



Sermon Transcript August 5, 2018

The Gospel According to James Your Mouth is the Window to Your Heart James 3:13-4:12

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Sermon Text
James 3:13-4:12

3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

4:1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? **2** You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?

⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

¹¹ Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

Introduction

I am convinced that our passage this morning is the second half, or the completion of the passage we looked at last week. Last week we considered James 3:1-12 and what James had to say about the tongue. Often when we are reading through the book of James, we may be tempted to think that we are off onto a new topic when we come to James 3:13. Even the headings that are inserted into our Bibles may cause us to think that our passage this morning sends us off onto a brand new topic. In my Bible the heading for James 3:1-12 reads: "Taming the Tongue." And then the heading that leads into our passage this morning reads: "Wisdom from Above." There is even a heading introducing James 4:1-12 that reads: "Warning Against Worldliness." While those themes are present in these passages, there are at least three threads that tie this week's and last week's passages together and complete what James teaches us about the tongue.

The first thread that ties these passages together may not be as obvious as the others. I made the case last week that while this issue of the tongue is an issue for all of us to consider, I felt that James was primarily talking to the leaders of the church. Clearly, that is his focus in James 3:1-2 when he addresses those who teach in the church. But I think it remains his primary focus throughout the passage. Our passage this morning begins with, "*Who is wise and understanding among you?*" Often in the Old Testament the characteristics of "wisdom and understanding" were required for those in leadership. Moses said in Deuteronomy 1:15, "*So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you.*" So it would not be unnatural to think that the "teachers" alluded to in James 3:1-2 are the focus of his comments when he asks, "*Who is the wise and understanding among you?*" You would hope these teachers are "*wise and understanding.*" And furthermore, James spends a lot of time in this passage addressing a proud and haughty spirit that often tempts those who are in leadership. I am inclined to conclude that the leaders of the church are one of the threads that ties these passages together.

A more obvious thread that ties these passages together is the thread of the tongue and how we talk. There is no doubt that the tongue was a focus of the passage we looked at last week. We made four observations about the tongue last week. We saw that while the tongue is small, it is powerful. We saw that there are consequences to our words and our words impact our testimony. We were reminded that because people bear the image of God, we must be careful how we treat people with our words. And we concluded last week by acknowledging that our words are nothing more than the outflow of what is in our hearts. While much of our passage this morning deals with our hearts, we will see

that our hearts are connected to our tongues. In fact, the concluding point made by James at the end of this passage brings us right back to the tongue. He says in James 4:11. “*Do not speak evil against one another brothers.*” The issue of the tongue serves as brackets at the beginning and ending of this passage, tying these two passages together.

The third thread that ties these passages together is that I don’t think James is just talking to us as individual followers of Jesus. Rather, he is talking to us as a community of Jesus followers. I mentioned last week that the use of the word *body* in James 3:1-12 may be referring to the church body as opposed to our personal bodies. I see this same theme in the two questions James asks in our passage. In James 3:13 he asks, “*Who is wise and understanding among you?*” He then asks the question in James 4:1, “*What causes quarrels and fights among you?*” That phrase “*among you*” causes me to conclude that he is talking to the church about our collective tongue and our collective heart—how we talk to each other. This point is further solidified when he concludes in James 4:11, “*Do not speak evil against one another brothers.*” We mentioned last week that the church is “a colony of heaven in a country of death.”¹ If we are going to bring heaven to earth, we must be a people who knows how to talk to each other.

So the thread of addressing the leaders of the church and the thread of talking about the tongue and the thread of processing this in the context of the community of the church ties these two passages together. And when you put it all together what you discover is that you can tell a lot about the heart of a church by the way we talk to one another. Our mouths are an indicator of what is in our hearts.

I mentioned last week that our passage this morning can be likened to when you go to the doctor and he or she tells you to “open your mouth, stick out your tongue and say ahhhh!” I used to wonder, as my tongue was hanging out of my mouth and that wooden instrument was pressing down upon my tongue; what possible insight can a doctor gain from this seemingly silly exercise? I discovered this week that the mouth is a window to what is happening in the body. I read this week how diseases like cancer, anemia and diabetes can be first identified by an oral exam. In addition to that, doctors can discover bad habits or favorite beverages simply by getting you to open your mouth and saying ahhhh! At times, pregnancy can be detected by what is happening in your mouth. Your breath can even be a dead giveaway to what is going on in your body. Fruity breath could point to diabetes, while fishy breath could point to liver or kidney issues.² Our mouths are windows to what is going on inside of us and that is what James is saying in our passage this morning. Our mouths are windows into our hearts. And so quite naturally, if you want to tame the tongue, you need to tame the heart.

Diagnosing Our Hearts

My first observation is that our tongues—the words that we speak—are what we can use to diagnose the state of our hearts. Jesus said it this way in Luke 6:45, “*For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*” In other words, I can gauge where my heart is by the words that come out of my mouth. We can gauge the spiritual health of our church by the words we speak to each other.

