

RCC in the Word
Week of November 5
James 3:1-12

(Although this passage was part of our reading for last week, and since Jason wrote on Hebrews, I wanted to write a devotional on James and decided this was a passage we should all consider)

When James talks about the tongue what is he referring to here? He is referring to what comes out of our mouth; our words; the words that we create with our tongues. And James writes clearly on how dangerous the tongue is. The topic of the danger of the tongue is not new to the Scriptures though, is it? Throughout the Scriptures, our speech is singled out to be a key marker of godliness. And that is because the words that we speak provide a glimpse of what is going on in our hearts. And so it is that Jesus taught in Matthew 15:10-20, "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person...what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart." But the warnings against the tongue are not new teachings from Jesus. The call to heed our speech is found throughout the Old Testament, most clearly in the Proverbs. For example:

Proverbs 10:8 – The wise of heart will receive commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin.

Proverbs 12:18 – There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Proverbs 13:3 – Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life, he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.

Proverbs 18:7 – A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul.

And there are many more...So clearly the issue of the tongue is one that we must all consider as we aim to live a life pleasing to God.

And when we consider our use of the tongue we must think more broadly than we typically do. When people come to Christ they typically learn pretty quickly that they need to give up their crude language. You don't hear many people cussing in church, do you? And so as Christians we think that we have tamed the tongue when we don't use foul language, right? Our hearts are so tainted with sin that we can become self-righteous because we don't use cuss words. We think we have tamed our tongues and we are perfect. But we are far from it. That kind of language is really only but a small part of what James and the rest of the Scriptures teach regarding the tongue.

Just for example, think about those proverbs we just read. There is nothing in

those condemning crude language. Rather they condemn babbling, rash words, and a wide-open mouth (speaking incessantly). The words we say don't have to be coarse to condemn us. Other ways that the Scriptures describe our sinful use of our tongues include flattery, lies, cruel jokes, gossip, slander, angry speech, quarrels, arguments, coarse language, plotting evil, boasting, nagging, sarcasm, untimely speech, hasty speech, and excessive speech.

I want us to see four truths as we look at this passage in James 3.

First, we see James introduce the issue of the tongue by warning people who want to be teachers. Now, why would James do that? Quite simply because those who teach use their tongue a lot; they speak a lot. They say a lot of words. As we move on through the passage we will see the dangers of the tongue. So because of these dangers, he begins by cautioning those who desire to teach. Why does he caution them? for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Those who teach expose themselves to greater danger of judgment. I say they expose themselves to a greater danger of judgment because of the difficulty of harnessing the tongue. Just because they are a teacher doesn't mean they will automatically receive greater judgment. But rather they face the danger of a greater judgment because their frequent use of their tongue affords them many opportunities to sin, and potentially lead others astray at the same time.

This is a warning to those who teach. When we teach, when we lead others in understanding Christian faith and doctrine, we must be very careful with our words. But the taming of the tongue is a command not just for teachers. This is applicable to all Christians.

The second truth that we see in this passage is the incredible power of the tongue. In verses 3-6 James uses three illustrations to show how our words can have such an enormous impact on our spiritual condition.

- 1) A small bit that turns a large horse.
- 2) A small rudder that turns a large ship.
- 3) A small fire that sets a forest ablaze.

By putting a bit in the mouth of a horse we can make it obey us. Literally, it says we persuade them for our benefit. We can persuade the horse to do what we ask of it and so we can direct the whole animal.

This illustration shows us that just as the bit determines the direction of the horse, so also the tongue can determine the direction of a person. The Christian who can control his tongue is also able to control his life, and guide his life according to the will of God. If we can discipline our tongues then we can discipline our bodies and live in a controlled manner. On the other hand, when

the tongue is allowed to speak freely, as small as it is, the rest of the body will follow suit. If the tongue is not disciplined and controlled, the rest of the body will follow suit and be undisciplined and uncontrolled.

The second illustration is that of a ship. This illustration makes the same point as the first one – that very small things can control very big things. Look at verse 4, Look at the ships also: 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.

The tongue is small, but it boasts of great things, James writes. Typically in the Scriptures, the idea of boasting is negative. I think of the little horn that grew out of the fourth beast in Daniel 7, and how it had a mouth that spoke great things. It boasted of its own strength while rejecting the Lord. Boasting typically carries this idea of presumptuousness before God. But the boasting spoken of here is not like that. This boast that the tongue makes is more neutral because the tongue can legitimately claim to have great power. Unlike the little horn in Daniel's visions that makes great boasts but is in actuality nothing before God, the tongue can make great boasts because it exerts tremendous power over the body.

