

“TAMING THE TONGUE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Text: James 3:1-12

Introduction.

Two recent news stories illustrate the power and influence of words. There was the Charlie Hebdo tragedy in Paris and then the announcement by Alex Malarkey that his book, *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven*, was fabricated. Blasphemy and lies, just two of the many ways our words and our tongues have the power of death and life, as Proverbs says.

Nations have risen and nations have fallen by the power of the tongue. Students of history marvel at the power of two great orators of WWII separated by a narrow channel of water. Adolph Hitler on one side inspiring the masses of Germans to war and Winston Churchill on the other inspiring the allies to persevere. Hitler using his tongue to perpetrate great evil and Churchill using the same instrument to lead his nation in its finest hour.

James 3:1-12.

In chapter one James gave an outline of the practical wisdom he would expand on in later chapters. He introduced a theme in 1:19 and 26 that is now developed in chapter 3:

James 1:19 Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

James 1:26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

James honestly confesses, “we all stumble in many ways.” I wonder how many unkind remarks James said of his older half-brother, Jesus, before he saw Him with the eyes of faith? I know I speak this morning as a man with unclean lips to a people with unclean lips.

The fact that we all have failed in this doesn't excuse us from seeking and striving by God's grace to control our tongues more and more. But it does put us all in the same boat, each of us beggars needing the same grace.

So here we are this morning to talk about the world's smallest and biggest trouble maker. It makes me wonder if God paused a bit before creating our tongues, I wonder if He thought to Himself, “do I really want to do this?”

James uses six illustrations to make three points about our tongues and its power to direct, to destroy and to delight.

The Power to Direct, The Bit and the Rudder (3:1-4).

James begins with a warning to those who teach. Why does he single them out? Scripture says that were there are many words there is much sin (Proverbs 10:9).

We all sin with our words. But people who make their living with words sin more. And people who say a lot of words up in front of a lot of people sin even more.

The tremendous responsibility and accountability of the teaching office ought never to be entered into lightly. My judgment will be greater, for my sin is greater. Pray for me.

Words are a dangerous business, and we should all take to heart this warning.

From this beginning James works to impress on us the power of the tongue and how such a small thing has such huge influence in a person's life and in other's lives.

Take the example of a bit and bridle. I have been to the fairgrounds and seen an 80 pound girl control a half ton horse. Just that little bit in the horse's mouth wields great influence.

And I have seen some pretty small helmsmen steer some pretty good size boats with just a small rudder.

A good rider and a good helmsman have learned the skill of carefully guiding and influencing a horse or boat.

James wants to impress on us the huge influence of such a small object and motivate us to learning the important skill of knowing how and when to influence and direct, such as knowing when to be silent and when to speak; and when intentionally, pro-actively to influence or guide others in a good direction.

The tongue is a huge influence, how can you use your tongue to influence for good, for God's glory, for the benefit of others? Are we captains of our mouths? Are we taking responsibility for our words, are we exercising great power over so powerful a force?

James moves on to impress us with the destructive power of the tongue.

The Power to Destroy, The Fire and the Animal (3:5-8).

On the evening of October 8, 1871, Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over a lantern starting a blaze that in just 27 hours killed 300 people and destroyed 17,000 buildings in Chicago.

We all witnessed the largest fire in our states history last year, the Carlton Complex fire that burned a quarter of a million acres and destroyed 300 homes.

In August of 1997 I lead a group of 18 men and boys on our annual canoe trip in the Boundary Waters Wilderness in northern Minnesota and southern Ontario. As we paddled north we saw

the effects of a recent forest fire that burned millions of trees over miles of shoreline. Our beautiful pristine old timber forest was now barren and charred because of some careless teenagers with an illegal campfire. I remember being so ticked off at what they had done.

Two days later I would experience the destructive power of fire in a much more personal way when my son passed out from a bee sting and fell into our campfire.

Have you ever experienced the power of fire, the incalculable damage of one spark? An unregulated, uncontrolled fire is a terrible thing.

Yet the destructive power of the tongue is far greater. This little three ounce piece of flesh can be filled with so much sin, a world of evil, the power of hell. Much of Satan's best work is done through tongues.

Satan starts countless wildfires through the tongues of men and continues to set our tongues on fire so we will in turn start more fires. He delights to make us verbal arsonists. Like an uncontrolled fire, an uncontrolled tongue is one of the most deadly things in the world.

Words destroy lives, ruin reputations, tarnish characters, tear down souls, and break spirits. Our tongues do more damage than a bomb. Bombs only do physical and temporal damage, our tongues do spiritual and eternal damage.

James goes on to illustrate how difficult controlling the tongue proves to be. Wild animals which are very hard to tame and control, have been tamed with more ease than the tongue.

Think of lion-tamers and snake charmers and falconers and sharks and whales at Sea World. Human skill has tamed the most ferocious beasts, even creatures with deadly poison.

But the tongue is far more difficult than all of them. We are supposed to be superior to the beasts, yet our tongues are the most unruly beasts.

Why does James point out the destructive power of the tongue? To get us to take to heart how serious this matter is and how diligent we should be to bridle and tame our tongues.

