

THE TAMING OF THE TONGUE JAMES 3:1-12

A pious woman with a rather sharp tongue, who professed to be a Christian but gossiped like an old hen--approached the rector of her church in London. She complained that the white bands which he wore with his pulpit gown were altogether too long and that this annoyed her greatly. She wanted permission to shorten them and had come armed with a pair of scissors. The pastor agreed, handed over the bands, and the woman snipped away with her scissors and then handed the garments back to the rector.

He said, "Now, my good woman, there is something about you which is altogether **too long** and which has annoyed me and many others for quite some time, and since one good turn deserves another, I would like your permission to shorten it."

Startled, the woman said, "Certainly sir, you have my permission to do so and here are the shears."

Whereupon, the pastor smiled and said, "**Very well madam, stick out your tongue.**" (1)

This story further reminds me of a woman named Arabella Young. On her tombstone in an English country cemetery reads her epitaph:

BENEATH THIS STONE, A LUMP OF CLAY,
LIES ARABELLA YOUNG,
WHO, ON THE TWENTY-FOURTH OF MAY
BEGAN TO HOLD HER TONGUE.

Chuck Swindoll writes: "**The tongue--what a study in contrasts! To the physician, it's merely a two-ounce slab of mucous membrane enclosing a complex array of muscles and nerves that enables our bodies to chew, taste and swallow. How helpful! Equally significant, it is the major organ of communication that enables us to articulate distinct sounds so we can**

understand each other. How essential!" (2)

However, the following words that come from another woman of the Christian faith are closer to what God designed for the tongue, "**Kind words can be short and easy to speak—but their echoes are truly endless.**" You know her as Mother Theresa. Yes, James writes in the third chapter, tenth verse, "**Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.**"

As a preacher of God's Word, I squirmed and shuttered when I read these first 12 verses of the third chapter. While written to all Christians, it has a special exhortation to teachers and preachers concerning the words we use. Yes, those of us who teach and preach will be judged with a greater strictness. It is enough to get you looking for another line of work.

Dr. Brack at Drew University taught with a smile that, "words are what set human beings above the lower animals." Then I thought of Bosnia and the O.J. Simpson hearings. Remember the childhood nursery rhyme we were taught when, as innocent children, we met our first bully, "**Sticks and stones may break my bones—but names will never hurt me**"? How wrong. Words and names used wrongly are deadly like poison darts.

William Shakespeare knew of the power of words when he wrote, "**He who takes from me my good name, takes that which enriches him—but makes me poor indeed.**" Yes, when anger spreads through thy breast--guard thy tongue from barking wildly.

St. Augustine wrote years ago that a preacher is a "**vendor of words,**" and because of this teaching in James' Epistle, it frightened him a great deal.

Then to make matters much more challenging, James writes in verse 8, "**No man can tame the tongue.**" It is as if James is saying your conversion to Jesus Christ is not fully completed until your tongue has been baptized as well. Even Charles Haddon Spurgeon was forced to conclude,

"Tongue sins--are GREAT sins." John Calvin wrote, "The only thing more damaging than a loose cannon--is a slippery and loose tongue."

We have opened God's word today and read those revealing words from James 3:1-12 in which we see that the problems of the tongue and communicating properly is not a new problem--but an ancient problem that demands daily attention and action. It needs control.

When you go to the doctor's office for a checkup, one of the first things you are asked to do is to stick out your tongue. Then the doctor takes a tongue depressor and presses down the tongue to examine your throat and mouth. The tongue is a great help in determining our physical condition.

The writer, James, declares the same principle is at work in our spiritual life and maturity as a follower of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

It has been said, "We know metals by their tinkling and men by their talking."

The writer James further demonstrates that although the tongue is small, it has great influence and power over the rest of the body. It may only weigh two ounces but it can cause tons of damage.

Look at the images James uses in describing the power of the tongue: in verse three it is compared to a **bit** in the mouth of a horse. Nothing is quite as scary as a horse out of control--like a bull in a china shop.

In verse 4, the tongue is compared to a **rudder** on a large ship--a small appendage that controls the entire body.

In verse 5, James compares it to a **spark** which can set the whole forest burning.

Perhaps the greatest insight that James shares is that without the **constraining** and **controlling** power of the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to tame the **tongue** from its natural tendency to hurt and harm. Only when the "tongue is under the power of the Holy Spirit--can it be used to

heal—not hurt." In our own strength, we are incapable of overcoming the power of evil and the devil, which really is at the center of the problem of the tongue.

