

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 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. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 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. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. James 3:1-12

Its been said on that a windswept hill in an English country churchyard there stands a drab, gray slate tombstone that bears an epitaph not easily seen unless you stoop down and kneel and look closely. For those who find it and do so can then read the faint etchings of words which say:

Beneath this stone, a lump of clay,
lies Arabella Young,
Who on the twenty-fourth of May,
began to hold her tongue.

Without knowing her, it would seem those words tell us much about the character of Arabella Young; if nothing else we could venture a guess that she most likely began to hold her tongue a bit too late. But before we stand in judgment regarding her propensity to speak too much, we must take note that our own English language casts that same shadow on us all, as there is an overabundance of phrases that reflect our own excessive use of our tongue – such as biting our tongue, slip of the tongue, holding our tongue, wagging our tongue, cat got your tongue, tip of your tongue, keeping a civil tongue, tongue in cheek, roll of your tongue, watch your tongue, stick out your tongue, tongue-lashing, loose tongue, silver tongue, tongue-tied, forked tongue, and sharp tongue. In our text for this morning, the scriptures will give us an even deeper understanding of God’s view of our tongue.

The subject of our tongues is not something new to James, the brother of Jesus; he has already been addressing it in his letter to the churches of his day. In James 1:19-20 he wrote: “*Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God*” and in James 1:26 he says: “*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.*” In James 2:12-13 he continues by writing: “*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*” Remember again that James was writing this letter to a people of God who were struggling with social, relational and spiritual conflict between differing factions within the church. He rebuked his readers for their worldliness and he challenged them to humbly seek God’s divine will and wisdom in working out these problems by getting their hearts right with God. James exhorted them to pursue a *living faith* in Jesus Christ because they were lacking in spiritual maturity. The reality of dynamics of our faith reveal that spiritual maturity is not a natural consequence of growing older in years or longevity of faith. But rather God’s Word defines spiritual maturity in terms of brokenness, surrender, obedience, sacrifice, commitment, love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

In the first two chapters of his letter James has revealed to us two characteristics of what a living faith in spiritually mature followers of Jesus Christ looks like. In chapter one he told us that we can identify spiritually mature Christians by their patient attitude toward suffering; and in chapter two he told us that spiritual maturity is revealed through humble obedience to the truth of God's Word. In our text for today, James uses chapter three to tell us that a Christian's speech – our words, how we use our tongue – is another test of the spiritual maturity of our living faith in Jesus. The truth is words have power. We see that in the beginning when God spoke creation into being. And as beings created in the image of God, our words also have power. We intuitively know that because we live by words. We think words, hear words, speak words, sing words, write words, and read words—all the time, every day. We also know the power of words *experientially* in that we know the old axiom “sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is not true. Words can cut, stab, wound, hurt and even destroy. When God gave us the faculty of speech, He gave us a tool to bless and to build with; but sin has caused words to be a weapon of destruction.

In John 1:1 the apostle wrote: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* The “Word” here is Jesus, who was God incarnate on earth. Jesus, in being God, clearly understood the power of words and he clearly understood our struggle with them. In Luke 6:43-45 Jesus said: *“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”* James would have most likely heard these words and this is what he is speaking to us about today. After first telling us how spiritual maturity *develops* through a patient response to suffering, and how spiritual maturity *deepens* through a humble response to God's Word, James now tells us how spiritual maturity is *evidenced* by the use of the tongue – which reveals what is deep in our hearts.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. James 1:1-2

James begins his teaching on the spiritual mature use of the tongue by issuing a word of warning and wise counsel to those who aspire to be teachers: *“Know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”* In James context, the vocation of “teacher” was highly prized in the Jewish culture he lived in. The root of the Hebrew word for “teacher” (*rabbi*) means “master” and many sought its high honor as they were offered respect, prominence, prestige and power. Mixed motives can propel people to aspire to teach; we see that in the New Testament church in that Paul's letters almost always addressed the false teachers who were causing trouble in churches. James warns us that teachers should be conscious of the weight and potential influence of what they say because words lie at the heart of the teaching ministry. Those who teach must humbly consider and measure everything they say and do and teach because they will be ultimately judged by God.

