

James 3:1-12 Taming the Tongue

People of God, there are many sayings which teach us about the power of words. Parents teach their children to respond to the harsh words of another child by saying, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But if that were true mother wouldn’t have to protect their children from the consequences of the power of their words by also telling them, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all."

There is another saying that originated during World War II as part of a campaign to remind people that careless talk could lead to devastating consequences, endangering lives, and national security. “Loose lips sink ships.” I was told this repeatedly when I was in the Navy every time we were about to pull into port. The idea is simple: be careful about what you say and who you say it to because it could put our ship and the lives of our shipmates in mortal danger.

Now we may not be dealing with wartime secrets in our everyday lives, but the principle remains just as relevant. Our words are powerful.

In our passage this morning in James 3:1-12, the apostle James gives us a profound lesson on the immense power of the tongue and its impact on the church and warns us of its danger. James warns both the pastor-teachers of the church as well as the members about the extreme power found in our words.

In order to drive home the destructive power of a tongue that is used for evil, James piles illustration on top of illustration, and metaphor on top of metaphor. He is using his words to create mental pictures to get you to understand just how deadly serious our words are.

Just like "loose lips could sink ships," an uncontrolled tongue can steer our lives, the lives of others, and the church toward great harm.

The Responsibility of Teachers

Now let us remember that we left off at the end of James 2 where the apostle taught us that it is not merely the one who makes a profession of faith with his mouth that will be justified, but one who demonstrates his faith by his actions.

But lest we think that the words of our tongues have little to do with the works of our faith, James quickly corrects us. The words spoken by both teachers of the church and her members are what either builds up or tears down the church and one another. Our words are among the chief works that we ought to be concerned to do to demonstrate saving faith.

Being a teacher of the church is no small matter. A Christian's spiritual growth can be stunted or supported by the words that teachers of the church speak. The Church's maturity is linked to the words that pastors and teachers preach and teach.

Thus James says, *“My brethren, let not many become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body.”*

James’ reference to the whole body is primarily a reference to the Church, the body of Christ, and only secondarily a reference to the individual body. A Pastor-teacher is called to be a perfect man, a mature man, who is able with his words to bridle and direct the church through times of trial, difficulty, and controversy.

As we speak of members of the body, some are hearts, some are hands, some are strong backs, the pastor-teacher is the tongue. And he uses his tongue to direct the body.

Much like how a horseman uses a bit and bridle to direct the way of a horse. Or how a captain of a ship navigates the seas by turning the rudder this way and that. “And just like ships, the direction of a church community is often controlled, for better or worse, by a very small rudder – the tongue of an influential teacher.”¹

And in as much as a teacher determines the spiritual growth and maturity of a local body by his tongue, so also do you guide and direct your own individual spiritual growth and maturity by how you use your tongue.

¹ Jeff Meyers, James, 215.

The Tongue is a Fire

Growing up we had plenty of commercials with Smokey the Bear telling us, “Only you can prevent forest fires.” And those images and words were forever burned into our consciences.

Likewise, James tells us of the danger of forest fires that can be caused by the fire of our tongues.

He says, “*See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.*”

We need to have that same reverence and fear of the potential danger of fire that our words can cause in the church and in our lives. James knew first-hand in his own life of the danger of words spoken in wrath and anger against perceived enemies.

Remember in Luke 9 Jesus was rejected by the people in Samaria, and James and John responded by saying, “*Lord, do you want us command fire to come down from heaven and consume them just as Elijah did?*”

But Jesus rebuked them and said, “*You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them.*”

Christian men who express their righteous indignation toward the enemies of the Church through words of anger and malice and by wishing harm upon them are not speaking with heavenly tongues of fire. James describes the tongue as being set on fire by Gehenna, the burning trash heap outside Jerusalem which is used as a symbol of eternal hellfire in the New Testament.

A tongue that is prone to curse and speak evil, even of enemies, is a burning garbage heap enflamed with the everlasting fires of hell. Those who are filled with bitterness, anger, and malice, slander, curses, and envy, accusations, insults, and bitter zealous rivalry, your breathe smells like you have been French kissing the devil himself. Your words are ignited by the spirits and fires of hell.

