



Sermon Transcript

July 29, 2018

The Gospel According to James

Observations About the Tongue

James 3:1-12

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on July 29, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Introduction

The issue of James 3:1-12 centers around the tongue. It addresses how we talk. Quite frankly, it is a passage that paints a rather negative and pessimistic view of the tongue. It is a passage that speaks to the destructive nature of the tongue. For example, in verse 8, James calls the tongue “*a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*” At the beginning of that same verse, James attests to the futility of trying to tame the tongue. No human can.

I don't think the way James characterizes the tongue catches any of us by surprise. We can all attest to the destructive nature of the tongue from our own experiences in life. We have all said things we wish we could take back. We have all felt the sting of words spoken about us or to us. We all can readily receive the knowing glance we receive from James in verse 2 when he says, “*For we all stumble in many ways*” when it comes to this issue of the tongue.

So in one sense, there is nothing new under the sun. This universal struggle we have with the tongue has been around ever since the fall of man. And yet, when I consider the times in which we currently live, there seems to be a lessening of restraint on what comes out of our mouths when it comes to social discourse. I wonder if that is some of the consequence of social media. Without a live person sitting in front of us, we lose some of that restraint that often tempers our speech when we are eyeball to eyeball with someone. Edward Luce made a similar observation in an article he wrote for the *Financial Times Magazine*. He described the tone of our culture as “The Age of Vitriol.” He observed, “For all of its pluses, social media has drowned politics in vitriol . . . Obnoxiousness has infected all sides of the spectrum.”¹ I think we all can feel it. While this is not a rant against social media, Luce acknowledged the temptation that comes with social media. He says, “One of social media's key features is anonymity. When you engage with someone directly, it is harder to maintain an angry tone.”² But with this age of social media, we now have a whole other realm for us to consider how we use our tongue. We have another realm where the destructive nature of the tongue is at play.

That being said, I was surprised to discover that James is not necessarily addressing the universal problem we all have with the tongue. Up to this week, that is how I used to approach this passage. I saw it as a passage making proverbial statements about the tongue for all of us to consider. And indeed, as we make our way through this passage, there is something here for all of us to consider this morning. But what I discovered this week is that James has a narrow focus on who he is talking to in this passage. I think his initial target audience he is addressing in this passage is the leadership of the church.

Look how James introduces the passage in the first two verses. “*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.*” I used to view these two verses as a brief and passing statement regarding leaders in the church and then in verse 3, James was off to a new topic, namely the topic of the tongue. I have come to realize this week that the leaders of the church are the primary focus of his instructions all the way to James 4:12.

In our conversation this past year about elders, we discovered that one of the main functions of an elder in the church is to teach. By its very function, teaching is a role that carries with it authority and power. While addressing teachers in this passage, I don’t think James is addressing what is being taught. Of course, sound teaching and sound doctrine is important, but it is not the focus of his instructions here. Rather, James is warning leaders in the church about how they talk to people and to what end they use their speech. In James 4:1 he talks about quarrels and fights among the people in the church. And so the focus of James on the leaders in this passage is a reminder to them that they set the tone for how the church talks to and treats each other.

In fact, I would like to suggest a different way to read verse 2 than how you might be inclined to read it. I want to suggest that the word “*body*” may not be referring to the physical “*body*” but to the church “*body*.” And the word “*perfect*” can mean “*mature or complete*” like it does in James 1:4. In James 1:4 James says that the enduring of trials makes us “*perfect and complete*.” In other words, trials mature us. What I think James is saying in verse 2 is that while we all struggle with the tongue, we need leaders who are *perfect*—a mature and developed follower of Jesus—one “*whose love shapes how he or she teaches and speaks to others.*”³ Consequently, “*he is able to keep the whole body [the church] in check with a bridle.*”⁴ This is why Paul calls the elders in 1 Timothy 4:12 to “*set the believers an example in speech.*” As the leaders set the example in their speech, like a bridle in a horse’s mouth, they are able to properly lead the church.

