

James 3:1-12: Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ²We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check ³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹²My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

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LISTEN TO THIS RIDDLE: "I AM OFTEN HELD, BUT AM RARELY TOUCHED. I AM ALWAYS WET, BUT NEVER RUST. I OFTEN BITE, BUT AM SELDOM BIT. TO USE ME WELL YOU MUST HAVE WIT. WHAT AM I?" THE ANSWER-IS, OF COURSE, THE TONGUE.

HUMAN SPEECH REALLY IS AN AMAZING THING--NOT ONLY CAN OUR WORDS CONVEY OUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS, TONE AND VOLUME CAN CHANGE A MESSAGE THAT ON PAPER MAY SEEM TO SAY ONE THING, YET WHEN SPOKEN SAYS SOMETHING DIFFERENT.

AND WHETHER WE REALIZE IT OR NOT, LIKE WITH MANY OTHER HUMAN ATTRIBUTES- THIS GIFT OF COMPLEX COMMUNICATION COMES WITH GREAT RESPONSIBILITY.

LISTEN TO THIS SHORT POEM I FOUND, WHICH HELPS TO SUMMARIZE THE DUAL POTENTIAL OF OUR WORDS, AND THEREFORE OUGHT TO CAUSE US PAUSE BEFORE SPEAKING.

A CARELESS WORD MAY KINDLE STRIFE,
A CRUEL WORD MAY WREAK A LIFE.

A BITTER WORD MAY HATE INSTILL,
A BRUTAL WORD MAY SMITE AND KILL.

A GRACIOUS WORD MAY SMOOTH THE WAY,
A JOYOUS WORD MAY LIGHT THE DAY.

A TIMELY WORD MAY LESSEN STRESS,
A LOVING WORD MAY HEAL AND BLESS.

OUR PREVIOUS LOOK AT THE LETTER WRITTEN BY THE APOSTLE JAMES OBSERVED HIS FOCUS ON THE NEED FOR CHRISTIANS TO ACT IN WAYS THAT WITNESS TO THEIR FAITH.

HE WROTE ABOUT HOW WE ACT IN OUR LIVES MATTERS. HOWEVER, JAMES ALSO BELIEVED OUR WORDS ARE IMPORTANT.

IN FACT THE INSTRUCTION JAMES GAVE CONCERNING WORDS USES MORE FORCEFUL ILLUSTRATIONS THAN ANYTHING HE WROTE ABOUT OUR DEEDS.

SPEECH, OR HOW WE USE OUR TONGUE- IS ONE AREA THE APOSTLE MENTIONS IN ALL FIVE CHAPTERS OF THE EPISTLE.

IN CHAPTER ONE IT IS FOUND IN THE ADMONITION TO LISTEN MORE THAN SPEAK. CHAPTER TWO SAYS CHRISTIAN SPEECH AND ACTION SHOULD MATCH. TODAY'S READING WARNS ABOUT OUR NEED TO "TAME" THE TONGUE.

IN CHAPTER FOUR, JAMES WRITES THAT IF WE SUBMIT OURSELVES TO GOD WE CANNOT SLANDER OTHERS; NOR SHOULD WE BOAST ABOUT OUR OWN ATTRIBUTES.

FINALLY CHAPTER FIVE CALLS FOR THE KIND OF HONESTY IN SPEECH THAT NEGATES THE NEED TO MAKE OATHS TO DEMONSTRATE SINCERITY.

TODAY WE FOCUS ON CHAPTER THREE AND ITS CALL FOR US TO MASTER THE TONGUE, WHICH BY THE WAY INVOLVES THE CHOICE TO REMAIN SILENT AS WELL AS- WHAT WE SAY.

I IMAGINE THAT JAMES MAY HAVE REVIEWED THE WISDOM FOUND THROUGHOUT PROVERBS BEFORE COMPOSING HIS LETTER, SINCE THERE ARE MANY SAYINGS IN THAT BOOK THAT TEACH ABOUT BOTH TALKING AND REMAINING SILENT.

BUT INSTEAD OF LABELING SPEECH THAT IS RASH, ANGRY OR OTHERWISE WRONG AS “FOOLISH”, HE SUGGESTS IT IS SINFUL.

