

TAMING THE TONGUE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

James 3:1-12

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. (James 3:5)

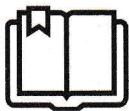
STEPPING INTO THE WORD

“I once caught a fish THIS big,” said my friend, spreading her arms as wide as possible. She is my favorite preacher, a woman with impeccable intuition about what a congregation needs to hear, whether it is the local church she serves or the transitory community gathered at a wider church event. She often jokes that exaggeration is an important tool for preachers, or perhaps it is not a joke at all. The talent for taking an ordinary story—catching a fish—and making it distinctive enough in its details to illustrate a teaching point that will be remembered is a gift. Even her less spectacular sermons tend to succeed because, as she says, “I end well.”

Rhetorical power is a real thing. My preacher friend uses her verbal force for positive reasons: to break forth the good news, to motivate the passive, to comfort the downhearted, and to educate the willing. That same power can be used for negative purposes too. If you had ever heard her yell at a *#&@\$#*^ Little League umpire, you would not want to be on her bad side.

Our words have an impact on others, and our unkind words most of all. James feels strongly enough about the harmful potential of gossip and other forms of hate speech that he uses all the metaphors he can gather to direct his readers toward blessing rather than cursing one another. Whether with our families, our faith communities, or our neighbors beyond the church walls, Christians need to practice using our words for good, because it does not come naturally.

Creator of All That is Good, you made us, and you know us, and you love us, even when we lose control of our tongues. Help us to manage ourselves better, for Christ's sake. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

James 3:1-12

3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet 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 exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

A WORD ABOUT METAPHOR

Earlier in this unit, we considered the use of metaphor in Scripture and the risk of reading something literally when it is intended to be a figure of speech. The images used by James as a teaching tool in chapter 3 are all intended to be read as metaphors, common images that help us understand a concept better. In this case, he emphasizes the power of the tongue to cause trouble and injury and offers warnings against its misuse.

Aficionados of horseback riding will recognize the function of a bridle and bit, both used by a rider to guide a horse. The bit sits in the horse's mouth, in a section where there are no teeth, and is held in place by the headgear of the bridle. The rider uses the attached reins to reinforce what is desirable; a reward for doing

something right comes through the release of pressure. James reminds us that people who always use speech well are under the same pressure as the rest of us. They are just better at keeping themselves in check.

He goes on to use the metaphor of a ship, in this case a sailing vessel, propelled by wind. Even a very large ship is steered by a rudder that is relatively small compared to the size of the ship. The rudder of the tongue is under the control of the pilot; James encourages us to steer ourselves and our speech with a conscious will.

As a favored camp song reminds us, “it only takes a spark to get a fire going.” Left uncontrolled, fire destroys. While the references James makes in the section on fire are unclear to scholars, he connects the fires started by our tongues to the fires of hell. Our talk can exacerbate a situation or burn the whole thing down.

James warns of the tongue’s power to poison. In 2003 an angry parishioner at a Lutheran church in New Sweden, Maine, literally poisoned the congregation by putting arsenic in the coffee urn. One man died in the immediate aftermath, and a woman died later of complications related to the poisoning. Thankfully an antidote was available that saved others. When the tongue poisons with lies and insinuations, it can do the same damage to a community’s spirit. The poisoner confessed in a suicide note, naming church politics as his reason.

This section concludes with a practical use of images to remind us that we cannot be two things at the same time. James compares fresh and brackish springs; the fruit produced by fig trees, olive trees, and grapevines; and fresh and salt water.

② Which metaphor in the passage speaks most clearly to you?

WHY SO SALTY?

One of my favorite jobs in ministry was teaching Introduction to Christian Worship as an adjunct professor at Bangor Theological Seminary. It was a big commitment given that I also served a church fulltime, but I was excited to be asked. When I prepared my first lecture, I wavered between using a manuscript or an outline. Some things I wanted to express in exactly the right words, while others I trusted myself to simply tell in “close enough” to the right words. By the end of the three hour class I

was exhausted from making sure to say everything the right way, from filtering things as perfectly as possible.

