

Taming the Tongue: Danger • James 3:5b-8

Along the highway there are yellow diamond-shaped signs. The shape communicates danger with words warning that the road is “slippery when wet”, “deer crossing next 5 miles” or “falling rocks”.

The same applies to downhill ski slopes. Diamonds mark trails that are dangerous and are meant only for advanced skiers. Double diamonds are doubly dangerous and designed only for experts. I rarely attempt hills with diamonds when I ski and then only with great caution.

If you take a look at James 3:5-8 it is almost as if there ought to be diamonds written in the margin to catch our eye and to indicate to us that this is a danger section. These are words of serious warning, and while the Bible, for the most part, is a positive book loaded with hope, the truth is that God is honest with us as well. He tells the down side and the dark side. He loves us enough to give us warnings about the dangers in life so that we can avoid them.

So, with double diamonds on our mind, let’s read James 3:5-8:

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

To understand God’s warning we must get into some “tongue theory”. What the Bible here is telling us is that tongues are dangerous. They are like a spark in a very dry forest.

This year forest fires have consumed tens of thousands of acres across the western United States and western Canada. Veteran firefighters have tragically died. Smoke has filled the skies

a thousand miles east and darkened our Minnesota skies and lowered our daytime temperatures. Campers or smokers who were careless with embers or matches started some of these fires. Some of the fires have destroyed forests that have stood for a hundred years, burned houses to the ground and left widows and orphans behind. And, in some cases, the people who started these fires don’t even remember doing it.

Words are a lot like sparks. Properly used they do a lot of good, giving warmth and comfort and security. But carelessly used they can destroy lives and change history and the speaker might never know the damage that has been done.

Tongues are dangerously evil. James 3:6 uses very strong description: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.” These are not easy words to understand.

Compare humans to matches. How flammable is a match? Very flammable! The character of a match is that it burns very easily. Which part is most flammable? The tip—it burns first and fastest and sets the rest of the match on fire. It then sets other materials on fire.

Just as matches are flammable, humans are sinful. Every part of us sins easily from the tops of our heads to the bottoms of our feet. We easily sin in our thoughts, actions and everything else. But which part of us is most flammable—that is, which part sins most quickly and easily and can set the rest of our lives to sinning? Many modern Christians would refer to parts of the body most associated with sex, but the Bible says it is the tongue. Tongues are like the tips of matches that can start the fire that will burn everything else to destruction. “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.”

The biblical language gets stronger the

Tongues are tough to tame!

more we read. James 3:6 talks about the “whole course of life” that can be set on fire by the words we speak. Bad talk poisons the whole body. It singes our relationships, our Christian faith, our family, our job and health and everything else.

There are those who think that gossip won't really hurt anybody. There is the man who imagines that abusive words spoken to his wife really don't hurt him and bring only temporary pain to her. There's the Christian who supposes that a lie that is spoken at work can't make any difference at home. And there are those who think that the fire of their words can be contained, that they can just cut them off at any moment. All of these people are foolishly naïve. They fail to realize what destruction can come from the human mouth. They are just plain wrong!

Tongues are like matches that are heated by hell until they ignite and the flames spread all over every other part of life. It is dangerous indeed. Anyone who hears about these dangers should want to tame their tongues. But tongues are tough to tame!

When it comes to taming something, most of us think of animals. Some animals are harder to control than others, yet just about every type of animal—to one extent or another—has been tamed by humans. But tongues are far more difficult to tame.

My first home computer with a CD-ROM came with a disc called “The Animals”. It was all about the San Diego Zoo. With the computer controls I could take a tour all over the zoo and visit animals from every part of the world—from the sky to land to sea. I could click a button and see pictures, click another button to get a written description, another button to hear what each animal sounds like and another button to watch a short movie featuring the animal of my choice. We humans have come a long way since the Garden of Eden in our ability to contain animals, to control them, to cause them to be where we want them to be and do what we want them do, and that is not easy. It is not

easy to catch an elephant and get it to San Diego. It's not easy to contain an alligator or a crocodile or a mountain lion.

But God is here saying that that's really quite easy compared to taming the tongue. Take a person who swears regularly and tell him not to swear. Ask a chronic gossip to keep a secret. Ask the person who writes angry letters to stop. See if the liar can go a week telling the truth. The tongue is tough to tame.

All of this negative perspective on tongues reaches its pinnacle in James 3:8: “. . . no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

Understand this isn't talking about the physical pink muscles in our mouths. It's talking about the words that we speak. Sinful humans have speech that is marked by “restless evil” and “full of deadly poison.” Jesus said it this way in Matthew 15:11:

“What goes into a person's mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’

“. . . the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these are what make a person ‘unclean.’ ”

The popular notion of our society is exactly the opposite of what Jesus said and what the Bible teaches. Our culture says, “You are what you eat.” Jesus says, “You are what you speak.”

Does all this mean that we can't tame our tongues? Yes, that is exactly what it means. We can never control our tongues. We are incapable of making them good.

