

TAMING THE TONGUE

Jas 3:1-12

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He who has a sharp tongue soon cuts his own throat. . . . A sharp tongue and a dull mind are often found in the same head. . . . The tongue is a deadly weapon, whether it is sharp or blunt. . . . No matter which screw is loose in a person's head, it is usually the tongue that rattles. . . . The human tongue is only a few inches from the brain, but when some people talk they seem miles apart. . . . Many things are opened by mistake, but none so frequently as one's mouth. . . . And a final saying that is a favorite of mine: You cannot judge a person by what others say about them, but you can judge a person by what they say about others. The human tongue—it has been described as the world's smallest but biggest troublemaker.

In chapter three of the New Testament Letter of James, we read the following:

¹Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged by God with greater strictness. [Now there's a scary statement for a preacher as he begins his sermon!]

²We all make many mistakes [in many ways], but those who control their tongues can also control themselves in every other way. ³We can make a large horse turn around and go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. ⁴And a tiny rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot wants it to go, even though the winds are strong. ⁵So also, the tongue is a small thing, but what enormous damage it can do. A tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. ⁶And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is full of wickedness that can ruin your whole life. It can turn the entire course of your life into a blazing flame of destruction, for it is set on fire by hell itself.

⁷People can tame all kinds of animals and birds and reptiles and fish, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue. It is an uncontrollable evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it breaks out into curses against those who have been made in the image of God. ¹⁰And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! ¹¹Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? ¹²Can you pick olives from a fig tree or figs from a grapevine? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty pool (Jas 3:1-12, NLT).

The tongue tells the tale, and to tame the tongue is no easy task.

It is typical for James to announce themes in chapter one that he then analyzes in later passages. Jas 3:1-12 obviously develops the statements found in 1:19 that everyone should be quick to hear but slow to speak, and in 1:26 that a claim to be religious without control of the tongue is worthless.

New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson offers this historical insight:

All of the wisdom of the ancient Mediterranean world, both Greco-Roman and Jewish, agreed on certain points concerning the power and perils of speech. From the sages of ancient Egypt, through the biblical books of Proverbs and Sirach, to the essays of Plutarch and Seneca, there is a consensus that silence is better than speech, that hearing, not speaking, is the pathway to wisdom, that speech when necessary should be brief, that above all speech should be under control and never the expression of rage or envy. The mark of the wise person was above all control of speech.¹

Speaking about speaking, James says much in few words. His discussion of the delicacies and dangers of dialogue begins with the importance of controlled speech for teachers. It is striking that for the only time in this letter, James uses the first-person plural with reference to teachers: “we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (v. 1). Not only are teachers people who use speech more often, as public persons who exercise control over others, but also they are subject to temptations concerning speech that others are not: arrogance and domination over students, anger at contradiction or opposition, slander and abuse directed toward rivals, flattery of students for the sake of popularity. Furthermore, James may have in mind the mouth of the church leader. As such a leader himself, he recognizes *both* the risks and the rewards of being a teacher.

As James continues, he is not arguing that we control our body by controlling our tongue, but that if we can control our tongue we ought to be able to control our body, because bodily control is far easier. A bit to tame the horse, a rudder to steer the ship, a spark to enflame the forest: in each case there is a contrast between the smallness of the instrument and the power it exercises. Likewise, the human tongue: it is the world’s smallest but biggest troublemaker. Words, they can bring promise and they can bring peril. They can delight and they can destroy. They can be wonderfully good and they

¹Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, NIB, vol. 12 (Abingdon, 1998), 203.

can be woefully evil. Somewhere I read that for every word in Adolph Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, 125 lives were lost in World War II.

Earlier and later in this New Testament letter, James condemns being "double-minded" (1:8; 4:8). Here in chapter three being "double-minded" takes the form of being "double-tongued"—speaking with a "forked-tongue." Nothing so reveals the destructive power of speech than the cursing of another human being. Nothing so vividly reveals double-mindedness than to have that curse proceed from the same mouth that blesses God. To bless God but curse His representation is senseless and sinful. This ought not to be so! (v. 10). We humans have been as unsuccessful in mastering our mouths as we have been successful in controlling creation. We have tamed the creatures of the earth but we have not tamed the tongue, the beast from hell.

Speaking of animals, what distinguishes man from the animals is that we are speaking animals. We are animals with tongues that talk. Among the species, we alone command the power to use words to communicate ideas, to express personality, and to enter into dialogue. The power of the tongue is a distinctive feature of humankind and carries with it all manner of effects, good and bad alike.

Perhaps one of the most disturbing features of contemporary culture is the way in which words serve to create a distorted view of reality. For example, the advertising industry seeks to deceive and seduce, to consciously create by means of words and images illusions in pursuit of which other humans can spend their fortunes and their energies. Such language weaves its web with words of desire, greed, and envy. What about politics?—where messages to the public are crafted precisely according to the ability to "sell" a candidate, where lying about and slandering opponents have become recognized as the most effective of all campaigning strategies, and where political agendas are advanced by appeals to the voters' most primitive fears and most unworthy cravings. And what about the new wave of "reality shows" on TV? Are they really real? Since when did TV become the medium and measure of reality? Well . . . enough.

To sum up James' six images, speech possesses the power to do three things: (1) *The power to direct*. Both the bit and the rudder are small instruments that exert enormous force and that overcome contrary forces. As the bit determines the direction of the horse and the rudder determines the direction of the ship, so the tongue possesses the power to

determine the destiny of the individual. (2) *The power to destroy*. Both the forest fire and the wild animals represent dangerous and destructive forces. The tongue must be tamed for it possesses the power to damage and to destroy. (3) *The power to delight*. Both the fruit-bearing tree and the fresh-water spring possess the power to nourish and refresh. So, too, the tongue possesses the power to do great good.

Stick out your tongue and say, “Ahhhh.” Your physician can learn a great deal about your physical health by looking at your tongue. The Great Physician, Jesus Christ, can learn a great deal about your spiritual health by looking at your tongue. The tongue tells the tale.

Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer (Ps 19:14).

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