

Tame my Tongue!

- James 3:3-12
- It weighs less than two ounces, works almost constantly for 16 hours a day, and cannot be controlled by either man or woman. What is it? Of course! It is the tongue. Less than one-tenth of one percent of a man's bodyweight, and yet it is the source of powerful trouble. I know what Charles Wesley meant when he wrote "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," but we just couldn't survive it! 999 of them would be gossiping or backbiting or complaining, while the one would be singing "our great redeemer's praise." No thanks, Charles. One is plenty. Because no matter how hard we try to "think before we speak," it just doesn't seem to work for long because there is no evidence whatsoever that the tongue is connected to the brain.
- We saw last week that James begins his instruction about the tongue with a warning to would-be teachers. Because those who teach the church use words and can put themselves and their congregations at great risk! In fact, every teacher will sin because, as James says, we all stumble in many ways. It is a perfect man who does not stumble in what he says. We could ask all the perfect men to stand up now, and then have the perfect women join them. But no one would stand. I hope. But the word for perfect is *telios*, and we have seen it before in James, remember? He first used it in James 1:4, "And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." It means mature. God sends trials our way, we discovered, to teach us patience, to develop our "steadfastness muscle," and that muscle when used and developed, produces maturity. So, the way we respond to trials determines whether or not we are learning steadfastness, and letting it grow us up to maturity. How can you tell if you're growing up? Listen to yourself talk when you are going through a trial, or when things just aren't the way you want them to be.
- A large family sat around the table for breakfast one morning. As the custom was, the father returned thanks, blessing God for the food. Immediately afterwards, however as was his habit, he began to grumble about hard times, the poor quality of the food he was forced to eat, the way it was cooked, and much more. His little daughter interrupted him and said, "*Father, do you suppose God heard what you said a little while ago?*" "*Certainly,*" replied the father with confidence. "*And did He hear you what you said about the bacon and coffee?*" "*Of course,*" the father replied but not as confidently as before. And then his little girl asked him again, "*Then father, which did God believe?*"
- James uses at least six different illustrations, three pairs that point to three different powers of the tongue that are most often used to do harm, not good. The tongue has the power to direct, the power to destroy, and the power to delight or deceive. Let's look at those, and then we will close with a word of encouragement.
- **Power to Direct**
- James illustrates this power with the bit and the rudder. (vs. 3-4) A bit is put into a horse's mouth so that a 100-lb kid can control a 1,000-lb horse. One of my dad's decisions when he was going through mid-life was to buy a horse and keep him pastured offsite. I remember going over to ride Sundance, the horse, on occasion. Every time I did, the horse would obey my instructions given through the bit and bridle, for about ten minutes, and I could set my watch by what happened next. After ten minutes he would get tired of the whole thing, because he knew somehow that I was really NOT in charge, and he would take off for the trees. He would gain speed as he got closer to the trees, all while I am pulling back on the reins and yelling, and he would go straight for the low branches to try to knock me off. That horse was evil. Not really. But he was just like me as a young man, and sometimes as an older man. He did what he wanted to do; he was not going to be controlled by someone else. When the horse submits to the bit, then the rider has control over the horse's whole body, and the ride is a pleasure for both. My favorite horse whisperer, Woody Shoemaker, said, "God made the horse beautiful and strong for us to use and enjoy. Apart from this partnership the horse has no purpose." You could say the same thing about each person on the planet: without the partnership with God for which he was created, man has no purpose. God delights to work with all who submit their lives to

him: with encouragement, reward, firm control of the reins, and discipline where necessary. He tames our tongues if we will submit, so that He can have control of the whole man. He can then turn the ship, to use James' second illustration, in the direction He wants to send it.

