

Controlled Speech

This week James will be addressing yet another behavior in which we all indulge that does not reflect the glory of God dwelling within us. James very descriptively and pointedly describes the effect of unbridled tongues. Just as he asked us in Chapter 2, “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?”¹ I think we can examine our own behavior and ask ourselves, brothers and sisters, do you with your *loose tongues* really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? Do the things that come from our lips reflect our faith in Jesus, or do they reveal a divided heart and a faith sickened with hypocrisy? This is another one of those lessons where I wish I could protect you from James’ harsh words, yet I firmly believe we must hear them in their intensity if we are to truly allow them to affect our hearts and change patterns of behavior. If James’ letter is to have its perfecting effect, we must not only be hearers, but doers of the word thereby achieving a faith that we live not just espouse. That was the intention of this letter nearly 2,000 years ago and its purpose and intent is just as important today as it was when it flowed from his pen.

Tongues of Fire

So much damage can come from a thoughtless comment, a heated rebuke or when words are whispered out of turn. I know I have fallen into each one of these traps and brought harm to those most dear to me. James’ rebuke shames me and makes me regret each time I have spoken when silence would have been more suitable. How appropriately he warns us “*let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger*” (1:19). This is yet another tough lesson for us to learn if we truly desire to be followers of Christ and to live our faith authentically. How many times have we revealed a heart of hypocrisy by opening our mouths when we shouldn’t have? May I suggest we humble ourselves before the Lord and ask for his grace in learning this lesson through James words before we fall into this trap yet again?



Read James 3:1-6 and answer the following questions.

What is the warning for those who teach?

Why would a teacher be held to a higher standard?

¹ 2:1, NRSV

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In verse 2 we are told that all of us stumble. We all make mistakes in what we say. James goes on to say that only a perfect man (or woman) is able to keep his tongue in check, and never at fault in what he says. What does this tell us about the perfect man?

Verses 3-5 give us four examples of something small steering or effecting something large. What are the four examples?

How is a tongue like a fire?

"It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles..."

"But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander."

Matt 15:11, 18-19

What are some examples of an unbridled tongue?

Where does the destruction unleashed by our tongue originate?

How is the tongue *"a world of evil among the parts of the body"*²²?

How does it corrupt the whole person?

How does it set the whole course of one's life on fire?



If the destruction originates from hell, how does Satan utilize our tongues against us?

Personal Reflection

According to Matthew 15:11-19, Jesus teaches us that the things which pour forth from our mouth reveal the state of our heart. What does this tell us about a Christian whose tongue sets fires? After completing this lesson, do you find that your heart accurately reflects your faith?

²² NIV

The teachers to which James is referring in this passage were the unofficial teachers of the synagogue where even strangers were permitted to speak.³ Paul often made use of this courtesy when presenting the gospel to new congregations throughout his missionary journeys. James' concern was that too many believers not yet mature in their faith were assuming the authority to teach others. Spiritual maturity requires a controlled tongue. It requires the perfecting process to have reached a point of circumspect speech – speech that is honest, true and righteous in teaching doctrine, yet also merciful and compassionate in encouraging others in their faith and instruction. Circumspect not only in speech, but also conduct ... no mentality of “do what I say but don’t do as I do.” The teacher, and all faithful, must strive to live according to their professed faith, and their speech should reflect their actions. There is a tendency to profess one’s faith yet live like the world. Speech ought to be a reflection of faith. The one who speaks with maturity is one who lives a life of spiritual maturity.

The Greek text tells us that if a believer “stumbles not” “in word” he is a “perfect person”⁴, the perfect person in this context is *teleios anēr*, meaning one who is spiritually mature and complete⁵, that process of perfecting has reached or developed a level of completion, and he has control over not only his actions but also his tongue. Not only is he able to bridle his tongue from teaching false doctrine, but also prevents himself from evil speech. This self control not only bridles inauthentic speech – speech that contradicts authentic faith, but self control also guides one’s behavior away from evil actions and towards good actions. According to James, authentic faith always reveals itself in good works. Teaching, whether good or false, sets people in motion. The words of a good teacher, one who teaches the word of God with wisdom and understanding, moves not only himself, but others into action producing good works in the body of Christ.