As I studied and researched and gathered material and illustrations for this sermon, I remembered an insight learned from childhood days in Sunday School class: **The good Lord gave us two ears, but only one tongue. We should try to listen twice as much as we speak.** Like a good physician, Dr. James of Jerusalem wants us to stick out our tongues for an examination today.

I want to share three ways we can use our **tongues** to **empower** us to be **authentic witnesses** for our Lord, Jesus Christ.

First, all of the words from our tongues should bless—rather than blast or burn—another human being.

The story is told of two literary clubs at the University of Wisconsin a number of years ago. There was a group of brilliant young men who gathered to read their stories and essays to each other. They dubbed themselves, "**The Stranglers**," so fierce was their criticism of one another. No punches were pulled. They dissected each others' work unmercifully.

There was a women's literary group at the University as well. They called themselves, "**The Wranglers**." They offered helpful criticism to one another, but above all, they supported and encouraged one another in their writing careers. They hunted for **kind things** to say. Years later came the results. Not one of the men in the men's group went on to become a writer of note, but from the women's group, over half a dozen became famous writers, including Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings who wrote *The Yearling*. (3)

Remember the Apostle Paul gave a great insight when he declared, "**Even though I can speak in the tongues of men and angels—if I have not love—I have gained nothing.**" Our tongue,

if used for harm, leaves a great stain in the fabric of life. That, unfortunately, is not a winsome witness for our Lord.

Proverbs 12:18 says, "**Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword--but wisely spoken words can heal.**" To which support group does your tongue belong?

Second, the tongue reveals whether it is connected to the spirit or to the sewer.

I believe James indicates this in verse 12 when he writes, "**Can a fig tree bear olives--or a grape vine bear figs?**" Perhaps what we say on the outside is always determined by what is on the inside.

I recently read about four physicians who were quarreling about which part of the body was most important for life. They could not reach a consensus among themselves so they consulted the Rabbi.

"Of course the heart and blood vessels are most important," said the **first physician**, "for on them the whole of life depends."

"Not at all," said the **second physician**. "It is the brain and nerves which are most vital, for without them, even the heart would not beat."

The **third physician** said, "You are both wrong. It is the stomach and the digestive passages which are important, for without the proper digestion of food, the body will die."

"The lungs are most important," declared the **fourth**, "for a person without air will surely die."

"You are all wrong," said the Rabbi. "There are two vessels of the body only that are important, but you have no knowledge of them."

"What are they?" asked the physicians.

The Rabbi replied, "**One is the channel that runs from the ear to the soul and the other**

is the channel that runs from the soul to the tongue."(4)

This is the exact anatomy lesson that Dr. James of Jerusalem is sharing in our scripture lesson today.

Yes, when our tongues are connected to our souls, our words come from a fountain that blesses life, not corrupts it. Our words are to be **governed by God**.

The story of a very successful fisherman comes to mind. Two extreme environmentalists rebuked him, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself for so cruelly catching those poor little fish?" Without even looking up the fisherman replied, "Fellas, if those fish had kept their mouths shut, they wouldn't have been caught!" Are we opening our mouths for the right reasons? Do our words reflect the Spirit's leading or our own desires?

Once upon a time, a preacher visited a rural church as the guest speaker. This man had a reputation as a great orator, and he lived up to his reputation. His voice was powerful, his gestures were perfect and his logic was persuasive. His sermon had little to do with the Bible, but as a speech, it was a masterpiece. When the sermon was finished, an old man in the audience was asked by a friend what he thought of it. The old man had been a Christian for many years and he was a man of much wisdom and few words. He summed it up this way, "**Much wind; loud thunder; no rain.**" This is not a good testimony. Christians can do a lot of talking, but the true test of faith is whether or not that talking is **consecrated by God**.

Almost every Sunday in every pulpit around the world, the preacher pauses to pray, "**Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.**"

The tongue is a tremendously powerful tool. You can make a person feel like a zero--or lift

them to the zenith of life. May God tame it--that we may always speak the truth in love.

If the Holy Spirit had all the tongues of this church it would be like Pentecost all over again!

May God take your tongue and lips and speak through them with *his love and light!*

I think Charles Wesley had the right idea about how we are to use our tongues when he wrote:

**O for a thousand TONGUES to sing
My great Redeemer's praise
The glories of my God and King
The triumphs of His Grace.**

I close today with the words of an Old Irish Blessing:

Three things are of God:
The merciful word; the singing word
and the good word.
May the power of these three holy
things be on all the men and women
of the earth forevermore. AMEN.