



“A Subject That is in Everybody’s Mouth” (James 3:1-12)

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This morning our ministry of the word takes up the subject that is in everybody’s mouth, the subject of the tongue. I begin by referring to a gravestone on a hillside in England, the repository of the bones of a woman named Arabella Young:

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

Arabella isn’t the only one to have trouble keeping that organ in check, even if her epitaph might suggest that she had more difficulty than most. If each one of us had the opportunity to change something from the past in our lives, and we thought carefully about it, most of us would probably like to have back certain thoughtless words that we have spoken, words that did damage to others, and through them did damage to ourselves.

Our text is the first twelve verses of James chapter 3, but since this is a passage about words, before I read it I wanted to share with you something from my files, a few proverbs that could be styled “words to live by.” I don’t really know where these came from but if I had to guess I would say they sound very much like something that Will Rogers, the American humorist, might have uttered a few decades ago. Here they are:

- Behind every successful man is a surprised mother-in-law.

- A penny saved is ridiculous.
- Life and liberty are safe only when congress is in recess.

There's a lot of truth in that one. I've been surprised what a warm feeling I get from time to time when I hear that the federal government has shut down because the congress can't agree on something. But the last one is the one I think that our author James would at least be somewhat sympathetic toward...

- A closed mouth gathers no feet.

This one may have been conceived by someone who heard the report that the average person utters 25-30,000 words in the course of a typical day. Somebody once calculated that people put out in oral form the equivalent of a 54-page book every day. Over the course of a year, that would produce about 66 800-page books if everything was written down. If you are like the average person, you spend one fifth of your life talking.

SCRIPTURE: JAMES 3:1-12

1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. 2 For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a mature man, able also to bridle the whole body. 3 Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. 4 Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. 5 Even so the tongue is a little member yet it boasts great things.

See how great a forest a little fire kindles! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.

7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. 8 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing.

My brethren, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON JAMES 3:1-12

Let me begin this morning with a few observations on this passage that will help us to gain some benefit from it. First of all, notice that...

This passage marks the longest continuous discussion of the tongue in the Bible

There are many passages in Scripture that talk about our words, but they are for the most part scattered about. In fact, references to the tongue are scattered about in James. He mentions the tongue in every chapter. You see it in 1:19 and 1:26; again in 2:12; again in 4:11, and in 5:12.

But here in 3:1-12 we get a concentrated dose of very pointed wisdom about the power and danger of words. I can tell you that I personally find this passage very sobering and convicting. For close to 50 years I have been carrying on a ministry by means of words, and when you read James 3 you start to think about that.

I calculated not long ago that I have spoken and written during those years about 30 million words. It really gives you a little chill when you remember the warning of the Lord Jesus, who said, *“I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment”* (Matt. 12:36). So anything I say today that may apply to you, will apply to me all the more.

So many words... and yet Scripture insists, *“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such [a word] as is good for edification according to the need [of the moment], so that it will give grace to those who hear”* (Eph. 4:29). If we speak 25-30,000 words a day, it seems highly likely that somewhere in the process an unwholesome word or two will slip through. That is why James 3 is so valuable.

For some the solution might seem to lie in simply speaking less. But that is not necessarily God’s advice for the handling of the tongue, as we shall see. But with that brief preface, let’s see what James had to say about the tongue and its proper use in the Christian life.

A second observation is this...

This discussion on the tongue has to do especially with the business of teaching.

James is warning us not to be too quick in acquiring an ambition to be a teacher. Teachers of necessity have to use words, lots of them, and so we place ourselves at some risk of their misuse. And yet, to balance that somewhat, please notice that James is not reluctant to admit that he himself is in fact a teacher. He says, *“We shall incur a stricter judgment.”* James is teaching in his letter, he taught frequently when the church gathered, and he is not going to give up his teaching ministry

just because it means that he will have to answer for his words at the judgment seat of Christ. But he recognizes the dangers. Thirdly...

Teaching remains fundamental to Christian discipleship despite the risks

The last thing Jesus said to the apostles as he was taken up into heaven was to go and disciple the nations, a process that would include teaching disciples to observe everything that he had commanded them. Those who are gifted as teachers will not be able to lay aside their responsibilities as teachers just because words are essential to the process. But they should go into it with their eyes open and aware of the pluses and minuses of words.

