

**“PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY:
TAMING THE TONGUE”**

James 3:1-12

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

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Over the five Sundays of September, I'm preaching on the lectionary readings from the Epistle of James – which is sort of a New Testament version of the Old Testament book of Proverbs. James is not a discourse on Christian doctrine like Paul's letter to the Romans. James is a collection of teachings and exhortations about Christian living. The writer talks less about what Christians should believe and more about how they should behave. He is down-to-earth and practical, addressing real-life situations and questions: What does an authentic Christian life look like? How should we conduct ourselves as a Christian community? What practices should we avoid, and what practices should we embrace?

Today's lesson from James could not be any more relevant and timely for our own church. Last Sunday we consecrated a group of persons to teach in our children's Sunday School and youth ministry. Over the next ten days, another group of individuals will begin teaching Confirmation classes and adult study groups. Well, it turns out that James has some practical, pointed things to say about the teaching ministries of the church; and contrary to what we might expect, he begins with a cautionary word to those who presume to teach. On the surface, this doesn't make any sense, because churches certainly need teachers, especially good teachers. However, churches sometimes feel a sense of desperation in recruiting teachers, so much so that we are tempted to say, "Whosoever will may come." But James is more discriminating. He thinks teachers are held to a higher standard than others in the church: "we who teach will be judged with greater strictness," he says (3:1). As a result, he does not think teaching is for everyone.

Why is this so? Because to teach is to make active use of the tongue, and the tongue is a dangerous thing. James knows full well that whoever speaks makes mistakes. Those who assume a teaching role speak too many words not to blunder occasionally. The perfect speaker is not to be found, most certainly not in this pulpit! But it is not poor grammatical speaking that he is worried about, but something more sinister that happens when the tongue starts flapping. And here, James is surely addressing not just those who occupy the teaching office in the church, but every member of the congregation. We all speak to one another in one setting or another – over the phone, in small groups and committee meetings, in the pews before worship begins, around a table during Fellowship Hour. And all of us have the potential not just to speak, but to misspeak.

James knows that small things can do great harm. Size is not the main measure of power. The tongue is like the rudder of a ship or the bridle on a horse – tiny by comparison with ship or horse, but highly leveraged. Moving the rudder just slightly at the beginning of a voyage is the difference between docking in England or in Spain. A small metal rod properly pulled can control a raging stallion. That is the power of the tongue – small, often hidden from view, but the controlling rudder, the bridling bit.

James also knows about fires. Big fires often begin with a small match. As we have witnessed in the western United States over the summer months, wildfires can rage for days, destroying thousands of acres and hundreds of homes, defying legions of firefighters. So it is with the tongue. Its words are like sparks of flint, setting fire to woods that have been carefully nurtured for decades. Relationships slowly built are savagely destroyed by the wrong words said in the wrong way. Resentments are created with no more than a word or two, wrongly uttered, even if rightly meant. A whole range of emotions – hatreds, jealousies, ill will – can rage like a forest fire set by the tongue.

Especially vile are words maliciously spoken. These are perhaps what James has in mind when he speaks of the tongue as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (v. 8). Capable of blessing and cursing, the cursing tongue condemns, belittles, abuses, intimidates, waging its war with words like Sherman marching to the sea – destroying everything in sight. It would come as no surprise to James that so many of society’s laws are laws against untruthful and harmful words – slander, contempt, perjury.

We’re already seeing a familiar pattern repeat itself during this mid-term election year. One of the most common strategies in campaigning for office is the “attack ad.” These are brief sound bites broadcast on television and paid for by a political action committee. The purpose of the attack ad is not to expound the virtues of one’s own candidate, but to put one’s opponent in the worst possible light. The opponent’s policies are caricatured and ridiculed; his or her statements are taken out of context; his or her character is brought into question. In the typical attack ad, civil discourse is replaced by fanaticism. Qualifiers disappear, along with ambiguities. Words whittle away like a freshly sharpened knife, and truth lies on the floor, a bleeding victim.

