

Taming the Tongue

by Mark Jarvinen

Today's epistle lesson and our sermon text for the day focuses on taming the tongue. Apparently, false teachers were using their speech within the community of faith to exercise personal power, which, like favoritism in last week's message, was having a corrosive, destructive effect on the entire church. For this reason, James writes to the congregation, urging them to control their speech for the good of the entire church. The problem is that in our own strength, we are unable to control or tame our tongues. Let's look more closely at what James has to say about how to tame our tongues, with the transforming grace of God as the key factor in this process, using the acronym **(TAME)**.

I. T-ake Our Words Seriously.

The saying "***Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,***" is a cute saying, but it's not anchored in reality. In fact, our words do have real influence on others and therefore, real consequences.

Look at vv. 1-2. ***¹Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ²We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.***

I don't think people are lining up to be teachers of the Word these days, but apparently in James' day, many wanted the honor. Many thought that being a teacher carried a certain prestige. However, James warns that being a teacher is an immense

responsibility. Teachers will be held to a higher standard and judged more strictly than a non-teaching Christian. That's because teachers are handling eternal truth. Eternal life and death hang in the balance. What is a teacher's primary tool? The tongue. Words matter.

We've all heard **humorous anecdotes** about how important it is to speak correctly: Here's a couple I've heard:

- When Coca Cola was first shipped to China, they named it something in Chinese that sounded like "**Coca Cola.**" The only problem was that the actual Chinese translation meant, "**Bite the Wax Tadpole.**" They scrapped that idea and renamed it with Chinese characters that translated into something much more appropriate, "**Happiness in the Mouth.**"
- Those of us who are a little older now remember the **Chevy Nova**, manufactured from 1969-1979. They never sold well in Spanish speaking countries because **NO VA** means, "**It does not go.**"

There's no doubt about it. Words matter. Effective use of the tongue is vital.

In **verse 2** James tells us that **we all stumble in many ways** – another good reason why few should be teachers. This universal susceptibility to failure in matters of speech again points out just how important the use of the tongue is. Then comes the clincher – if you can control the tongue, you can control your whole body, (keep it in check). **The Greek word for "keep in check" means "bridled," as a horse is reined in by use of a bridle.** Are you starting to grasp the importance of a controlled tongue?

II. A-ttempt To Choose Words Carefully.

When I was a kid, I learned a Sunday School chorus that went like this: ***“Be careful little tongue what you say? (x2) For the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little tongue what you say.”*** I think you’ll agree that it’s easier to sing it than to live it.

Consider vv. 3-6 - ***³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.***

In vv. 3-4, the tongue is compared to a small bit in a horse’s mouth that can be used to control the movements of that rather large animal and a small rudder is referenced because it can be used to steer a very large ship. It’s as if James is telling us, ***“Don’t be deceived, the tongue’s influence is not in proportion to its size.”***

The tongue, therefore, small as it is, makes great boasts, and can be the small spark that sets a forest on fire (v. 5), and is also called ***“a fire,”*** in (v. 6). Don’t underestimate the capability of the tongue to do great damage, like a fire burning out of control. James calls the tongue ***“a world of evil ... and is itself set on fire by hell.”*** Is it fair to say that the tongue can be a weapon of ***spiritual warfare*** in the hands of Satan, the great enemy of our souls? Consider Satan’s power to destroy others through the power of the tongue.

Karen Carpenter is a name many of us remember. A popular singer from the 1970's, who with her brother Richard, produced scores of hit songs, died in 1983 of heart failure, caused by a severe case of **anorexia**. Basically, she starved herself to death. What started it all? According to a CBS movie for television, called **"The Karen Carpenter Story,"** her **"fatal obsession with weight"** began when an interviewer called her **"Richard's chubby little sister."** That little phrase was all it took to start her on the path to tragic self-destruction. The interviewer certainly had no intention of causing her harm, but it certainly illustrates the power of words to bring someone down. **Is it any wonder that the tongue is used by the enemy as a weapon in spiritual warfare? Verse 6** says that the tongue, in the hands of Satan, can corrupt the whole person and negatively impact the **"whole course of his life."**

Obviously, the word for us as Christians is to use the tongue carefully. Say no to gossip, slander, and malicious talk and rather choose to employ the admonition found in **Colossians 3:16-17:**

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Take the tongue seriously, Always use it carefully, and ...

III. **M-ake sure to ask God for help.**

To control the tongue, we're going to need help because the next few verses tell us we can't do it on our own.

