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The Power of Speech

James 3:1-12

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“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

For all of us make many mistakes.

Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put **bits** into the mouths of **horses** to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at **ships**: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small **rudder** wherever the will of the pilot directs.

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.

The tongue is placed among our members as **a world of iniquity**; it **stains the whole body, sets on fire** the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

For **every species** of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, **but no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil full of deadly poison**. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

Does a spring put forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs?

No more can salt water yield fresh.”

Did you know - it takes the interaction of 72 different muscles to produce human speech? Relative to size, the strongest muscle in the body is the tongue.

This scripture from The Letter of James reveal the power for both good and evil that resides in our tongue or our speech. If we live long enough, all of us will have painful conversations both in person or on the phone or via a computer. Sometimes it starts with someone else, often someone very close to us, even someone we love, telling us how some words of ours had caused pain. Often times we are totally unaware of the pain or discomfort caused by our words. Other times we know by both the conviction of the Holy Spirit or the other person’s response that what we said hurt.

Some speech is deadly for relationships including, “*You always....You never...You’re such a ...All you ever do...I told you so...*” We could all add more in greater detail and intensity that we may have been subjected to or used ourselves. The

idea that *“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me”* is just wrong. Our words have tremendous power and influence and our tongue can get us in serious trouble or cause serious pain.

The movie *A Christmas Story* is a nostalgic look at growing up in Gary, Indiana through the eyes of a boy named Ralphie. One scene depicts a school recess in the middle of a winter. Surrounded by their classmates, two boys argue whether a person’s tongue will stick to a metal pole in below freezing weather. Eventually one of the boys succumbs to the infamous “triple dog dare,” and hesitantly sticks out his tongue and touches it to the school flagpole. Sure enough it gets stuck. The recess bell rings. Everyone runs into the school building, everyone except the hapless victim. When the teacher finally looks out the window, she sees the boy writhing in pain, his tongue frozen to the flagpole.

While hopefully few of us have found ourselves in *that* predicament, we all know what it’s like to have our tongue get us in trouble. According to James, all of us make many mistakes in speaking. Those of us who teach or speak publicly, or who are followed by the press, such as politicians and athletes, are even more likely to misspeak or to make a mistake that is seized upon and endlessly analyzed and scrutinized. We’ve suffered the stinging pain that comes when we or someone else speaks: lying and accusing words, bitter and cruel words, hypocritical or deceitful words, negative or hurtful words, thoughtless or hateful words.

James says, ***“Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.”*** But none of us is perfect and there are few measures that reflect our spiritual imperfection as clearly as our speech. Proverbs 17:28 tells us, *“Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent.”* The problem is most of us speak sooner or later and when we do, our tongue and speech reveal who we are and the condition of our heart. One of the truest reflections of any person’s spiritual maturity is exactly what comes out of our mouths in words and tone when we speak.

Our speech can be encouraging, loving, comforting, uplifting, inspiring or humorous. A member of our church who works with preschoolers shared with me that recently she and some of the children were out for a walk, and there were two nuns across the street in their black and white habits. One child said "What is that?" She tried to think of how to answer, and began to say they are called nuns; and before she could say more, another child said "And they are twins!" The tongue is so powerful and can do

so much good. Or our speech can demean, discourage, cut down, and be hateful, thoughtless, ruthless, sharper and more piercing than a dagger. James uses three images to illustrate the power of the tongue: **a horse's bit, a ship's rudder, and a fire's spark.**

If you put a small bit into the mouth of a horse you can guide that powerful and graceful animal any place you wish. If you want to go right, you pull right. If you want to go left, you pull left. The bridle controls the horse by controlling the horse's mouth. People who ride horses usually wouldn't use the bit to guide the horse in a way that would be self-destructive, like off a cliff. The horse's bit illustrates **the principle of obedience.** A small device can give you control over a large and powerful creature so that it obeys your commands. In the same way, James says, our tongue, though small, controls our body - much like the rudder of a ship.