A false teacher, or one that is self-deceived (double-minded) may think he teaches in wisdom, but does not yet have the spiritual maturity to guide others in the way they should go. If he is not yet mature in his own faith, he will unwittingly lead himself and others astray. He is not guided by God’s wisdom, but is still moved by the ways of the world attempting to reconcile a professed faith with a worldly lifestyle. The false teacher is the most dangerous and insidious. He knows scripture well enough to use it to his own end of elevating his own position of power and authority. He teaches scripture but in such a way that it is pleasing and affirming to hear, but does not truly instruct and lead others to a sound understanding of God’s law. Those who follow after him walk a dangerous path that leads to destruction and evil. Yet again James addresses the issue of self-deception in this passage.⁶ Believers are so easily swayed and lulled by the ways of the world; James takes this opportunity to remind them again not to be deceived. Speech is

“Words have the power to elicit action; indeed, the activity of speech itself interprets every other human action. There is no evil act that the tongue cannot tell, let alone initiate.” --NAC

³ BKC

⁴ 3:2

⁵ BKC

⁶ Self-deception is a recurring theme in James epistle.

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powerful and believers must be vigilant not to allow worldly thinking and desires to undermine their faith. Worldly wisdom has no place in true faith.⁷

In James' illustrations we have a small device that controls and guides the larger body. We must not think it is the tongue which guides the body in following his analogies. In fact, it is God's wisdom that controls and guides the tongue. It is God's wisdom that shapes our thoughts, that allows us to recognize right from wrong, true teaching from false doctrine. It is wisdom that is acquired from a life lived in faithful obedience to God (part of the "perfecting" of faith process) that leads to spiritual maturity. This wisdom is not from human intelligence and ability it is a gift from God that he willingly gives upon our request. Recall from chapter 1, *"If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you."*⁸ Wise teaching will result in good works for both the teacher and the student. Teaching that is grounded in the careful and diligent study of God's Word provides the necessary wisdom to control the tongue.

Just as a bit in a horse's mouth guides the direction and movement of the horse, wise teaching provides the self-control to govern the tongue. A tongue that is controlled will keep the body in check. Just as it is not the body of the horse that determines the direction it shall go, it is not our body that directs our actions. It is the mind or self that moves or turns upon our thoughts and desires initiating the direction we go. When we apply self-control (godly wisdom) over our thoughts and desires, we then control the body. The New American Commentary says it this way: "In the moral life, at first virtue seems to be a matter of controlling the body; but, in a surprising way, all comes down to controlling speech. If speech has such control over the body, however, who can control speech?" The teachings we receive are crucial to the way we will direct our lives. If we abide by the wise teachings of godly teachers, we will develop self-control and make choices leading to good works. If we abide by the teachings of false teachers, we will make decisions based on worldly wisdom leading to death and destruction. "Words have the power to elicit action; indeed, the activity of speech itself interprets every other human action. There is no evil act that the tongue cannot tell, let alone initiate."⁹ It is through spoken word, particularly those of false teachers, that all manner of evil is spread throughout the world.

The power of the tongue is great. Left unbridled, it causes great destruction. When there is an inclination towards evil, the effects of an unbridled tongue are thorough and total in its devastation. The analogy of the tongue being a spark that kindles a great fire is probably the most accurate because it illustrates its destructiveness. Verse 6 tells us that the (unbridled) tongue sets itself apart from the body, bringing corruption and engulfing one's life in that fire. The actual image (that is poorly described in scriptural translation) is the Hellenistic concept of life being like the "wheel of existence" or the "wheel of fortune".¹⁰ Evil is unleashed through the one with no self control, the "fiery tongue" which is the center or hub of that wheel setting everything else in motion. That hotter it burns the faster the wheel spins spitting flames in all directions, setting

⁷ Worldly wisdom, or wisdom according to the ways of the world are based on values or rationalizations often in opposition to the ways of God, or godly wisdom.

⁸ James 1:5 (NRSV).

