

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 11/20/94 PM
James 3:3-5 "The Power of the Tongue"

Intro: (story from Leadership Journal, Spr 93, 49) In the classic movie, A Christmas Story, a boy named Ralphie reveals what life was like growing up in Gary, Indiana. One scene depicts what happened during recess at school one cold winter day. Two boys got into an argument about whether a person's tongue will stick to a metal pole in below-freezing weather. While they argued, a crowd gathered around them. The argument led to a "dare." Eventually, the dare led to the infamous "triple-dog-dare." One of the boys took the challenge, stuck out his tongue, and touched it to the school flagpole.

You can guess what happened. Sure enough, it stuck. Then the recess bell rang. All the kids ran into the school building, everyone that is, except the boy. When the teacher finally looked out the window, she saw the boy writhing in pain, his tongue frozen to the flagpole. If only the boy had read Proverbs 21:23, "He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity."

I won't ask how many here tonight have ever experimented to see whether their tongue would stick to a frozen pole. But I would venture that all of us have been embarrassed a time or two by the wrong use of our tongues.

Why is that? We're going to find out from James 3. In part, the answer is because of the incredible power of the tongue. How powerful is your tongue? It weighs but a few ounces, but oh, the damage it can inflict! Our tongue can cause more long-lasting pain than a bare fist to the jaw.

One of the great themes in the book of James is this. If faith is genuine, it will be SEEN (Faith without works is dead). We discover another great theme in James. If faith is genuine, it will be HEARD.

1:19 "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath."

1:26 "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain."

2:12 "So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty."

Last Week: We learned three lessons about taming the tongue.

I. God holds me responsible for my tongue (1-2a).

II. My tongue is a barometer of my spiritual maturity (2).

What comes out of my mouth reveals what's in my heart (Matthew 12:34).

A. Brash words reveal a proud heart.

B. Malicious words reveal a self-seeking heart.

C. Timid words reveal a fearful heart.

D. Sarcastic words reveal a bitter heart.

E. Complaining words reveal an ungrateful heart.

III. There is great potential in my tongue (2).

A. For bad (we can "offend")

B. For good (If we can control the tongue, we can control the whole body)

The next issue James addresses is the power of the tongue.

Proposition: In James 3:3-5, James helps us to understand the incredible power of our tongues by giving us three, practical illustrations.

- I. Illustration #1: A small bit can turn a large horse (3).
- II. Illustration #2: A small rudder can guide a large ship (4).
- III. Illustration #3: A small spark can cause a large fire (5).

Implications:

1. My tongue may be petite, but it sure is powerful.
2. My tongue can boast of great things.
 - a. The solution is not silence.
 - b. The solution is control.

I. Illustration #1: A small bit can turn a large horse (3).

James used the image of the bridle in v 2. "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body." The bridle is the piece that goes around the head of a horse. The bit is the piece of steel that fits inside the horse's mouth.

What's true of a bit? First, it's small. Second, it can turn a large horse. V 3 "Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body."

What does a bit do? A bit controls. The issue is obedience. If you have ever been around horses, you know the real question is this one--Who decides where the horse will go, the master or the horse. With the use of a bit, the master does. Why? Because a bit inflicts pain. And a bit communicates to the horse the master's desire of which direction he wants the creature to go.

My parents have a horse named Su-Jay that's been with the family for nearly 20 years. Right now, she's probably out in the pasture grazing. If I was there in the pasture right now, to be honest, I would hesitate to jump on her back. Not because she's mean, for she's very gentle. I would not hesitate to get on her if she had a bridle on. Why not? Because with the bridle, I can control her. I can guide her. I can tell her to go, to turn, to back up, to stop, and that's what she will do. Without it, I'm at her disposal! What a difference a small bit makes.

What's the comparison between the bit and the tongue? Both are small but significant. Both are powerful in their affect. Both are influential.

The Proverbs illustrate this for us. "A soft answer turns away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger (15:1)." "The tongue of the wise uses knowledge aright, but the mouth of fools poureth out foolishness (15:2)." "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver (25:11)." Your tongue may be small, but it can make or break somebody else's day.

When I was in the 5th grade, my dad got a job transfer that caused our family to relocate. We moved from a house in a small city, to a farmhouse in a small community on the other side of the state. It was my first taste of farm life. Soon after that, we got a horse from a fellow who trained and traded horses. Her name was Soxie. She was

beautiful to look at, but we didn't find out until later (the hard way) that she had a little problem. We lived about a hundred yards from a railroad track. One day, my 3rd grade brother got on the horse to go for a ride. A train went by and blew its whistle. Then we found out that our horse's quirk was that she was petrified of trains! She took off running full steam. The straps to the bridle were not tied together (a mistake), and they fell to the ground. My brother had no control at all over the horse. All he could do, was to grab the horn of the saddle, and hold on! The horse galloped full speed until the train was gone, and she wore herself out--at least a mile down the rode! We took off after the runaway. When we got there, my brother was smiling and said something like, "I held on! I held on!"

I learned the importance of a bit that day. Without a bit (and the straps to pull on the bit), you have very little control over a large horse. With a bit, you can control a horse (By the way, we got rid of Soxie soon after that!).

What's James saying? Show me a person whose mouth is out of control and I'll show you a person whose life is out of control. An undisciplined tongue is the indicator of an undisciplined life. But what is true of the person who, by God's help, has learned to control his tongue? V 2 says that person is "complete," spiritually mature.

Illustration #1--A small bit can turn a large horse.

II. Illustration #2: A small rudder can guide a large ship (4).

V 4 "Behold also the ships, which, though they are so great and are driven by fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, wherever the pilot willeth."

