

TONGUE TROUBLE

INTRODUCTION

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Sound familiar? Maybe you heard it from your parents, or a teacher. You may have even said it to your own children. The meaning is hurtful words cannot cause any physical harm. Thus, they hold no power. I can say from personal experience, words either spoken or written to us or about us, have great impact. They affect how we think and feel about ourselves. No, words may not cause physical harm, but they can cause great pain and leave permanent scars.

As we continue our series on godly communication, we will be in James chapter 3. There are 59 commands in 108 verses in this epistle of James. At first glance it appears he has a zeal for law and obedience. And even though James never quotes Jesus, he alludes to His words throughout the epistle. There are many parallels between the words of James and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. His most contentious statement in the letter is his statement, faith without works is dead. If you are not careful, you can walk away from the book feeling like the gospel is a works-based religion. Hence Luther's struggle with the epistle itself.¹ Yet, James knows it is only by the grace of God, that we have the power to obey (James 1:21).

This epistle is addressing issues of division within the church. The rich were being shown favoritism over the poor; words were being thrown around in judgment of one another; and their actions were not congruent of those who profess faith in Christ. All these issues resulted in fights and quarrels. In summary, the people inside the church were becoming like the people outside the church, people of the world, living like the world.

Verses 26-27 in chapter 1 sum up the book well. Flip back a page and let's read it.

²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Now let's pick up in James 3 verse 1. But before that, let's pray.

DANGERS OF THE TONGUE (v.1-12)

*¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers,
for you know*

that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

² For we all stumble in many ways.

And if anyone does not stumble in what he says,

he is a perfect man,

able also to bridle his whole body.

³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us,

we guide their whole bodies as well.

⁴ Look at the ships also:

¹ Doriani, D. M. (2007). [James](#). (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (pp. 6–7). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

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*though they are so large and are driven by strong winds,
they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.*

⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

THE TONGUE IS POWERFUL (v.1-5A)

Teachers have tremendous influence. Think about this: The Creator of the universe sent His Son not build, plant, or create, although He did do these things, but He sent Him to teach and preach the Good News. James is addressing the power of our words.

"Of all the talents bestowed upon men, none is so precious as the gift of oratory. He who enjoys it wields a power more durable than that of a great king. He is an independent force in the world. Abandoned by his party, betrayed by his friends, stripped of his offices, whoever can command this power is still formidable," - Winston Churchill.

If I say, "Fourscore and seven years ago..." most of you know what I am about to say. You know what it means, and you know the powerful impact it had in the history in the life of this country. Or, this one, "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood." Reading and/or hearing these speeches and others like them can move us to tears. They engage our hearts and minds. They stir our emotions and can ignite our spirit and inspire us to lay down our lives for others. But, unfortunately, in this fallen world, words can also inspire people to commit unspeakable acts. Great orators have created cultic followings and ominous world powers. We are a people wooed by words.

Therefore, not many of us should become teachers. We all fall short of the glory of God and no one is righteous. As one commentator says, "There is no sin into which it is easier to fall and none which has graver consequences than the sin which is the result of something uttered."² Jesus warned us, "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matt. 12:37).

[CLICK] James follows up with the two illustrations; the bit for a horse and the rudder of a ship. A bit is the part of the bridle that is inserted into a horse's mouth. It enables a rider to cue a horse by placing pressure in and around the horse's mouth.

This pressure is used to control the horse's speed and direction of movement.³ They are used to train horses to obey. If the horse runs contrary to the ride's desire, he/she uses the bit to direct and guide the horse to its proper direction and speed. The second illustration has to do with power in size. Have you seen a large cargo boat? They are enormous and yet, they are navigated by one man, and a rudder. The ships go where the helmsman directs. What would happen if we were to attempt to ride a horse without a bit? Or if we were to direct a ship without a rudder? We would be at the mercy of the will of the horse and the winds and waves of the sea. No control, no direction. This is true of the tongue also. It too is a very small member but can boast great things. The ability to say the right words at the right times is a gift. It can grow your friendships and even advance your career. Many people have acquired positions based on their wooing words in an interview. If you control the tongue, you can

² Barclay, W. (2003). [*The Letters of James and Peter*](#) (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, p. 95). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

³"Understanding Bits for Horses Learning Lesson - EXTension." *Extension.Org*, 2015, articles.extension.org/pages/10858/understanding-bits-for-horses-learning-lesson.

direct your course of your life, either for good or for evil. The incredible power of the tongue. But not only is the tongue powerful, but it can also be poisonous. Let's read 5-8.

THE TONGUE IS POISONOUS (V.5B-8)

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

⁶And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.

The tongue is set among our members,

staining the whole body,

setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

⁷For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature,

can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,

⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue.

