

The Tongue is a Fire

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Date: 09 March 2014

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if you would take out your Bibles, I'd love it if you did and turn to James chapter 3 on page 1012. James chapter 3, and this is a fantastic passage for Lent, because every single one of us struggles with our tongue.

In fact, I think James ought to be mandatory reading during Lent, but no part of James more than chapters 3 and 4, which are both about the use of the tongue.

And it's very interesting that the tongue comes up in every chapter of James, and you can see how crucial it is for him that he devotes chapter 3 verse 1 to chapter 4 verse 12 all to the issue of how we use our tongue.

And this is the first of two weeks we're looking at it together. In fact, you remember at the end of chapter 1, he says, All our claims to be religious or to follow Jesus Christ are a complete sham if we're stained with the world, if we don't follow through in mercy for widows and orphans, and if we haven't got the control of our tongue.

And James is not talking about how we use words generally. He's speaking specifically about the context of the Christian community, as we'll see next week.

[1 : 2 6] Because nothing corrodes Christian community faster than sins of the tongue, bickering, angry words, gossip, abuse.

We are able to do almost immeasurable harm, barely thinking about it, even with the best intentions. And I'm very conscious as we begin this this morning, that it's very easy to make each other feel guilty.

So I want you to look at one phrase in verse 8, which we're going to come back to at the end of the sermon. I'm going to look at it twice. If you look at verse 8, the first sentence says, No human being can tame the tongue.

And in the original, it's very stark and absolute. It's not that lots of people have tried and no one's had success yet. James is saying, it is impossible.

There is no power within us as human beings, within human nature, that can control the tongue. No amount of moral exercises. No amount of careful reflection.

[2 : 3 5] No amount of, and this was one of the most depressing things this week on preparing for it. Lots of Christian authors give us three quick rules. Some rules are very, very good, like the five second rule.

Don't speak until you've thought about it for five seconds. It's a good rule. But that still is not going to tame the tongue. It cannot be subdued by any power that resides in us.

We are fabulous as human beings. We've conquered all sorts of things. But before our own tongues, we stand shockingly defeated. That's what James is saying.

At the very same time, and this is where the tension comes. I mean, I could probably just say, let's say the grace together and leave, couldn't I? No, no.

See, at the same time, James calls us to be like God in our speaking. And this verse was not read in the reading, but it's in the same section, chapter 3, 17. This is in the context of the tongue.

[3 : 33] The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, undivided and sincere, and a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make for peace.

Our speech is to be like God's, pure, avoiding all evil, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, not jealous, not bitter, listening, not holding our own views as though they are the ones that are most important, but willing to trust and submit to others in reasonable conversation, with the fruit of mercy and good works, without division or insincerity, saying what we mean and meaning what we say without a divided heart.

And when you put those two things together, I think it's, in one sense, worse. We bow our heads and we say, James, you're not mocking us, are you?

You are laying before us something which is absolutely impossible, and it's something we hardly ever think about. It's the reverse of the way we usually think. We think that we should be free to express ourselves, and it's impossible.

But James has been doing this, hasn't he? Count it all joy when you meet various trials, my brothers and sisters. Don't think of yourself or your neighbours according to what they're worth.

[5 : 02] Don't boast in your humility. Do the word. Help us. So what James does in this first passage on the tongue in 3, 1 to 12, he is like a spiritual doctor.

And what he does is he says, poke out your tongues and say, ah, ah. That's what he's doing for all of us this morning, as a diagnosis of our spiritual health.

And he makes two simple points in this little passage. The first is the spiritual power of the tongue for good, and the second is the spiritual power of the tongue for evil.

Verses 1 to 5, the spiritual power of the tongue for good and wonderfully James starts with himself. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

He's not writing to outsiders, he's writing to the Christian community, those who claim to follow Christ and he's saying to them, don't be in a rush to stand up before other people to teach God's word for the simple reason that you'll be more exposed with your sins of speech than in any other course of life.

[6 : 21] He's not saying there are too many people going into the ministry and we want to restrict it to a small number. Nor is he saying that there's one standard of judgment for Christian teachers and one standard for every other Christian.