But notice: James does not address his warnings to politicians or to those who seek to put them into office. He is speaking to committed Christians, to faith communities, especially to teachers and other church leaders who let their language get away from them. Apparently, wildfires are raging in some of the congregations to which James writes, and these wildfires have been started by a loose and destructive tongue.

During my college years I served as the Minister to Youth in a large church adjacent to the campus of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. In the spring of my senior year, I took a group of high school youth to my hometown of Corpus Christi for a weekend retreat. On Sunday morning we held a worship service out on a small island in Corpus Christi Bay. We sang choruses and we prayed; I gave a brief homily. Then we shared a simple meal of bread and fish, recalling Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the five thousand. It was a moving and memorable experience for all of us.

After we returned to Waco the pastor of the congregation received an anonymous letter from a church member. The pastor recognized the handwriting and knew immediately the identity of the author. It was an elderly woman who exceedingly pious, constantly professing her love for the Lord. But she was also a notorious gossip, frequently critical of church leadership. Somehow this woman had heard that we had served those young people bread and grape juice instead of bread and fish. She didn’t like the idea that we had observed the Lord’s Supper in a setting other than a regular church service. She was particularly incensed that I, not yet an ordained minister, would presume to lead such a service. Of course, we had not observed the Lord’s Supper at all, but it was typical for this woman to play fast and loose with the facts

and spread misinformation throughout the congregation. I'll never forget the punch line of her letter to the pastor. She proposed that the church "eliminate the youth director." She didn't say, "Let's eliminate the position of youth director"; she said, "Let's eliminate the youth director!" I was 21 years old, in my first ministry position, and I felt like a marked man!

James says, "No one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so" (vv. 8-10). Fortunately, I have known many church people for whom this is not so, who do not talk out of both sides of their mouths. When they speak, they speak only words of blessing.

One of my pastors during my seminary years was a man named John Claypool. He was universally recognized as a great preacher, but he was also controversial. He was a public advocate of the civil rights movement and spoke out from the pulpit against the Vietnam War. Some in the church thought his application of the gospel to be too extreme, and he endured constant criticism.

Perhaps John Claypool's strongest supporter in that congregation was a man in his early 60's named John Day. He always sat on the second row of the sanctuary and listened intently to his pastor's sermons. And he could have cared less that those sermons sometimes steered into contentious waters. He simply knew that his pastor loved him, and he returned that love. You see, John Day was severely handicapped from birth; he had the IQ of a small child; his speech was barely intelligible; and he walked with a distinct limp. But he always had a smile on his face and a spring in his step. That church was his life, the place where he was somebody. And the person who really made him feel like somebody was his pastor. John Claypool treated John Day like a VIP, which, in the kingdom of God, he was. During the church's informal prayer meeting on Wednesday nights, there would be friendly banter between the two. On many occasions, John Day would say aloud to his pastor, "I love you, John." No one else in the congregation would have dared to be so direct and personal in such a setting. But John Day was full of affection for his controversial pastor, and he couldn't contain that affection. "I love you, John." And the reply would come back, "I love you, too, John." John Claypool once told me that during his darkest days he was sustained by those words of fondness and caring. When he needed to hear a word of blessing, John Day was always there to give it, albeit in broken speech.

In assessing the power of the tongue, the writer of James seems to accentuate the negative. It is "a restless evil, full of poison." But James is aware that the same tongue that has the power to curse also has the power to bless. The tongue can be an instrument of encouragement, healing, and reconciliation. The tongue can build others up, not tear them down.

I grew up singing an old gospel song entitled, "There Shall Be Showers of Blessing." The chorus went like this: "Showers of blessing, showers of blessing we need: mercy-drops round us are falling, but for the showers we plead." At the end of the day, isn't that what most of us need? We yearn for words of blessing – not just a few drops here and there, but showers of them. "Thank you." "I appreciate you." "You did a great job." "I believe in you." "I may disagree with you, but I love you." We need to hear those words from our family members, our friends, our employers and teachers, and from our fellow church members. Yes, the tongue can start a wildfire of suspicion and resentment, but it can also produce showers of blessing to quench those fires and bring forth new life and love and hope. Let the showers begin!