

## **Use The Tongue For Good, Not Evil**

As you just heard brother **Richard** read the scripture passage we are focusing on the morning, the tongue is the most interesting member of ones body. The tongue is more YOU than any other organ and it expresses you uniquely. The tongue is an informer or stoolpigeon that conveys your heart and discloses who you really are to those around you.

Even though Christ has saved us, we are temped by sin. The temptation and ability to sin is before us each day. The Ten Commandments from Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 are clear. Let me refresh your memories:

1. You shall have no other gods before Me. *(Worship God with heart and speech)*
2. You shall not make idols.
3. **You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.** *(The tongue)*
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother. *(This includes with your tongue)*
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. **You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.** *(The tongue)*
10. You shall not covet.

The misuse of the tongue is perhaps the easiest way to sin. There are no limits to what a person can say, no boundaries or controls. With the tongue one can praise the Lord. As King David said in Psalm 35, “**Let those who delight in my righteousness shout for joy and be glad and say evermore, ‘Great is the LORD, who delights in the welfare of his servant!’** <sup>28</sup> **Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise all the day long.**” (Psalm 35:27-28) Also the

tongue may blaspheme the Lord, as the prophet Jeremiah wrote, “They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:3) In the Bible there are almost 500 verses dealing with the use of the tongue and the majority are concerned with its negative use. Scripture says the tongue is deceitful, filthy, slanderous, foolish, cursing, sensual, vile, blasphemous, and foolish and the list goes on and on. As I have heard it said, “Is it any wonder that God placed the tongue in the cage of the mouth behind the teeth, knowing that the tongue is in a wet place and can easily slip. Washington Irving, author and diplomat of the 19<sup>th</sup> century said, “A sharp tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener with constant use.”

The use of the tongue is of great concern to James, for he mentions it every chapter of his letter. Here is chapter 3 how one uses their tongue is yet another qualifier of a person’s faith. As he sated in chapter 1, “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. <sup>15</sup> Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” (James 1:14-15) The tongue produces only what the heart tells it to, for it is the heart where sins originates. As Jesus our Lord said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. <sup>20</sup> These are what defile a person...” (Matthew 15:19-20)

Last week we explored the relationship between faith and works. The relationship between faith and works is evidenced in part by one’s speech. What one expresses orally discloses the measure of their faith and their inner spiritual condition. In scripture the tongues is referred to as a sword, but the rabbis of old referred to the tongue as an arrow instead of a sword, because it can wound and kill from great distances.

The first sin recorded in the Bible was the fall of Adam and Eve. It was a sin of the tongue. When God questioned Adam whether he had eaten the forbidden fruit Adam's first response tries to lay at least some of the blame on God, saying, "The woman **whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.**" (Genesis 3:12) Adam is saying, God this would not have happened if you had not given me Eve, so the blame lays with you and the woman you gave me. It's not my fault! Haven't we heard that excuse from our children and adults alike?

When Paul painted a word-picture of man's total depravity, he said of the tongue, "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. <sup>14</sup> Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." (Romans 3:13-14) Only God is holy, man is not. Mankind becomes less sinful and more holy when God saves them and they are indwelt by himself as the Holy Spirit. When one is saved they begin the process we call sanctification and as they are transformed in mind and heart their behavior also changes and they speak differently for their heart has changed. Their speech begins to glorify God, "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens." (Psalm 8:1) King David was a changed man by God's will, this change did not mean he did not sin, for the Bible recorded David's sins. But it also says David was a man after God's own heart. We see this change in David in the Psalms, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; <sup>8</sup> the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart..." And, "Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise all the day long." (Psalm 19:7-8; 35:28) Are these the type of sayings people hear from you at home, work and when you are out in the community?

If you have been given faith by God it will transform your mind and heart and this will produce transformed speech and behavior. Those with true faith possess a sanctified tongue that speaks from a sanctified heart. James states God through the

Holy Spirit gives us, as he promised, all we need for living by faith, but he goes on to say one must receive what is given. James says, God has told us that all believers **will** face trials and yet one **must** stand firm in faith to endure them. We **will** receive the Word of God, yet we **must** make an effort to receive it into our hearts. God's **will** is that we be gracious to the needy without partiality, yet we **must** determine to be gracious without partiality. God says his children **will** produce good works, yet we **must** decide to do good works. God **wills** our speech to bless others, yet we **must** choose our word carefully to do so. When one is truly saved and grows in true faith there is spiritual transformation and these things and many others both **will** be the result and **must** be the result. Cesare Pavese the Italian writer and poet said, "Give me the ready hand rather than the ready tongue."

