

Hold Your Tongue (Or Something More Poetic)

James 3:1-12

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Perhaps you know the old riddle “Can you stick out your tongue and touch the tip of your nose?” The trick to this riddle is that typically people can’t reach their noses with their tongues, and so the trickster gets the person to stretch and strain his tongue all over the place, looking like a buffoon before accepting defeat. At this point, the trickster says smugly, “oh, I can,” then does this.¹

I think I first came across this extremely mild prank in middle school, during the era when the bar for humor was (obviously) pretty low. But when the joke was introduced to me, it wasn’t even mildly funny, because I responded by doing this.²

The tongue is a remarkable part of our anatomy. Colloquially known as the strongest muscle in the human body, it’s actually eight muscles that bond together without a supporting bone. Our tongues are as close as we come to an octopus’s tentacles or an elephant’s trunk. They move in all directions, virtually never get tired, and enable us to complete our most essential tasks.³

And yet, it is a part of the body that I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about. It’s just there...which is, maybe, why James chose it for his central focus in this chapter.

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These twelve verses in the third chapter of James are fascinating. They are poetic, filled with remarkable imagery and metaphor. James moves quickly from one allusion to the next trying to help us understand the mystery of the tongue, so quickly that it might be possible to overlook the depth and complexity of his comparisons. He actually makes three different arguments about the role of the tongue, about the role of our speaking, in the six metaphors sprinkled throughout these twelve verses.

The first and overarching metaphor is the tongue itself. As fascinating as that collection of muscles is, James is far more concerned with our speech than with our physicality. The use of the tongue as a metaphor for our words is common throughout scripture, but for James it is essential. Words are amorphous, hard to pin down, challenging to wrap our brains around, but the tongue is something we all understand and grasp. James is able to comment on the power and fluidity of our words through myriad metaphors, and he compares each of those to the metaphor of the tongue. He bends his words in as many different directions as we can bend our tongues.

¹ For those of you reading along at home: the trickster sticks out his tongue and then uses his finger to touch the tip of his nose.

² Again, for those of you at home: I’ve got a long tongue and can actually touch my nose with it, so that effectively kills the joke.

³ Most of the data in this paragraph comes from an excellent 2014 *Scientific American* [article](#) by Julia Calderone & Ben Fogelson.

The first two of these comparisons liken the tongue to a bit in a horse's mouth and a rudder on a ship. The choice of a horse and a ship is not accidental—these are the two primary forms of transportation for James's readers. If they wanted to go somewhere, they would most likely want a ship or a horse. But the ship or the horse can't be directed without the bit or the rudder...and while these images are still available to use today (we still sail on ships and ride on horses), they aren't as prevalent as they once were. Part of the statement James is making connotes an everyday, maybe every moment phenomenon.

My first instinct was to say that our best modern comparison is a car and its key: the car is virtually ubiquitous in our world, and the key—like a bit, a rudder, and a tongue—is small and overlooked but absolutely critical for movement. The problem with this is that the key makes the motor turn, and the bit and the rudder are both concerned with direction. James is concerned with direction.

When I was learning to drive, one of the hardest things to comprehend was how just a little movement of the steering wheel could affect the car so greatly. My dad was always steering with one hand on the wheel, easing it slightly to make the car hug a curve or pass someone else. I had both hands on the wheel, fixed firmly at 10 and 2, gripping the vinyl as if my life depended on it. And I eased nothing slightly—it felt like every time I was trying to change lanes, the car somehow leaped across the dotted line all at once instead of gliding over smoothly. I had to learn the subtlety of driving.

Our words are often our motors, moving us forward, but they are also our steering wheels, and they must be handled delicately, subtly, in order to pilot us effectively. A sincere thank you here. An honest but tactful appraisal there. I am amazed at the difference in impact between the clerk who says "how are you today?" because it's in a pre-approved script and the clerk who actually wants to know the answer to that question. "How are you today?" and "How *are* you today?" or "How are *you* today?" are completely different questions, somehow consisting of different words even though they look like they consist of the same words. And those words determine our direction.

There is a lot of potential for destruction in that open road, and this is likely why James moves into his next metaphor, the metaphor of an enormous fire that begins with a tiny spark.

This metaphor gets personal for me. I love a good campfire, and one of the things I love about it is watching the spark catch and spread. It's like watching a living creature grow. But James is clear that we're not talking about a campfire—we're talking about a beautiful, living forest engulfed in deadly fire. We're talking about fire not for its ability to warm or provide, but for its dangers of destruction.

Anyone who has watched the news the past few years knows the destructive power of fire. Out west, we've seen it displace whole communities and destroy entire cities. In our own city, just a few years ago, we watched as a seven-story building on Glenwood Avenue erupted in flames, burning through the night despite the attention of every firefighter in the county. Every time I see footage of any of those fires, I wonder, "How did this get so out of hand?"

This is the next metaphor James is using: a fire that grows more rapidly than we can comprehend, that destroys everything in its path, and that leaves bystanders baffled and puzzling, "How did this get so out of hand?"

Despite the fact that these verses are eloquently written, James mixes his metaphors here...but his point carries through that mixing. Our words have the ability to direct us forward or to destroy us completely. In either case, the words themselves are small, easily overlooked, practically forgettable...but the impact and the results are astonishing. The question is how we can make sure that our words are edifying instead of destructive.

James alludes to this in verse 7—not with a full metaphor, but with an image of creation that reminds us that words are critical to both of the creation stories at the beginning of Genesis. In chapter one, God speaks us into creation. The scripture suggests that humanity exists because of words, because God spoke. In chapter two, humanity is given naming rights over all of creation. We are given the role that God took with us, the role of giving these creatures their identity and, in a way, therefore speaking them into creation.⁴

We long to create, to build up, to make better...not to destroy. And yet, with one wrong utterance, we find ourselves wondering “how did this get so out of hand?”