Our third and final illustration now adds the theme of destruction. A small fire can cause a great forest to burn down. The picture is like the forest fires we have in the western United States each summer. A cigarette, or a campfire not put out all the way, are typically responsible for fires that consume hundreds and thousands of acres, destroying homes and everything else in its path. An out of control fire makes a strong illustration of destructive power. James' point here is clear. Not only does the tongue, like the bit and the rudder, possess great power over a larger entity, but it also carries the potential to bring about a great disaster, like a spark in a dry forest.

James then continues the theme of fire by noting that the tongue is indeed like a fire, it is a world of unrighteousness. What does he mean by saying that the tongue is a world of unrighteousness? He means that even though the tongue is such a small member of the body, it is the most difficult member of the body to control. And because it is so difficult to control, it becomes the conduit through which the evil of the world finds its expression in us. John Calvin put it this way, "a slender portion of flesh contains the whole world of iniquity."

Jesus put it this way in Matthew 15. "[11] it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person. [18] But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. [19] For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. [20] These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."

The tongue expresses the heart, from which come evil thoughts (have you ever spoken evil of someone), murder (have you ever wished death upon someone

with your words), adultery, sexual immorality and so on. The tongue is a world of unrighteousness.

James ends verse 6 with three parallel actions of the tongue:

- 1) the tongue corrupts the whole person,
- 2) the tongue sets the whole course of a person's life on fire
- 3) the tongue is itself set on fire by hell.

We have seen how the tongue can corrupt the whole person even though it is so small. But we also learn that the tongue sets on fire a person's life. Like a fire, the tongue can ruin and destroy one's life. And where does this destructive power come from? It comes from hell. It is set on fire by hell. Satan and his demons, coming from hell, ignite the destructive power of the tongue.

This shows us that the battle over our tongue is a spiritual battle. It is a battle that we cannot win in our own strength. We cannot simply force ourselves to speak rightly. Rather this is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.

Now I'll just briefly mention our third and fourth points.

The third truth we find is that the tongue is extremely difficult to control. We see this in verses 7-8. Do you see the fourfold division of the animal kingdom? Every kind of beast (literally translated animal) and bird, or reptile and sea creature. With this fourfold division, James is alluding to the creation account in Genesis.

Genesis 1:26, Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

Why does James allude to creation? He's making a theological point about the nature of the world. Humans, being made in the image of God, were given a divine mandate to subdue, or as James says, tame, the animal world. And so humans are able to tame all species of animals.

But then comes the contrast. Humans can tame all the animals, but no human can tame the tongue. The taming of our tongue is impossible. If we could then we would be perfect and we know that we will not ever be perfect in this life. So should we abandon our efforts to control our speech? Of course not. We may never reach the point where the words we say are always perfect, but we can grow in great measure so that our speech glorifies God.

Lastly, we see that the tongue exhibits the "double-mindedness" which is so typical of sin. The double-minded man, James writes in chapter 1, tries to please both God and the world at the same time. And this is so often what we do with

our tongues. We praise God and we curse humans. Praising God is the highest form of human speech. Cursing people who are made in the image of God is one of the lowest. The curse here is more than just abusive language. To curse someone was to call upon God to cut off a person from all of God's blessings and consign the person to hell.

This is what we do when we are angry at someone. Particularly on the Lord's Day as we come to bless God and then curse men on our way home. James then gives three illustrations of the inconsistency of this. The point being that despite all the praises we may offer to God with our mouths, it is the curses against men that reveal our true nature inside.

James says in conclusion that this is not the way it should be. The Christian should not be double-minded in their speech. Rather as they are transformed by the Spirit of God they should display wholeness and purity of their hearts and their tongues.

The tongue is closely related to the heart. What is inside us will come out through our mouths. And so James teaches us great truths in this passage. First, those who desire to teach should cautiously examine their hearts and their tongues because they will face a stricter judgment. Second, the tongue is extremely powerful. Third, the tongue is extremely difficult to control. And lastly, the tongue displays double-mindedness.

A transformed tongue displays a transformed heart. We must seek God's grace and his help in transforming our hearts and controlling our tongues.

May David's prayer be our own: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer."
(Psalm 19:14)

-Written by Nathan Renfro