Look at vv. 7-8 – "All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by

man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

There is an important bit of theology for us to grasp here. From the time of creation, it was mankind’s divinely appointed role to have dominion over the animals. ***Genesis 1:28*** says, ***“Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that lives on the ground.”*** But when mankind fell into sin, they lost the ability to have dominion over themselves. Mankind became slaves to sin. As we consider mankind’s fall into sin, we must again recognize the power of words. The fall was instigated by false words. ***Genesis 3:1*** says, ***“The serpent (Satan) said to the woman, ‘Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the Garden?’”*** Of course, we know that the only tree that was forbidden was the ***“tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”*** Every other tree was fair game. Do you see the power of misused words?

Because of the Fall, we no longer have the ability to tame the tongue. The Greek word for ***“tame”*** also means ***“to subdue.”*** Our fallen nature can’t subdue the tongue. But God has the power to do in us what man in his old nature is powerless to do. That’s why we need the transforming grace of Jesus both to save and strengthen us. His help is there for the asking.

I came across a great little prayer that reminds us just how much we need Jesus if we are going to tame the tongue. It says, ***“Dear God, so far today I’ve done alright, I haven’t gossiped, lost my temper, been nasty, or selfish, or over-indulgent. But in a few***

minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed, and from then on, I'm going to need all the help I can get."

Do you remember **Tom Hanks** in the movie, "**Cast Away?**" He plays the part of a **Fed-Ex executive** who goes down in a plane crash and is marooned on a deserted island. Remember how he ends up talking to a volleyball that washes ashore? He named it **Wilson**. It became his best friend. Hanks' character talked to Wilson throughout his stay on the deserted island, nearly idolizing him, and almost lost his sanity when Wilson was lost at sea. Interestingly, never does Hanks' character talk to God. Why does he trust a volleyball more than God? But then, why does anyone trust in something other than God? People talk to their friends, call Dr. Laura, tune in to Dr. Phil, or read the latest self-help book. ***It would seem that we have more trust in ourselves than in God.***

All I know is that when it comes to taming the tongue, we can't do it on our own. We must rely on Jesus for the help only He can give. He empowers us by His Spirit, and forgives us when we fail through the power of His blood shed on the cross.

Take the tongue seriously, Always be careful how you use it, Make sure to ask Jesus for help, and finally ...

IV. E-xamine Our Need for Grace.

The nature of the problem with the tongue is more than the influence of Satan, which we have already discussed. The source of

the problem is the nature of man – the state of our hearts. To change who we are at the core of our being requires a work of divine grace.

As human beings, since the Fall, which was spoken of moments ago, we are painfully inconsistent. We fall far short of perfection.

Consider vv. 9-12 – “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”

In **James 1:8**, we learn that man, in his old nature, is ***“double-minded, and unstable in all he does.”*** The Christian, however, has two natures, the old nature and the new nature, vying for supremacy. In this inner spiritual battle, the old nature occasionally rears its ugly head and causes inconsistency in a believer’s attitudes and actions, as the Apostle Paul expresses in **Romans 7:19** –

“For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.”

James, speaking to Christians, says, ***“This should not be.”*** Realistically, we can only throw ourselves on the mercy of God for forgiveness and trust in the Holy Spirit to bring about change in us. Christians must not simply cave in to the old nature. We are called on to say “yes” to the new nature and “no” to the old. James says two kinds of water can’t flow from the same spring. Two different kinds of fruit can’t come from the same plant.

Can a bitter spring (salt water) ever produce sweet water (fresh water)? Has such a thing ever happened before? Yes! During the

Exodus, when the children of Israel left Egypt, they came to a place called Marah.

In **Exodus 15:23-24**, it says, ***“When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter ... Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.”***

Listen to this – Just as it was only God who could turn bitter water into sweet water for the children of Israel, so it is only God who can transform a bitter soul into a sweet soul. ***Just as a piece of wood made bitter water sweet, so did Jesus die on the wood of a tree to make our bitter souls sweet. The righteousness of Christ is reckoned by God as our righteousness through faith in his finished work on the cross. On this basis we grow in grace to become conformed by degree to the character of Christ. This work is a life-long process.***

Only by grace, through the finished work of Christ, will we grow in consistency through the power of the Holy Spirit. Only through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit can we hope to control the tongue. Jesus said in **Matthew 12:34-35**,

“Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.”

CONCLUSION

Christians, don't be careless about your tongue. Don't ignore this tiny member of your body. Don't ignore James' warning about the tongue. Call out to him in prayer, confessing past failures and receiving His forgiveness. Yield to God and allow the Holy Spirit to bring your tongue under His control, praising Him for the changes He has and will continue to bring about in your life. **A-men.**