THIS MAY SEEM LIKE AN EXAGGERATION TO SOME PEOPLE, AND YET WORDS CAN CAUSE AN INCREDIBLE AMOUNT OF HARM, AND THEMSELVES LEAD US TO SINS OF ACTION.

THERE IS AN OLD FOLK TALE THAT APPEARED IN VARIOUS COUNTRIES AND CULTURES THAT ILLUSTRATES THE NEED TO MASTER OUR TONGUE.

IN ONE VERSION OF THE STORY, A MAN SPREAD MALICIOUS AND UNTRUE RUMORS ABOUT THE LOCAL RABBI, WHICH HE LATER REGRETTED.

HE WENT TO THE RABBI TO APOLOGIZE AND ASK FOR FORGIVENESS. AND HIS RABBI ACCEPTED THE MAN’S APOLOGY AND FORGAVE HIM.

HOWEVER BECAUSE THE MAN, SAW HOW HE CAUSED SOME OTHERS TO SPEAK OR ACT IN NEGATIVE WAYS, HE THOUGHT THAT HIS APOLOGY DID NOT GO FAR ENOUGH. AND SO HE ASKED WHAT HE COULD DO TO MAKE AMENDS.

THE RABBI TOLD HIM TO TAKE ONE OF HIS FEATHER PILLOWS AND GO INTO THE VILLAGE SQUARE AND CUT IT OPEN, THEN SHAKE OUT ALL OF THE FEATHERS AND LET THEM SCATTER.

HE DID SO AND RETURNED TO LET THE RABBI KNOW HE COMPLETED THE TASK. THE RABBI TOLD HIM THAT NOW HE CAN SEE HOW FAR AND WIDE GOSSIP SPREADS.

THEN HE ADDED THAT IF THE MAN WISHED TO REPAIR ALL OF THE HARM HIS GOSSIP HAD DONE HE NEEDED TO GO AND GATHER UP EVERY ONE OF THE FEATHERS. THAT TASK, OF COURSE IS IMPOSSIBLE, WHICH WAS THE RABBI’S POINT.

THE LETTER OF THE APOSTLE JAMES SHOWS HE WOULD AGREE WITH THAT LESSON ABOUT THE HARM WORDS CAN DO, EVEN WHEN WE REGRET THEM.

SO LET US DEEP DEEPER INTO THE POWER OF WORDS AND WHY JAMES WAS SO CONCERNED ABOUT HOW CHRISTIANS USE THEM.

THINK ABOUT IT: CREATION CAME INTO BEING, NOT BECAUSE GOD ACTED, BUT WHEN GOD SPOKE: “LET THERE BE...”

THIS IS THE SUPREME EXAMPLE OF THE POSITIVE POWER OF THE SPOKEN WORD.

JAMES ACKNOWLEDGES THAT WE ARE GIFTED WITH THE ABILITY TO PRAISE GOD AND BLESS OTHERS WITH OUR TONGUE.

HIS CONCERN IS NOT ABOUT WHAT CHRISTIANS SHOULD SAY, BUT ABOUT WHAT WE OUGHT NOT TO SAY.

IT IS BAD ENOUGH, HE WRITES, THAT PEOPLE SAY THINGS IN ERROR, WHICH UNINTENTIONALLY OFFENDS SOMEONE.

BUT WHAT IS WORSE IS WHEN OUR WORDS WHETHER DELIBERATELY OR ACCIDENTLY DEEPLY HURT SOMEONE.

HUMAN BEINGS, WE SHOULD REMEMBER, DO NOT HAVE THE POWER TO CREATE BY SPEAKING ANYTHING INTO BEING LIKE GOD DID WITH CREATION.

WE DO, HOWEVER, HAVE A TREMENDOUS POWER TO WOUND OR DESTROY WITH OUR WORDS.

THE ATTACK ON THE U.S. CAPITAL BUILDING ON JANUARY 6, IS A PRIME EXAMPLE OF HOW THE SPOKEN WORD CAN IGNITE, WHAT JAMES CALLED A FOREST FIRE OF VIOLENCE. BUT THAT WAS NOTHING NEW.

THE HUMAN TONGUE, THE SPOKEN WORD HAS BEEN DOING SOMETHING SIMILAR IN OUR NATION AND THROUGHOUT THE WORLD FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS.

