

## *Taming the Tongue: Power • James 3:3-12*

When O. J. Simpson offered a plea to charges of double homicide with special circumstances, he said emphatically that he was absolutely 100 percent not guilty. There was a power to those words that cast doubt in the minds of millions of Americans who had previously decided that the former football star was guilty.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “I have a dream.” John Kennedy said, “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” With those words both men captured the imagination of a whole generation of Americans. Powerful words!

But a person need not be a celebrity to exercise the power of words. There is life-changing power in saying “no” to drugs, in saying “yes” to a marriage proposal, in the emotional words of the person calling 911 or in simply saying, “I love you” to a child.

The New Testament book called James is about living Christianly, about the connection between the faith we believe and the action that we do. A recurring theme woven through all the teaching of James has to do with the words we speak and the management of our tongues.

James 3:3-5 is part of a chapter on “taming the tongue”. In these verses James strongly emphasizes the power of what we say. He makes a big deal out of this because he knows that some people will think that words really don’t matter.

Little children shout, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” James says that’s just not true. Words can hurt you. And your words can hurt someone else. Words can make a marriage succeed or fail. Words can get the promotion or get dismissal. Words can shape history. Words are ultimately stronger than sticks or stones.

*In order to be a Christian, the tongue must say so. To become a Christian is to verbally declare belief in Jesus Christ.*

Edward Bulwer-Lytton was right when he wrote, “The pen is mightier than the sword.” Written words, like spoken words, have a power that exceeds armies and arsenals. In fact, every army that has ever marched and every navy that has ever sailed did so in response to the words that ordered them to fight.

James knows that we will never tame our tongues unless we are able to understand first of all the great power that words have. That’s why he wrote:

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

He starts out with two common illustrations: a horse’s bit and a ship’s rudder. Neither is new with James. He borrowed from the literature of his time and the popular comparisons Greeks used in everyday speech to help us understand the power of the tongue.

Most of us don’t ride horses, but many of you know far more about horses than I will ever know, although there was a time in my life when I actually rode horses fairly often. There was a summer when I worked at a camp and taught horsemanship to children. I learned a lot about horses in the process.

I remember the first time I attempted to put a bit in a horse’s mouth. I thought I would lose my fingers. I learned that some horses have soft mouths and other horses have hard mouths. I learned that there are many different designs of bits — some barely making any difference, most with a device that presses down on the

horse's tongue and some that resemble torture chamber inventions designed to inflict pain.

There are some very obedient horses that eventually don't need bits. They are sensitive to the slightest pull of the reins. Even without reins they will respond to a touch on their necks and will turn in the direction the rider indicates. Then there are those that are so tough and resistant that they need a harsh bit and a strong pull to make them turn or stop. The point that James is making is that bits are really quite small in comparison to the size of a horse, yet it is able to control the behavior and direction of the biggest horse.

James' second example is the small rudder that steers a large ship. Very large sailing ships would be destroyed by strong winds if they were unable to be controlled by rudders. With a rudder the pilot can steer a large vessel so that it not only will survive the winds but so that it can take advantage of them to get to the ship's destination.

The ratio is great between the size of the rudder and the size of the ship. It is really quite amazing that something so small can control something so big. But the ancient principle still applies today.

Our family has a 17-foot ski boat powered by an "I/O", an "Inboard/Outboard". That means that the engine is inside the boat but that the "lower unit" is outside the boat. The lower unit includes the boat's transmission, propeller and a rudder called a skeg. The boat is steered by turning the lower unit with a pair of cables attached to a steering wheel. Just behind the propeller is a small triangular piece of aluminum called a "trim tab" that helps keep the boat going in the right direction.

If the trim tab is out of adjustment by just a fraction of an inch, the boat will go around in circles. When the trim tab is out of adjustment the driver has to exert enormous and constant strength to steer the boat because it keeps pulling hard to the right or to the left. Once again, a very small piece of equipment has great influence over the enormous horsepower of the boat.

The important point that the Bible is here making is that tongues are small, yet they have great power. Though tiny parts of the body, they can control the direction our entire bodies go.

