

4/5/09

Watch Your Tongue

James 3:1-12

Introduction

A man saw an ad in the paper advertising a talking dog for twenty dollars. He knew it wasn't possible, but his curiosity got the best of him. He went to the home and the owner ushered him into a side room and there was the dog. The man was left alone with the dog, so he tentatively asked, "Can you talk?" "Yes," said the dog. The man was amazed. "Where have you been all this time?" said the inquirer. "Well," the dog replied, "first, I was a bomb sniffing dog for the CIA. After that I became a seeing eye dog for Stevie Wonder. Then for a time I was in the Broadway show 'Annie' where I played 'Sandy'." The man was amazed and went out to the owner. He said, "I have to hand it to you, that dog really does talk. But, why are you willing to get rid of him for twenty dollars?" the owner replied, "Sure, he can talk, but he is such a liar!" [Michael Shannon, Preaching, May/June 2004, www.crosswalk.com] As we have made our way through the book of James, we have learned a bit about growing up in our Christian walk. Last week, we saw what faith in action looks like and how a growing, spiritually mature believer will live their faith out in their daily lives. Another measure of spiritual maturity is a Christian's speech. James' letter spends a good portion of content warning the Jewish church against having a careless and corrupt tongue. As we saw a few weeks ago, the tongue is a window into the heart of human beings and Jesus tells us that what comes out of our mouths reveals what is truly in our hearts. If we are speaking angry words, then Jesus would say that we have anger in our hearts. If we are always talking filthy language, then Jesus would say that we have perversion in our hearts. Just as our true faith in Christ is manifested in the works that we do, what is in control of our hearts is revealed by what comes out of our mouths. In a passage we studied in chapter 1, James spoke of being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Later, he showed us that the person who is truly "religious" will keep a tight rein on his tongue. In the passage we are studying today, James expands on the idea of bridling the tongue and shows us that, just as bad as it is to have faith without works, it is no good to substitute words for works. As has been the case throughout the book of James, I have been extremely challenged by his discourse here. I think back over the past and how often I fall short in the area of controlling my tongue. I will say one moment how wonderful God is and turn around the next and lash out in anger at someone. I will sing praises to Him and then get involved in a conversation about someone that is pure gossip. As we work through this passage, I challenge you to review your own life and sincerely evaluate how controlled your tongue is. As we will discover, we cannot, in our own power, control our tongue. James expands the illustration of bridling the tongue for us and goes into more detail about the true nature of the tongue. Let's read the text together (read James 3:1-12).

Pray

I. The first thing James shows us is that the tongue is very powerful (v. 1-5). As has been said, the words that we speak reveal a lot about who we are and who is in control of our lives. As we will see later, we can use words to build up or to tear down. How many times has what one says to another been a source of bitterness and anger? How many times have friendships been destroyed over something that someone has said? How many times does the Bible warn us about following false doctrines being taught by those that speak the Word in error? Yes, the tongue is very powerful and God's Word tells us much about this truth. In our passage this morning, James speaks to 3 areas regarding the power of the tongue.