Why is it important that the leaders of the church be mature in setting an example in this regard? It is because of what the church is meant to be in this world. I mentioned last week that one of the books I read on sabbatical was the memoirs of Eugene Peterson. It was simply called *The Pastor*. I loved his description of the church when he said that the church “*is a colony of heaven in a country of death.*”⁵ In this “*country of death*” we don’t just deal with mass shootings at the hands of guns, but every day there are “*mass shootings*” in this “*Age of Vitriol*” through the way people talk to each other. And so the

church needs to be that slice of heaven in “a country of death” so that through the way we talk to each other we can give demonstration that Jesus is indeed among us.

And so yes, the leadership of the church is a primary target of this passage because the leaders set the tone and are to be an example for the church in being “a colony of heaven in a country of death.” And at the same time, we are all called to maintain unity in the body of Christ. So much of that unity is maintained by how we talk to each other.

As James begins to address this issue of unity in the body of Christ that goes all the way to James 4:12, he begins by making some simple and perhaps obvious observations about the tongue and it’s potential to do harm to the work of God. And I think that is really what needs to remain at the forefront of our thinking as we listen to what James has to say about the tongue. The testimony of Jesus in this country of death is at stake with how we talk to each other. These four observations I want to make from this passage are simply reminders to us of our need to remain vigilant in this area because, as we all know and have experienced, words can fly from our mouths quickly and rather freely—and once they are spoken or written or typed—they are very hard to erase.

Observation #1 - The Power of the Tongue

The first observation James makes is that though the tongue is small it is quite powerful. Chuck Swindoll says that the tongue is a “mere two ounce slab of mucous membrane.”⁶ But don’t ever underestimate the power of that “two ounce slab.” That is the point of the three illustrations James makes about the tongue in James 3:3-5.

These illustrations are self explanatory. James says, “*If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.*” The bit in a horses mouth is small, but that little bit controls where the horse goes. Likewise, the rudder of a ship is a small piece of the ship, but with it the pilot of the ship can navigate the waters and harness the wind. With the rudder, he is able to guide the ship. The point is rather obvious, James says in verse 5, “*So also the tongue is a small member*” but it really does set the tone for how we relate to each other. That little two ounce slab can make or break a community.

It is with the third illustration that James warns us about the destructive capacity of the tongue. He begins to shift our attention in this direction by saying that though the tongue is small, “*it boasts of great things.*” Of course we know that the physical tongue is

just physical instrument of our hearts and it simply gives voice to what is inside of us. At the end of the day, our tongues give voice to the pride of our hearts. Psalm 12:2-3 puts it this way, *“Neighbors lie to each other, speaking with flattering lips and insincere hearts. May the LORD bring their flattery to an end and silence their proud tongues.”*

So with the final illustration, James makes his point. *“How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.”* It is hard not to read this verse and not call to mind the forest fires that seem to be commonplace every summer out in the western region of our country. A spark could be set by a firecracker, a smoldering cigarette, a campfire, a lightning bolt or the match of an arsonist—and from that small spark miles and miles of forest and homes are consumed by an inferno. Last year was California’s worst wildfire season in history with 1.2 million acres of land consumed by fire. That is an area the size of the state of Delaware. I remember seeing footage of entire communities completely leveled by the inferno that lapped up everything in its path. That is the kind of destruction that can be unleashed by the tongue. That is a sobering visual.

Is it any wonder that over and over and over again, the New Testament writers are reminding the church to be vigilant over how we talk to each other. It is interesting to me that when Paul tells us not to grieve the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 4:30 he surrounds that verse with instructions on how we talk to each other. Prior to this verse he says, *“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”* And then the verse that follows the command to not grieve the Holy Spirit says this, *“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”* Or as Paul says in Colossians 4:6, *“Let your speech always be gracious and seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”*

The observation is a simple one. How we talk to each other can make or break us. If we want to be a colony of heaven in a country of death, heaven needs to shape our words.

