

Taming the Tongue – Part 4

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – James instructs his audience to speak as those transformed by faith
2. aim – to cause us to speak in a way that glorifies the one who has saved us by his own word
3. passage – James 3:1-12

b. outline

1. The Centrality of the Tongue (James 3:1-5a)
2. The Power of the Tongue (James 3:5b-10a)
3. The Taming of the Tongue (James 3:10b-12)

c. opening

1. the **preaching realities** of the second half of the letter
 - a. **(last week)** sometimes you have to deal with *depressing* subjects – but, you preach because the word of God demands it (**i.e.** to only preach “upbeat” messages is to *fail* a congregation)
 - b. **(this week)** sometimes you have to go from “preaching to meddlin” – you have to look into the eyes of your congregation and call them to a proper application of your material, *even if it hurts*
 1. and ... this will require me **repeating** a number of things I have already said in this series
2. the **changeover** to the second half of the letter
 - a. **chaps. 1-2** concentrated on the *definition* of faith (**i.e.** what is genuine saving faith)
 - b. **chaps. 3-5** concentrates on the *transformative effects* of faith (**i.e.** what are works?)
3. the **starting point** of the second half of the letter
 - a. James will argue that it is the **words of a believer** that are one of the first “works” of true faith
 - b. James starts the “practical” side of his letter by giving insight into the nature of language
 1. language is *central* to what it means to be human – it is a central part of the *Imago Dei*
 2. language has an inherent *ability* to “create” – just as God creates through language, so do we
 3. language must be *controlled* to be effective – language, like all other aspects of the *Imago Dei*, is subservient to the understanding and will of the individual (**i.e.** the heart)
 4. language is *reflective* of who we are as human – our speech is an indicator of our **ontology**
 - a. **principle: it is in our speech that our regeneration is most notable**
 5. language *also* has an inherent *ability* to “destroy” – speech is a deeply fallen aspect of the *Imago Dei* that reveals the depravity of an individual *and his or her destiny of destruction*
 - a. **i.e.** it is a world of unrighteousness, staining the whole body, a restless evil, full of deadly poison, set on fire by hell, setting on fire the entire course of life (**see below**)
 6. **(now)** language must be “tamed” by the true follower of Christ as a **revelatory expression of the renewed inner nature**
 - a. **i.e.** like all other aspects of the *Imago Dei*, Christians must “redeem” the use of language as a part of what it means to be a person of *genuine faith*
 - b. **i.e.** the first great work of faith is learning to *speak* in ways *consistent* with what it means to be a born-again individual – to “take dominion” over our use of language in ways that reflect our new inner nature as those remade by the Spirit of Christ into his image
 - c. **i.e. Genesis 1:28 cf. Romans 6:14** – sin, *including the sinful (or neglectful) use of language*, is to be “taken into submission” by the Christian **for he has the power to do so**

III. The Taming of the Tongue (James 3:10b-12)

Content

a. the context of the illustrations (v. 10b)

1. **vv. 5b-8** is an indictment of *the entire human race*, deceived by Satan *through his words*, and now using this great gift of God *in unholy and rebellious ways*
 - a. **question:** why is there so much *swearing* in popular culture? **answer:** because swearing is a way for reprobate people to “show” that they are (now!) free of all moral constraints (**i.e.** in the same way that they flaunt deviant forms of sexuality)
2. but, James shifts in **vv. 9-10** to indicting the language of the “believers” he is writing to
 - a. he uses the word “we,” he references “brothers” (**again**) in **v. 10**, and he speaks of us blessing “our Lord and Father” (**i.e.** which is only possible by men who are *adopted* to him through faith)

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- b. James is moving from a *general indictment* of humanity to a *specific indictment* of “Christians”
 1. “*these things ought not to be so*” (v. 10b) = not to be true of those claiming to be believers
 - a. “*these things*” = in context, the use of language in sinful ways
 - b. note the parallel to 2:14: what do your *words* say about you?
 1. just as “empty” words of faith without any connection to *substantive transformation* cannot save, so words with a *reprobate speech pattern* demonstrate the *real possibility* that the person speaking them is not actually saved
 - c. **principle: it is in our speech that our regeneration is most notable**
 1. changing our language is the first great “*work*” of faith outlined in chap. 3
 2. so, it is in vv. 11-12 that James “makes his point” *to his audience of believers* ...
- b. the substance of the illustrations (vv. 11-12)**
1. (once again) James uses a series of rhetorical questions *in the form of illustrations or analogies*
 - a. see again 1:23f (a reflection in a mirror); 2:2-3 (the rich man in the church); 2:11 (murder, but no adultery); 2:15 (the poor man needing food and clothing); 3:3-4 (bits, rudders, and matches)
 - b. **here:** four (4) obvious rhetorical questions involving what something can or should produce
 1. a spring: can it produce salt water (while also producing fresh water)?
 2. a fig tree: can it produce olives?
 3. a grapevine: can it produce figs?
 4. a salt pond (or just salt): can it produce fresh water?
 5. there *may be* a bit of “sub-symbolism” in James framing the inner and outer elements similarly – the *contrasting* use of water sources *might* frame a *difference* between the two types of individuals implied in these questions (i.e. the regenerate vs. the reprobate; see below), with the *inner* examples implying what the true believer
 2. **the rhetorical point: the nature of an object determines what it produces**
 - a. **remember v. 5** = the language coming from an individual is indicative of who they really are, at *the core* – by definition, we speak “out of the well” of what we are (i.e. our knowledge, experiences, relationships, culture, education, interactions, worldview, etc.; Matt. 15:17-19)

“Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, ... false witness, slander.”