Teaching is central to Christian discipleship because of the power of words. We tend to dismiss that idea pretty quickly, but to do so is a mistake. Words matter. They matter to the people who hear them because they penetrate. Proverbs 12:18 says, "*Thoughtless words can wound like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*" They touch in places where no other person can see. They shape us.

Fourthly...

James is aiming at the teaching that takes place through informal conversations.

And, of course, a great deal of teaching takes place just that way, through one-on-one discussions. Some of the most powerful teaching, some of the teaching that marks lives, takes place that way. And just because it is informal and conversational does not mean that it can be approached casually. Wholesome words are the order of every day.

And finally, a fifth observation...

The passage inaugurates the middle section of James's letter

James organizes the body of his letter under three headings, all of which are found in verses 19-20 of chapter 1. He says, "*Let everyone be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God.*" We have finished the "swift to hear" portion of the letter, covering the first two chapters. Chapter 3 will cover "slow to speak," and chapter 4 and part of 5 will address "slow to anger."

And please notice that it is "slow to speak." It is not "not to speak." If we don't use words at all, we miss opportunities to do good. And there are people who have tried to address the issues of the tongue by simply saying nothing, and it won't work. Even David tried it, and found that it wasn't helpful. He wrote, "*I said, 'I will guard my ways, lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle, while the wicked are before me.' I was mute with silence, I held my peace*

even from doing good; and my sorrow was stirred up” (Psa. 39:1-2). He had to junk that resolution and to think about ways to be slow to speak rather than not to speak at all.

So what are we supposed to know about being slow to speak? James tells us, first of all, about...

THE POWER OF THE TONGUE

You see the power of the tongue in verse 3: *“Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member yet it boasts great things.”* The emphasis is on control, not harm, in these verses. Here we see...

The strength the tongue displays

The tongue can do great good as well as harm. It’s like nuclear power. You can use it to destroy a city or to light up a city. You can use atomic power to take lives or to save them by its use in medicine.

We don’t often think about the good things that words can do, but Scripture is filled with references to them. For example, you find Scripture saying, *“The lips of the righteous feed many”* (Prov. 10:21). We basically learn the content of our faith by means of words. Words become a means of feeding people what they need for their souls, and equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

Scripture teaches that words can be therapeutic: *“Anxiety in the heart of a person causes depression, but a good word makes it glad”* (Prov. 12:25). There are great benefits to the careful and edifying use of the tongue. It is a strong instrument. But of course that’s not the whole story. In the middle of verse 5 James turns to point out...

The harm the tongue can do

He writes, *“See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.”* You can come up with many examples of how this verse is true, probably none better than Mrs. O’Leary’s cow. In Chicago, in 1871, a cow knocked over a lantern while she was being milked, and the barn caught fire. The fire spread rapidly all around, and before it was over the city of Chicago had basically burned down. Over 100,000 people were left homeless, 17,000 buildings were destroyed costing 400 million

dollars to rebuild in 1871 dollars. That's the kind of thing the tongue can accomplish all by itself. It gives off sparks when people are quick to make thoughtless comments, and often lives are severely damaged or even destroyed.

I think all of us could give examples of occasions where hurtful words, gossip, half-truths, and innuendo have done terrible damage to ourselves or to people we know. Speaking too quickly and too critically can do great harm. And for most of us, critics are a dime a dozen and can be found on every street corner. What we need are people who can help us see strengths that God can build on to produce possibilities for the future.

But the interesting part of this section to me is how self-destructive the tongue is. We don't often think of its dangers in that sense, but notice how in verse 6 James tells us what careless words do to the one who speaks them: "*The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.*" The tongue defiles the whole body. James took that statement, by the way, directly from Jesus. In Mark 7:20-23, the Lord Jesus said, "*That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting [and] wickedness, [as well] [as] deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride [and] foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.*" Harsh and thoughtless words fit into that category, as James notes here.

Now James moves on from the power of the tongue to its perplexity.

THE PERPLEXITY OF THE TONGUE

He begins in verse 7: "*For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue.*" Well, this is a bit discouraging, I think you could say. There is so much damage that thoughtless words can do, James says, that it would be great if we could just treat the tongue like we treat a circus elephant. Elephants can do all kinds of impressive tricks, as large and imposing and as difficult to manage as they are. But the tongue, which is so much smaller, can't simply be tamed that way. It's untamable. All we can do is contain it and minimize its damage. Why is that? For two reasons. First...

