

Taming the Tongue – Part 3

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 **unfortunate nature** of the second half of the letter
 - a. 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)
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*
 - a. **i.e.** the ability to communicate complex concepts is what separates us from other creatures
 2. language has an inherent *ability* to “create” – just as God creates through language, so do we
 - a. **e.g.** marriages (via the minister), relationships (via speaking to one another), moods
 - b. **and faith itself** by the preaching and the hearing of the word of Christ (**Romans 10:17**)
 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)
 - a. **e.g.** like a bit or a rudder, language must be “steered” by the individual for it to be useful
 4. language is *reflective* of who we are as human – our speech is an indicator of our *nature*
 - a. **i.e.** what comes out of the mouth indicates what we are *ontologically*
 - b. **principle: it is in our speech that our regeneration is most notable**
 5. (**now**) language *also* has an inherent *ability* to “destroy” – and this is where James goes ...

II. The Power of the Tongue (James 3:5b-10a)

Content

a. the destructive power of the tongue (vv. 5b)

1. **remember:** James uses the word “*tongue*” *interchangeably* to mean two different things
 - a. the muscular flap in our mouth vs. the whole world of language and communication
 - b. like the concepts of “*faith*” and “*works*” in the previous section – two *overlapping* ideas mixed together to paint a picture that makes his point
 - c. **IOW:** the “smallness” of the *physical* tongue is contrasted in this pericope with the “grandness” of its power – whereas the *physical* tongue is small, the *power of language* is immense
2. **remember:** James uses two imageries prior to this to describe the steering of the tongue, so **v. 5b** becomes a *third one* designed to transition to his next point
 - a. a bit and a rudder act as *steering mechanisms* (**i.e.** the tongue can act as a steering mechanism which must be *controlled*), but a “*small fire*” (a match) can “*set ablaze*” a “*great forest*”
 - b. **e.g.** a faulty transmission line probably arced, sparking the 2018 **Camp Fire** in N CA which destroyed 153,000 acres, 19,000 structures, and killed 85 people
3. **a single word coming out of the mouth of an individual can do great damage**
 - a. **e.g.** a rude word can ruin a good mood, a hastily spoken word in error can ruin a trust, a single, innocuous lie (or half-truth) can spread and ruin a man’s reputation (**e.g.** a false accusation), etc.
 - b. **e.g.** social media is one of the *easiest* ways (now) to spread maliciousness and falsehood

b. the innate power of the tongue (vv. 6)

1. “a world of unrighteousness” = virtually every form of evil in the world is expressed *verbally* or through some means of human communication involving words
 - a. since language is so *pervasive* in our nature as image bearers of God, it stands to reason that *every form of evil in the world* finds an expression *one way or another* through words
 1. **e.g.** at the end of the “cycle of depravity” of **Romans 1:18-32**, Paul lists a number of forms of evil that ultimately *characterize* those turned over by God to their evil – every one of them has a *verbal component*: deceit, maliciousness, gossip, slander, insolence, boasting, including “*disobedient to parents*,” which typically begins with the verbal retort by the child of “no!”
 - b. like fire (which spreads rapidly), so the evil that starts with words “spreads” rapidly through us
 1. a single harsh word turns into a many harsh words and an overall feeling of anger
 2. **e.g.** murder starts with angry words and *permeates* us until we commit the act (**Matthew 5:22**)
“But I say to you that everyone who is *angry* with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever *insults* his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever *says*, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”
2. “*staining the whole body*” = sinful language is a part of the **concupiscence** of the flesh
 - a. concupiscence = the strong *desire* (**1:16**) inherent in fallen man to act in ways that are evil (to sin); the nature of the fallen man whereby he desires to do what is wrong; the sinful human nature
 - b. the effect of the Fall whereby all who are descended from Adam possess his fallen nature and are, thereby, filled with every kind of desire to do evil (including his desire to *speak wickedly*)
 - c. this desire permeates the *heart* (**Matthew 15:19**) and the *flesh* (**1 John 2:16**) of the fallen man, including his most *prominent* capability: the ability to speak (to communicate)
 1. but, upon regeneration by the Spirit, the *heart* of the believer is “reborn” to a state of good, thus concupiscence remains *only in the flesh* of the believer (until the day of resurrection)
 2. this explains the statement of **vv. 9-10a** (see below) – as followers of Christ, we are able to speak what is good and righteous, and (yet) find ourselves still speaking in wicked ways
3. “*setting on fire the entire course of life*” (or the entire “*wheel of birth*”) = the sinfulness of language permeates into every part of our earthly existence, from birth to death
 - a. **principle: the destiny of every human being is revealed by what they profess in words**
 - b. **e.g.** the reprobate expresses an eternal *hatred* of God – the *vitriol* of the reprobate exposes his destiny to a state of eternal rebellion and damnation (see **Gehenna lectures**)
4. “*set on fire by hell*” = the sinfulness of language *begins* in the rebellion of Satan himself, and continues through the reprobate until the destiny of hell is realized
 - a. **note:** this is one of those “revelations of Scripture” that became new to me this week ...
 - b. **question:** how did Satan get Eve to eat from the forbidden tree (**Genesis 3**) – what *technique* did the serpent use to get her sin against the express command of God (over against *force*)?
 - c. **answer: he used words** – he *convinced her*, through half-truths, obfuscations, and false promises
 1. true, she *ultimately* saw that the fruit was pleasing and inviting but, her deception was won by Satan’s words, *which convinced her to distrust the words of God*
 2. Satan used the singular power of language against her – he “turned” the most *significant* gift given to her *as a human being* into an instrument of deception and destruction
 3. and, when confronted, Adam immediately used *sinful words* to both explain and defend himself
 - a. he tells God he hid because he “*was naked*” (**Gen. 3:10**) – **i.e.** he understood a *new word*
 - b. he *deflects* his guilt before God onto his wife (**Gen. 3:12**) – **i.e.** he blames *her* for his failing
 - d. **reality: the sinfulness of language is primordial in nature – it is at the core of the Fall**

