

“The Power of the Tongue”
James 3:1-12
Rev. Michael Poulos
May 5, 2024
First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
use by permission only

This morning we continue our study at the Book of James, turning our attention to the first part of chapter 3. Up till now, James has emphasized the importance of putting our faith into action, for Christians to not only “talk the talk” but actually “walk the talk” to practice what we preach. James has no tolerance for hypocrisy, and he’s willing to speak the hard truth that faith that does not translate into good works of love and mercy is not simply deficient faith, but rather its dead faith (2.14-17).

Those who may think the Bible is concerned mostly about heavenly, spiritual things and not the practical matters of day-to-day relationships & living in this world have never read James! When it comes to faith, what we say and what we do are both critical things in the life of a Christian - and this morning we are going to focus on the power of the tongue, the impact our speech has on others, and what all of this has to do with our faith as followers of Jesus. Let’s turn now to our passage which can be found in this morning’s bulletin insert - I invite you to read along with the parts in bold.

James 3:1-12 *Common English Bible*

My brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers, because we know that we teachers will be judged more strictly. We all make mistakes often, but those who don’t make mistakes with their words have reached full maturity. Like a bridled horse, they can control themselves entirely. When we bridle horses and put bits in their mouths to lead them wherever we want, we can control their whole bodies.

Consider ships: They are so large that strong winds are needed to drive them. But pilots direct their ships wherever they want with a little rudder. In the same way, even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly.

Think about this: A small flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives. Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell.

People can tame and already have tamed every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish. No one can tame the tongue, though. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God’s likeness.

Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn’t be this way! Both fresh water and salt water don’t come from the same spring, do they? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree produce olives?

Can a grapevine produce figs? Of course not, and fresh water doesn’t flow from a saltwater spring either. The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As I have told y'all before, when I was growing up I was mostly a rule follower. I tended to go along with the expectations placed on me at home and at school, and as an introvert I wanted to stay off the radar of the authority figures in my life, so I was mostly a good kid. But something happened to me in third grade! I don't remember all the details but I began to get into trouble in Mrs. Blake's class. All year long I was called down for talking too much in class, and even having it marked down as a demerit in my report card. And when you talked too much to the classmate sitting next to you in Mrs. Blake's class, she would punish you in a rather unusual way. We would be assigned to write a hundred or two hundred times the sentence, "I must bridle my tongue in Mrs Blake's class!" At first I had no idea what bridle meant, but after writing it several hundred times at home on pieces of notebook paper, I became quite familiar with the term. And though I can't remember how many times I had to write that sentence, I do know I was a multiple offender!

Looking back, I can see how in Mrs. Blake's eyes I was not mature enough as a 3rd grader, and I needed to work on bridling my tongue. And James would certainly agree! In our passage this morning we are told that those who are bridled like a horse can control themselves entirely. Bits in the mouths of horses can guide them completely, just like a small rudder can guide a large ship. Being human we all say things we should not say. Like when we hit our thumbs with a hammer, we may say a bad word or two - and being more disciplined in our speech certainly is good advice. In James chapter 1 we hear this good advice: "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger" (1.19). And so it might be tempting for us to consider the Bible and passages like this one from James as a book of moral guidance, giving us tips for how to be a good person, how to set a good moral example for others. I have no doubt that Mrs. Blake wanted to mold and shape her students into good people, and who could blame her for her efforts?

But when we take a closer look at this morning's passage, we see that something much more is going on than just a moral lesson. James is not saying that all we need to do is to watch our words, to just not say any bad ones, or to not talk when the teacher is teaching. No, James is concerned with something much more than good manners. He is concerned about something much deeper - how our words relate to our faith, and how hypocrisy shows up not only through our actions but also through our speech. This morning I invite you to take a closer look at the power of our tongues.

James begins with the simple and straightforward examples of the horse and its bit and the ship and its rudder. Though I am not a horse rider and have not sailed a ship before, I can get the point - something small can direct something much larger, and the same can be true for us humans - the tongue is relatively small, but its influence can be great. We have to be careful, but this is all relatively positive advice. But notice where James goes next! He says, "The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us." James is not comparing our tongues to rudders or bits in horses' mouths - he's saying the tongue IS fire that contaminates our entire lives. "Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell." Well, this seems to have escalated quickly! What is making James move from horses and ships to flames of fire?! What problem does James

seem to have in mind when it comes to the words that come out of our mouths?