James grew up around the Sea of Galilee. He saw ships all the time. Notice his description. He had in mind a great vessel. He had in mind a sea vessel driven by sails. There is a pilot on board giving the orders. And that great ship is controlled by what? A small rudder.

Did you ever ride in a boat in which the rudder didn't function properly? Once, while at the camp, I took the girls out in a paddle boat. The paddle worked fine, but the rudder wouldn't turn left. We'd crank like crazy and only go one direction. What a difference a rudder makes! With a small rudder, we can guide a ship many times its size.

What's the comparison between a rudder and the tongue? Both are small. Both function the way the "pilot" wills. In fact, our great challenge is to learn to submit our tongue to THE pilot, the Lord Jesus.

III. Illustration #3: A small spark can cause a large fire (5).

At the end of v 5 we read, "Behold, how great a matter (lit. "wood, forest") a little fire kindleth!" V 6 continues, "And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity; so is the tongue among our members that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature, and it is set on fire of hell."

James uses the image of fire to teach us about our tongues. What's true of fire? For one, it starts small, but can exhibit massive influence. A small spark can cause a roaring fire. Another thing about fire is that it has the power to spread quickly. Fire

itself is not bad. But when it's out of control, it can be devastating. It can destroy. The NASB of v 5 reads, "How great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!"

That's true of the tongue, too. Proverbs 16:27, "An ungodly man diggeth up evil, and in his lips there is a burning fire."

Did you ever notice how ONE word can totally change a situation? For example, suppose your wife worked all afternoon to prepare a delicious supper. I mean, she pulled out all the stops to please you--fancy table cloth, candles, the crystal, the whole works. And she fixed your favorite dish. When you got home, she was in a terrific mood. You sat down to eat, and took your first bite. She asked, "How do you like it?" Fellows, that is a moment of truth! If you answer flippantly, "Not bad," what will happen to the atmosphere of your evening?

Words ARE as powerful as fire. Another example. Suppose your child goes 0 for 4 her softball game. And on the way home in the car, you say, "You really were an embarrassment to our family out there today." Do you think that one sentence will affect your child in the future?

We can say something in church, even in passing, that can cause great pain for others. I remember vividly when I was a teenager. We used the Word of Life Quiet Time, which the leaders checked every week. One time I got my QT back, and read the comments of one of the leaders. He criticized my exegesis (I didn't even know what exegesis meant). He didn't mean to harm me, and in fact, what he wrote was true. But his words might have hurt less if he'd phrased them more carefully.

Words are powerful in a positive way, too. I remember another youth leader I had when I was in Jr. High. He was in his 50's. I can still see the gleam in his eye, and the assurance of his voice when he would say to me, "Brad, I sure appreciate you. I believe God has something special in store for you." To this day, when I return to my home church, Charlie comes up to me with an encouraging word.

That's James' point. There is incredible power in the tongue. As a small bit can turn a large horse, and a tiny rudder can direct a large ship, and a little spark can cause a large fire, so is the power of the tongue.

Implications:

James highlights two implications in the first phrase of v 5, "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasteth great things."

1. My tongue may be petite, but it sure is powerful.

Consider those words, "The tongue is a LITTLE MEMBER." It's little. It's tiny. It's petite. But, oh, the power of it.

I want to make a suggestion. I don't think we realize the destructive power of a few, misplaced words. Just a few.

For instance, when I was about 8, I was out in our back yard playing. All of a sudden, a neighbor lady that lived on the other side of an open field, about 50 yards from our house, started yelling, "Get out of here, you crazy thing!" I wasn't doing anything wrong, but I was sure she was yelling at me, so I ran inside the house. For weeks, I stayed away from that lady. It wasn't until quite awhile later that I discovered it wasn't me she was yelling at, but her dog. The power of a misplaced word.

Parents, may I remind you (as I do myself) that your words have incredible impact on your little ones. More than one child has outlived the critical words, "Why can't you be like your sister?!" I beseech you to be careful with your words.

And be careful with your words in church, too. How would you feel if, after the singing the first song tonight, you heard these words from the person next to you, "Who told you that you could sing?" Those can be cutting words, even if used in jest. More than a few people, having heard words like those, have clammed up and refused to sing again publicly for years. A few, flipant words (that may have gotten a laugh) actually robbed God of the praise He deserves.

Never forget this. My tongue may be petite, but it is very powerful.

Notice a second implication in v 5...

2. My tongue can boast of great things.

When I boast, what am I doing? I am using my tongue to call attention to myself. Athletes do it. Musicians do it. Preachers do it. We use our tongues to elevate ourselves, to exalt ourselves, to solicit honor for ourselves. But we are not worthy of that honor. Only Jesus Christ is.

We would do well to ask ourselves often the three questions presented in I Cor 4:7 (NIV), "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you **BOAST** as though you did not?" The fact is, we do boast. We use our tongues to rob God of what He deserves.

What's the solution, then?

a. The solution is not silence.

In light of the power of the tongue, we might be inclined to say, "I'm never going to talk again! I might as well go to the doctor and have him stitch my mouth shut!" That's not the answer. James is not saying that silence is the answer. Nor is he forbidding speech. Aristippus the Greek had a wise saying (in Barclay, 84), "The conqueror of pleasure is not the man who never uses it. He is the man who uses pleasure as a rider guides a horse or a steersman directs a ship, and so directs them wherever he wishes."

The solution is not abstention. What is the solution?

b. The solution is control.

We need to learn to control our tongue. But guess what? We can't, on our own. To bring this tiny creature under control we must submit it to the control of Jesus Christ.