Observation #2 - The Consequence of the Tongue

This brings us to our second observation about the tongue and it is found in verse 6. While it is a difficult verse to interpret, it is plain to see that this verse flows from what we just saw. Having acknowledged that the tongue can be destructive, in this verse James describes the consequence of the tongue and the kind of destruction that comes upon us as a result of the tongue.

He begins by saying that *“the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.”* Some will translate this verse as *“the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity.”* I think what he is saying here is that every kind of sin you can think of finds expression through the tongue. Tasker says it this way, “all the evil characteristics of a fallen world, its covetousness, its idolatry, its blasphemy, its lust, its rapacious greed, find expression through the tongue. In consequence, the tongue *defiles the whole body*, it pollutes the entire personality.”⁷ James 4:2 says it this way, *“You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”* Our spirit of coveting is given expression and voice through our tongues. Our speech reveals what is behind the curtain of our hearts and it pollutes the whole body.

And so James says that the consequence of this is that it *“stains the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life.”* Literally, the translation of this verse says that the tongue *“sets on fire the course or the cycle of nature.”* What does that mean? Well if by *body* he is talking about us as individuals, the cycle of nature could be the process of life; namely from birth to life to death. And surely we have seen how words—especially negative words spoken to us or spoken by us can be destructive throughout the span of a lifetime. And left unchecked or unable to find healing from these words, these destructive patterns are repeated from generation to generation. And like embers that are carried by the wind in these forest fires out west, the destruction from the tongue continues to spread and the damage widens extending beyond our own lifetime.

Or, it is possible, that once again the word *body* can refer to the church body. *“The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.”* Having warned teachers in verse 1 of being accountable for how they conduct themselves, it is interesting that James is using the image of fire, which is an image associated with judgment. McNight suggests that “what should be observed here is the almost apocalyptic nature of his rhetoric: the teachers are about to undo the very course of God’s design, namely redemption.”⁸ What he is saying here is that the consequence of the destructive nature of the tongue within the body of the church is that it quenches the work of the Spirit and we lose our capacity to be “a colony of heaven in a country of death.” Frankly, it impacts our witness.

Recently, Tim Keller gave a speech to Britain’s parliament at their annual prayer breakfast. He was talking about the church being salt in the world. His third and final point was that like salt is distinct from meat, so the church is different than the culture. He was pleading with these governing officials in the secular west to allow the church to be the church and to not force the church to adapt with the changing morality of our day. While his appeal was an appeal to government, I found it to be an appropriate

appeal to the church. In an indirect way he was reminding the church that we are different and the world needs us to be different so that they can see Jesus. Perhaps the most fundamental way we can express that difference between the church and the culture is in the way we talk with words of grace. If we fail to do that, we run the risk of “undoing the very course of God for nature, namely redemption.” In other words, how we talk to each other has as an impact on our ability to communicate the most important words we need to communicate: Jesus saves!

Observation #3 - The Target of the Tongue

The third observation about the tongue reminds us of the target of the tongue. James says, *“For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”*

Here we are this morning and with our tongues *“we bless our Lord and Father.”* We sing “Bless the Lord O my soul . . . Worship his holy name.” We sing, “It will be my joy to say, your will, your way.” We sing, “All I have is Christ.” We pray the prayer, “Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be your name.” With our mouths *“we bless our Lord and Father.”*

But then from that same mouth *“we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.”* Go figure?!?! That statement ought to temper our words. Because it reminds us that every person we encounter is stamped with the image of God. Therefore, every person must be held as a person of value and worth. How we talk to people conveys their sense of value.

One of the reason why murder is wrong is because when you take the life of another human being you fail to see their value as one created in the image of God. This is why Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, *“You have heard that it was said of those of old, You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry will be liable to judgment.”* Then Jesus addresses how our anger is expressed through our words. *“Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”* It speaks to the way we can assassinate the character of someone who is precious to God simply by the way we talk to people. It is good to keep in mind that when you talk to people and about

people that you are talking about someone who is precious to God.