 1. i.e. the physical tongue is a small thing, but *controlled by the heart of a sinful individual*, it “boasts of great things” (i.e. it speaks in ways that demonstrate that sinful rebellion)
 3. **the implication being: if a person is truly born-again, the “produce” of his heart should be language consistent with that regenerated nature**
 - a. James *insists* that there is a *strong connection* between *true faith* (i.e. a genuine faith that is not just “words”) and the language (speech) of the individual – for the person who has *truly trusted in Christ by faith*, his language *must* reflect that change (Eph. 4:20-25, 29)

“But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another ... 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.”
 - b. **principle: those with a renewed heart know that one of the chief elements of discipleship is controlling how we speak, to speak in ways consistent with true faith in Christ**
 1. for the reprobate man, we should *expect* him to speak as one (e.g. as a salt pond)
 2. for the regenerate man, his language *will* reflect that new nature (e.g. as a spring)
- c. the application of the illustrations (now for some meddlin’ ...)**
1. the *popular* (fundamentalist) application of this text: that Christians should not swear or gossip
 - a. **IOW:** the *typical* approach to this passage – treat it as simply a “negative” application
 - b. **agreed:** that is a *proper* application of this text – James *clearly* is referencing language that is unholy and should not be used by believers
 1. with it we “*curse people*” (v. 9) = speaking ill of others (i.e. gossiping, rudeness, slander, etc.)
 2. from it comes “*cursing*” (v. 10a) = using filthy language (i.e. swearing, angry words, etc.)
 3. as Paul says in Eph. 4:29, we should speak no “*corrupting [unwholesome, evil] talk*”
 4. **IOW:** believers should *disciple* their words so that they are not *characterized* by such language
 5. e.g. years ago, my need to confront a co-worker about language that was affecting me
 - c. **but:** there is an *additional* (positive) application of this passage that should be true of believers
 1. or, what if James’ message isn’t just: don’t do this, but: **the work of genuine saving faith** is to speak in ways that *demonstrate that you are trusting in Christ* (e.g. produce figs or grapes)
 2. the “positive” (proactive) application of this text: that Christians should not only avoid certain “bad” forms of language, but should also practice (proactively) certain “good” ones
 - a. **IOW:** what if the *real sin* of language is our *failure to speak in certain positive ways*?

- b. **positive way #1:** using our language to **edify** others – to speak *positively* about someone, using our words to create hope and encouragement in others, to strengthen them to greater faith, either as a positive reinforcement of their good or an encouragement to press on in the face of failure
 - 1. edify = not just to compliment, but to build up; lit. to construct an *edifice* (**1 Cor. 10:23 KJV**)
"All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not [not all things build up]."
 - a. **i.e.** using our language to lift up fellow believers – to edify them by *both* calling them to repent (when necessary) *and* encouraging them when they are obedient
 - 2. **truth:** it is easy for us (in a fallen world) to criticize and complain – it is much harder to find something positive to say and then to go out of our way to actually say it
 - 3. **when was the last time that you purposely went out of your way to edify a fellow believer in his or her faith-life, to encourage another believer to a stronger walk with Christ?**
 - c. **positive way #2:** using our language to **evangelize** others – to speak forth the central message of the gospel to an unbeliever; to express the demand of the gospel to repentance and faith
 - 1. **truth:** those truly born-again by the Spirit have a heart that is *filled* with the reality of the **grace of God** – therefore, the primary thing *flowing out of that heart* should be words filled with the *content* of that grace (**i.e.** lit. the message of Christ)
 - a. **IOW:** just as the fig tree *must produce figs* (or it's worthless), the person saved by grace must produce words of **reproduction** – the gospel is "reproduced" through words
 - 2. **when was the last time that you purposely went out of your way to evangelize an unbelieving friend or co-worker with a message of repentance and faith?**
 - d. **positive way #3:** using our language to **express theology** – to talk about the things of God, to purposely talk about theology and doctrine within the scope of fellowship with other believers
 - 1. theology = lit. to talk about God (*theos* and *logos*); to discuss the *reality* of God's revelation as *it intersects* with our lives and the world around us
 - a. **i.e.** *theological dialogue* amongst believers is a *central expression* of the life of the church
 - 2. **truth:** it is easy for us (under the influence of our culture) to talk about "popular" subjects – it is much harder to have conversations about the content and implications of Scripture
 - 3. **when was the last time that you purposely went out of your way to turn the conversation with a fellow believer in the church to something biblical or theological in nature?**
3. **the first great "work of faith," the first great measurement of our trust in Christ, is the content of our speech – faith is not just "professing" that you believe, but speaking in a way that demonstrates the new nature within you – faith without consistently Christian speech is dead**