A. First, James gives a stern warning to those who would be teachers of God's Word (v. 1). Apparently in the early Jewish church, there were many who were immature in the faith that were attempting to teach the Word of God. It seems that a common practice was for freedom to be given to basically anyone in the synagogue meetings of the church to stand and speak. Many were seeking to gain status reserved for the apostolic teachers of the gospel and the Rabbis by being teachers themselves. But James seems to be reinforcing the teaching that had previously been given about gifts of the body of Christ and the order of things in the church. He reminds them and us that not everyone is gifted by the Holy Spirit to be teachers. Teachers of the truth have a huge responsibility that is not to be taken lightly. It is extremely important that those who teach ensure that they are truly gifted in this area. Let's look at some scriptures that remind us of this (I Corinthians 12:28-31, Ephesians 4:11-12). These scriptures remind us that not everyone is gifted in the same way. Each person in the church has a special gift given by the Holy Spirit that is to be used to edify the church. The Ephesians passage reminds us that those who teach are gifted as such to prepare and equip those with other gifts to perform their duties in the body of Christ. Something else that the Bible shows us is that those who teach must be careful to teach sound doctrine. We have seen in the past that man's wisdom is flawed and that correct interpretation of scripture comes only through the power of the Holy Spirit. Many have been lead astray because of those who think they are teachers who are not empowered by the Spirit to do so and end up teaching bad doctrine. This is clearly seen in I Timothy 1:6-7 (read). There are those who teach simply to use the church for their own gain - whether in status, finances, or influence (I Timothy 6:3-5). They prey on those whose faith is weak and are easily influenced because they don't learn God's Word on their own. Titus 2:7-8 gives us the instruction on how to teach properly (read). If we adhere to the truth in our teaching, no one will be able to refute it. If done properly with the right attitude, God will make sure that what we teach will put those who would oppose it to shame. Teachers are held to a very high standard and will be judged by God accordingly. They should be gifted to do so and Paul tells us in II Timothy 2:2 that they should be properly trained by those who are also experienced and gifted teachers. It is a process that the Church can ill afford to ignore (2:2 teams).

B. James also gives a stern warning to everyone else about the power of the tongue (v. 2). Including himself, James tells us that no one is exempt from stumbling with the use of their tongue. Because our flesh is tainted with sin, we are all subject to succumbing to sin, including sins with our speech. I have read that the average person spends 1/5 of his or her life talking. If all our words were put into print, the result would be this: a single day's words would fill a 50 page book, while in a year's time, the average person's words would fill 132 books of 200 pages each. Among all those words,

there are bound to be some spoken in anger, carelessness, or haste. [*Today in the Word*, June 15, 1992, www.sermonillustrations.com] The odds are against us being able to control our tongues at all times, but the mark of maturity in the believer is having a tight rein on their tongue. The Bible tells us that it is very important to watch what we say and how we say it (Psalm 34:12-13, Proverbs 10:19, 12:18, 21:23).

C. Also, James shows us by example that although the tongue is a small organ, it is very influential (v. 3-5). I don't think this is really any big news to any of us, but have we stopped to ponder this? The entire sales field is about talking to someone and influencing them to buy a product. Politics is more about influencing those who are voting with good speeches than what the politicians actually stand for. Similarly, in churches today, it seems that it has become more about getting people in the pews and influencing them to give money to build bigger buildings and more modern facilities than about giving them the truth. The tongue is truly very influential and James gives us 3 natural examples to show us this truth (bit/horse, rudder/ship, spark/forest fire). There is another example that we know more about today than James probably knew then. Bacteria are exceptionally small, but they have a huge influence in our world. Usually only a few micrometers in length, there are typically around 40 million bacterial cells in a single gram of soil and a million or so in a single ml of fresh water. It is estimated that there are approximately 5 nonillion bacteria on Earth - that's 5 followed by 30 0's! - forming much of the world's biomass. Although most bacteria have not been characterized and only about half of them can actually be grown in a laboratory, we know that they are very important to the life cycle on this planet. There are about 10 times as many bacterial cells in the human flora of bacteria as there are human cells in the body with large numbers residing on the skin and in the gut. Bacteria are important in digestion and in breaking down waste products. Most are harmless and a few are actually beneficial to humans, but there are a number that are harmful and cause illness, even to the point of death. Bacteria are exceptionally small - you can't even see them without the aid of a microscope - but they influence your life on a daily basis. As it is with the tongue. It is relatively small, but it has great influence on our daily lives.

II. The second thing that James tells us is that the tongue is perverse (v. 6-8). It boasts, it lies, it deceives, and it eventually can cause man to come to ruin. It can act as a cancer that starts small and eventually overcomes the whole person if left uncontrolled. With its power mixed with its perversion, entire human beings can be destroyed. How many people's lives have been dismantled because they followed a lie? How many people have died and are spending an eternity in hell because they chased after a false doctrine spoken by someone who seemed sincere? James again gives example from the natural world to illustrate his point.

