

Sermon 13: James 3:1-12: The Power of a Forked Tongue

OUTLINE

The importance of the tongue
The power of the tongue
The duplicity of the tongue

INTRODUCTION

Think with me for a moment about all the good the tongue can accomplish. With our tongues we engage in the most dignifying of acts, the worshipping of God. We can imitate the God of truth by speaking truth. Words can bring life as we share the gospel; as we nurture the young egos of our children with encouragement; as we confess our love for our spouses; as we say sorry and ask for forgiveness; as we pray for the needs of others; as we give wise counsel to a friend. Prov. 10:11 talks about the mouth of the wise as a fountain of life and 15:4 as a tree of life; that can bring healing, 12:18; able to make an anxious heart glad, 12:25; gentle speech can end wars, 15:1; wise and true speech is described as a kiss, as treasure, as a refreshing breeze. But the Bible has so much more to say on the sins of the tongue, their pervasiveness and their power.

Some sins of the tongue are obvious like lies; but many times, especially in the lives of religious people the sins of the tongue are often socially acceptable sins; what some have called respectable sins. This is the problem at James is addressing. Here we have some professed believers in Christ, but these Jewish Christians seem to have carried over many of their hypocrisy from the way they practices Judaism. Religious people don't like to be told that they are bad and that they need to repent, so James has to use heavy ordinance to shatter the hardened self-righteous opinion that they have of themselves. They do not see themselves as worldly or acting in a worldly way, so James names their sins and goes hard after them to bring them to the point of repentance. We have spent some time looking at James exposing their sins in around the matter of rich and poor, how they have shown partiality, and how they have neglected to help those in need exercising their faith in good deeds. However another major area of sin is the tongue. James characterized true religion as someone who has a bridled tongue, 1:26. J Sidlow Baxter said it well, 'One of the first things that happens when a man is really filled with the Spirit is not that he speaks with tongues, but that he learns to hold the one tongue he already has.' James lists several sins related to the tongue. He has condemned those who grumble against God blaming Him for their sins 1:13; for hasty and angry speech, 1:19; that pure speech defines true religion 1:26; he condemns speech not followed up by deeds, 2:16; of course we have the section before us 3:1-12; but following that there is the boasting, lying and verbal jousting associated with worldly wisdom; the quarreling of 4:1-2; the faithless prayers of 4:3-4; the slander and judging of 4:11-12; the boasting of 4:13-17; the grumbling of 5:9; and the false swearing of 5:12. James fears that his hearers have a faith that does not save because they are hypocrites, not hypocrites in that they are murderers and adulterers, but in that they are partial, prejudiced, boastful, contentious, grumbling, verbal abusers of their fellow men.

The portion before us is all about the tongue, but it is not a celebration of the power of affirming speech because James has a major problem to address. James builds up to his point as he starts by talking about the importance of the

tongue, v1-5a; then he moves to the destruction of the tongue, v5b-8; and the grand finale he was driving towards is the duplicity of the tongue in v9-12.

The importance of the tongue

V1-2, 'Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.' James begins this portion on the tongue in a strange way, by talking about teachers. We can see that teachers because of their increased responsibility will be held to a higher standard in judgement. The question we have to wrestle with is, why does James introduce this matter about teachers and speech here? Some have suggested that there was a problem with some wanting to be teachers to hastily even though they were not qualified, possibly drawn by the prestige that the position of Rabbi held in that context, and James is trying to scare them off with a warning about judgement and then launches into the power of the tongue. I think that James is taking someone who would be seen as respectable, as knowledgeable, as trustworthy and perceived as being a good person, someone that would be 'safe from judgement' and showing how those who know more will be judged by a higher standard, and he then follows this up with the fact that there is no one that does not sin in their speech. In other words, if teachers are not perfect and not above being judged by their speech, these being those seen as models in speech, as better speakers than ourselves, how much more do we need to think about our own speech and our own judgement according to our words. If people we thought were better than us are in trouble what does that say about us? Religious hypocrites content themselves that judgement holds no threat for them, the true evangelist disabuses them of this self-deception. Jesus did this when he warned the Jews that anger not only murder can damn; that lustful thoughts not only adultery violates the 7th commandment; and that even our words spoken in secret are seen and judged by God. To put these two thoughts side by side, that teachers—those perceived to be safe from judgement—are held to account, and the more you know the higher the standard; and that no one is perfect in speech, I think these thoughts are intentionally put up front to rattle the cage of the self-assured hypocrite. The hypocrite is often concerned to virtue signal their religiosity with certain markers and actions, for the Jew it was handwashing, Sabbath keeping, circumcision, not eating with sinners, showing zeal for the traditions of the fathers, etc. But they are betrayed as hypocrites by their speech. Their hatred, their anger, their prejudice, their judgmentalism, their verbal abuse of others, their scoffing, their justified lying—all the while they are uttering orthodox statements, making prayers, and singing songs with the saints.