Note that James, the brother of Jesus - the one who was known for his humble, righteous character - does not exclude himself from this warning. When it comes to the misuse and abuse of the tongue, he is humbly conscious of his own shortcomings: *“For we all stumble in many ways.”* Because James was spiritually mature, he confessed his spiritual poverty rather than claiming false perfectionism. He speaks of that perfectionism, but does not fully claim it for himself: *“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.”* History tells us that spiritual masters of the past would have understood this imperfect/perfect double reference as describing the negative and positive aspects of controlling the tongue. What this practically means for us is understanding there are times we need to “not stumble” and restrain our tongues in silence – and there are times we need to humbly “bridle” our tongues and just speak with grace when needed.

The story is told of a teacher named Pestalozzi who lived in a Swiss village. He was highly esteemed by his peers and deeply loved by the children, whose lives were molded by the strength of his character. After he died, a statue of him was erected in the town. When the sculpture was unveiled, everyone was amazed to see how much it resembled the old master. The teacher was shown kneeling down, with a little child looking up into his face. But those who knew him best felt the sculptor had missed the dominant desire of Pestalozzi the teacher, which would have been to have his students look up *not to him* but to God, and the challenging heights of learning. So the statue was changed, and a second unveiling revealed the child peering toward heaven rather than looking at the teacher. The temptation we face when we instruct people is the tendency to draw attention to ourselves. But a teacher who is spiritually mature longs to have their students look beyond themselves so they can see God. They reflect the words of John the Baptist who, in speaking of Jesus, said: *“He must increase, but I must decrease”* (John 3:30). And they humbly hold their tongue and speak with grace when needed because they know that nobody except Jesus has ever fully mastered their tongue. Its here James speaks to us about our need to discipline our tongues and in the remaining verses for our text he uses a number of paired illustrations to portray the power of our tameless tongue.

If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 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. James 3:3-4

God’s Word tells us here that the tongue has the power to *direct and guide* like the bit on a horse or a rudder on a boat. We first read that the tongue is like the *“bit”* in the mouth of a horse. James would have been familiar with this picture as he had surely seen the powerful Roman military horses riding through the streets of his day. Horses by nature are wild and unmanageable yet their feisty and fiery temperaments can be subdued and their movements controlled by a rider when a small bit is placed into the horse’s mouth over its tongue. From that point on all the rider must do is pull and he controls this powerful animal’s whole body. The point James is making about the bit is about the extraordinary power and influence that one small object can have over something so large and powerful. So it is with the tongue. This is also true for the *“rudder”* of a ship. Large boats were fairly common in the ancient world. The ship spoken of in Acts 27:37 that transported Paul across the Mediterranean en route to Rome held 276 people. History speaks of large boats like the Roman ship *Isis* that operated on the Mediterranean during the rule of the Roman Empire around 150 AD, a boat that could carry one thousand people, but when driven against by gales and violent winds the ships still yielded to the direction of a small rudder according to the inclination of the pilot’s desires.

The tongue has the power to *direct and guide* like the bit on a horse or a rudder on a boat. We can see how this small muscle in the human mouth has the power to change the direction of a life or human history for the evil or for the good. Adolf Hitler recorded his Nazi philosophy in the book *Mein Kampf*. That book would be the beginning of one the most devastating and widely fought wars in history. Someone has noted that for every word in that book, more than a hundred lives were lost in World War II. Yet in April 21, 1855, Edward Kimball went into a Boston shoe store and used his tongue to lead young Dwight L. Moody to Christ. The result changed not only the direction of Moody’s life but multiplied thousands of others. The tongue has great power to direct and to guide ourselves and others in right or wrong directions. May we use our tongues to give godly direction!