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Over the last few years we have seen the devastation a forest fire can have on people. Million-dollar homes have been reduced to ashes. In 2018, over 1.5 million acres were burned and over 100 people lost their lives⁴ due to wildfires. These wildfires cost the state of California over 700 million dollars⁵ in damages. Some of those fires started with a small match. Like the match, the tongue can be as devastating. Words have sparked revolutions and rebellions, resulting in the conquering of nations. But not only can the tongue bring down nations it can bring down people groups, teams and individuals. Sports teams are strongest when they are unified. The words of a discontented player can spread like a cancer and destroy it's unity. In the same way, a discontented individual can bring division and destruction to a church. Even on a personal level, a few words can destroy a person's confidence and worth. As a coach I have seen words elevate an individual to great achievements. But I have also observed words cut deeply into the very core of the individual. When emotions are high and fiery, words fly like shrapnel. And the scars from these words can last a lifetime. I'm sure we can all think of hurtful words spoken to us. We obviously have never forgotten. Sometimes, those effects stay with us and we treat others the same damaging way. We can also spread "a world of unrighteousness" within our homes. Parents, your children will duplicate what they hear in your home. If you are biting and devouring others, they will do the same. Hence, spreading the wildfire of the devastating effects of the tongue.

Our tongues also stain our whole bodies. In other words, our character. It doesn't matter how you present yourself, your speech will ultimately reflect who you are. If you lose credibility, your words won't matter. You will lose your listeners.

And our speech does not necessarily have to be evil in its words. Humor can be just as detrimental to our character and others. Our jokes normally stem from some fault we see in others. We poke and jab with our words to gain a laugh from a crowd or a few friends. When we hurt others with our humor, we will attempt to cover it up by saying, "I was only joking." Our joy and self-exaltation at someone else's expense. The funny thing is, we tear down others due to our own insecurities. Hurtful words are a sign of weakness within.

When you are tearing down others, your friendships will suffer. If you have a difficult time maintaining relationships, check your speech with others. Your biting tongue may be destroying your relationships. When

⁴ Cart, Julie. "Tracking California's Deadly Wildfires." *CALmatters*, 17 Oct. 2018, calmatters.org/articles/california-wildfires-statistics-tracker/.

⁵ "Fire Statistics." *Ca.Gov*, 2018, cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/incidents/incidents_stats?year=2018.

character is marked by your worthless and ungodly speech, others will not listen to you. James does not mince words. He uses clear and powerful metaphors and illustrations to make his point. Harsh, destructive, biting, and dividing words come from hell itself. The match from the fires of hell feed our evil hearts and spread fires with our words.

Man can claim great accomplishments. In fact, man can and has tamed great animals of every size and kind, but we cannot tame our words. Have you ever known it was better to refrain from speaking but regardless of your efforts, you could not stop them from being spoken? Sometimes they fire out like a bullet from a gun. Once it leaves the chamber and hits its target, there is no turning back. The damage is done. There is no retrieving it nor reversing the damages at that point. Other times, like an aerial bomb, they dropped off our lips with devastating destruction. Sometimes no matter how hard we fight to restrain them, we are unable to control them. Have you ever burned bridges due to a misspoken word? Not only is the tongue powerful, and poisonous, but it is also perverse.

THE TONGUE IS PERVERSE (V.9-12)

⁹ *With it we bless our Lord and Father,
and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.*

¹⁰ *From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.*

My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

¹¹ *Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?*

¹² *Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs?*

Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

We come here and sing the praises of our Lord and Savior. We may even be brought to tears contemplating the glories of Calvary. But soon afterward, we speak vile words toward someone who cuts us off on the way home. Maybe we don't have to leave this building for our tongues to be prompted to speak evil. Do we ever look at others in this church, think evil thoughts and have hatred in our hearts? We may not share those here, but just wait until you get home and out pours verbal vomit of ridicule and judgment. "Can you believe what so and so said?" "Did you see what they were wearing?" "They didn't even say a word to me!" "They wouldn't even look at me, they are so..." See how judgment can lead us to a restless evil tongue? That's normally where it starts. Judgment made upon others in our hearts. However, we'll ask each other for prayer when desperate. We'll praise God in song. Yet, tear others down and apart with words. This is defiled religion. As we heard last week, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). If your speech is evil, wicked, and cruel, then it reflects your heart. And ultimately a reflection of what you believe about God, about Jesus. If your heart is committed to Christ and the gospel then your words will reflect that love. And if not, it will reflect that too. We are not to have gospel grace and earthly passions flowing from the same heart. How do we overcome such dissension and inner conflict? Let's read on...

WISDOM FROM ABOVE (V.13-18)

¹³ *Who is wise and understanding among you?*

By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

¹⁴ *But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts,
do not boast and be false to the truth.*

¹⁵ *This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.*

¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

After James has exposed his readers, he challenges them with a question. If you think you are so wise and understanding, then show it. Here is the crux of the message. Many of us have opinions on everything we are involved in. And we have opinions on people in the church, people in ministries, and ministry leaders, and elders.