A. The tongue is like a fire (v. 7). He uses a progression to describe it. It consumes the whole person or corrupts him revealing what is really in his heart. The tongue itself is like the hub of a fireworks wheel that is the fuse and is itself lit by the very fires of hell. That is a pretty strong statement! The word translated hell here is *Gehenna*. This was a place in the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem where human sacrifice had been offered (Jeremiah 7:31) and where continuous burning of rubbish would make it a fit illustration of the lake of fire. The flame never died. Using the picture of the fireworks wheel, once the fuse is lit, the wheel spins and spews fire in every direction. The tongue can be like that. The person with an out of control tongue doesn't think of who is getting hurt by their words. They spew out the true nature of their heart at whomever comes across the path of the fire. Several scriptures speak to this (Proverbs 16:23, Matthew 12:34-37, 15:18, Luke 6:45). I don't want to beat a dead horse here, but since the Bible broaches the subject so often, I

think it is appropriate to remind ourselves of the importance of reining in our tongues.

B. The second image that James gives us is that the tongue is like a wild animal (v. 8). All kinds of animals have been tamed by man, but no man has been able to tame the tongue. It is impossible. I think the inference is that only God and the power of His Spirit can tame the tongue. Jesus spent a lot of time addressing the fact that the tongue speaks what is in the heart, so naturally, if our hearts are filled with the Holy Spirit, we will naturally use our tongue for good. James also tells us that the tongue is full of poison. Getting back to our discussion of the tongue being relatively small, spiders are relatively small, but some of them can be deadly. There are about 35,000 known species of spiders, but only about 27 of them are venomous, and not all those are terribly deadly. The Brazilian Wandering Spider is believed to be the most venomous spider in the world. Its venom has been shown to kill a mouse with as little as 0.006 mg (6/1000 mg). The Sydney Funnel Web Spider of Australia is thought to be the deadliest have been shown to be capable of causing death in as little as 15 minutes. In the US, the most venomous spiders are the Brown Recluse and the Black Widow. The Black Widow's venom is 15 times more potent than a prairie rattlesnake. Again, small but full of poison. It doesn't take much to destroy a life. But, just as the venom from these spiders can be neutralized by the appropriate antivenom, so too, can the poison of the tongue be neutralized by the Holy Spirit.

III. Finally, James tells us that the tongue is polluted (v. 9-12). Just like a two-headed monster, a man's uncontrolled tongue can give praise to God at one moment and then curse man the next. Similar to a snake's forked tongue, a tongue out of control will both praise and curse. Because of sin, the tongue, like the rest of our flesh, is polluted. It doesn't make much sense that the same mouth that can praise our heavenly Father can also spew out curses. Again, James turns to the natural world to illustrate his point (fresh water/salt water spring, fig tree bearing olives, grapevine bearing figs). In today's world, I don't think there are very many people who would walk down to the Ohio River and start drinking straight from it. I know a few people who won't even drink it after it has been processed. But, anyway, the water is taken through a filtration process and treated with chemicals to remove the harmful bacteria before it is put into the tap water system. Without this, the water would remain polluted and it would be extremely harmful to those who drank it. The same is true for us spiritually. We have to allow the Holy Spirit to treat our hearts and filter our words so that we continuously speak praise to God. Like bacteria can be both beneficial and harmful, we have to allow Christ to remove the harmful things in our hearts so that we can honor Him with our tongues. We do not have the ability to remove the pollution from our tongues on our own. The believer's tongue should not be an instrument of inconsistency.

Conclusion

The tongue is small and influential, therefore it must be controlled. It is satanic and infectious and must be corralled. It is salty and inconsistent, so it must be cleansed. Only God, through the power of His Holy Spirit, can do this. Just as a believer's faith is revealed through his works, who is really in control of the person is revealed through what comes out of his mouth. I would like to leave you with some traditional wisdom about speech and the tongue:

It would be better to leave people wondering why you didn't talk than why you did.

First law of public speaking: nice guys finish fast.

When all is said and done, there's usually a lot more said than done.

Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.

What are your thoughts on what we have studied today?