

Taming the Tongue – Part 2

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. some **opening questions** for the second half of the letter
 - a. have you ever told a lie, spoken rudely to someone, thrown a verbal temper tantrum, cursed, insulted someone by something you've said, spoken hastily and regretted it later as either an error in judgment or something that needed to be explained?
 - b. these are common to all of us, and they are a part of the *fallen nature* of human communication – they can be examples of *sinful language*, that which becomes the **first subject** of a new section
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?)
 1. **IOW:** what are the ways that those who trust in Christ *live out* that faith in everyday life?
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 part and parcel to being a new creation in Christ – one of the first “works” of a believer is how he or she speaks
 1. **principle: it is in our speech that our regeneration is most notable**
 - b. so, James starts the “practical” side of his letter by giving some instruction about the very nature of speaking and language itself ... and he starts by referencing the concept of a “teacher”
 1. because teachers use *language* to communicate, and teaching is the *primary means* by which the church is established and maintained, and
 2. because *Christian* teachers are tasked with communicating *truth*, therefore, those who use language to teach will be judged “stricter” in what they say and how they say it
 3. **IOW:** teaching (in the church) is an **example** of a form of *communication*, which leads James into his point about speech as a **genuine work of faith** ...

I. The Centrality of the Tongue (James 3:1-5a)

Content

c. the importance of speech (in all of life; vv. 2-5a)

1. “tongue” (**v. 5a**) = not the muscular flap in the mouth, but the whole of how a person *communicates*
 - a. **i.e.** like the heart – not the “blood pump” in the chest, but the control center of a person, the “soul” of the individual, where the totality of his thoughts, words, and deeds originate
 - b. the totality of how people *communicate* – verbal speech (including tone, inflection, volume, etc.), written language (in all its various forms; **e.g.** writing, typing, texting, etc.), sign language, foreign languages, translation, Morse Code, communication assumptions (**e.g.** telephone numbers), etc.
 - c. James uses the term in different ways, somewhat how he did with “faith” and “works” in **2:14-26** – sometimes as the physical tongue (the “small member”, **v. 5**), but mostly as above
 1. **i.e.** the physical tongue is not the only component of speaking (also the lungs, larynx, jaw, teeth), but it **euphemistically** “represents” the concept of spoken language
 2. **e.g.** we often use the term “native tongue” to refer to a person’s native language
2. the ability to use language is one of the *chief components* of the *Imago Dei*, separating humans from other creatures – in a sense, we *also* have the ability to “create” using our words:
 - a. **e.g.** marriages are formed by the minister’s word, we create and build *relationships* through communication, we can alter the *mood* or *emotional state* of another person by our words, etc.

