

James 3: Taming the Tongue

Harwell and Chilton Churches

Revd Dr Jonathan L Mobey, Sunday 19th September 2021

A. The Primacy of the Tongue

I get the impression that the Apostle James liked to shock. He was a straight-talking man, even abrupt at times, and it seems that he was not afraid to call a spade a spade. The arresting opening verse of our chapter demands attention – especially if you are the preacher!

“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (3:1).

Now I do have to admit to finding that a little daunting! It seems likely that in James’ time there was some rivalry in the churches over who would teach – maybe it’s not so different now. Teachers probably had prestige and were able to exercise influence. Even today, whilst some teachers are not always as respected as they should be – and I’m thinking in particular of schoolteachers – teachers do nevertheless have significant influence and power over people. Some people are called and equipped to be teachers in either secular life or in the church, and to be a teacher is a noble calling, but it is also a serious one that should not be undertaken presumptuously.

I’m sure we can all think of gifted teachers who have inspired and guided us. But we can probably also think of others who have not. I rather like this definition of a teacher, which hopefully doesn’t apply to preachers: someone who keeps on talking when people are no longer interested. Of course that’s unfair: there are of course many excellent teachers. One wise schoolteacher sent the following note to all parents on the first day of school: “If you promise not to believe everything your child says happens at school, I’ll promise not to believe everything he says happens at home.”

But what do teachers have to do with the subject matter in the rest of our passage? Well, a teacher’s occupation and in some cases livelihood is dependent on the tongue – the power of speech – whether in spoken or written form, and it is reasonable to draw attention to someone who uses the tongue professionally before widening the consideration to everyone else with the power of speech, as James does in verse 2:

“We 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” (3:2).

The tongue, then, is the subject of this chapter and therefore of this sermon which has three parts – the first considers the Primacy of the Tongue, the second the Power of the Tongue, and the third the Provenance of the Tongue.

In speaking of the tongue, James introduces the third major topic in his letter, the third test of Christian maturity. Chapter 1 told us that we can identify mature Christians by their attitude to suffering, and chapter 2 by their obedience to God's Word. Our chapter tells us that a Christian's *speech* is another test of maturity. In some ways it is the ultimate test of whether we are "mature and complete" as James puts it in 1:4. Once your speech is perfect, you have truly made it. To be faultless in speech indicates perfection. If you can control your tongue, you can control any part of your body, James seems to be telling us.

But is the tongue – our words – really that significant? Yes – according to James there is a sense in which words, whether spoken, written, typed or even simply thought, are supremely powerful and can be used either as a tool to build with, or a weapon of destruction. During the Second World War people were told that 'Careless talk costs lives' and 'Loose lips sink ships'. But 'careless talk' and 'loose lips' also wreck lives: they can encourage or denigrate, they can promote a cause or destroy a reputation, they can abuse or cherish.

But not only do words influence others, and give rise to actions, with our words we also affect ourselves, since the words we possess enable us to internally handle concepts and ideas. It is with words that we think, form opinions, rehearse arguments and plot a course. George Orwell in his dystopic novel '1984' latched on to this idea as he described how the totalitarian authorities exerted power over the minds of the population by

controlling their language. Many theorists and authors have linked our internal dialogue with emotions and behaviour, and language is frequently manipulated in an attempt to control attitudes, for example in various forms of political correctness. The tongue and the words it gives rise to, whether out loud or in our heads, are undeniably powerful.

B. The Power of the Tongue

And this brings us to our second heading. In verses 3-12, James illustrates the power of the tongue with three paired images. Here we learn that the tongue has (i) power to direct, (ii) power to destroy, and (iii) power to delight.

i) Power to direct: the bit and rudder

Firstly then, the power to direct. In verses 3 and 4 James speaks of the bit and the rudder, both small things, but disproportionately potent in influencing a large, powerful animal like a horse, or a colossal ship weighing many tonnes. In both cases, it is about capturing and directing contrary forces – in the case of the horse it is its inner strength and wild nature, in the case of the ship it is winds and currents. And whether from the inside or outside, these forces threaten to control. The firm hand of an expert horseman on the reins or an experienced pilot on the tiller can overcome these forces and chart a straight course.

And so it is with the tongue: the internal force of our own sinful nature, and the external pressures of the world and hostile spiritual forces work together to drive us off course in life. But if under firm control the tongue can be kept in check, and then the whole body follows. The tongue has power to direct.

And just as a runaway horse or an uncontrolled ship can cause harm not just to itself but to those around it, so the power of the tongue to direct affects not just ourselves but the lives of others. It is not just those with particular authority such as judges and lawmakers that direct the lives of others, we all have influence and power over other people, whether as parents, neighbours, friends, bosses or co-workers. The tongue has power to direct not only our own lives but the lives of others.

ii) Power to destroy: the fire and animal

The tongue also has power to destroy. This relates to verses 5 to 8 in which James speaks of fire and of a dangerous animal.

Wildfires regularly make the news headlines. **A fire can start as a small spark but can destroy a city. The Great Fire of London in 1666, started at the bakery of Thomas Farriner on Pudding Lane and, it is estimated, destroyed the homes of 70,000 of the City's 80,000 inhabitants. What destruction resulting from an overcooked loaf of bread!**

And so it can be with the tongue, which has such destructive potential. We all have experience of people who seem to love to set a fire and then even fan it with their tongues! The office gossip, the malicious relative, the sarcastic teacher, the bitchy neighbour, all can use the tongue to destroy personal reputation, emotional security, and harmonious community.