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes,” writes James. No kidding. While I had been leading worship as a pastor for a decade before I taught the class, my wisdom about worship was largely situational. I avidly studied the history text we used to be sure I remembered the basics about architecture and the liturgical calendar. I took my role so seriously that when a student made excuses for a late paper by telling me he had other responsibilities related to commencement and ordination, I got a little salty, as my youngest would say. I rose up to my full height of 5 feet 9.5 inches while responding to his email and reminded him that my class was required for graduation. Because the communication was in writing, I managed to choose my words carefully. It would have been more difficult face-to-face, because I was angry that the student did not take my class, or me, as seriously as I did.

By the time the letter from James was written, people had been living in Christian community for decades, maybe even a century or more. While its date is uncertain, we can conclude from his writing that people in the first century were not that different from people in the twenty-first. Even those committed to following in the way of Christ got into disputes with each other, or forgot to put the good of others or the community ahead of their own needs. Out of the same mouths speaking of the good news also came words of pride, condemnation, provocation and cruelty. People gossiped and issued sick burns and trash talk. James offers a warning against the way our tongues get us into trouble when we take off the filters that matter most.

Sometimes the filter is off before we know it.

② What have you said that you later regretted? How did you make amends?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

It is a Sufi saying: “Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates. At the first gate, ask yourself ‘Is it true?’ At the second gate ask, ‘Is it necessary?’ At the third gate ask, ‘Is it

kind?” Evangelist Alan Redpath formulated a similar rubric, using the word “think.” T—Is it true? H—Is it helpful? I—Is it inspiring? N—Is it necessary? K—Is it kind? Perhaps you remember this from an earlier lesson in our study of wisdom: “If you can’t say something nice . . . don’t say anything at all.” Any principle so broadly accepted that it is espoused by Islamic mystics, evangelical Christian ministers, and Walt Disney must have something to it.

These principles sound reasonable and sensible and high-minded, but they can be challenging to remember on the fly. My daughter, Lucy, grew up going to Pilgrim Lodge, a church summer camp in Maine. When she attended Counselor-in-Training orientation at age sixteen, it came as a slightly disappointing surprise that so much of what she thought just happened at camp was intentional. The rules, the boundaries, sure, she knew those must be thought through and planned for good reason. The schedule, the option times and special activities—yes, those require planning. But what surprised Lucy was that the counselors, junior and otherwise, learned how to create the atmosphere of trust and acceptance and gentle discipline that they call “being Pilgrim Lodge-ical.”

Lucy was excited to CIT for a second summer. When she told me on the eve of camp that she needed to bring a watch and couldn’t find the one I bought for her the previous year, my response was not Pilgrim Lodge-ical. I did not take the time to think before I spoke. I walked my thoughts through none of the three gates. I most assuredly didn’t say “nothing at all.” And while it might have been true that the top of her dresser was a mess, the way I named it was not helpful, inspirational, or necessary, and it wasn’t even close to kind.

There may be rare people who come to this naturally, but most of us need to work at it. Kind communication is a tough spiritual discipline. It takes intention and practice. Here are some starting points to try. We remind ourselves what is “Pilgrim Lodge-ical.” We post the THINK list on the Sunday bulletin or the meeting wall. We write ourselves a note or draw a picture of the three gates. Or maybe we start with Thumper, picturing a bunny, and quietly, kindly biting our tongues until we find the right words.

② What helps you to hold your tongue?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. The warning that those who teach will be judged more strictly expands on what Jesus said in Matthew 12:36–37.
2. "Able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle" (v. 2) is the verb form of the same word that appears in verse 3, where it is a plural noun and translated as "bits."
3. The word hell is the Greek *gehenna*; this is the only use of this term in the New Testament outside the Synoptic Gospels.
4. James speaks of the tongue as if it operates independently (boasting great things, etc.). This must be tempered with what Jesus says about the role of the heart in what comes out of the mouth (Matt. 12:34–35). Controlling the heart, then, becomes key to controlling the tongue.
5. The irony of blessing the Lord with the same mouth that curses those made in his likeness (v. 9) has a parallel in 1 John 4:20: "those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	Aug. 24	Wisdom about End Time Signs	Matthew 24:3–14
T	Aug. 25	Wisdom for Speaking a Prophetic Message	Jeremiah 38:1–6
W	Aug. 26	Wisdom in Knowing Hearts without Blame	1 Thessalonians 3:6–13
Th	Aug. 27	Wisdom in Speaking Clearly	Matthew 5:33–37
F	Aug. 28	Living Gracefully with One Another	1 Peter 4:7–11
Sa	Aug. 29	Wisdom in the Prayer of Faith	James 5:13–20