It's simply by the sheer number of words you open yourself to greater punishment, which I am deeply conscious of. Careless words, flattering words, mean-spirited words.

And James is not writing from the comfort of the consultant's armchair. He's deeply conscious of his own weakness in verse 2. He broadens out the scope now to include we all, all of us, and the sheer frequency and variety of our verbal sins.

And I do hope you pray for us as clergy. We need prayer in this. He turns in verse 2 to speak about the spiritual power of the tongue for good.

We all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man or woman, able also to bridle his whole body.

[7 : 28] And I want you to see this. You can read that quickly and not get it. This is the opposite of the way we think. See, we think the tongue is one area of our lives and perhaps not really even the most important area.

I would be surprised if many of us here this morning thought that this was a major sin in our lives. And we begin to divide ourselves and we say, well, what I said doesn't really represent who I am.

And I don't think we really think it's a big problem. We say things, we hardly think about them afterwards, and then we post things online and we never really imagine the effect. But James is saying that our words and our tongue is the key to everything else in the Christian life.

He's not saying be on guard and be careful. He's not saying don't say nasty things, say nice things. He's saying that the control of the tongue leads to the control of all the rest of your life.

Isn't that unusual? He's saying that the God's control of our tongue is the means by which God gains control on the rest of our lives.

[8 : 45] I think there's something profoundly mysterious about this. That it is through our tongues that we control the course of our lives. It's not just that it's a key indicator of our spiritual health, but it's through our tongues we learn spiritual maturity.

It's a unique gift of God which is key to our spiritual lives. And I think that's why he uses these illustrations of the horse and the ship. See, how does a 40-kilogram teenager control, you know, a half-ton horse?

It's with a tiny piece of metal between the horse's teeth called a bit. Or take the ship. Sailing along in the face of violent storm and severe winds and waves, how does the pilot keep the ship on course?

It's through the tiny rudder, so that the direction and the destination come from how the pilot steers the rudder. James' point is not just the size difference between the tongue and the rest of the body, but that the horse and the ship are both guided by the little tiny rudder or the bit.

It's not the tongue is sovereign. It's not in charge. There's still a rider. There's still a pilot. But the way that the rider steers the horse, the way that the pilot steers the ship, is with that tiny rudder.

[10 : 08] And that is the spiritual power of the tongue, you see. We gain control over the rest of our lives by gaining controls over our tongue. I find this just amazing.

I've never seen this before. It's not that if you're strong enough to control the tongue, you can control the rest of yourself. It's that our direction and our destination are set by our very tongues.

This is the master battle that we must win. And I think it may be because God himself is a speaking God.

The way he created his world was by his word. The way he brings the recreation is by the word of truth. Word is pivotal to true relationship and communication.

And of all the creatures that he made when he made the world, there's only one creature who is made to be his image. Humans uniquely are God's speech partners.

[11 : 09] It's in our words that the creative power of speech that we demonstrate our likeness to God. Animals are not made in the image of God. This is the one thing that sets us apart from all creation.

God spoke about the animals, but he spoke to the man and the woman. And the gift given to us is the gift of speech to be like God, our maker. And you can see, can't you, the spiritual power for good that God has given in his words.

I mean, it's amazing the power to build up other people in the body of Christ. And most of us, I pray all of us, have had words spoken to us at a time, at a crucial time, words of encouragement and hope and faith.

And all of us have the opportunity today, in the future, to be that person to someone else, to bring heavenly hope to another person. When I was six, my father drove me home from school in Africa.

We sat in the front seat when we got home and my father said words to me of blessing and affirmation. And I can, I didn't understand them at the time, but I can remember them to this very day.

[12 : 23] I'll never forget it. But James is saying even more than that. It's not just that our words can have a massive positive effect on others, but they can on us as well.

In some way, we set the direction of our lives in every area by our words. And when we come to the end of verse five, James now flips the coin and we start to see the other side.

So verse five begins, so also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts great things. And it is a very, it's a very big gift that God has given us.