But speaking to the point that teachers are judged more harshly, this is a warning to those who do seek to teach. Being an entrusted position where people are encouraged to listen to us, where we are in the position of speaking for God, handling His word and calling His people to obey His will, it is no mystery why they are held to higher standards. Teachers tend to say more and Prov. 10:19 is true, 'When words are many, transgression is not lacking.' Teachers can sin by being cowardly, not declaring the full counsel of God as Paul did Acts 20:27; by man pleasing and tickling itching ears with what they want to hear. We can present opinion as fact; bind consciences; plagiarize; make a strawman of opinions we don't agree with; present as facts things that we have not substantiated; fall prey to carnal tactics like trying to constantly entertain

through humour. The declaring of God's word is a privilege but a daunting responsibility. It is not a calling that any person should desire lightly.

We must address the matter of the supposed perfectionism in v2. James is not saying that a person can be perfect. He has just said we all stumble in many ways. He does not then go on to contradict his own words. He is assuming for the sake of argument. He is saying something like, if a person could be perfect in speech he would be perfect. The point being that sins of the tongue are the easiest to commit and the hardest to stop. So if you have enough self control to never sin with your tongue you would technically have enough to never sin, but there is only one man who has never sinned with His tongue. 1 Pet. 2:22, 'He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.' James is not saying, you can if you try harder, he is rattling our self-assurance. He is wanting those who think they are ok to see they are worldly and not ok and humble themselves before God who gives grace to the humble. James is not laying out a doctrine of sanctification as it pertains to the tongue. If he was I am sure he would talk about the need for regeneration as the root that would enable progress and self-restraint in our speech. How a new heart would overflow in positive speech, and how we can more and more reflect God though perfection in speech awaits us on the other side of eternity. His tactic here is instead to show our danger, to show our inability, and he goes on to show the pervasive way the tongue influences us.

V3-5a, 'If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 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. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.' James uses two pictures, a bit controlling a powerful race stallion or a horse pulling a chariot; and a rudder used to guide a ship through a storm. These are not negative examples but merely demonstrative, look at the potential that a bit has to win a race or a war; how using the rudder properly can save your life or sink it. The importance of the tongue is immense and cannot be denied. But the tongue is used to boast of great things. Here you can feel James taking a darker turn which sets us up for the next section that focuses on the destructive power of the tongue. Some might feel tempted to develop a doctrine of perfectionism focused on controlled speech from these statements, but Jesus Himself reminds us that it is the heart and not the tongue that ultimately drives our actions, the tongue reflects the heart. As goes the tongue so goes the man. What a powerful point to make to those who take their self-assurance before God from external performances, or race, or ceremonies, or orthodox statements. If the heart drives who we are, then what does your speech say about you. Not your religious speech, your singing at church, but your words Monday to Saturday. James is saying this is the real you. The horse of your life and the ship of your life is characterized by your tongue. This would have been a shocking perspective to those used to seeing other things than purity of speech, and loving the needy as marks of true religion. You should take these statements as making a rhetorical point not trying to unveil the mechanisms of sanctification.

The power of the tongue

V5-8, 'How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and

has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.' Technically, fire, like bridles and rudders can be used for good. But here James uses the picture of fire to speak of the destructive power of the tongue. A small spark can make a terrible fire. John Blanchard retells a story from his childhood, 'During World War II I was evacuated to the Isle of Islay in the Western Hebrides of Scotland, where two other young refugees joined me on a remote farm. One of the jobs we were given was to take the ashes out of the farmhouse fire and dump them in a low-lying, wet place to make absolutely sure that all the embers were put out. But boys will be boys and our one aim was to keep them alive and to have some fun with them. I can vividly remember one occasion when we took one small ember from the ashes, wrapped it around with cardboard, held it cupped against the wind, and ran with it up the side of a nearby mountain. We put the little ember down in some very dry heather and blew until it caught alight. Then we deliberately started to spread it a little bit further. We had seen heather fires put out before and decided to see how big a frontage of fire we could allow to get going before putting it out. When we had about five yards of frontage it still looked quite small, so we let it grow to ten yards, then fifteen, then twenty. Suddenly that fire was raging out of control, sweeping through acres of heather with devastating speed, and I can still remember cowering in the farmhouse looking up with absolute horror as the whole of the mountain roared into flame. Every farmer for miles around rushed in to help in controlling the blaze, which almost literally consumed the whole mountain. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but flame and smoke. It was terrifying—and it began with a little ember that could be cupped in a little boy's hand!'