### **Bridle The Tongue**

As it should be God's expectations begins with those he has called to preach and teach his Word. Reading James chapter 3, beginning in verse 1, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. <sup>2</sup> For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body." Teachers and preachers of Christ's are due respect, but James was addressing the problem in the early church populated mainly by converted Jews. Jews often revered their rabbi to the point of worship. In Jewish literature it was written if ones rabbi and parents were captured by the enemy the rabbi was to be ransomed first. Ones parents brought them to life in this world but their rabbi gives them life for the world to come. At the time of James writing scribes and Pharisees, many of who were rabbis, expected high honor to be afforded to them. Jesus spoke to this problem, <sup>2</sup> "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat ... <sup>5</sup> They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries (fə-'lak-t(ə-)rē) broad and their fringes long, <sup>6</sup> and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best

seats in the synagogues <sup>7</sup> and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.” (Matthew 23:2, 5-7) Jesus was making the point that men are to serve in humility for they help us focus on God, not man and certainly not themselves.

James is not discouraging men from becoming pastors, but is calling for men to consider the cost, their spiritual condition of faith in order to know one is truly saved. James made clear in chapter one, “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.” (James 1:26) However, this principle applies to every Christian; every person in our church. For a pastor it is sacred duty and privilege to preach, interpret and explain God’s Word. Christians must remember that their allegiance is to their Lord Jesus Christ not to men. Therefore, pastors are not the only ones called to know and speak God’s truth, all Christians are to work at mastering the scriptures in order to live by them and share God’s saving truth with others.

The fact that James says in verse 2, “For we all stumble in many ways” reinforces that no person is exempt from the dangers of the tongue and sinning against God. Understanding we are saved sinners means working towards what James wrote in the second half of verse 2, “If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.” One must always work to understand the precepts of the Bible by understanding the meaning of words in context. “If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man.” Perfect in the Greek can have two meanings; first, perfection and the second, which the context suggests is James’ meaning here, means complete or mature. A purified Christian has a spiritually mature heart and a purified heart leads to purified speech. No Christian can ever be perfect in the sense that Jesus is perfect. However, we can grow towards being spiritually mature through the power of the Holy Spirit, study of God’s Word and protracted time in prayer.

Now, as your pastor I stand here convicted of my sin - of saying things at times that hurt others or are insensitive. I have improved over the years, but still fall short of the mark. If I can gain better control of my tongue then I get closer to being able to bridling my whole body. Even when I speak words in innocence and without intending any harm, it's still possible to affect other people's lives in a negative way. My words may have been meant as a way to enlighten or teach or inform someone else, but to the person on the receiving end they could sting, belittle or even hurt if they're delivered incorrectly. This is a burden to inform without judgment and to correct without hurting. This is why I spend so much time preparing the sermons for each Sunday and still I make mistakes. The Lord knows my heart and its desire to present His Word as true as possible for your benefit. Please do not ever hesitate to come to me if I have said something that is confusing or offends you, for I desire to do neither. Outside of the pulpit I take to heart what Pilius (pī-lī-əs) the Greek philosopher of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century said, "I have often regretted my speech, never my silence." The old saying, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me" is simply not true. Broken bones heal, but words can open a wound that is able to fester for years and even a lifetime.

Let me take a moment to address our need to forgive others. When we are deeply wounded by others if we are not careful a root of bitterness will grow in our hearts. As it is written, "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble..." (Hebrews 12:15) God calls use to forgive whether a person deserves forgiveness or not. By forgiving we let go of our bitterness and let God bear the burden. Jesus said, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:14-15) Forgiveness does not mean you place yourself in the position to be hurt again, but it does mean forgiving and giving your hurt to the Lord and when you do

this your wound heals, but if you do not forgive your wound remains open and festers. Now, let me return to James and what he is teaching us about the use of our tongues.