⁹ NAC

¹⁰ BCK

everything in the vicinity ablaze. The tongue itself is not the source of the corruption and evil spewed, but is only the fuse. The source of destruction is hell itself.

For James, the destructive force of evil speech is comparable to the destructive power of hell. Control over the tongue is the only way to prevent that evil from corrupting the believer and the body of Christ as a whole. God's wisdom is the key to self-control and governing the tongue.

Living Waters

In our last passage we learned that the destruction that issues forth from the mouth not only reveals the state of the heart, but also the evil the spews forth has its origin in the pit hell. But we have hope! That fire can be quenched by the living water of the Holy Spirit. The tongue that is prone to speak evil can be controlled. Our scripture lesson today will teach us how a divided heart can be cleansed and produce good rather than evil. Take a few minutes to present yourself before the Lord before we launch into James words of wisdom.



Read James 3:7-12 and answer the following questions.

Who has managed to tame the creatures of the world?

What has he been unsuccessful in taming?

What double-minded thing do we do with our tongue?



Why do you think we are unsuccessful in taming our own tongue?

How does James describe this double-mindedness in verse 10-12? Is it really a case of being "double-minded" or does it hint at something else?

What do the images of fig tree bearing olives and a grapevine bearing figs demonstrate?

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Personal Reflection

It appears that we are unable to fully control what issues forth from our hearts. No matter how hard we try, at one time or another we exhibit these double-minded tendencies because we lack control. How do we go about finding a way to control the evil that issues forth? James specifically uses the image of fresh water and salt or brackish water flowing from the same spring for a reason. Read the following two scripture passages having to do with spring water and reflect on what these two passages might be able to teach us in relation to the well spring of our hearts.

- John 4: 4-14

- Exodus 15: 22-26

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

James 3:10-11

We know that James is firmly grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures and carefully chooses his words for maximum effect and meaning. Let us take a few moments to investigate some of James' carefully chosen words in this passage. His imagery of streams of words pouring forth from the mouth in praise of God at one moment followed by streams of curses the next are well illustrated in the analogy of springs of water. In verse 11 James uses the image of fresh water and salt or brackish water. What we have translated into

English as "fresh" water is more accurately described as "sweet" from the Greek. And what the NIV and NRSV call "salt" and "brackish" is from the Greek word *pikrōs*¹¹, which means "bitter". James speaks of a well-spring of sweet versus bitter water. For Jews everywhere hearing this epistle read aloud, these descriptions would have echoed in their minds drawing them straight back to the days of Moses and the miracle at the spring called Marah recorded in Exodus 15:22-25. The bitter waters of Marah could not sustain life, in fact, if consumed they would poison and steal life away. Led by God Moses threw a piece of wood into the bitter waters and immediately they became sweet and life giving. Moses proclaims to all Israel, *"If you will listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the LORD who heals you."*¹² It is not Moses, or any man, that miraculously

¹¹ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

¹² Exodus 15:26 (NRSV), emphasis added.

renders the waters sweet and life giving so that man and beast may survive and flourish, it is the Lord.

The image of fresh or sweet waters also calls to mind the story of Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman. She too is in need of “living water” which only the Lord can provide. He gives her those living waters as she comes to believe that he is the Messiah. We too are in need of a well-spring of living water. It is only Jesus who can transform the brackish life-stealing water that pours forth without his miraculous and healing touch. He alone makes the waters of the well-spring of our heart, our soul, pour forth with sweet, life giving water.

James’ co-worker and co-apostle to the Jews, Peter, tells us “*[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness: by his wounds you have been healed.*”¹³ The wood that Moses threw into the bitter waters by God’s inspiration is echoed in the wooden cross making it the instrument of our salvation and turning the bitterness of sin and death into sweet eternal life. It is by the power of God, the healing hand of Jesus, the presence of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us that can extinguish the flames of evil and life stealing effusions of the heart. When we dedicate ourselves to serving him and submit ourselves to his will, the Holy Spirit can go about its work fitting a bridle to tame our evil tongue and transforming us into the likeness of Christ.

¹³ 1 Peter 2:24 (NRSV), emphasis added