

Taming the Tongue

September 16, 2018

James 3: 1-12

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴ 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 pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire. 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. ⁷ For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue — a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Taming the Tongue

Pastor John

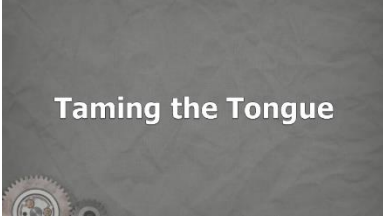
Words are powerful. Words can build up. Words can tear down. Although the title and focus of today's

message is “Taming the Tongue”, I also want to focus for a moment today on our ability to use our tongue for good. As I just finished saying in the children’s message, our words can be as sweet as honey. Our words can bring healing to someone’s pain. Our words can lift someone up and give them the encouragement that they need to take that next step. Our words can bring a smile to someone’s face and warmth to someone’s heart. We can all remember moments when someone said a positive word to us just when we needed to hear it. We can remember what a difference it made. Those words of love and kindness may have just brightened our day, or they may have been just the words we needed to do that thing that we knew we needed to do. Those words made all the difference in the world. As we begin today, let us pray...



Positive words do make a difference. In a Harvard-based study of 60 teams at a large information processing corporation, researchers found out that positive words really matter. They identified positive comments as the number one factor in determining a team’s success. Researchers found that the teams that were rated highest in performance and in customer satisfaction heard positive comments six times more often than they heard negative comments from their team leaders. Six times more often. The lowest rated teams heard three negative comments for every positive comment. We can all probably relate to these findings. You can have a great day and things can be going really well and then one person says something negative or complains and it can make it feel like your whole day is ruined. Ten people can say nice things about your

hair or your dress or the food you made or whatever and then one person says something unkind – that is what we remember, right? It is how we are wired.

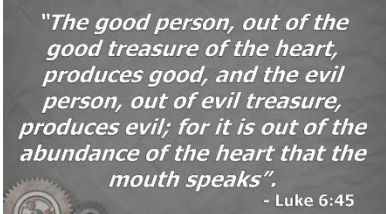


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James begins today's passage with a great observation: "*For all of us make many mistakes*". How true this is, isn't it? When we admit that we are not perfect, there is a freedom that we find. But that freedom is not an unlimited or open-ended freedom. Last week we talked about how our relationship with God brings both privileges and responsibilities. With our tongues, there is both freedom and responsibility. Our text today invites us to consider the impact of our words, both for good and for bad.

Before we look at the impact that our tongue can have, we first need to address some of the root causes for needing to tame tongue. Sometimes, we harbor ill feelings and we mull them over and over and over. We contain it until we cannot – then the feelings just spew out, usually causing much damage. In other cases, there is no release and the smoldering within us produces a deep anger that poisons our own souls. When we hold onto and nurse a grudge, this is what happens. It eats us up from the inside out. In order to control the tongue, therefore, we must first address our heart.

Luke 6:45 reads, "*The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the*



"The good person, out of the good treasure of the heart, produces good, and the evil person, out of evil treasure, produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks".

- Luke 6:45

abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks". When we have good in our heart, we speak good. In an article I read this week, the author wrote about what makes us holy and what makes us unholy. He argued that it is what we fill our minds and hearts with that largely determines whether we are holy or unholy. The author, Tim Challies, wrote this:

"This is why the battle for holiness is first a battle to flood your mind and heart with the right things, the best things, and why it's equally a battle to avoid flooding your mind and heart with the wrong things, the worst things. So, let me ask you, when it comes to what you see, what you watch, what you read, what you ponder, what you enjoy, what you find entertaining, what fills your mind and thrills your heart — what is your standard? What do you invite into your mind, your heart, your life? What do you deliberately keep out? What is your standard"?