- The tongue has the power to direct, and it boasts of great things, James says in verse 5. On August 20, 1940, Winston Churchill said to the House of Commons, "*Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few,*" as part of a speech in which he praised the courage of the Royal Air Force in their ongoing battle against German warplanes and their nightly bombings of the city of London. On his way to give the speech that day, he was riding in a car with General Pug Ismay, his chief military assistant, and Churchill was going over his speech. He had planned to say, "Never in the history of mankind have so many owed so much to so few." Pug said, "What about Jesus and His disciples?" Churchill smiled and said, 'Good 'ol Pug,' and he changed his speech, to "Never in the field of human conflict..." Edward R. Murrow, the famous reporter said of Churchill, "He mobilized the English language and sent it into battle." The tongue of one man, Churchill, directed a nation, and gave them courage in the face of an enemy. Of course, the tongue has great power to direct others into evil as well. Someone has calculated that for every one word of Hitler's autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, 125 lives were lost in WWII.
- **The Power to Destroy**
- The second set of word pictures James uses illustrate the tongue's power to destroy. Most of the verses in the Bible that refer to the tongue, and there are over 110 in Proverbs alone, refer to its destructive power. James says the tongue is a fire, and that it is set on fire by hell. (verse 6) The word for fire here is Gehenna, which is a reference to the valley outside Jerusalem where people dumped their garbage. It was constantly on fire and the stench was unbearable. And the fire was fueled by a never-ending stream of garbage, just as the tongue is fueled by a stream of refuse from the world, the culture, what we read and what we see and the thoughts and the intentions of our hearts.
- We understand the destructive power of a fire. On a Sunday October evening in 1871, Mrs. O'Leary's cow knocked over a lantern as she was being milked, which started the great Chicago fire that would rage for two days, take 250 lives, blacken 3 and ½ miles of the city, and destroy over 17,000 buildings.
- James also calls the tongue a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (verse 8) This reminds me of a poem I heard years ago, called *The Snake That Poisons Everybody*:
- It topples governments, wrecks marriages, ruins careers, busts reputations, causes heartaches, nightmares, indigestion, spawns suspicion, generates grief, dispatches innocent people to cry in their pillows.
Even its name hisses.
It's called gossip.
Office gossip.
Shop gossip.
Party gossip.
It makes headlines and headaches.
Before you repeat a story, ask yourself:
Is it true?
Is it fair?
Is it necessary?
If not, shut up.
- How many would come to church every week if you never knew whether a snake would slither across your feet as you sat in the pew? That would be nobody, I'm guessing. Or what if you knew we had tigers roaming the halls? Would you come? The funny thing is, snakes and tigers can both be tamed. We've seen them at the circus or at the conservatory, and apparently James had, too. In fact, he says every kind of beast, bird, reptile and sea creature can be tamed. But not the tongue. At least, not by man. No human being can tame the tongue. Aren't you glad that people will show up here every

Sunday morning, even though we are surrounded by deadly, poisonous tongues? I am! And I am glad we all know the Great Tongue-Tamer and He is at work. More on that later.

- **The Power to Delight...or Deceive**

- The third set of word pictures used by James illustrate the tongue's power to delight or to deceive. With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father. (verse 9) That's the power to delight. With the same tongue we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. That's the power to deceive. James compares our tongue to a spring that poured out fresh water and salt water. How many of you would drink from the water fountain in the fellowship hall if you never knew whether what came out would be water or apple cider vinegar? I am guessing nobody. But wait. Do you know anyone like that? That person you have to be careful around because you never know what's going to come out of his or her mouth: it could be a word of greeting and encouragement or a word of disgust, or even an angry tirade? How many of you would plant an apple tree in your yard if you never knew whether you would get apples or olives? OK, I might do that, because it would be cool. But the point James is making is that it is impossible. And his word for those who praise God on Sunday and revile a person whom God has created on Monday is this: "My brothers, these things ought not to be so."

- **What Can We Do?**

- It seems hopeless. Our tongue is destructive and deceptive, and can direct people towards evil. But we know James did not write this passage, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, to discourage. Verse 8 is the key: "No human being can tame the tongue." Who can, then? God. Look back at chapter 1, verse 18. We shouldn't stray too far from this verse, as it points to our everlasting hope. He brought us forth. We did not and could not bring ourselves forth from death. How did He do it? By the word of truth. Though in our flesh we may scoff at truth and hide from truth, we know in our spirit that truth is the means of grace by which God changes us. From the inside out. To what end? "We should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." We are His. He brought us forth by His truth so that we might be His. Look at **Romans 8:29**. That's what God is doing. It is an eternal promise that it will be done. If you are a believer, a follower of Jesus Christ, you will be conformed to the image of His Son. That's God's purpose in saving us: for His glory, he changes us, by His Word of truth, to make us more and more like Jesus.
- The tongue professes what the heart possesses. So put your heart on the altar. Ask God to show you what He wants to change about your heart. As He changes your heart, He changes your tongue.