James tells us that the impact of the tongue is worse. James blends for descriptions in v6 to heighten our sense of the tongue's destructive power. Firstly, it is a world of unrighteousness. The world of sin is not outside of us but inside of us. As religious people we love to talk about the sinful world referring to what lies outside of us, but James reveals there is a world of sin within us. And we could list and ways we sin with the tongue and be here for hours. Here is a list from a sermon Thomas Watson preached on this verse. This is not an exhaustive list of the evils of our tongue. There is the silent tongue, when we do not praise God, speak of God, bear witness, or speak up to defend those we should. The hasty or angry tongue, when we give vent to anger. The vain tongue, when our speech is empty wind, frivolous, not aiming at edification. The judgmental/censorious tongue where we fixate on others sins and accuse them, acting like satan. The slanderous tongue when we tear down the good name of others. The unclean tongue that is filled with speaking about things that Christians ought not to talk about. The lying tongue. The flattering tongue. The boasting tongue. The seducing tongue. The complaining tongue. The cursing tongue. Out of the heart come these sins

Secondly, it is set among our members staining the whole body. Religious hypocrites compartmentalize sins. They think that can keep a pet sin that will not impact the rest of their lives. They might think that filthy, racist, sexualized, bigoted speech is only a cultural sin not a theological sin, that words are neutral and don't impact your Christianity. False. Your tongue reveals the real you. Are you an angry swearer; a complaining doubter; a cynical judge; a scoffer who mocks sincere Christians, virginity; someone who trash talks their parents to their friends. The religious hypocrite sees these as unrelated isolated incidents, James reveals that they indicate a systemic problem.

Thirdly, the tongue sets on fire the entire course of one's life. The tongue not only impacts the whole of who you are, but your life as well. In an age of social media where our thoughtless words will haunt us years later, this is deeply understood. Angry words shaped you and your kids. Words don't just hurt, they separate life-long friends; end marriages; cause irreparable harm between children and parents; start wars; deceive millions; create tribes; ruin careers; provoke assassination, etc. We can excuse our words because 'stick and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me.' Not true, words can do more harm and the pain last longer than broken bones.

Fourthly, the fire is no ordinary fire but hell fire. What does this mean? Some think it is judgement worthy words; but it seems to be pointing more at the source, as in from the devil. The devil is a liar, accuser, and destroyer whose first tool was the tongue. Religious people might be able to pretend they hate the devil, but too often their speech imitates him.

How does your respectable sin, your harmless sin, your controlled sin seem to you now?

James tells us that human beings have been able to tame all sorts of animals but no one has the tongue. Why? It is a ceaseless source of evil, v7-8, 'For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.' A coiled and deadly viper ready to jump, able to kill. The bible regularly convicts us of sin by referring to the sins of the tongue, James is no different.

The duplicity of the tongue

James moves now from speaking about the tongue in general terms many would be able to agree with to a pointed application that this duplicity describes us, v9-12, 'With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.' One commentator observed that James uses the picture of twos to describe hypocrisy: doubleminded; double-tongued, Jesus describes hypocrisy as having two masters. James highlights that we use the tongue to praise God; and then in the next breath curse those made in the image of God. Nature has integrity because a fresh water spring produces fresh water; a fig tree produces figs, but we are unnatural. We speak praise to God while insulting those made in His image, mistreating those made in His image, hating those made in His image. This can be expanded to every sort of practice.

James is hitting hard against the sins of the tongue, that area of our lives where we let down our guard, that area where we justify and trivialize our sins, that area where we are quick to imitate the world's patterns of speech. He uses this area to help us test ourselves to see whether we are of the faith. Are we hypocrites who have unsaved hearts revealed by hypocritical speech? Are we Christians in need of sanctification? If you are someone who thinks he is a Christian but whose speech patterns reveal a lie, that you have been pretending and even deceiving yourself, James's call for repentance and humbling yourself is your response, knowing that God gives grace to those who humble themselves. He calls Christians to those who love their neighbour with their

speech, who are people of integrity and not double tongued. If we are truly born again we will be filled with speech that is 'pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.'