THIS IS THE REASON JAMES WARNED CHRISTIANS ABOUT THE DANGEROUS POWER OF THE HUMAN TONGUE. THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM, OF COURSE, IS NOT WITH THE GIFT OF HUMAN SPEECH BUT WITH OUR SINFULNESS.

JAMES WRITES THAT IT IS THE SIN WITHIN US THAT TAKES HOLD OF THE TONGUE, AND THROUGH IT THE WHOLE BODY.

HIS POINT IS THAT CHRISTIANS, IN PARTICULAR, HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO STRIVE TO CONTROL WHAT WE SAY. REMEMBER HIS ILLUSTRATIONS: A SMALL RUDDER CAN DIRECT A LARGE SHIP, A BIT ENABLES US TO MAKE A HORSE GO WHERE WE WANT IT TO GO.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE HUMAN TONGUE IS THAT SO OFTEN IT ACTS LIKE A BROKEN RUDDER OR A BIT WITHOUT REINS, SO THAT WE NO LONGER CAN DIRECT THE SHIP OR HORSE.

IN OTHER WORDS, TOO OFTEN WE LOOSE CONTROL OF OUR TONGUE, WHICH MEANS WE SIN BY OUR WORDS, RATHER THAN BY WHAT WE DO.

IN FACT, IT WOULD BE FAIR TO SAY THAT MOST CHRISTIANS SIN MORE FREQUENTLY AND SERIOUSLY BY THE WORDS WE SAY RATHER THAN BY OUR ACTIONS.

IT IS IRONIC THAT AMONG ALL OF GOD'S CREATURES WE HAVE THE ABILITY TO EITHER TAME OR DIRECT MANY KINDS OF BIRDS, ANIMALS, AND EVEN TO A LESSER DEGREE, SOME FISH, REPTILES, AND INSECTS.

BUT THE ONE THING EVERY PERSON, WHO IS PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY ABLE TO SPEAK, CANNOT FULLY CONTROL IS THAT LITTLE MUSCLE IN OUR MOUTH CALLED THE TONGUE.

AND YET, JUST BECAUSE THIS IS TRUE, IT DOES NOT MEAN WE SHOULD THROW UP OUR HANDS IN DEFEAT, OR TAKE A VOW OF SILENCE.

IF JAMES THOUGHT THERE WAS NOTHING CHRISTIANS COULD DO HE PROBABLY WOULD NOT HAVE BOTHERED TO BRING UP THE PROBLEM.

LET US THEREFORE, ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THERE ARE TIMES WHEN WE HAVE A PROBLEM CONTROLLING WHAT WE SAY.

AND LET US ALSO RECOGNIZE THAT IT IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO TRY, BECAUSE WE WILL BE ABLE TO SIN LESS OFTEN IF WE TRY.

FURTHERMORE, THERE IS SOME GOOD NEWS CONCERNING WHAT IS HUMANLY IMPOSSIBLE, THIS IS RECORDED IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 18.

WHEN THE DISCIPLES ASKED JESUS HOW ANYONE COULD BE SAVED, HE RESPONDED: "FOR MORTALS IT IS IMPOSSIBLE, BUT FOR GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE."

IN OTHER WORDS, IF WE ASK FOR GOD'S HELP, AND DO OUR PART. OUR TONGUE WE WILL NOT CAUSE US TO SIN AS GREATLY OR FREQUENTLY.

THE BIBLE ALSO TELLS US THAT ONE OF THE FRUIT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT CHRISTIANS RECEIVE IS- THE FRUIT OF SELF-CONTROL.

SELF-CONTROL ENCOMPASSES NOT ONLY OUR DEEDS BUT OUR WORDS AS WELL. SO WE CAN BE SURE THE HOLY SPIRIT CAN AND WILL HELP US IF WE ARE WILLING TO ACCEPT THIS HELP.

HERE IS AN EXAMPLE FROM THE SECULAR REALM OF A PERSON'S ABILITY TO CHANGE BOTH WORDS AND ACTIONS.

I USE IT BECAUSE IT OFFERS A GOOD EXAMPLE OF HOW THE WAY WE SPEAK, AND WHAT WE SAY, INFLUENCES WHAT WE DO. SPEECH ALSO IMPACTS HOW WE ARE PERCEIVED BY OTHERS, AND TO SOME EXTENT, WHO WE ARE.