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 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. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. James 3:5-8

Here we read that the tongue also has the power to *destroy* like the flames of a wild forest fire. James first tells us that the size of a thing does not determine its value or power. Like the bit on a horse or rudder of a ship, the tongue is a very small member of the body, and it is powerful, but not in the way we would like to think. The tongue is powerfully destructive when it's fueled by pride; James tells us, it "*boasts of great things.*" The next sentence is providentially appropriate for us today as the massive wildfire in British Columbia and Alberta continues to destroy homes and lives: "*How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!*" Just as a little flame can set a whole forest on fire so can a sharp tongue, slip of the tongue, wagging our tongue, loose tongue or silver tongue be a flame that through lies, gossip, anger, slander and heated words set a person, a family, a business, a church or a community on fire. James says that "*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.*" Because our "*tongue is a fire*" it can easily be an evil source of great destruction.

These verses go on to speak about how ironic it is that humanity has been able to subdue every kind of creature, from a parrot to a killer whale, and yet with all our success in bringing things under our control, we human beings are powerless to control their own tongues. In verse 8, James switches from the imagery of fire to that of poison. The tongue is a restless evil, and its poison is deadly.

James is telling us that our tongues are powerful and deadly and completely out of control. The picture he gives us here is comparable to trying to put the massive wildfire that destroyed Fort McMurray out with a squirt gun. That's what Gerber Products, the baby-food company, felt they were doing in 1997. Someone somewhere started a false rumor about the company that spread like wildfire. The Chicago Tribune took the rumor further and published an untrue story stating that Gerber had been involved in a class-action lawsuit and would give a \$500 gift certificate to families with children to settle the suit. Supposedly all the parents had to do to get the money was send a claim form and copies of their children's birth certificates and social security numbers to a post-office box in Minneapolis by October 1, 1997. Once the rumor caught fire, it began to spread along channels that gave it an appearance of legitimacy: notices were posted in hospitals and sent home with children by school teachers. One corporation put the false notice in the envelope with their employees' paychecks. Gerber Products tried to stomp out the rumor, putting a notice on several internet web sites, tracking down sources of the rumor, and informing the media. Nevertheless, they received over 18,000 phone calls to their toll-free telephone number in the three-week period before October 1 from people requesting the bogus claim form. The cost to Gerber Products of fighting this rumor was in the millions of dollars. Starting rumors and passing on gossip may seem harmless, but someone always pays an undeserved price when we misuse of the tongue to do others harm.

Some would say this is the kind of "*fire*" that is happening in these days in the United States when they hear the things that billionaire Donald Trump is saying while he is running for President. While admittedly his tongue does seem much more sharp and blunt than the normal political candidate today, *God does not measure the destructive nature of our tongue by degrees.* Because our tongues are powerful and deadly and completely out of control - we are all more likely to be more of the sharp and blunt nature of Donald Trump rather than the polished political nature of Prime Justin Trudeau or Barak Obama. A quote I read recently said that statistics show the number one cause of failed relationships is opening your mouth and letting words come out. James speaks about this issue in the church in James 4:11-12 when he writes: "*Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?*" The tongue has the power to *destroy* like the flames of a wild forest fire. This is where we as followers of Jesus need to remember our continued need of the gospel. We all will stand before the judge to answer for all of the fires that our tongues have caused. Have mercy on us O Lord!