And the fire of the tongue not only sets on fire those around it, but even sets on fire and leads to the destruction of the individual themselves. The reckless statement, the incautious insult, the ill-considered lie – they can all lead to a train of events that can destroy a career or a relationship.

And as well as being like a spreading fire, the tongue is also like a fierce, poisonous beast that cannot be tamed. Wild animals sometimes have the appearance of being cuddly and even tame, and poison is often something unseen. The tongue can be deceptive in this way, too. Whilst seeming to be benign, it has the potential to be deadly, with the power to destroy. The sly comment, a causal innuendo – how easy it is to inject a little poison into a conversation and then leave it to spread and work its destruction!

We have been hearing about **the Primacy of the Tongue, and also about** the Power of the Tongue – its power to direct and its power to destroy. And it has all been rather depressing, has it not? James doesn't seem to have a very high opinion of the tongue! It is **“a world of evil”** that **“corrupts the whole person”** (3:6), and **“a restless evil, full of deadly poison”** (3:8). The destructive potential of the tongue has been well hammered-home and we have duly taken note.

And so it would be nice at this point to have some let-up in James' negativity, a glimmer of light amongst the pessimistic gloom. But unfortunately it gets worse! And so in verse 8 we are told **“no man can tame the tongue”**. All hope it seems is lost. But before we do all take a vow of silence and go home, let's press on with our passage – it does get better, I promise you!

iii) Power to delight

In the third of our three paired images illustrating the power of the tongue, we learn that the tongue has the power to delight. This relates to verses 9-12 in which James talks about a fountain and a tree. Here James draws attention to the sad hypocrisy that afflicts so many who would want to be known as Christians.

To discover a spring that produces fresh water is a great blessing – fresh water is after all essential for drinking, washing, and agriculture. But the human predicament is to be

inconsistent, 'double-minded' and 'unstable' as James puts it in 1:8. One expression of this is the shockingly common practice of speaking well of someone to their face, but speaking quite differently of them once their back is turned. Such inconsistency is not fitting of Christians.

Here James draws attention to the duplicity of using our tongues to praise God, but then to curse people, those who have been made in God's image. In doing so we are indirectly cursing God himself. **“Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?”** (3:11) James challenges. The good which comes from our mouths is quickly contaminated and spoiled by the bad, like a blast of impure or salty water that follows and mixes with the fresh, so our cursing spoils our praising. Like fresh water, the tongue has the potential to delight, but just as its owner falls short of the glory of God (cf Rom 3:23), so the tongue falls short of that potential to delight.

And as we come to the last of our six images, that of the fruiting tree, we are reminded of the natural law that 'nature reproduces after its kind'. In doing so we learn that the fundamental problem – and so also the solution – is not with the tongue itself, but with the heart. Just as every part of the human body depends on the heart for its life-giving blood supply, so the tongue is dependent on and ruled by the heart.

C. The Provenance of the Tongue

The final section of our reading speaks of the source, the origin of our tongue's power – the Provenance of the Tongue, which is the heart.

Our dilemma is this: whilst the tongue, we have learnt, has power to direct, destroy and delight, and is the key to personal holiness and corporate unity, it is however untameable by man. The tongue is, however, tameable by God. We have been told that the tongue can be 'set on fire by hell' (1:6b) but the tongue can also be set on fire by heaven, as in the Day of Pentecost when tongues of flame came down and rested on each of the believers. The Holy Spirit gave each of them power to delight by enabling them to declare the praises of God in different languages. And the Holy Spirit gave Peter power to direct when he preached a sermon that resulted in the conversion of 3000 of his listeners.

So whilst the tongue cannot be controlled by man, it can be controlled by the Lord Jesus. When we submit to his Lordship and the work of his Spirit, then it can be turned to his service, to direct for good rather than bad, to build rather than destroy, to bless rather than curse. And all this is done by something that only God can do, by changing our hearts.

Verses 13-17 talk about the inner life – that of the heart – and that which is harboured inside us. We are either motivated for God's glory or for our own. We either harbour wisdom and understanding, or envy and selfish ambition. It was the latter that led to the squabbles and disunity in the churches that James was writing to. One type of heart produces the fruit of disorder and every evil practice – jealousy, division and confusion, the other type produces a harvest of righteousness – peace, harmony and sincerity. What is inside us inevitably shows itself on the outside, hence wisdom and understanding is shown by a good life (cf 3:13a).

I recently heard about a professing Christian who got angry with what he was doing and let rip with a few choice swearwords. Embarrassed, he turned to his friend and said, "I don't know why I said that. It really isn't in me." His friend wisely replied, "It had to be in you or it couldn't have come out of you."

Jesus made this point clearly in [Luke 6:43-45](#)

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks"

What kind of overflow comes from your heart? Is it a blocked toilet from which raw sewage spills onto the floor and across the cubicle, nauseating and toxic, or is it more like a pure bubbling spring, refreshing and life-giving?

The heart is the crux of the issue. Our natural heart, that which is earthly, is also unspiritual and even, in James' typically forthright language, 'of the devil' (3:15); the 'false wisdom' that is the Operating System for such hearts is 'from below'. In contrast, 'true wisdom' in redeemed hearts is from above. 'Every good and perfect gift is from above' (1:17a), and the supremely good gift of a new heart that we require if we are to live a controlled, holy life that begins with controlling the tongue, comes only from heaven, when we are born from above (cf Jn 3:1-7), born of God's Spirit. The key to controlling the tongue and to personal holiness is to put our trust in Jesus, being obedient to his commands and submitting to the work of his Spirit in transforming us from the heart outwards.

Closing prayer: Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips. Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil (Ps 141:3-4a).