

SERMON TITLE: The Tongue

SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-12

DATE: November 13, 2022

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SERIES SUMMARY

In Scripture, we find the life of faith is often a difficult journey. But true faith in Jesus will show itself in tough times and display the reality of Jesus to a watching world. In the same way, we're called to give voice to our words and action to what we believe. This is how our faith can make a transformative difference in our lives and the lives of others. On this side of eternity, a faith not applied is worthless and will make no difference. The book of James regularly asks us to put our faith into action so others can witness the reality of Jesus in our lives. As we turn towards Christ, our faith journey will be purposeful, fruitful, and sustain us through any difficulty we face.

SERMON SUMMARY

James is all about faith under pressure, faith persevering, and not just hearing the word but doing the word. He finished chapter two by talking about how you can be a Christian, but your faith can actually be dead and useless without works. He portrays faith like a muscle that you're supposed to stretch and train so that you can use properly. Immediately after this conversation, James talks about the tongue in 3:1-12. This is not an accident. The tongue is one of the strongest muscles in the body, and James wants us to think about training it and taming it. He wants us to think about our words as works that should accompany our faith. He wants us to feel the poignancy and responsibility of the old proverb: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

SERMON SCREENSHOTS & KEY POINTS

James starts his discussion on the tongue by talking about teachers: "Not many of you should be teachers, bc you'll get judged with greater strictness." Well, judged by who? By church members? Sure. By God? Absolutely. In some fragile way, teachers and preachers are supposed to speak on his behalf from his Word, and they will be held accountable for that. They are supposed to be holding out divine words of life for people, and if devolves into individualistic self-help, whiny politics, guilt-laced moralism, or temporal anecdotes, then those are *useless words* that are *useless works* from a *useless faith* – even if it's the pastor.

But then James gives a buffer in verse 2: "But we all stumble in many ways." This is a nudge to grace because we often don't live to the standards we place on others. We're so often quick to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt but then be suspicious of others, when in reality it should be the other way around. We should be a little hesitant or suspicious about our motives and words – "be slow to speak" (1:19); then we should give others the benefit of the doubt because maybe they're using hurtful words out of hurt in their own life. And because this life behind words is so fragile and mysterious, James then gives us two word-pictures: a horse and its bit, and a ship and its rudder. And James' point in all of this imagery is that the power of the tongue is in opposite proportion to its size. Or,

We think that we are in control of our words. But the truth is, in a very real way, our words control us.

This is what the teachers are getting judged for in verse 1, words that they have spoken in a sense control the judgment because you can't take words back or put them back in your mouth. When words are out, they become the measure by which we're judged. They become the instrument by which we're controlled. They're the bit in your mouth and the rudder on the ship of your life.

Next, James moves from the general power of words in his first paragraph (3:1-5) to their overwhelming negative effect in the second paragraph (3:6-12). In his mind (and likely ours), it's as if words of death are more hurtful than words of life are healing. Why is that? To think about this, James gives more word-pictures. With these images James moves from the uncontrollable nature of the tongue as a wildfire and a wild animal to the confounding nature of the tongue, that it is self-contradictory. But in the middle of this section, James gives us clues as to why negative words seem to have a greater weight.

When James lists all the tamable animals, he lists them like Genesis 1 does. In 3:9, when he talks about blessing and cursing, those are the dominant categories in Genesis 1-3 for God's design and our fall from it. But how did we fall from it? James then mentions that the tongue is "full of deadly poison." Horses don't have poison. Birds don't spew venom. But snakes? Snakes can be "full of deadly poison." Meaning, James is trying to draw our minds back to catastrophe in the Garden of Eden when the serpent deceived us. But how did he do it? He said, "Did God really *say*? Can you believe that? The first sin ever is about words. The snake took God-given words of life and put a question mark beside them. He twisted God's word, and without us knowing it, set the whole course of life on a downward spiral (3:6). So now, apart from God's mercy, our native tongue is to speak death.

This is why it's way too easy to gossip about someone when they're not there. This is why things like slander and outrage are totally acceptable. This is why it's easier to be a cynic and a skeptic and critic. This is why it's hard work to say positive and encouraging things to people. This is why lies are often more seductive than the truth is beautiful. This is why teacher-preachers will get judged more strictly. This is why complaining is often more normal than gratitude. This is why we think being obnoxious is a way to be right. This is why grumbling is somehow congratulated in our day. This is why being whiny gets attention. This is why words of death tear down *more than* words of life build up. This is why James says the tongue is set on fire by hell itself (3:6), because the enemy has taken the gift of words and made death its parasite. Therefore, we have to remember the bigger story:

God ordained words to be powerful vehicles of life and flourishing, but the enemy has twisted them to be corrupting tools of death and deterioration.

This explains so much. When someone expresses pure gratitude for you, when your dad told you he was proud of you, when your spouse praises your patience, when your friends lift you up with verbal kindness, these things are good, true, and beautiful because God designed words to be seeds that grow into trees of life that fill the world and make it Eden all around. That's the way it's supposed to be. But the snake has hijacked words as one of the main ways he is seeking to fill the world with death and destruction. And this is why it's always a war when it comes to our words.

But there's hope. Yes, we should practically be doing things like pausing to think about any way in which our words might be interpreted as hurtful. Yes, we should learn the art of saying "thank you" and "I'm sorry" and meaning it. Yes, we should fight to bless God and others with our words. But we should do all of these on the foundation of the Word-made-flesh.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And all things came to be through the Word, and in him was life and that life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness can't overcome it." This light is The Word of Life, that darkness can't grasp, that death can't stop. And this Divine Speech, this Word, it became flesh and dwelt among us. And he took the parasite of sin and death onto himself for us. This means that God's Truest and Purest Word is himself in the person of Jesus. And he has taken all the death and destruction of our hearts and words and emptied them of their power, so that we can know the Word of life and speak words of Life. He has conquered so that flourishing and not destruction would be our native tongue. And this is the foundation of our hope and our words.

This Word of the gospel doesn't take away the memories of hurtful words, but it gives you a way to interpret them whereby they don't sink into your heart, whether spoken by you or to you. By faith, Jesus as God's Word gives you an identity that no human words can take away, not even your own. It doesn't matter how loud your dad yelled at you. Jesus as the Word of life gives you a security that words of death can't overcome. It doesn't matter how many times they

said it to you. And all of these realities should re-ignite our commission to speak life to people. And when we do, our words hold them up into the light of Christ and we get to share in its beauty and its glory because that Light has conquered the darkness that often feels so near.

COMMUNITY GROUP QUESTIONS

Read James 3:1-12...

- What was your favorite part of this passage or sermon?
- How has God used you to speak life to people?
- When are you most tempted to use “words of death”?
- What is something hurtful that someone said to you that you still remember?
- Who is someone you know who “speaks life” as their native tongue?
- Why do hurtful words seem to weigh more than healing words?
- How does Jesus rescue us from the “words of death” that surround us?

The following resources have been a great help to us in preparing messages for this sermon series: *The Letter of James (NICNT)*, by Scot McKnight; *James (ZECNT)*, by Craig Blomberg; Mariam J. Kovalishyn; *The Epistle of James*, by Peter Lange & J.J. Van Oosterzee; *The Letter of James*, by Douglas Moo. Also, I (Charlie) have benefited from the teachings of Tim Keller, Tim Mackie and the Bible Project, and others whom I will credit during my messages. I have adapted and borrowed insights and illustrations from these men and incorporated them into the messages in this series.