And James is saying, it might just be a little bit too big for us. Like giving a 10 year old a Formula One car and the keys and say, drive around Kerrisdale, please.

Or a nuclear chemistry set. This massive power for good that God's given us can also be used for evil. So I move to the second point, the spiritual power of the tongue for evil, verses five to 12.

[13 : 29] And I say these things to you. I've got to, I've got to say these things because this is what James says.

Our tongues have an amazing negative capacity way beyond their size, don't they? They are like a fire. And the thing about a fire is that it spreads beyond you to another person and then to another person.

Look at the paragraph beginning 5b. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire. The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.

The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life and set on fire by hell.

It's devastating. My younger sister came to stay with us from Australia in October and she lives in the mountains behind Sydney where the bushfires were raging. Actually, she tells the story of packing her bag, waiting for the warning to evacuate the house and thinking this is stupid putting stuff in a bag.

[14 : 39] In her home Bible study group, two families lost everything. Fires can devastate and they were lit with one tiny spark. Well, it's the same for our words, brothers and sisters.

When a word is spoken, it cannot be taken back. And long after the spark has died, the words keep burning and they keep spreading, destroying everything in their paths, whole ecosystems of forests.

And every single one of us have said terrible things in our hurt and our anger and our contempt. We've been endlessly inventive.

We've done far more harm with our lips than we could ever with our fists because our tongues are a fire. They're like a world of unrighteousness where we can seek to be serving God in 25 areas of our lives and have this world of unrighteousness in our speech which not only harms others but stains ourselves which we have no power to remove.

And then he says, when we take this great gift of God and use it in this way, when we use it against others, it is Satan himself who uses our tongues for his purposes.

[15 : 59] Our tongues are cosmically connected. They are connected with God in heaven and they are connected with Satan in hell.

In the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve fell away from God, the first sin in the garden was the sin of the tongue. It was a lie. It was blame shifting where Adam said, the woman you gave me, she's to blame.

The woman said, the snake, he's to blame. Remember the day when the prophet Isaiah went into the temple and he was given a mighty vision of the glorious eternal God. Do you remember what his first words were?

He said, woe is me. I'm a man of unclean lips and I live among a generation of unclean lips for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

And when the Apostle Paul wants to summarize the human condition, he speaks about our talk. He says, their talk is foul, it's filthy like the stench from an open grave. Their tongues are loaded with lies.

[17 : 01] Everything they say has in it the sting and poison of deadly snakes. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. And I think the devil uses our tongue more than any other tool at his disposal.

And he tears down things that God is trying to build. He tears down families families and marriages and children and churches and nations and harmony. And if you have a quick and a sharp tongue, you will live an isolated life.

And even more devastating I think is the fact that this is not in our worst moments, this is when we think we have the best intentions. You remember the Apostle Peter when Jesus said he's going up to Jerusalem to be handed over and crucified?

And Peter took him aside and said, no chance. That's not the way we do things. And he thought he was doing the right thing. And Jesus turned to him and said, get behind me Satan.

You are not setting your mind on the things of God but on human things. It's why no human can tame the tongue. It is, as James says here, a restless evil full of deadly poison.

[18 : 16] We do completely contradictory things with our tongues that we don't do with any other part of our lives. with our tongues we sing the praises of God and we bless God and then you might get in the car and on your way home denigrate and criticise and destroy others.

It's shocking, isn't it, when we put it like this? I hope you're shocked because James is. In verse 10, the last phrase, my brothers and sisters, these things, they ought not be so.

Brothers and sisters, he says, in the Christian community, they ought not be so. He's still speaking to Christians. Christians. And just to turn the screw, one last screw, turn in verse 11 and 12, he says, you know, a fig tree can't bear olives and a salt spring can't bear fresh water, but from our mouths, even as Christians, pour forth both salt water and fresh water.

Our tongues have a massive power for both good and for evil. Even after we become Christians, this continues. And that is the point and I think that is why James is being so blunt and that is why he includes himself amongst the brothers and sisters.