### **Recognize The Power Of The Tongue**

James continues by giving two practical analogies concerning how something small can control something large. Reading at verse 3, “If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.” This illustration shows a great relationship to the human tongue. When a bit is placed into a horse’s mouth it lies on top of the tongue and by the attached bridle and reins the rider can control the horse’s mouth and this in turn controls the head that controls the body. James continues in verse 4, “Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.” Ships at the time James is writing are small compared to today’s ships – large ocean going cargo ships and warships are gigantic compared to those of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The largest cruise ship today has a capacity of 6780 passengers and 2300 crewmembers. We know from the Book of Acts that when Paul sailed to Rome there “were in all 276 persons in the ship” according to Acts 27:37 and this was a large ship for its time. But whether one is on a ship with 236 or 9,000 people the size of the rudder that controls the ship is quite small compared to the overall size of the ship. James says this is not only true of horses and ships, but the human tongue. “So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” Men are by nature self-centered and boastful and with skilled use of the tongue they not only control themselves or worst yet, they let their tongue control themselves and thousands and millions. Hitler was a great orator and was able to incite crowds into action and get them to accept the most horrible behavior as right and normal. The Word of God would have shown these great masses of people what truth was and the evil and falseness of Hitler’s words. This takes us to James next point of how

powerful the tongue is and its ability to do evil.

Continuing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of verse 5, “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! <sup>6</sup> And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.” Here James writes of the tongue’s tremendous power to corrupt and destroy. The tongue can speak to any subject or circumstance – it knows no limited, therefore there is little to no limit on the damage it can cause.

Just like a fire has the amazing and unique capacity to reproduce itself in an almost unlimited way as long as it has fuel to burn, so too the tongue can produce damage and evil. Like the vast majority of elements found in nature, water cannot multiply. When it is poured out it never grows and expands into a flood. But fire and the tongue feed upon themselves. If there is enough fuel they both can continue indefinitely. The writer of Proverbs observed, “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.” (Proverbs 15:28) Proverbs continues with its observation concerning the tongue, “A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire.” (16:27) The writer continues with his comparison of fire and tongue, <sup>20</sup> “For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases. <sup>21</sup> As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.” (26:20-21) The tongue for fallen mankind has been a struggle and will continue to be a struggle until the return of our Lord. The answer and solution is simple, but difficult to achieve because of our fallen nature, “...the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. ... <sup>5</sup> May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.” (2 Thessalonians 3:3 & 5) The more we trust and surrender to Christ as our Lord and Savior the less we sin, which includes our speech.

This brings us to James’ concern in verse 7 to 8, “For every kind of beast and bird,



of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,<sup>8</sup> but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

Mankind with effort can tame almost any animal, if this were not so Noah would not have been able to fill the Ark. However, man is unable to tame his tongue because he is a fallen and sinful creature. King David knew he had this problem and sought the help of God, saying, “Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!” (Psalm 141:3) As David is one of the heroes of the Old Testament Paul is in the New Testament. Paul also knew from the tongue flowed the thoughts of the heart, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” (Galatians 5:17) Paul was greatly concerned about the impact of his words.

The first sin after the fall was Adam’s tongue lying to God. The first act of those newly created in Christ, who became his brothers and his church was people heard “... them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” (Acts 2:11) It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit one can overcome the sinful power of one’s tongue and this is how James concludes this lesson.

### **Proclaim Blessing, Not Cursing**

Reading from James chapter 3, beginning at verse 9, “With ~~it~~ *the tongue* we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.<sup>10</sup> From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.<sup>11</sup> Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?<sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.” The tongue is ready and willing to compromise to gain what it wants. The unbridled tongue is wild like a raging animal; it is clever, plotting and deceptive. One only as to look to history to see this

and one only has to honestly look into their heart to see this truth also. It was not only the wicked scribes and Pharisees who claimed to bless God and yet demanded the crucifixion of God's only Son, but the people in Luke chapter 23, "... kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!'" (Luke 23:21) James says in verse 10, "My brothers, these things ought not to be so." There should be no place in a Christian's speech for evil, hurtful or deceptive words.

Peter declared what is right and true for believers, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9) James writes of this tension of what is and what ought to be. Because we have been made righteous by Jesus Christ we are called to submit to his Holy Spirit within us so that we will be able to live righteously according to his will and power. This is a conscience decision a believer must make. For Joyce and myself we have made our decision, "...as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:15) even if daily we stumble, we will get up and seek the Lord. Make your decision this day whom you will serve and may the words we choose be a blessing to both God and mankind.