With the nomination of a new Supreme Court Justice, the issue of abortion has come back into the forefront of our culture. It has been interesting to me to see how this issue has evolved over the years. On the left, if you will, there are some who are not just championing the right of abortion but are celebrating the right. A female comedian recently did a skit with the title “God Bless Abortion.” Dressed in red, white and blue, she came out onto the stage proclaiming, “Women, if you need an abortion get one. . . If you want an abortion get one . . . It’s up to you and it doesn’t have to be a bid deal . . . It’s actually a great deal. It’s like \$300, that’s like six movie tickets!”⁹ I was really shaken by this trivializing and celebrating of abortion and it made me think that if this is where we are “in this country of death.” It is an illustration that points to how we view human life in general and it spills out into how our culture talks to each other. It contributes to this “age of vitriol” that blankets the discourse of our culture.

But it is easy for those on “the right” or the “religious right” to point the condemning finger and not realize the many ways our tongues can betray us. We can be quick to say that murder is wrong in any form because life is precious. We can be quick to condemn abortion because that precious child is fearfully and wonderfully made and is of value to God. At the same time, our razor tongue can be just as sharp as the next person, not realizing that the sins we condemn with one finger are the very sins that are being committed when with rapid fire we demean the image of God in people through the way we talk. We in the church can be guilty of this and James says of this double tongue, “*My brothers, these things ought not to be so.*”

May we have the same passion and the same level of conviction over how we talk about people and how we talk to people as we do for things like abortion or murder. Because Jesus says, they are one in the same.

Observation #4 - The Source of the Tongue

There is one more observation to make from this passage about the tongue. Jesus says in Luke 6:45, “*for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*” That is the point James is making with verses 11-12, “*Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.*”

Jesus said that we know a tree by its fruit. Salt water does not come from a spring of

fresh water. So it is with us who possess the Holy Spirit. *“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”* That is what comes into our life when we come to faith in Christ. And so when James says of the mouth that both blesses and curses; *“My brothers, these things ought not to be so”* he is saying that the only remedy for the tongue is Christ and the power of his Spirit at work in us.

In our “Way of Life” we encourage you to pray daily for the filling of the Holy Spirit. No human can tame the tongue, but Jesus can. It is interesting to me how Paul describes what it looks like when we are filled with the Holy Spirit. He says in Ephesians 5:19 that we *“address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, making melody to the Lord with all our heart.”* In other words, it affects us at the root of our lives and it produces the fruit of how we talk. The Holy Spirit is described in the Bible as *“springs of living water”* spilling out of us in the words that we say.

So my final observation is that through the gospel we remind ourselves that we belong to God through faith in Jesus and consequently the Holy Spirit resides in us. And so we daily pray that the Word of God would dwell in us richly and that the Spirit of God would fill us so that out of the abundance of our hearts we would speak words of life to others.

When the Holy Spirit marks the church in this way, others see Jesus in us and we indeed become a colony of heaven in a culture of death. It is as simple as the words we speak.

Conclusion

I encourage you to look at James 3 through the lens of the church. God has called us to be a slice of heaven on earth. God has called us to be “a colony of heaven in a country of death.” We need to be different than the world around us so that others can see Jesus. One of the most powerful ways that difference can stand out is in the way we talk to each other and how we talk to others. Look how much space James is devoting to this issue. It is a daily battle and it requires daily vigilance.

That tongue is small but it is powerful. Remain vigilant.

There are consequences to the tongue. Pray that we do not compromise our testimony.

The target of the tongue is people. Keep in mind that people are precious.

The source of the tongue is the heart. Pray daily for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

¹Edward Luce “The age of vitriol: Edward Luce on US politics and social media” in *Financial Times Magazine* November 4, 2016

²Ibid.

³Scot McKnight *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 275

⁴Ibid., 275

⁵Eugene Peterson *A Memoir: The Pastor* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2011) 110

⁶Quoted in Kent Hughes *James: Faith That Works* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991) 138

⁷R. V. G. Tasker *The General Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 76

⁸McKnight, 285

⁹<http://thehill.com/homenews/news/396047-michelle-wolf-salutes-abortion-god-bless-abortion-and-god-bless-america>