WISDOM IS HUMBLE (v.13)

How does wisdom handle these inner thoughts and struggles? Those who are wise are first humble. If you claim to be wise, then demonstrate your wisdom by your works.⁶ You may be a great orator. You may speak sound words and attract a great following. But if you don't live what you preach and teach, then your words are worthless. Wisdom acts. It is seen and not always heard. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and its result is a life lived counterculturally. James once again is matching faith and works.

But the works James has in view are those stemming from a meek heart. The wise and understanding are those who are humble. Biblically wise people, those who fear the Lord, will know they are depraved. They know they fall short of the glory of God and therefore, spend their time looking at Jesus and not others. Their outward conduct is evidenced by their inward belief. In humility they serve. How do you know the level of humility of someone's heart? By what they do and how little they say.

WISDOM IS GENUINE (v.14-16)

Wisdom also probes the depths of our hearts. It does not cover up what we are internally. James knows there will be times when jealousy will consume us. Have you ever compared yourself with others in this church? Maybe you are of other's lifestyle or their possessions. Or you get jealous other's gifts and talents. When this root grows, it begins to tear you apart internally. Will no longer be thinking the best of everyone, only the worst. Jealousy can consume your every thought.

What about selfish ambition? Sometimes this will be the engine driving our actions. We will want to be praised for what we do. It confirms for our hearts, we aren't that bad. Other times, we think we could do a better job than them. It becomes a competition within ourselves with others. The irony is that others don't even know they're in the race. Jealousy and selfish ambition are not from above. It is earthly, unspiritual, and if that wasn't enough, James calls it demonic.

But James opened this section with the words "but if". Meaning, there may be times when this is the state of your heart. So, the question is, what will you do when your heart is in this wicked condition? Will you lie and fake it. Will you present yourself before others as if you need no help? You will see this when others begin boasting of all that they have done or are doing.

As parents, it may manifest itself in continually promoting their children's accomplishments. We are shielding our inward insecurities. We present an image of outward confidence, when in reality, we are crumbling inside.

⁶ Doriani, D. M. (2007). [James](#). (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (pp. 168). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

If we are worldly inside, we will be worldly on the outside. And worldliness in the church, among other things, will cause disorder and division. Left untreated, “it will lead to every vile practice.” If we do not keep our hearts in check with the gospel, we will progress further into darkness. There will be no limit to its deadly effects not only on ourselves, but also to the body of Christ. But now we read the contrast.

WISDOM IS PEACEABLE (V.17-18)

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Wisdom from above is first pure. Purity is not perfection here. Rather it is knowing our weaknesses and being humble enough to admit and accept them. We see our need for the gospel, we see our need of forgiveness, and it transforms our hearts. We then seek peace in conflict. We work to resolve differences. We are quick to forgive, ready to reconcile quickly. We are a reasonable people. We remind ourselves we are all on the same team working for the same Savior and we are all saints in the body of Christ. Our words will be pure, undefiled, and ready to encourage. It's funny, we all love and desire mercy and grace, but sometimes we battle in showing it to others. When are living in the wisdom from above, we will work together for unity, and treat each other better than we deserve. We will be gentle with words. And, we will follow through with commitments. When the gospel is rooted within our hearts, there will be a harvest. It will produce fruit. Having an understanding of the peace we have with God, will result in peace with others. This peace will manifest itself in our actions and words with one another. You want to see a harvest of righteousness in your life, read the gospel, know the gospel, and preach the gospel to yourself daily.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

What are your words like? How do you speak to others? Your wife, your husband, your children? Be careful what you say and keep your eyes on the cross.

What about your actions? Do they match your words? Great teachers are great to have around, but over time if they are not modeling what they teach, they are frauds.

Do you tear down others whether within the church or without the church? If you are involved in gossip and slander outside the church, why would Jesus be attractive to any unbeliever?

As I was preparing this message, I confess the weight of many of my past interactions with others came flooding back into the present. Times when my words were harsh, painful, and deadly in that they have damaged relationships and even destroyed others. To this day, I have vivid memories of my failures. So how I can stand up here a speak these words to you with any conviction? It is only by the grace of Jesus Christ. As an elder, a teacher, I know the bar is higher for me than others. But in the kingdom of God, the bar is not something we climb to meet. It is not a competition, nor is it garnering the most praise or education. It is quite the opposite. It is being brought low. It is falling at the feet of Jesus. The way up to the kingdom, is by falling down before the King. That is all the hope I have, and that is all the hope that you have. And, my hope is that Christ does redeem our failures, redeems our words even when they are damaging in the lives of others. Proverbs 18:21 says, “*Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.*”