IN THE MOVIE "MY FAIR LADY", PROFESSOR HIGGINS MAKES A WAGER THAT HE CAN CHANGE THE LIFE OF A YOUNG WOMAN WHO SELLS FLOWERS FOR A LIVING, SIMPLY BY IMPROVING THE WAY SHE TALKS.

ELIZA DOOLITTLE VOLUNTEERS AS THE SUBJECT FOR THIS EXPERIMENT, AND AFTER MANY MONTHS AND A GREAT DEAL OF HARD WORK THE MANNER OF HER SPEECH IMPROVES.

ALONG WITH A CHANGE IN ACCENT COMES SOME NEW VOCABULARY, AND A DIFFERENT SET OF MANNERS.

FINALLY, THE LOWER CLASS FLOWER GIRL, IS ABLE TO SUCCESSFULLY ATTEND AN UPPER CLASS FUNCTION AND SPEAK AND ACT AS IF SHE WERE BORN AMONG THEM. WHILE THIS IS A FICTIONAL STORY THE PREMISE IS NOT UNREASONABLE.

AND IF THE RIGHT CIRCUMSTANCES, TEACHER, AND HARD WORK CAN ENABLE SOMEONE TO CHANGE SOCIAL CLASSES, HOW MUCH GREATER A CHANGE CAN THE HOLY SPIRIT MAKE WITHIN CHRISTIANS WHO ARE OPEN TO GOD'S INSTRUCTION?

TRULY, IT WAS BECAUSE JAMES HAD HOPE IN GOD'S ABILITY TO HELP US TAME OUR TONGUES, AT LEAST TO SOME DEGREE, HE WROTE ABOUT THE POWER OF HUMAN SPEECH.

HIS REMINDER ABOUT HOW OUR MOUTHS CAN BOTH BLESS GOD, AND CURSE OTHER PEOPLE, ALL OF WHOM ARE MADE, LIKE WE ARE, IN THE IMAGE OF GOD, IS IMPORTANT.

THE APOSTLE TEACHES CHRISTIANS ABOUT THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE POWER OF WORDS, AND WHY WE OUGHT TO BE MORE THOUGHTFUL, EVEN PRAYERFUL, WITH OUR WORDS.

AND JESUS OFFERS US AN EXAMPLE OF THE BLESSINGS OF HUMAN SPEECH. HE WAS A MAN OF WORDS AS MUCH AS ACTION.

YES HE DID MANY GREAT DEEDS OF HEALING AND OTHER MIRACLES, BUT IT WAS HIS WORDS THAT FIRST BROUGHT PEOPLE TO HIM.

WE SHOULD ALSO KEEP IN MIND HIS HEALINGS AND OTHER ACTIONS WERE ALWAYS FOLLOWED BY A MESSAGE OF FORGIVENESS, ENCOURAGEMENT, AND ON OCCASION A CHALLENGE OR A WARNING.

AND IT IS NOT ONLY HIS ACT OF DYING ON THE CROSS FOR OUR SAKES THE GOSPELS HELP US TO REMEMBER, BUT THE POWERFUL SEVEN LAST SAYINGS HE UTTERED AS WELL.

LET US LISTEN TO THOSE POWERFUL WORDS:

“FORGIVE THEM FATHER, THEY DO NOT KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING.”

“TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE”.

“WOMAN, BEHOLD YOUR SON! ... BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER.”

“I THIRST”.

“MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?” -

“IT IS FINISHED.”

“FATHER, ‘INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT”.

THESE STATEMENTS HAVE CONTINUED TO CAPTIVATE, CONVICT, COMFORT, AND INSPIRE PEOPLE EVER SINCE.

LET US PRAY:

GRACIOUS GOD, WE THANK YOU FOR THE WISDOM OF SCRIPTURE AND THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS OUR SAVIOR.

SEND YOUR SPIRIT, WE PRAY, TO GUIDE OUR WORDS AND DEEDS, SO THAT THEY MAY BETTER REFLECT THE WISDOM, UNDERSTANDING, HUMILITY, AND GENTLENESS OF HEART JESUS LIVED IN HIS WORDS AND HIS ACTIONS.

HELP US TO MAKE THE WORDS WE SPEAK AND THE MEDITATION OF OUR HEARTS ACCEPTABLE TO YOU, O GOD. IN JESUS NAME WE PRAY, AMEN.

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