and fix are you allowing your speech the way you act the way you speak to be changed by the Holy Spirit or are you relying on your own strength as you battle against the tongue so I want to leave you with those questions what does your tongue say about you what does the way you

speaking say about you does it say does it give testimony to your faith in Christ or does it give testimony to the fact that you're a worldly person what does it say about the direction you're heading is there some situation that because of the way you've spoken or the way you haven't spoken you need to fix you need to go home you need to ring someone up you need to apologize whatever and are you allowing yourself and particularly your speech your tongue to be changed by the

Holy Spirit or are you trying in your own self with your own strength to change the way you speak to tame the untamable let's pray Father God we ask that your spirit would change each person here to be more like you we ask Lord that that would start with our speech Lord we know that our speech has power and that our tongues can be destructive instruments that the devil uses but God we pray tonight that you would help all of us to have tongues which speak love which build others up and which speak praise of you and you alone God a fig tree can only produce figs and we ask Lord that those of us who trust in Jesus would produce speech that reflects that in Jesus name Amen