Does this mean that our tongues can't be tamed? No. God can tame our tongues, but we cannot. So if we have a problem with a bad mouth we need God's help to transform us from the inside out so that what we say will be good.

Perhaps you know how dangerous tongues can be because you've been burned by the words of others. Maybe the burns are fresh and the blisters are sores on your soul. Maybe the burns have hardened into scars that have disfigured your attitude toward life. As Christians,

what should we do when we are burned by the words of others?

Start out trying to put hurts into perspective. Understand that everyone experiences many hurts in life. How we handle hurts is what counts. Hurts can be enormous opportunities to trust God and to grow personally.

Research shows that most of us make a bigger deal out of the words and hurts of others than we should. The entire direction of life can be shaped by our magnification of words and events that really don't matter on the larger scale of life. Ask God, "Am I making too much out of this? Help me to get God's perspective on what was said."

Decide to forgive the person whose words burned you. That is the command of Jesus and the Christian thing to do. Until forgiveness is granted, the words of others will continue to have excessive burning power in your life. To forgive is to "let go of any desire to get even."

If it will help the other person and resolve the problem, follow the confrontation plan described by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17. Go alone to talk to the person who burned you. Try to get it straightened out. If that doesn't work, take a mature Christian along with you. If that doesn't work, come to the church for help. If that doesn't work, you have done everything you can and it is time to get on with life and accept an unresolved conflict.

Everyone faces the inflammatory words of others. Some people respond to those words like fans that turn a small flame into a roaring forest fire. Others are more like firefighters who quickly put the little flame out before it causes much damage. Which are you? Ask God to help you as you try to be a firefighter instead of a fan. Recognize the danger of sinful words and be the kind of person that puts them out.

On the other hand, maybe you are the scorcher. Maybe you are something of a verbal arsonist. Every time you open your mouth red hot words come shooting out scorching every-

one that gets in your way. What should you do?

First of all, go to God. James 3:8 is very clear that "no one can tame the tongue", so don't think that this is a problem that can be solved alone. Those who are verbally abusive, those who have filthy mouths, those who frequently scorch others will *never* solve the problem alone. No number of resolutions or promises will make a difference.

Go to God for help. Pray for him to change your heart from the inside out and ask him to clean up your mouth. Tell him that you are willing to get help from wherever he suggests. Ask God to make a difference in your life through Jesus Christ. I John 1:9 says that if we confess our sins, God will forgive our sins and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If you've set a fire, do what you can to put it out. Apologize. Tell the truth. Accept the responsibility. Undo the damage as best you can. Resolve to keep quiet if you don't have anything good or kind to say. Keep your mouth shut when hot!

For those who are lifelong verbal arsonists, understand that it will take some time for those who know you best to trust you again. Trust is something that, when it is broken, is slow to heal and rebuild. It may take months or even years, for those who have been burned in the past to believe that the change has really taken place.

Finally, make a list of those that you have burned and do what you can to help those that you have hurt. Since verbal arsonists tend to scorch members of their families most of all, start with them. Ask what you can do. Seek the counsel of others on what is appropriate. Become a healer instead of a burner with words.

There was an interesting "Letter to the Editor" in a recent USA TODAY written by a man named Darril W. Deaton from Morris, Connecticut. He was responding to an earlier article in USA TODAY entitled "Mail Full of Hate".

To forgive is to "let go of any desire to get even."

Deaton's letter seems to me to illustrate much of what James 3:5-8 is teaching:

I would like to apologize to Michael Gartner for the way some so-called Christians react to his opinions (and he references "Mail Full of Hate", Counterpoints, Tuesday).

I am a conservative, usually vote Republican and most importantly, I am a dedicated Christian. I also am intensely offended by the nasty, hate-ridden mail Gartner has received.

I regret he has suffered at the hands of those who call themselves Christians. I regret there are people who call him names and give Christianity a bad name by doing so. You see, true disciples of Jesus Christ also are suffering at the hands of these people. Whether they write detestable letters, vandalize abortion clinics, or shoot abortionists, they truly hurt me and other followers of Christ. We are found guilty by association when no association exists.

I would like Gartner to know that for every person who writes him an obscene letter there are hundreds, if not thousands, praying for him and others in the media.

For every person who pickets an abortion clinic, there are thousands quietly, and lovingly, investing their own money and time and other resources to help women and families through crisis pregnancies - without taking their babies' lives.

For every person who perpetrates violence against gays, blacks, Jews, women, whites, Hispanics or abortionists, there are millions praying for peace and a moral,

spiritual awakening in America.

I regret that Michael Gartner may have received a distorted view of Jesus Christ because of the disgusting behavior of a few who claim to associate with him. I know millions of Christians are trying to live their lives in such a way that their sovereign leader will be pleased. I pray Gartner's opinion of Christ and his disciples will come to be a more positive one.

Darril W. Deaton, Morris, Connecticut.

And so, in the words of the Psalmist, May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in the sight of our Sovereign, Jesus Christ. Amen

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