

"Taming the Tongue"
Sermon Series on *Faith That Works* #5
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May 1, 2016
(James 3:1-12)

All of us have done it. Perhaps we were distracted by a phone call. Or maybe we were upset. Perhaps we just typed the wrong address. There is nothing like the sinking feeling after sending an inappropriate e-mail to someone and dearly wanting to take it back.

Last year Google's Gmail announced that it will offer a way to cancel the delivery of an e-mail you sent. With the new option, when you send an e-mail within Gmail, a large button with the word "UNSEND" will appear on your screen. If you click on that button within 30 seconds, your e-mail delivery will be cancelled.¹

Now if only Google could invent this feature for our mouths and the words we speak!

All of us have difficulty controlling our tongues at times, don't we? We say the wrong thing to the wrong person at the wrong time. And I suspect we all could use a little help in this area of life. James knows this all too well, and he says a great deal about the nature of the tongue and how to tame it in the passage we'll study today. In the course of our time together, I would like for you to consider what James says about faith that works as it relates to: 1) The Influence of Words; 2) The Destructive Power of Words; and 3) The Control of Words.

I. The Influence of Words.

Earlier in his letter, James mentions the tongue -- in 1:19, 26. There he says, *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...If anyone considers himself religious and yet doesn't keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."*

In our current passage he revisits the subject again, but this time he does so in greater detail. And his first concern in this matter has to do with the influence of our words.

James illustrates the powerful influence of the tongue by pointing to two analogies in life -- bits in the mouths of horses, and rudders on the back of ships. In both cases a very small item can turn the whole thing. Like bits and rudders, the tongue is also relatively small by comparison. And yet, also like them, it exerts a powerful influence.

Gail MacDonald writes about the American artist Benjamin West, who lived in the 18th century. West used to tell friends that his career was launched on a day during his childhood when his busy mother asked him to take care of his younger sister, Sally. Hoping to please his mother, Benjamin determined to surprise his mother upon her return with a painting. So he attempted to paint a simple portrait of his sister.

As you can imagine, West wasn't very tidy in his effort, and soon paint was splattered everywhere. But when his mother returned, she wisely ignored the mess that would normally have sent most of us into a tailspin. Instead, she focused only on her son's performance as an artist. And she exclaimed with enthusiasm as she looked over his shoulder, "Why Benjamin, it's Sally!" Then she stooped down and kissed her delighted son on the cheek. West later reflected on that moment, and he said, "(Those words and) that kiss made me a painter!"²

Think about a time in your life when someone praised you or gave you a pat on the back. How did it make you feel? What inspiration did you receive from those simple words? And how can you become an encourager to someone else this week? That's the influence of words.

II. The Destructive Power of Words.

James says in verse 2 of our passage, "*We all stumble in many ways.*" All of us struggle with taming the tongue. For some their struggle is with foul language, or losing their temper. Maybe your problem is telling off-color or inappropriate jokes, or you tend to gossip. Or perhaps you have well-developed verbal skills, and sometimes you use them to intimidate or belittle other people.

A. The Analogy of a Fire. James illustrates the nature and depth of our struggle with all this by drawing upon the analogy of a fire. He writes, "*Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue is also a fire...*" (vv.5,6). Recent fires in Colorado and California illustrate the way in which enormous damage can result from a tiny spark. A little over a week ago Lorie and I were in Yosemite National Park for a memorial service for my brother Rob who died last year, and we could see the effects of a devastating fire they had there back in 2015. The hillside is still charred badly.

James reminds us that the incendiary nature of the tongue can burn through relationships, and the heat of a person's anger can be so destructive at times. He warns that the tongue is capable of a great deal of damage that ranges from boasting to blasphemy, gossip to grumbling, and flattery to false witness.

James calls the tongue a "*world of evil,*" and he says that it is "*full of deadly poison*" (v.6,8). We can be so hurtful in what we say sometimes. I once heard the following, "Three things can never come back -- the arrow that is shot, the opportunity that is lost, and the word that is spoken."³

B. The Source of our Struggle. Why do we say hurtful things to other people? What prompts us to do it? And where does it come from? Jesus said, *"For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks"* (Mt. 12:34). It's out of our hearts that our words come. The problem is inside.

The word "sarcasm" comes from the Greek word *sarx*, and it literally means "to cut the flesh." Why do we cut people down with sarcasm? Is it because of our own low self-esteem, and we feel the need to bring others down to our level? Do we belittle people because we feel inadequate? Do we wound others because we've been wounded ourselves? The poison is in us; it's in our hearts. And when the wound is lanced, the poison spills out in destructive ways.

What can you and I do to avoid these problems and control our tongues better? I came across an article about losing one's temper, and it offered these helpful suggestions.

1. Recognize your triggers. There are some things that set us off more than others. Take note of these and be aware of them. Lorie and I once noticed early on in our marriage that, like animals at the zoo before feeding time, we tended to be irritable with each other just before dinner. So we learned to not engage in an argument until after we'd eaten our meal. All of a sudden, the problem didn't seem as important when our stomachs were full.

2. Find strategies to calm yourself down. Walk away. Practice deep breathing. Count backwards.

3. Try to communicate calmly. When we're angry, we are excitable. And we tend to raise the volume of our voices which never helps the situation.

4. Choose your battles. Not everything is worth arguing about, and you should pick and choose when you need to draw attention to a problem.

5. Apologize when you're wrong. Some of the most important words you can ever say are, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me."

6. Get support. Don't try to deal with this alone. You might even need to get some professional help in dealing with your anger.