Taming the Tongue

James then moves on to talk about how the tongue is practically impossible to tame.

He says, *For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, they sinned with their tongues by speaking against God and against Moses, saying: *Why have you brought us up out of Egypt*

to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.”

The words of a complaining, thankless, hard-hearted person is a deadly poison. So much so, that in response to their sin, God sent fiery serpents to bite the people, and many of them died.

God was showing that the real poison which destroys the camp of the saints are the venomous words which we train ourselves to say in our thanklessness. Thanklessness, grumbling, and being discontent with what God has given you and with your lot in life, is a tongue full of deadly poison.

Anyone who has ever worked with a grumbler knows just how bad they can be, and can testify that they would rather be bitten by a poisonous snake than to continue to work with such a grumbler. Can I get an Amen?

Blessing and Cursing

But taming the tongue and bringing our speech into greater conformity with what the Word of God says, and who the Word of God is – Jesus Christ – is what demonstrates the life of God in us, and is one of the chief ways in which Christ brings life to the world.

But the reality is, that no matter how much we try to tame the tongue, we are all inconsistent. For no one can perfectly

tame the tongue, not me, not you. It is an unruly evil full of deadly poison. And even our best efforts are tainted with hypocrisy.

For with our tongue we bless our God and Father, and with the same tongue we curse men who are created in the likeness of that same God. Out of the same mouth proceed both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.

As Christians, who have the Spirit of God put with in us, we have God's words put into our mouths, we have his word written on our hearts. Like Isaiah, we are people of unclean lips, and we dwell among a people of unclean lips. But by the grace of God, Isaiah's lips were touched by the burning coal from the altar, and he was cleansed of his iniquity.

And our lips can also be cleansed of our iniquity. But we apply the burning coal of Christ's love to our lips and have it go down into our hearts.

In Christ we have been set apart as holy. We have been purified. We are clean. Therefore there ought to be a definitive break from sinful speech.

There is nothing more revealing about a person's spiritual state than the words that come out of their mouth. Jesus says, *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person (Matt. 15:18-20).*

In Christ we have been cleansed. Yes, we do still have indwelling sin which continues to defile us, spurting up from our heart and out of our mouth. But this ought not to be so. Christ is making us new.

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

The spring James speaks of is our heart, where the Holy Spirit dwells. Our hearts are either a fresh water pond, or a salt water pond.

Living Water

Jesus said in John 7:38 – “He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' By this he spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive.”

If you believe in Jesus, you have a spring of fresh living water flowing forth from your heart. The words that Christians are to speak are supposed to allow that to flow into the world.

But many of us make a habit of blocking and damming up that river by the filthy words we speak. We pollute the fresh waters of life. We should be arrested for dumping the toxic sludge of our filthy hearts into the river of life.

This shouldn't be the case. A spring cannot produce both fresh water and salt water. And neither can a salt pond

produce fresh water. The salt pond James speaks of is the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea is referred to in the Bible as the “Salt Sea” and has also been called the Sea of Sodom and the Stinking Sea because of the odor of rotten eggs created by the sulfur in the water. The Dead Sea is the world’s deepest salt lake and has 34.2% salinity, which is 9.6 times that of the ocean. Due to the high salt content of the water, no living creature (not even microscopic aquatic organisms) can live in the sea. This explains the name - “Dead” Sea.

And James says, that is what your heart and tongue are like. Full of death.

The prophet Ezekiel prophesied that one day living water would flow forth from the temple and go down into the Dead Sea and heal its waters, so that the Dead Sea becomes a Living Sea. Ezekiel says that there will be a very great multitude of fish, and fishermen would be able to cast their nets from shore.

"And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing."

This is an image of the work of the Spirit of God in our hearts and in the life and ministry of the church to the world.

In our natural sinful state, our hearts and mouths are like the Dead Sea. Our hearts were dead, nothing living was found there. Our words burn with the stench of sulfur, bringing death to everyone.