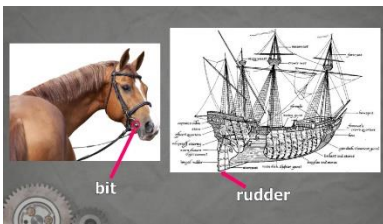
These are good questions for us to consider. What do we seek to fill our hearts and minds with? What do we try and keep out? And most importantly: what is our standard? I believe the answer, our standard, is found in Philippians 4:8:

"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things". Paul encourages us to fill ourselves with the things of God. Think about the things of God. Fill our hearts and minds with God. This is our standard.

"Finally, beloved, whatever is true... honorable... just... pure... pleasing... commendable... if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things".
- Philippians 4:8

At times, we will struggle. Being human and living with other humans can cause difficult situations to arise. There are times and places where being upset or even angry is okay. There will be times when we are wronged. But we cannot stay there. When anger or ill feelings or a grudge resides in our heart, then we will speak evil. We must look within and honestly ask ourselves: are we speaking from place of pain or out of longing of an unmet need? If so, we must make peace first with God and, second, with our neighbor. From there we can speak words that make peace, words that bring reconciliation, words that offer restoration and healing. Words are powerful.

James begins our passage today with some excellent illustrations that demonstrate the power of the tongue. James compares the power of our

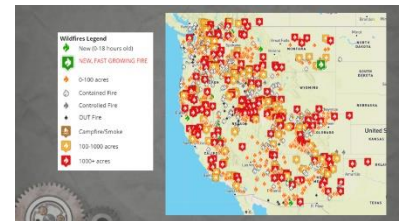


tongues to the bits we place in a horse's mouth and to the tiny rudders that steer huge ships. With a tug this way or that way, a huge animal can be turned. For you mathematicians, that means a six-ounce piece of metal

can turn an animal that, on average, weighs 1,300 pounds. (That is about 21,000 ounces for those of you trying to compare apples to apples). Although I do not have hard numbers on the size of a rudder compared to size of the entire ship, this drawing allows us to see how small the rudder is compared to the whole ship. With an average clipper ship, I found that the rudder typically accounts for 2% of the total underwater surface area of the vessel. Like with a small bit in the mouth of a horse, the tiny rudder will turn the massive vessel with ease. And so it is with our tongues. This tiny little muscle has much power.

James goes on from these great illustrations to talk about our tongues. Although he might not have known it, mathematically, James is in the ballpark with his comparisons. In verse five, James writes, *"The tongue is a small member"*. Indeed, a very small member. The average human tongue weighs 70 grams. The average human body weighs 62 kilograms or 62,000 grams. If you are a math geek like me, that means the tongue is about 1/10 of 1% of our body. But oh, the power of the tongue. In this same verse James writes, *"How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!"*

Usually at this time of year we see lots of news stories about the power of and the destruction caused by forest fires. Earlier this week, I captured this map of current fires in the US. Each of those red boxes represents a forest fire that is over 1,000 acres. Each brown box represents fires between 100 and 1,000 acres. The small orange flames represent fires between less than 100 acres. There are a lot of boxes and flames on that map, aren't there.




And do you know what caused many of those fires to start? Yes, just a small flame. From this small flame, a whole forest can be set ablaze. And so it is with our words. With just a small word, much can be set on fire. Although small, our tongue is very powerful. James writes that our tongue is *"a fire"* that is *"placed*



among our members as a world of iniquity” that *“stains the whole body”*. Yes, with just a few words we can ruin a reputation or worse.

In Matthew 15:18, Jesus said, *“What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles”*. Our tongue has the potential to do much harm. In our passage today, James rues the fact that all species of animals and birds and sea creatures have been tamed by man, yet we still struggle to control our tongues. He laments, *“the tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison”*. This is a timeless truth. Each and every day we wrestle with our tongues.



Taming the Tongue

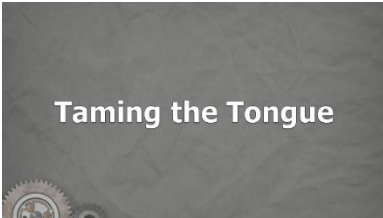
For as long as humanity has been around, controlling the tongue has been an issue. In the beginning, the tongue and its lies were an issue in the Garden of Eden.