And I think this is now we need to come back to verse 8 because verse 8 is not just disheartening, it is massively encouraging. You remember verse 8?

[19 : 47] Just look at it again. No human being can tame the tongue. Notice please, he does not say that there is no power power that can tame the tongue.

He's simply saying that the power cannot arise from within us as humans. He's not saying that the tongue is untameable, but that it is only tameable by the power of God.

This is James, the half-brother of Jesus who grew up in the house with the Son of God. Jesus who committed no sin, no deceit, no guile was found on his lips.

As a boy, as a young man, as a man, he never said anything untrue, never said anything unkind, unclean, unnecessary. Nobody spoke like this man, Jesus.

And he is the wisdom from above personified. He is the word of God, if you like, made flesh. And in his death, Jesus bears the mocking and becomes the curse of God for us so that we might receive the blessing and be the blessing of God to others.

[21 : 06] And I think this is the point of verse 8. The tongue is stronger than all of us, but it's not stronger than God. And so what James does is he tells us the Christian way with the tongue is not to get out your rule books, but it's indirect.

The way we deal with our tongues is in an indirect fashion because the fundamental issue does not really have to do in the end with our tongues, but with God himself.

And I'm going to steal some verses from next week's passage. If you have your Bible open, just look down at chapter 4, verse 6. I'm justified in doing this because it's one section.

Chapter 4, verse 6, God gives more grace, more grace, ongoingly, consistently, continually, more grace, grace more powerful than your speech and my speech, freely, without reproach, grace that never runs out, that continues to fill and continues to flow.

God gives more grace. Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. So what do we do? Verse 7, submit yourselves therefore to God.

[22 : 25] Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Are they not amazing promises? resist Satan.

We can't control our tongues. We have no power over Satan. But James says, if we draw on God's grace day by day, hour by hour, conversation by conversation, while we cannot tame our tongues and we don't have power over Satan, what we must do is bring ourselves in humility and repentance and faith to God and ask him to change us.

Ask him to change our words, to enter into our mouths, to offer him our lips for his service and he will. You see what I mean when I say it's indirect.

You don't just get three rules or ten rules about your tongue. We turn to God and we humble ourselves and we draw near to him and the promise is when we draw near to him, he draws near to us with his grace and his goodness, forgiving us, renewing us, setting us right, keeping us through temptation, forgiving us again, changing us, purifying us, using us.

He is the only source of true change and transformation. And any way forward for us begins with drawing near to God and him drawing near to us.

[23 : 56] And though we fail him daily and hourly in our words and though we pollute ourselves and damage others, his grace is stronger and will forgive and will empower.

So the place we start is turning from evil speech, turning away from every hateful word with humility, drawing near to God. And if you know you've said something or spoken in a way that's hurt someone else in the congregation, go to them in humility and ask them for their forgiveness.

You know, after this service we're going to have our little vision gathering. I wanted to say it's a complete dud unless it's built on God's grace and his abiding presence.

It's your tongue and my... They're a mighty gift, a spiritual power for good and evil. And if we continue to draw near to him and resist the devil, he will quench the evil fire and he'll set our tongues on fire in a different way.

Because you remember on the day of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit came down from above sparking new power, new hearts. And do you remember what the first sign of the new creation and the presence of the Holy Spirit was?

[25 : 15] It was a renewed power of speech where the disciples spoke in intelligible language declaring the wonderful deeds of God. And this is available to us day by day if we humble ourselves under his mighty hand.

It's not automatic. We have to determine to turn away from some things and do as God says. And it's not immediate. By that I mean we need to constantly go back to God for his grace and over time we will change.

And there are no words that we can speak that have more power than words to God in prayer. So we're going to draw near to God in prayer now as he draws near to us.

I want you to pray for yourself and for us as a community that we would have this wisdom from above. We're going to take a pause before we enter into prayer before Julie leads us and we're going to have a musical reflection.

And pray for yourself and pray for each other that God would enter into us and would make our speech pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere and that we would sow a harvest of righteousness in peace because we want to be those who make the peace.

[26 : 37] So let's be still for a few moments shall we?