James, a completist at heart, suggests that the answer to that question is similar to his advice in chapter 2. He implores his audience to stay true to themselves...but, since he’s feeling poetic, he uses two more metaphors to convey this, rhetorically asking, “Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree yield olives, or a grapevine figs?”⁵ Obviously, no.

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I’ve proposed that James is a book of non-negotiables, the essentials of faith for a church that is just starting out. It is fascinating to me that this chapter is included. Everything else that James will address is relevant on both a personal, individual level and for communal, corporate health...but the tongue and the words we speak are intensely personal. And yet James feels the need to emphasize this point among his requisites for that community.

Given the community emphasis in the rest of this letter, it seems that James accentuates this point as essential because, even though the words we speak are indeed individual, the impact of our words is far more public and wide-spreading. This is truer now than ever before. The words that we speak are recorded and revisit us throughout our lives. We type and publish words for the world to read, and as soon as we hit “post” or “send” they are permanently available even if we then attempt to hit “delete.”

Last week, talking about James 2, I said that “these are not just words; they are life itself.” Like it or not, our words become who we are. They had better be pointed in the right direction, edifying and not destructive, and above all authentic.

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The cleverest thing about this scripture is that James makes this point twice over. He makes it overtly, actually telling us that our tongues are powerful and our words significant...but he also recognizes that he can’t extol the value of carefully chosen words without choosing his words carefully. James uses the metaphors of tongue, horse, ship, fire, freshwater, and figs in part

⁴ Johnson, Luke Timothy (1998). “James,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 12). Abingdon. 205.

⁵ James 3:11-12, NRSV.

because it helps his readers to understand exactly what he's saying...and he uses them in part because he knows it matters what words he selects.

One of my mentors, giving a seminar on sermon-writing, said that he goes back over a sermon word-for-word and asks himself "Is this exactly the right word for this sentiment and this spot" about *every single word*. (You, for better or for worse, did not land a preacher who is so fastidious.) The result for my mentor is that his sermons flow with a remarkable cadence. Their messages convey with profound eloquence, striking a chord deep within those who hear them...and they are gorgeously poetic with images that stick in your craw for days and weeks following.

Our tongues—our words—are indeed powerful, creative, dangerous, and real...and they are also beautiful, or at least have the potential to be. And that beauty shouldn't be ignored. It is a critical part of how our words make up who we are, make up our life stories. It is a critical part of how our words have lasting impact.

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Shortly after Jennifer and I got married, we traveled to the beach with our two dogs Holly & Toby, both of whom are sadly no longer with us. Toby was as sweet a dog as you would ever meet. He loved all people, and all people loved him. Strangers would roll down their windows while passing by in cars to compliment his look and ask where they could find a dog like Toby.

His one vice was small furry creatures. He was constantly breaking free from our yard in search of the latest possum or squirrel, and he would go into full-on hunter mode when we passed a cat on a neighborhood walk.

On this trip to the beach, Toby caught a whiff of feline from inside our rental house, and he quickly realized that the screen door on this house was not sufficient for keeping him inside. He bolted through it and flew down the street in search of the cat. Jennifer and I chased after him, eventually catching him a few yards over before he could do any damage.

The hubbub caused the neighbors to come out, and they understandably began to take issue with the dog who was coming after their pet. We apologized, but this didn't seem to satisfy them, and so they continued lashing out, calling our dog names and suggesting that they would like to do to him what he'd tried to do to their cat.

I expect that most of your interactions with my wife have been 100%, altogether pleasant. This is because you have never attacked one of her dogs. You can say as many nasty things as you want to about me and she will keep her cool, potentially even agreeing with you about some of them, but if you cross her dog you will quickly regret it.

That's what happened at the beach. Insults were volleyed just once or twice before it seemed like there would be an actual brawl (and, I hasten to include, Jennifer wanted me to tell you [correctly] that she would have won). I found myself in the middle of the two women asking them to calm down...and as any substitute teacher knows, you might be okay breaking up a fight between two men, but you do not want to be in the middle of two women.

Somehow, everyone steadied, calamity was avoided, and Toby came back inside looking particularly pleased with himself for the fun afternoon he'd had.

When Jenn and I talked about the incident later, she characterized it as an out-of-body experience. She knew that she shouldn't escalate the insults and threats lobbed at Toby, but that knowledge was irrelevant. She heard the words come out of her mouth without intending to say them. She felt her hands ball up into fists without telling them to.

Our words, spoken or heard, lead to action faster than we can comprehend.

Here's the thing: I kind of wish my wife had decked this other woman. She—the other woman, not Jennifer—was so obnoxious, and she wouldn't let it go even after we'd apologized and even though our dog hadn't actually done anything to her cat. I would not want to deal with the repercussions of my wife slugging a stranger, but there's a part of me, in the moment, that would've liked to see this woman get what she deserved.

At the very least, I sort of wish that Jennifer had thoroughly unleashed her words on this woman. You know that feeling where you have the perfect comeback, one that would really level a verbal assailant, an immensely witty and clever retort...but it comes a day too late? I'm pretty sure she had the perfect comeback right on the tip of her tongue, armed and ready. And I'd like to have seen this woman crippled with Jennifer's words, and our dog get the defense he deserved.

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It's not quite as simple as James makes it sound. This sermon probably has a sequel about when *not* to hold our tongues. But in general, we are too quick to speak. In general, our words control us instead of us controlling our words. There is a reason James saw fit to include this message among his essentials.

The passage in James 1 that foreshadows this chapter is James 1:19-20: "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." James makes this point directly in under 140 characters, and then he makes it beautifully with image after image that reminds us our words determine our paths, our character, and our identity. Once again, these are not just words. These are life itself.