A very small rudder guides even the largest ships, wherever the will of the pilot directs. The largest ship, with the greatest technology, can be sunk if the pilot doesn't guide it well. There is a program on the History Channel that investigates shipwrecks called *Deep Sea Detectives*. The Titanic was an opulent, 900-foot cruise ship that sunk on its first voyage in 1912. An international team of divers and scientists used sound waves to probe the wreckage of the Titanic, buried in mud under two-and-a-half miles of water. They discovered the damage was surprisingly small. Instead of finding a huge gash, they found six relatively narrow slits across the six watertight holds. Small damage caused by excess haste and careless direction can sink a great ship. Some of us may have made "titanic" mistakes with our tongue and hit an iceberg. Small words spoken in haste or carelessly can sink a relationship or a reputation.

Our bodies are so large compared with our tongue. Yet this small muscle often guides us into treacherous waters where we are wrecked or left stranded. A horse's bit has rather limited influence. A rudder can only serve one ship at a time. But the tongue is so powerful it is, James says in a third image, like a spark of fire that can cause the destruction of thousands of acres of wilderness. One match can destroy a whole forest. Sometimes even a so called "controlled burn" can get out of control and end up burning thousands of acres and a number of homes.

Smokey the Bear used to say, *"Only you can prevent forest fires."* That saying is also true when it comes to our tongue. In our own experience, the spark of one angry, hurtful, word can start a blaze that ends up burning ourselves as well as others. The fire that a tongue begins can burn for years afterward. There is a town in the anthracite coal

region of Pennsylvania near where Jill's parents grew up called Centralia. The town has had to be abandoned because of a fire burning for more than three decades in the coalmines deep underground. In some families, there can be fires started by words that burn under the surface for years that lead to emptiness, pain, and even abandonment. The fire under Centralia will burn as long as there is coal to fuel it. How we speak can add fuel to quarrels and keep them burning. Proverbs 26:20-21 says, *“For lack of wood the fire goes out, and **where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.** As charcoal is to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.”*

The tongue is a fire. Like any fire it must be used and watched with great care and diligence. Our speech is like a highly combustible and unstable fuel that may be harnessed for good, but which can be dangerous if not handled properly.

Think about it, James says, every species of beast, bird, reptile, and sea creature can be tamed and has been, but no one has tamed the tongue. Humans have tamed lions, tigers, and bears, elephants, eagles, and falcons, seals, dolphins, even killer whales! While I wouldn't want to try and tame any of those creatures, some people have done it. Taming the tongue has proved more difficult and more elusive.

James illustrates the power of the tongue as he builds to his greatest concern: With the same mouth we bless the Lord and Father, and we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. This ought not to be so. While most of us would agree with James, we also would have to confess that the tongue that prays, *“Thy will be done,”* has also said some very ungodly things. Most of us can probably remember at least one time when we put our foot so deep in our mouth we almost turned ourselves inside out. Please understand that depending on our personality, we approach speech in different ways.

Some of us don't know what we think until we hear what we say.

Others won't say anything until we are absolutely sure what we think.

In either case, James is concerned about the spirit, the heart condition that is revealed and brought out by our tongue. James again uses several images: a spring can't bring forth both fresh pure water and brackish filthy water. It merely shares what is at its source. Fig trees don't yield olives, nor do grapevines produce figs. **Whatever the source is – the fruit will follow. The same is true of our tongue.** Becoming a Christian means we change the source of our inner spring to the living water of Jesus. **Our hope is that the more we have of Jesus inside us, the purer, more loving, and more truthful our speech will become.**

Taming our tongue begins **with Jesus being the source of our inner spring**. Another helpful reminder is to **speak only when necessary**, not every moment you feel like speaking. Some of us talk more than we need to. We realize, some times too late, the truth of **Proverbs 21:23**, **“To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble.”**

Think before speaking. That sounds simple but there are times we may not.

Pray before responding to someone else. Checking our motives before the fire of our tongue is released can save us, and others, from harm. There are many brands of mints one can buy to help give you fresh breath; one is called Breath Savers. Perhaps when it comes to speaking what we need our Speech Savers that are of even greater benefit in our relationships. I'll even give you some free samples, you can try yourself right after worship, *“I'm sorry. I was wrong. Let me just listen. What can I do to help? Well done! How can we solve this together? I forgive you.”* I'm telling you these are powerful, just try them and see.