In many ways Christianity begins with the mouth. Romans 10:9-10 says:

...if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

In order to be a Christian, the tongue must say so. To become a Christian is to verbally declare belief in Jesus Christ. Faith plus statement from the tongue changes a person's life now and their eternal destiny forever. I Peter 2:21-23 says:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

In other words, Jesus had his tongue under control. When enemies swore at him, abused him with words, insulted and provoked him—he did not retaliate. The Bible tells us that Jesus set an example for Christians to follow.

The power of the tongue can be used for good or for bad. Many people quickly learn the power of the tongue. Some use it to lie, manipulate and abuse. Others use it to tell the truth, help, encourage and heal. Which we do demonstrates whether or not we are like Jesus. Those who abuse this enormous power of the tongue usually have lives out of control and are unlike Jesus. Those who use the tongue for good are like Jesus Christ.

While the words we speak are not the only test of whether or not a person is a Christian, it is a primary test. A person who uses the power of the tongue like Jesus is probably a Chris-

tian. Someone who abuses the power of the tongue is probably not a Christian.

The greatest opportunity and test of this is usually in our relationship to those who are the closest to us. It's the way a man speaks to his wife or to his children; the way a woman talks to others about her husband or her children. It's the verbal treatment we give to employees and to coworkers. It is the words we use, the jokes we tell, the encouragement we give. Conversations we hold with our closest friends and associates are the greatest indication of how we handle the power of the tongue.

So what then is a Christian to do—especially those of us who have trouble with our tongues? Well, first of all, we ought never underestimate the power of words. We need to learn, if we have not learned already, that words do matter. Every word makes a great deal of difference. Words do have power. Bad words do far greater harm than we think. Good words have far greater impact for help than we realize.

Perhaps the best way to remember the power of the tongue is to recall the impact others' words have had on us. Each of us can think of times when we have been devastated by the unthinking or cruel or angry words of another person. Each of us can recall the times we were lifted to encouragement and hope with the kind and good and helpful words of another person.

Remember that what the words of others have done to us, our words do to others. We ought to listen to what we say and the way we say it—to God and to other people as well. Do we really mean what we say? Are we really saying the best things and the right things? Are we speaking the words that God wants to hear?

I don't have a "big" voice. It's not easy for me to comfortably raise volume and increase projection. When I must, my words can sound angry. There have been times at home when

I've been asked to repeat something several times because background noise made my words hard to hear. When I try harder to be heard, I hear the sounds that come out of my mouth and have to explain that I'm not upset.

But, sometimes I don't listen to myself as well as I should. We all should. When we reflect on what we've said, we may be very sorry. All of us have thought, "I never should have said what I did." It may be necessary to go back to those who heard the words and make amends. But it is equally important to hear ourselves and think through how we could better respond and what we should say. Then we can "program" ourselves for when the next occasion arises.

It's good to ask someone we trust to evaluate and critique the use of our tongues. If we are going to use the power of the tongue well, we need to hear what we say.

Consider the words we speak as the first measure of the growth and maturity of our Christian lives. Believe that God cares what we say. Understand that living Christianly and growing in godliness are always reflected in the words we speak. In other word, count speech to be extremely important!

If our tongues need help, begin with God.

Christians believe that God hears and answers prayer. Christians believe that God cares about what we say and how we live. Christians are convinced that God makes a powerful difference in our lives.

So don't rely on self-help. Don't think we can cure abusiveness or problems with obscenity, profanity, hurtful anger or unkindness. These issues need God.

When I was a little child, my mother had me memorize and then say every day before I went out the door to school, the words of Psalm 19:14, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."

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I think that would be a good grown-up prayer for all of us to pray with the conviction that God who is listening to every word that we speak and engaged in every detail of our lives would delight in the opportunity to be asked for his help.

Several years ago I took a good look at my tongue, my physical tongue. When I did I saw some small growths that concerned me. My dentist referred me to an oral surgeon who surgically removed them—while I watched! It wasn't the most pleasant experience of my life, but it was the right thing to do and I'm glad I did it. And I'm glad the results were benign.

James 3:3-5 is given to us so that we do the same thing with our words. At least once in awhile we need to take a moment and listen to our words "in the mirror". We need to hear what

we say and be willing to go to God as the great oral surgeon, if need be, and let God cut out whatever shouldn't be there in order that the power of the tongue may be used for the good of others and for the glory of Jesus Christ.

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