But after the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our hearts, and we believe in Christ, living water begins to flow forth from our hearts and transforms everything. No longer do we speak death, but we speak life. No longer do we bless God and curse man made in His image, we bless God and bless our neighbor, and even our enemies. And in this way, we will not let our loose lips sink the ship of the church, but we will sail by God's grace to the New and Heavenly Jerusalem.

Let us not continue the habit of praising God on Sunday morning and then insult, slander, or accuse one another during the rest of the week. As a New Creation in Christ, we should always speak to one another with kindness and love. Instead of gossiping and being filled with malice and anger, we should use our words to encourage and uplift each other.

However, using our words positively requires effort and self-discipline. We must train ourselves to speak kindly and

avoid gossip, negativity, and foul language in both our public and private conversations.

You must tame your tongue to not speak filthy words on Signal, Discord, Telegram, Instagram, Marco Polo, or any other social media and private chat groups you have. You must not use these platforms to give your lips free reign to vent your evil heart with your small group of friends.

Also, as I tell new couples who I give pre-marital counseling to, you must never ever curse at your spouse, or even jokingly insult. Jesus taught us to bless, and not to curse.

Business with Brothers

Now this last bit that I have to say might seem like a stretch in terms of suitable application of this passage, but I think it worth mentioning, and I think it worthy of your deep consideration.

As our church community grows and our people own and operate businesses, and our people are working with and for one another, there are opportunities for sin to mess things up. And there is no other sin like the sinful use, or misuse of words as it pertains to business contracts.

First, Write it down: Regeneration does not make anyone's memory perfect, least of all yours. And do not assume that a handshake will do, or a text message will suffice because you are working with a fellow Christian. Christians are

sinners too. Write everything down in a contract, and get that thing notarized. Good contracts are good fences, and good fences make good neighbors.

Details fade over time, and as details fade misunderstandings grow. We write down a shopping list when we go to the hardware store so that we will remember what to buy. How much more should we write down the terms of a business deal between brothers, so that misunderstanding between you does not disrupt the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace?

The functional process of putting things down on paper allows both parties sufficient time to think through the arrangement from their own side and also to see what the other side is thinking. This process routinely raises questions one (or both) sides haven't considered yet and need to discuss.

This is also important with regard to long-term business ventures. Although written agreements (usually in the form of a partnership/shareholder/operating agreement) are relevant if the venture fails; they are absolutely vital if the venture succeeds. No one fights when there is nothing to divide up. But when the business is successful and really starting to take off, the potential for misunderstanding, mistrust and sin grows. Greed and envy still afflict Christians.

These agreements should address who will be responsible to contribute money/labor, what the income to the business will be used for, and how the money will be split between the owners. It should also address how (if) a partner can exit the arrangement, and what the buy-out terms will be and what the triggers for that buy-out will be. Depending on the nature of the venture; it should also address whether or not other third parties can come in, and if so, on what terms.

Having the agreement in writing allows third parties (e.g. a Session of elders) to review and assess the arrangement if there are disputes. And I guarantee, if you do not write it down, there will be disputes.

And Second: Abide by what you wrote down: *A righteous man swears to his own hurt, and does not change (Ps. 15:4).* Don't flake out on a contract that was written up because you now come out on the wrong end the deal. You knew that was a possibility of going into the agreement, and now here you are. Honor your word.

Christians who guard their words with a contract will be successful in business, and will contribute to building up the church, and not tearing it down.

Conclusion

As we move forward, let us commit ourselves to speaking words that give life, that build up the church, and that bring

glory to God. Let our words be seasoned with grace, truth, and love, reflecting the character of our Savior.

Imagine a church where every member, guided by the Spirit, speaks life into one another. A church where words of encouragement, edification, and blessing flow freely, creating a community of growth, peace, and unity. This is the church that Christ desires, and it begins with each of us taming our tongues and using them for His glory.

Let us strive to use our tongues not to curse, but to bless; not to wound, but to heal; not to divide, but to unite. In doing so, we will not only avoid the pitfalls and dangers that James warns us about but will also contribute to a vibrant, healthy, and thriving church body. Amen.