Our tongues are just a few ounces of flesh and our words maybe few and small, but the damage done is far out of proportion. We all have scars from words spoken decades ago.

Don't ignore or dismiss small things. Remember what a misplaced Lego in the middle of the night can do to a normally reasonable and rational adult, and how much pain and anguish it can inflict so quickly. Don't be flippant about your words saying, "Oh, I didn't mean anything, it was nothing." Develop a healthy respect for its size and a fear of its power.

The Power to Delight, The Fountain and the Tree (3:9-12).

There are quite a few people here this morning who can't help themselves, whenever they open their mouths to speak they betray their homeland, their accent gives them away. There are a bunch here with a Dutch accent, a few with a Canadian accent, a couple with a British accent (Emma isn't alone now that Chris Marshall is here), a couple with a Mexican or Asian accent, and maybe our favorite of all, our token southerners, Paul and Joyce McElroy.

With our mouths we communicate something about our hearts home and what's in them. James points out that our tongues are capable of much good to the delight of our own souls and of others, like a fountain of fresh water or a tree bearing fruit.

But there is trouble here as well. Our tongues are schizophrenic or bi-polar or passive aggressive. With them we praise God and curse the image of God. We must give serious thought to the terrible inconsistency of our speech.

A fountain doesn't give both fresh and salt water.

A fig tree doesn't produce olives or a grapevine figs.

As alien as these things are in nature, so alien should it be with our tongues.

Neither should our tongues bless and curse, speak good and evil, speak truth and lies.

There is no hypocrisy in nature, there ought not to be in our tongues.

As water is life-giving and refreshing so ought our words be a delight.

As a tree is life-giving and fruit producing, so ought our words bring life.

Proverbs 10:11 The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,

Proverbs 13:14 The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life,

Colossians 4:6 Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt.

Application and conclusion.

Pray for help and ask others to help.

Is James saying that the tongue cannot be tamed? It cannot be tamed by man, it can only be tamed by the Holy Spirit. It is a spiritual battle needing spiritual resources that leads to spiritual maturity. Ask God and ask others to help, get serious. Pray for your tongue.

Psalms 141:3 Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!

Confess your tongue's sin, cauterizing your tongue through repentance.

Isaiah 6:5-7 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

Confess the sin of your lips, name it, acknowledge it before God and own your sinful motives behind it.

I am a man of many words and I know I have sinned against some of you, I just don't know who. I know I need forgiveness and I am glad to give it as well. If I have hurt or offended anyone here by my words, I will gladly repent, if you will give me the opportunity by telling me.

Discipline yourselves, reign in your tongue, bridle it at home and work, like you do at church.
Proverbs 4:23 Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

Ephesians 5:4 Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.

Jonathan Edwards knew the power of his tongue and made a resolution:

“Resolved, never to say anything against anybody except when it is acceptable to the highest degree of Christian honor and agreeable to the golden rule” (#31).

This resolve should include all our communication, like Facebook posts and status updates, Twitter tweets and text messages.

Kill gossip, slander, innuendo, flattery, lies, criticism, insults, name-calling, meanness.

Kill all language that God wouldn't use. God doesn't gossip, He doesn't say one thing and mean another, or use flattery or innuendo, He isn't passive aggressive, or mean. His yes is yes and His no is no. He speaks the truth in love. He uses direct speech.

Gossip is saying behind the back what you wouldn't say to their face.
Flattery is saying to the face what you wouldn't say behind their back.

Don't speak or share untruths about people and don't share negative truths you have no business sharing. Are you tearing others down with your words? Are you throwing people under the bus of your ego or pride or insecurity?

Philippians 2:3-4 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Read Proverbs:

Proverbs 26:20-21 For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.

Proverbs 17:27 Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.

Do not return evil for evil.

Who here has mastered complete control of their tongue? No one.

Who here has ever spoken something they wish they hadn't said? Everyone.

Who here has hurt or offended someone with a word? Everyone.

Who here has ever needed the grace of forgiveness for something you said? Everyone.

So when someone sins against you with their words, consider how you have done the same and how you need grace, and extend grace to them.

“...repay no one evil for evil... if it is possible live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge... but leave room for God's wrath...”

“Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:17-21).

Change what's in your heart.

Matthew 12:34-37 How can you speak good, when you are evil? ***For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*** 35 The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. 36 I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, 37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

To speak the words of life we must have the Spirit, we must be sanctified, we must have the Word in our hearts increasingly. If there isn't good in there, good can't come out.

May the mind of Christ, my Savior, PH 291, 1-5

Live in me from day to day,

By His love and power controlling

All I do and say.

May the Word of God dwell richly

In my heart from hour to hour,

So that all may see I triumph

Only through His power.

Prayer: Father, thank you for sending your Son, the One who perfectly walked His talk and talked His walk. Remind us to live by His example and follow it. Nourish us and our faith with what we need to live as Christ and be salt and light in our lost and dying world. Make our speech seasoned with salt, with graciousness, with boldness, with love.

Thank you for the life and example and true words of our Savior, Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.