If we have been paying attention to what bothers James in the first two chapters, the answer to my question should come as no surprise. *What troubles James is the hypocrisy he sees being manifest through our words.* With our tongues we both bless God who is Lord and Father and curse human beings who are made in God's likeness. "Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn't be this way!" (3.10) James knows that our words should reflect the truth of our identities, that we are all made in God's image - and that through our actions and our words we should honor the image of God in ourselves and in others. I saw a post on Facebook this week that ended with the line "Always remind people of their worth. One small act could mean the world to them." I think James knows this, that when our speech is used to cut down, shame, belittle or stereotype others, we are failing to see the intrinsic worth of every human being, every person who is made in the image of God.

Here's a question for you: did you know that many reptiles including snakes have forked tongues that help them smell in different directions, giving them the advantage to sense what's in their environment? Well, before this week I did not know this! My good friend and Presbyterian pastor Kim Wells reminded me that the expression "speaking with a forked tongue" means saying one thing and meaning another, or to speak in a hypocritical way; to speak out of both sides of your mouth (Kim Wells' sermon ["Speaking with Integrity"](#) 9/9/2018, New Hope Presbyterian Church, Asheville). Words do have power, and when we use them to spread rumors behind people's backs or spew hatred in front of people made in God's image, we are setting a blaze afire. One of the most powerful lies we are told growing up is, "Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me!" Our words can have a powerful effect on others for both good and evil, and the racial slurs and taunts that bullies inflict on others sometimes have drastic consequences. On the other end of the spectrum is the positive power of words like, "I forgive you"... "I am sorry"... or "You are not alone in this."

Our words do have power: the power to create blessings or curses, the power to build up or to tear down, the power to speak the truth in love or to distort with lies. I believe a big reason our country has become so divided along political and cultural lines is that we no longer share a commitment to speaking and hearing the truth - we can spin our own version of truth and justify lies if it serves our interests. Social media, the internet and other forms of digital communication can distort and spread things like wildfire, enabling people who live in their silos to believe what they are inclined to believe. My heart resonates with James when he groans, "My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn't be this way!"

So what can we do? In thinking about a response to today's passage, I offer up a few invitations, invitations for how we can respond and make a change. *First of all, I invite you to pay attention to the language you use - not just our spoken words, but the words we write in a letter, in a text on our phones, or a post on social media.* Doing this is going to take the discipline of slowing down, of self-reflection and self-awareness. Do our words act more like bullets sent out to

do harm, or are they more like seeds being planted for love and affirmation? (see Gary Chapman's [Love As a Way of Life](#)) Reflecting on our language also means we reflect on the words we are NOT using - maybe we are holding back saying what needs to be said out of fear. Whatever is the case, our first step is awareness.

The second invitation is to take a deeper look inside our hearts. When we are upset about something someone else has said or done, the natural tendency is to lash out at them. This may be done directly with an angry word or text, or indirectly with a passive aggressive anger that may come out later. Either way the temptation is to put the blame and focus on the other, instead of looking inside your own heart. According to Jesus, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart" (Matthew 15.18) and I know when someone upsets me it's a lot easier to automatically blame the other instead of asking, "What's in my heart that has caused me to react this way?" Even if the other person is at fault the scriptures tell us to slow down, to listen before we speak, and that listening should include not only the other person but also our deeper selves. Unfortunately, that is the trouble with digital communication - the temptation is to respond right away. But I know I have taken the wiser route when I delayed my response to a text or email for hours or even days, than to hit send right away!

Finally, the invitation is for us to stay connected to one another. You see, if we want to grow in our awareness of our words as well as our hearts, we are going to need one another. We need friends who can be sounding boards, people who can listen without judgment, and people of different ages and experiences to learn from. Belonging to a community of faith like our church is a blessing because we are part of an intergenerational family committed to loving God, loving our neighbor, and loving ourselves. And on this communion Sunday, as we prepare to gather around the Lord's Table, we are reminded that our communion is much wider than the people in this room. It includes all the saints who are at home this morning because of various physical ailments and restrictions; it includes the ones who are scattered and who are watching our service online, and it includes those who are in the heavenly communion of saints - through the power of the Holy Spirit we are united with them in a real way! Together we are better able to put our faith in action not only through our deeds of mercy and justice, but also through our words that give witness to God's truth and love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.