- b. **language is a powerful tool, and it is central to the life of a human being**
1. **e.g.** the terror of “solitary confinement” is not the aloneness (introverts would be fine!), but the inability to communicate with other human beings over the long term
 2. **e.g.** the “#AloneTogether” hashtag is an *oxymoron* – human beings are *made* to be relational creatures, and being “alone” is *not being together* – **we need others to talk to, not just tweet**
 3. **e.g.** a child learning to speak is an *amazing* thing, but once a toddler learns to speak ...
3. **principle: language is central to what it means to be human, but it must be controlled by the person living in a fallen world (i.e. the point of vv. 2-5a)**
- a. **v. 2** = a *general principle* regarding the *problem* of language within the whole of a person
1. “*stumble*” = to trip; to fall; to fail (**see 2:10**); a *euphemism for sin* – a “polite” or “easier” way to say that (when it comes to language; **see below**) we all “*fall short*” (**Romans 3:23**)
 - a. conveying the idea of something we “miss” in our natural state (**e.g.** Jesus as the “stone of stumbling, a rock of offense” for Israel; **1 Peter 2:8 cf. Isaiah 8:14**)
 2. the **first sentence** of **v. 2** (then) is simply a statement about life in general – **i.e.** every human being, by virtue of living in a fallen world and being a fallen creature (implied), “*stumbles*”
 - a. **e.g.** sins of **commission** (purposely done) vs. sins of **omission** (things not done or things done without sinful *intention*, but still sinful nonetheless) – **IOW**: life is full of stumbling ...
 3. the **second sentence** of **v. 2** adds the term “*in what he says*” to narrow the focus of the sin in question to *language and communication (i.e. the particular problem he wants to address ...)*
 - a. but, James (once again!) uses a **preposterous example** to make his point:
 - b. a man who never stumbles (sins) in what he says (**i.e.** is able to control every word that comes out of his mouth) is also a man who would be able to control “*his whole body*”
 - c. **IOW**: only the man who can control *his every action* would be able to control *every word he speaks* – language is *central* to our nature, and a *fallen nature* leads to *fallen speech*
 1. the questions I asked at the outset *show the preposterousness* – no one (by definition) has such *total control* that he *never* commits any of these *faux pas*
 - d. **e.g.** it is the *words* of Jesus that we best see his *sinlessness* – **i.e.** the evidence of his sinlessness is in how he deals with matters *verbally* (**e.g.** how the Jews often tried to “*test him*” and his *verbal* response usually “shut them up”; **Matthew 22:34-46, esp. vv. 45f**)
“If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?” And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.”
- b. **vv. 3-4** = two (or three; **v. 5b**) *familiar examples* regarding the need for **control** of language
1. **IMO**: James is *not* saying that *language* is a “small thing” (**i.e.** true, the physical tongue is small, like a bit or a rudder [or a match; **v. 5b**], but it *represents something*)
 - a. **i.e.** the *physical tongue* *is* a small part of the human anatomy (true), but *language* (the metaphorical meaning of the tongue) is *huge* as a part of the person (**see above**)
 - b. **i.e.** if language (to James) is such a “small thing,” why spend so much energy making a *point about it* in the life of the believer?
 2. **IMO**: James *is* saying that *language* (represented by the physical tongue) must be **steered by the individual** – it is a part of the “larger picture” of communication in a fallen world (and, in this case, a *person of faith*)
 - a. a bit and a rudder *guide* the direction of a large object (a horse or a ship) – a small device that can turn a 1,000 pound horse or 100,000 ton cargo ship – a small bit or rudder are all it takes to turn a great horse or a massive ship (a single match can start a forest fire; **v. 5b**)
 1. just like our tongue is a part of the mechanism of physical speech
 - b. but, both a bit and a rudder **are controlled by someone**, a *rider* or a “*pilot*” – by themselves, neither object has any effect *per se* (**i.e.** the rudder does not have a “mind” of its own)
 1. our tongue, as a *part of the physical process of speaking*, must be controlled in order to be effective and useful (**e.g.** to just “make sounds” with our tongue is useless)
 - c. **IOW**: language (represented by the physical tongue) must be steered in order to be useful
- c. **v. 5** = the language coming from an individual is indicative of who they really are, *at the core*
1. by definition, we speak “out of the well” of what we are (**i.e.** our knowledge, experiences, relationships, culture, education, interactions, worldview, etc.; **Matthew 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.”
 - a. **i.e.** the physical tongue is a small thing, but *controlled by the heart of a sinful individual*, it “boasts of great things” (it can lie, it can claim to know things that are untrue, etc.)
 - b. **principle: what we say (and how we say it!) is reflective of who we really are – our speech is an indicator of our nature**

- d. **application: the Christian, *with the renewed heart*, knows that one of the *chief* elements of discipleship is controlling how we speak, to speak in ways *consistent with faith***
1. **note:** James has already condemned the concept of “speech that doesn’t save” (2:14-17)
 - a. **i.e.** the simplistic profession of words that don’t actually make one justified
 2. **so now:** James argues (by implication) that, for the one who has made a *true confession of trust in Christ*, his words now become *powerful evidence* of that change within him
 - a. **principle: it is in our speech that our regeneration is most notable**
 3. language is *central* to what it means to be human, and control of language is essential
 4. **so, for the believer, one of the first “works” of faith is to learn *under the direction of the Spirit* how to control every aspect of this *redeemed* element of the *Imago Dei* in us**