7. Be good to yourself, and practice self-care. Remember, we all make mistakes, and the grace of God covers all our sins.⁴

At the end of the day I think the best way to get at the destructive power of our words is to try and get at the source of the problem, the heart. Ask yourself, "What is it that is causing me to feel this way? Why am I so hurtful toward this person? What has happened in my life in the past that makes me angry so that I lash out like this?" Don't just deal with the words; get at the cause of the problem and allow the Lord to do a work of transformation in your heart. Let Him heal you from the inside out.

III. The Control of Words.

James concludes by writing, "*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*" (v.7). We've learned to exercise control over all the creatures of the world, but we can't seem to control our own tongues.

Some of my favorite television shows growing up featured trained animals like Flipper, Lassie, Mr. Ed, and Rin-Tin-Tin.

Animals can be trained, and we can even tame wild animals. Why can't we exercise the same control over our tongue? R.V.G. Tasker once wrote, "Because of the fall, man has lost dominion over himself."⁵

James goes on to point out the inconsistency we all express from time to time in vv. 9-12. On the one hand, we try to be pious and praise God for all that He's done for us. But then we turn right around and lash out at another person and say unkind words. "How can good and bad water come out of the same spring?" James asks.

I confess that there were times when our kids were growing up that I was angry with our kids, and I'd be grumping around the house and saying mean things, when all of a sudden the phone would ring. I'd answer it, and it was a member of the church. And in an instant I changed tone of my voice, and I became so compassionate and understanding. And I'd say, "How can I help you? No, it's no bother at all."

When I'd hang up the phone, Lorie and the boys looked at me and would ask, "Why can't you be nice like that to us!"

In his book, *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan tells us of a man named Talkative. Of Talkative Bunyan writes, "He was a saint abroad and a devil at home." Does that describe you?

Inconsistency is something I suspect we all struggle with. But if we have our source in Christ and we draw on His power, perhaps we can get rid of the poison inside our hearts and begin bear spiritual fruit and learn to exercise control over our tongues more effectively. Accountability is a key to spiritual transformation, and it's a good exercise to invite folks to hold your feet to the fire when you fail to control your tongue.

I've learned a four-fold test that I try to apply in my life that has been helpful when it comes to choosing what to say. Maybe it will help you, too. Before I speak, I ask myself: Is it true? Is it appropriate? Is it necessary? And does it build up? If I can't answer yes to all four of the questions, then I shouldn't say it. Apply the test to what you say, and see what a difference it can make in your life.

Conclusion.

William Barclay once wrote, "One of life's hardest and plainest duties is to see that the tongue does not contradict itself but speaks only such words as we would wish God to hear."⁶ In what ways do you struggle to control your tongue? And how does the Lord want you to change in this area of your life?

Once many years ago our friends Gordon and Gail MacDonald heard their two children arguing with each other in the family room of their home. And as siblings can sometimes be, they were very cruel and hurting in what they said to each other. Gordon and Gail decided to mimic the children and teach them a lesson, and they staged a fake argument in the next room. When the kids heard their parents fighting, they rushed in and said, "Don't do that!" It really disturbed the kids.

That's when Gordon and Gail fell out of character and revealed they were only pretending in order to make a point. Then they said, "We should never talk to each other that way in our home. Out there the world tears you down, but in here it should be safe. In here we build people, we don't tear them down like that."

The MacDonalds actually developed a family custom so that whenever anyone said a hurtful thing to another member of the family someone would ask, "Now, is that a building statement, because in here we build people?" Lorie and I like that idea, so we adopted this custom in our own home for a while. But eventually we got to the point when we would say, "I know that this is not a building statement, but"

Do you see how speech is a gift from God, and we're called to be stewards of it? One day each of us will give an account to the Lord for what we've said in this life and for the ways we have exercised stewardship over our words, and each of us needs to control what we say. We need to understand the incredible power of words for good or for ill, for building up or tearing down. It's a long hard battle to tame the tongue, but just think of the incredible difference our words really make.

I close with this. At the turn of the last century, there were two altar boys in different parts of the world who had radically different experiences, and it made all the difference in the way their lives turned out. In one part of the world Joseph Brauz was an altar boy in Zadgrab, Croatia, helping the village priest with communion. He was carrying a glass chalice which contained the wine to the table in the chancel area, and he accidentally tripped and dropped the chalice during communion. It shattered and spilled the wine. The priest slapped the boy on the face, and in anger he said, "You fool! Leave the altar, and never come back again!" The boy never did.

There was another altar boy at about the same time who was assisting the Archbishop in St. Mary's Cathedral in Peoria, IL. And he, too, stumbled and dropped the glass chalice of wine. It shattered into a hundred pieces and made a

mess. But on this occasion, the Archbishop winked at the boy, and he said, "Don't worry about that, son. Someday you will be a fine priest. Let's get another chalice."

One word cut, and the other word encouraged. And a world of difference was made. The first altar boy became Tito, the ruthless communist leader of Yugoslavia. The other altar boy became Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, a man who perhaps more than any other shaped popular Catholic theology in America in the mid-20th century.⁷

How will you attempt to tame your tongue in the coming week and bring it under the lordship of Jesus Christ? You never know the impact your words will make in the life of another person – for good and for ill. Control what you say. Develop a faith that works. And God will give a blessing both to you and to the people around you. Amen.

¹ Source: Jack Dominic at www.theHarrison-press.com.

² From Gail MacDonald, *A Step Farther and Higher*, p.51.

³ Source unknown.

⁴ Source: Dr. Joan Simeo Munson, www.empoweringparents.com.

⁵ R.V.G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James*, p.77.

⁶ William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, p.90.

⁷ Source unknown.