c. the restless power of the tongue (vv. 7-8)

1. “a restless evil” = unstable (see **1:8**); uncontrollable; almost *anarchic* (**i.e.** under no rule of law)
 - a. James uses *imagery* here of the restless nature of language: the **domestication** of animals
 - b. under the creation mandate of **Genesis 1:28**, humans were given the power to “*take dominion*” over every animal, to bring them to a proper use within the flourishing of human beings
 - c. and, as James notes, humanity has (in fact) domesticated wide swaths of the animal kingdom
 1. as food stocks, as pets, as wonders of the world (**i.e.** in zoos), etc.
 2. **IOW:** humanity *has* been successful (in limited ways) of fulfilling the creation mandate
 - d. however, with the Fall, the human ability to “domesticate” language has been lost
 1. just like the animal kingdom now flees in terror from us because of sin (**note Genesis 9:2**), our ability to live in perfect harmony with animals has been lost
 2. the eternal promise of the kingdom is the “*leopard lying down with the young goat*” (**Isa. 11:6**)
 - e. **reality: the sinfulness of language is wild in nature – it is a wild beast, untamable**
2. “*full of deadly poison*” = (as noted above) language has the ability to *kill* (to destroy)

d. the inconsistent power of the tongue (vv. 9-10a)

1. **note:** most everything in **v. 5b-8** is a condemnation of the sinfulness of language across *the entirety of fallen humanity* – while true in the *continuing* concupiscence of the flesh in the elect, it is more of an indictment of the whole race and how language is so *pervasively evil* by virtue of the Fall
 - a. however, it would *appear* that in **v. 9** James turns specifically to “*we*” – the nature of language *in the elect*, and (more specifically) the *appropriate response* of language as a “*work*” of faith
 - b. **IOW:** the ability to “*bless our Lord and Father*” *in words* is only possible in the regenerate
2. there is a deep inconsistency that remains in the language of those who are born again, and it is that inconsistency that must be addressed as one of the *primary* works of faith
 - a. **i.e.** the inconsistency of blessing God and cursing people *with the same mouth*
 - b. **i.e.** the inconsistency of claiming to love God and (yet) speaking ill of those *created in his image*
 1. the Christian, *unlike the reprobate*, understands the significance of the *Imago Dei* – thus, he *defends life* because all human beings are made in the image of God
 2. thus, for a believer to speak ill of another image bearer, *even one that is reprobate*, is to denigrate the significance of this new knowledge *and to attack the very character of God*
3. **application: what do your words, specifically your feelings towards others, reveal about you?**
 - a. are you able to say that there is a **consistency** between your love of God and your love of those created in his image, *regardless of their feelings towards you*?