This issue was even addressed in the Ten Commandments: *“thou shalt not bear false witness”*. Bearing false witness is a wide-ranging category. Yes, we correctly identify lying as an example of ‘bearing false witness’, but we should also include things like gossip and slander. The tongue can quickly lie about or slander another person just to make oneself feel better. Gossip so easily entraps us as well. Gossip is usually bearing false witness. We have even come up with ways to gossip without calling it gossip. For example, *“Dear Lord, please help Mr. Ebenezer with his pornography addiction and please rid Miss Squirrel of her recently sticky fingers”*. Lies, slander, gossip – these are just the tip of the iceberg concerning the ways that we need to tame our tongue.

Last week we heard James' admonition to be slow to speak so that we do not speak rashly or in anger. As we learned last week, when we are slow to speak and when we listen well, we are much less likely to say hurtful words. Another type of language that we use when we do not have time to think or when we allow anger to drive our words is cursing. In verse 10, our key verse for this week, James writes, *"From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so"*. No, we cannot speak a certain kind of words in one situation and use a whole other kind of language in another setting. With the youth, I used to call this "compartmentalizing" – you talk one way in the locker room and another way around your parents. This leads to a common critique of Christians: hypocrisy. You say one thing and you do another. You say you love all people, but your actions do not demonstrate that you really love "them". Just as our words must match our actions, so too must our words match our faith. We cannot choose to talk like a Christian some of the time and to talk like an old Navy sailor at other times. James addresses this two-sidedness as well. In today's passage we read, *"With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God"*. We cannot sit here in worship and praise God and then go home and grumble about our neighbor who didn't do this or our relative who did that. We cannot worship the creator and then turn around and curse something that God has made and that God loves.

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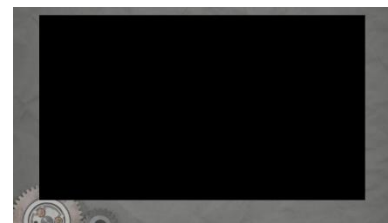
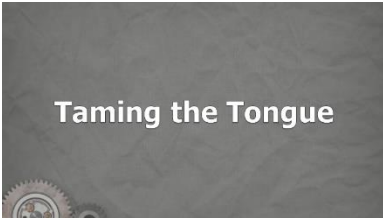
- James 3:10



Taming the Tongue

Last Sunday, part of the passage from James 2 and part of the message spoke against partiality and favoritism. Our words are what allows these things to have an impact on someone or on a group of people. Here too the words we choose to use or choose not to use matter. Last week the first GPS question asked, "What people or groups of people are negatively affected by favoritism, partiality, judging, and prejudice here in our community"? I wonder, did wrestling with this question cause anyone to use different words than you normally would have used? Did anyone choose to use words of kindness or words of hope to diffuse a situation or to combat favoritism or bias or prejudice?

To close today, I would like to share a video that summarizes the power of our words. It speaks of how our words can be used for good or for bad. Please turn your attention to the screens and consider these words:

Taming the Tongue

Once spoken, our words begin blazing a trail through the hearts and minds of those around us. One kind word can demolish guilt or inspire hope. Your words set off a chain of events beyond your control. One word can destroy beliefs, harden hearts, or cultivate hatred. But they can also demonstrate faith, display forgiveness, and nurture love. The power of life and death lie in a single word. We, we who are created in the image of God, we have this one word: love.

As we learn to tame our tongues, may we learn to speak words of love. As we practice taming our tongues, may we practice speaking words of love that build up and that encourage one another. May our words of love be Jesus' words of love. May it be so for me and for you this week. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) We all struggle with taming our tongues. Which areas do you most struggle with taming your tongue? How could it be better?
- 2) Who in your world needs to hear words of encouragement from you? Pray for the words and the opportunity to share these positive words.
- 3) Part of taming the tongue releases us to "*bless the Lord*" with our words. What words of blessing can you share to bring glory to God?