The speaking that permeates the mass media outlets of radio, television, and the Internet, as well as politics, religion, and individual churches, and Christians is often disheartening or disturbing. We have seen plenty of evidence of this during this tumultuous week. Each of us needs to ask the Lord's help in searching our own heart about our speaking and communicating.

Language is so powerful the Bible teaches us that God “speaks” creation into being in Genesis 1:3, *“Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.”* The whole rhythm of the creation account is *“God said...and it was so. God said and it was so.”* Language is a world creating capacity – there is a connection between speech and creation. In Genesis 2:19, Humanity is given the power of speech to name all of the living creatures. The first and most important gift distinctive to humans is the power to name, to create language, and by creating language also to continue God's own creative activity in the world.

The greatest peril of the tongue is in creating distorted worlds or false realities in which the word of truth is suppressed.

Pope John Paul once issued a letter on the Church and media that dealt with communication and speech. The Pope said the following about communicating with the power of the Holy Spirit (italics are mine).

“Believers in Christ know that they can count upon the help of the Holy Spirit. Such help is all the more necessary when one considers how greatly the obstacles

intrinsic to communication can be increased by ideologies, by the desire for profit or for power, and by rivalries and conflicts between individuals and groups, and also because of human weakness and social troubles. The modern technologies increase to a remarkable extent the speed, quantity and accessibility of communication, but they above all do not favor that delicate exchange which takes place between mind and mind, between heart and heart, and which should characterize any communication at the service of solidarity and love.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is called the Word who is spoken from God's heart full of grace and truth. "Throughout the history of salvation, Christ presents himself to us as the "communicator" of the Father: "God, in these last days, has spoken to us through his Son" (Hebrews 1:2). *The eternal Word made flesh, in communicating Himself, always shows respect for those who listen, teaches understanding of their situation and needs, is moved to compassion for their suffering and to a resolute determination to say to them only what they need to hear without imposition or compromise, deceit or manipulation. Jesus teaches that communication is a moral act, "A good person brings forth good out of a store of goodness, but an evil person brings forth evil out of a store of evil. I tell you, on the Day of Judgment people will render an account for every careless word they speak. By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."* (Mt 12:35-37).

Taming the tongue is a life-long challenge that requires constant attention and discipline. James says the tongue is a fire, but God has built into creation the possibility of good coming from a fire. New life and new growth emerge from the ashes of a burned over forest. Even when the earth of our life or someone else's is scorched by a tongue's fire, there is hope that forgiveness, growth, and new life can emerge.

Words are like water poured out on the ground – once they are out there is no retrieving them. We wouldn't use a fire hose to water a gardenia. We wouldn't use a cup to fight a forest fire. The challenge for us as followers of Jesus is to tame our tongue so the spring of Christ within us can enable us to water only when and where it is appropriate.

Questions for Reflection:

What do you notice about speech and language in our culture?

Have you noticed any patterns or habits in your own speaking or use of language?

If someone followed you around for a week and recorded every single thing you said, how much of your speech do you think would be:

Positive

Negative

Encouraging

Complaining

Affirming

Gossiping or criticizing someone else

Able to be shared with anyone

Wouldn't want everyone to hear me

James challenges the casual attitude that many people take toward speech. What steps have you taken or can you take in your life to help you speak appropriately as a Christian?

Verses about the tongue/speech

For those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit. (1 Peter 3:10)

Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. (Psalms 34:13)

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone. (Colossians 4:6)

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:31-32)

Lying lips conceal hatred, and whoever utters slander is a fool. When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech. (Proverbs 10:18-19)

A gossip goes about telling secrets, but one is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence. (Proverbs 11:13)

Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment. (Proverbs 12:18-19)

Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight. (Proverbs 12:22)

Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives; those who open wide their lips come to ruin. (Proverbs 13:3)

Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body. (Proverbs 16:24)

Scoundrels concoct evil, and their speech is like a scorching fire. A perverse person spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends. (Proverbs 16:27-28)

One who spares words is knowledgeable; one who is cool in spirit has understanding. (Proverbs 17:27)

To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble. (Proverbs 21:23)