It is insubordinate

He goes on to say, "*It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.*" Here we have the refutation of one of America's great proverbs. Probably most of us have heard or

have been taught the famous tidbit of wisdom, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me,” or some variation thereof. I don’t know who invented that one, but they ought to be forced to make a public recanting of it. Names in fact do hurt. Vicious comments do terrible damage to people’s lives, especially when uttered by people close to us that we love. We often struggle for years to compensate for the discouragements that issue from hostile comments made by others. This is especially true in the case of remarks made by parents toward children.

The tongue, James says, is unruly. It doesn’t follow orders. It is insubordinate and refuses to cooperate even when you are determined to be different. Then, too, the tongue is perplexing because...

It is inconsistent

Notice verse 9: “*With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.*”

Thoughtless speech decidedly sours our worship. That word *similitude* in verse 9 deserves a word of explanation: “*With the tongue we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God.*”

That word *similitude* could also be translated *likeness* or *image*. People, he says are made in the image of God. Now it is important to understand that the image of God refers mainly to the way we can relate to God as persons. It refers to personality—typically defined as intellect, emotions, and will. That combination of factors is what enables us to relate to God. Only humans have it. Animals don’t have it. Plants don’t have it. Only humans.

Occasionally people try to say that when man fell, he lost the image of God; but that is a mistake. The fall didn’t erase the image of God, but it did damage it. It is still there. It is still recognizable, but it is defaced. When a person is converted, God begins to reshape that image of God in the new convert. In Colossians 3:9-10, the apostle Paul says, “*Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its [evil] practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.*” Christian discipleship is a process of continual renewal. God upgrades us, as it were, constantly to more closely resemble the image of God that belonged to humanity before the fall.

But even without conversion, the image is there. That is why James brings this up. Any human being you meet possesses this image in varying degrees, and James says that this is why you should never insult another human being. It puts the lie to our praises. It is a contradiction to offer praise to God with the same mouth that we use to insult people made in his image.

Now this all sounds pretty discouraging on the face of it. What are we to do about our tongues? To what degree can we manage them, if we can't quite tame them? What, in fact, are the possibilities of the tongue?

THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE TONGUE

Words can do incredible good, and that is where our focus ought always to be. It is interesting, standing late in life as I am, to look back on the chain of people who influenced me through their words. I was heavily influenced when I was in college by the director of the Campus Crusade for Christ ministry at UCLA, which is where CCC (called CRU today) began. What I didn't know at the time was that Crusade was just a few years old at the time I got involved in it. It had been founded by Bill Bright, who in turn was greatly influenced by a woman named Henrietta Mears.

If the name isn't familiar, Miss Mears was for a long time the director of Christian education for Hollywood Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. When she was there, there were 4,000 people involved in her programs every week. Her biographer says that when she finished her work at Hollywood Presbyterian that there were over 400 young people who had gone into Christian service due to her influence. Among those were the man who was my pastor in college, the man who also married Cheryl and me, as well as Bill Bright and Richard Halverson, who became in time the chaplain of the US Senate.

Her parents probably knew early on that Henrietta was going to be something special. When she was six, she told her mother after school one day, "I'm bored with kindergarten. Kindergarten is designed to amuse young children, but I'm already amused enough. I want to be educated." Precocious, huh? In time everybody would see that she wasn't bluffing.

Henrietta was a key player in the founding of the National Sunday School Association. She knew that churches needed better teachers and better literature, and the association helped to spread her ideas.

She was not happy with the Sunday School literature that was in use in her own church when she was starting her work at Hollywood Presbyterian, so she sought to improve it. As part of this effort, she founded what eventually became Gospel Light Publications which for many years produced quality Sunday School curricula and influenced many evangelical leaders. We have used it in our own Sunday School programs here at CBC at various times. Gospel Light started it in her garage in 1933. She was also the visionary behind the founding of Forest Home Conference Center in southern California where thousands of people were brought to Christ and disciplined in the faith. *“The lips of the righteous feed many.”* Words have power for good as well as ill, and the chain of spiritual feeding goes on to this day.

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