With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. James 3:9-12

The tongue not only has the power to direct/guide and destroy – it is also *deceptively inconsistent*, as the tongue also has the power to bless and to curse from the same mouth. This time James uses a couple of paired illustrations from nature to give us a picture of what a deceptively inconsistent tongue *is not like*. A spring will produce fresh water or bitter water, but not both. A fig tree will produce figs not olives, and a grapevine does not produce figs. A salt-water pond does not produce fresh water. What something is by nature determines what it produces and that doesn't change. But our tongues are different. Because our tongues are powerful and deadly and completely out of control, our tongues are capable of producing words from the same mouth that are both blessing and cursing, both with absolute sincerity, sometimes within just a few moments of one another. James responds to this by saying: "*My brothers, these things ought not to be so.*"

Is the tongue a lost cause? No. Despite the reality that our tongues are powerful and deadly and completely out of control; and that the tongue has the power to power to direct/guide and destroy; and that the tongue is also deceptively inconsistent, as the tongue also has the power to bless and to curse from the same mouth – the Word of God offers no excuse for yielding to evil. Ephesians 4:29 says: "*Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*" Now reading these words alone cannot win the battle for the tongue in our own strength. But God can and will give us victory over our tongues when we surrender our tongues to God for His use and yield the control of our tongues to the Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, we must always be aware of the deceitfulness of sin that makes our tongues so inconsistent. We foolishly assume that our real struggles with sin are in the areas where we are "weak." We do not well understand the depth of sin until we realize that it has made its home far more subtly where we are "strong" and in our gifts rather than in our weaknesses and inadequacies. It is in the very giftedness God has given us that sin will be at its most perverse and subtle. But when the Holy Spirit is truly at work in us, we are brought to see that deceitfulness of our sin, stripped bare of our layers of self-deceit, and led to repentance, where God lovingly awaits to bless us.

The tongue cannot be tamed by any human means but can be tamed by God. And the Holy Spirit will give us increasing power to monitor and control what we say, the more we surrender its use to Him. We will know that we've won the battle for the tongue by the power of the Holy Spirit, when we use our tongues to share the gospel and to build up the people of God. But we still must also remember that Jesus said: "*For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*" (Matthew 12:34). If our hearts are filled with hurt or anger or bitterness or unforgiveness, the evil one himself will light a fire to our tongues. But if our hearts are filled with love, God will use our tongues to light a fire like that of Pentecost where lives were dramatically transformed and changed for Jesus Christ.

A story is told of a little girl who sat with her arms wrapped around her father's neck. But as she did so her mother observed that over her father's shoulder she was also sticking out her tongue at her little brother. The mother responded by saying, "Take your arms off from around your father's neck. You cannot love your father and at the same time stick out your tongue at his son." To profess love for God while condemning those whom God made in His image *is a blatant offense against God*. Only when we have been brought to such a recognition do we run to Jesus and seek his forgiveness.

“The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.” These words clearly speak of our need for God; as saved sinners we constantly and desperately need His grace – which we have been given through Jesus Christ. He sacrificed his life for our sins, taking our place on a cross, so that we might be forgiven and redeemed and restored back to God, so we might have new life in this life and eternal life with Him forever. James spoke of this in James 1:17-18 when he wrote: *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.”* This is our promise and hope and power in the face of the deceptively inconsistent destructiveness of our tongues. Sin has twisted and polluted our speech. But God began his work of a new creation in us when we come to a living faith in Jesus Christ. Even though we still live in a world marred by sin, we have access to the power of God by the Spirit to use our tongues to bless God and to bless one another and to bless those who have yet to know Jesus.

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer’s praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace!

My gracious Master and my God,
Assist me to proclaim,
To spread through all the earth abroad
The honors of Thy name.

Charles Wesley

Spiritual maturity develops through a patient response to suffering; spiritual maturity deepens through a humble response to God’s Word; and spiritual maturity is evidenced when we use our tongues to bless God and each other and others because Jesus is the greatest treasure of our hearts.

In Psalm 141:1–4 King David wrote:

O Lord, I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you!
Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!
Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!
Do not let my heart incline to any evil, to busy myself with wicked deeds
in company with men who work iniquity, and let me not eat of their delicacies.

Brothers and sisters, may this be our prayer. Amen? Amen!

2016-05-08

Pastor Leland Botzet

Arrowsmith Baptist Church