James first makes this connection between the heart and the tongue by asking the question in James 3:13, “*Who is wise and understanding among you?*” That is a good question to ponder. In this context, it may be assumed that “the teacher among us” is *wise and understanding*. But it begs the question: “what is wisdom?” Wisdom is not just knowledge. The wise person is not necessarily the one who knows a lot and is considered to be smart or intellectual. Rather, wisdom is applied knowledge. It addresses how we live. McKnight says it this way, “The wise person lives in God’s world in God’s way with God’s people.”³ It reminds me of what Eugene Peterson said about his role as a pastor in the church. He said, “I saw myself assigned to give witness to the sheer livability to the Christian life; that everything in Scripture was here to be lived.”⁴ That is wisdom. It is a life lived unto God and under God. So “*who is the wise and understanding among you?*” James answers it for us, “*By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.*”

It is in the response James gives to this question that we see the first connection between our hearts and our tongues. It is interesting to me what James couples with the word *wisdom*. He calls it “*the meekness of wisdom.*” The word *meekness* implies a certain posture of the heart that tells us that wisdom is more than just knowledge. In fact, knowledge all by itself, we are told, “puffs up.” That is the opposite of being meek. Meekness may even be hard to describe. But you know what? You know it when you see it. To be *meek* means that you are submitted to God and his Word. Proverbs tells us that “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*” In fact, in James 1:21 we are told that we are to “*receive with meekness the implanted word.*” Meek is not weak. But to be meek means that you are humbly submitted in mind and in heart to God.

And what comes of this *meekness of wisdom*? The result is “*good conduct.*” The word *good* here is not referring to keeping all the rules or an A+ level of spiritual achievement. One of my favorite lines from Johnny Cash was that he considered himself a “C-Christian.” I love that statement, because it tells me that he was very much aware of his own shortcomings and it marked him with humility. Rather, the word *good* here is the

Greek word *kalos* and it means “beautiful.” We find this word in our English word “calligraphy.” The word *graphe* is the word for writing. And so “calligraphy” is beautiful or attractive writing. That is the kind of life that emerges from one who is marked with “*the meekness of wisdom.*” It is not a perfect life, but there is something attractive about that person. That attraction is given voice by their humble words. There is something attractive in the way this person talks to people.

From this point in the passage, James says that your words can go one of two ways. There are one of two roads your words can go down. One road is a road that leads to disorder. He says of this road in verse 15 that it “*is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.*” The other road is a road that brings and makes peace. This road is described as “*wisdom from above*” - it is of God. How do you make sure your words are on the “peace road” and not the road that brings “disorder”? How do you make sure that your words are not “*demonic*” but are “*from above*?” It all has to do with the heart.

In verse 14-16, two times James said that the heart that leads to disorder is filled with “*bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.*” In other words, it is a heart that is filled with pride and I would suggest it is our natural “go to” heart. I confess that it is natural for me to think of me. I confess that I can think less of my own sin and much more of the sin of others. If this is what is on my heart, it will come through in my words. Condemning words, words lacking compassion, words expressing a lack of patience, words unwilling to forgive will be cloaked in a self-righteous attitude that in the end fails to embrace the mind and the attitude of Christ who “*made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant.*”

Conversely, James says, “*But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.*” I’ll just let these words speak for themselves and I will sum these words up with one word: attractive! Listen again to the kind of heart that James describes here, “*pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.*” One can only imagine the kind of words that exude from this kind of a heart. It doesn’t surprise us in the least bit that this kind of heart leads to making peace.

This week about 15 of us gathered to discuss Rosaria Butterfield’s book on hospitality. The focus of her hospitality was reaching out to the “stranger” - the person far from faith. What that means is that you are reaching out to the person who is different than you and may live in a way not congruent with your values and your Christian worldview. And yet she said that one of the things that is vital to extending hospitality

to people who are different than you is that you would be “a safe person to hear the burdens of your neighbor’s heart.” She prays, “May my words give grace to those who hear. My words are not pep talks. I hope, indeed, that my words are not even my own but Christ’s working through me.”⁵ Am I safe? Are we a safe place? Our words will determine whether that is true or not. Those kind of words can only come from a heart that is “*pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.*” Simply put, our words are indicators of what is on our hearts. So in *meekness of humility* we submit ourselves to God and our lives become the beautiful calligraphy—the attractive penmanship of God’s handwriting in our lives. It is given voice through the words we speak.

Symptoms of the Heart

As we move into James 4, I think James is highlighting how easy it is for us to speak in ways that lead to disorder. The issue of the tongue is an ongoing and never ending struggle. There are a lot of ways we can struggle with our tongues. And we all struggle. We can lie, gossip, brag, slander, exaggerate. . . . we can be too quick to speak, speak too much or not speak when we should. It is something we all wrestle with personally. But then when you take a church body made up of a whole bunch of people—each susceptible to struggling with the tongue—well, you quickly realize how this matter of the tongue is a never ending issue within the life of the church.

James highlights just one issue of the tongue in James 4:1, “*What causes quarrels and fights among you?*” On one hand, he answers this question with what we have already observed. These quarrels and fights—these sins of the tongue—are fueled by our hearts. He answers the question by saying, “*Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.*” But he is not just identifying for us the source of our struggle. Rather, he is highlighting the intensity of our struggle and the ongoing nature of our struggle. “*Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?*” James already referred to this ongoing battle when he talked about temptation in James 1:14, reminding us that we are each tempted when “*lured and enticed by his own temptation.*” Of course, Paul highlights this ongoing battle in Romans 7 where he confesses that he does what he doesn’t want to do and he doesn’t do what he knows he should do. He writes often about not being controlled by the flesh, but by the Spirit. It is ongoing. It is daily. It is a battle.

When I do premarital counseling, I tell couples that the vast majority of life is lived in

the everyday mundane activities of life. How you talk to each other in those mundane settings will make or break your marriage. As life is unfolding and as life is happening, the tone and content of our speech reveals our hearts set the tone for our homes. We talk about a thing called the “Yes Spiral” or the “No Spiral.” The “Yes Spiral” seeks to outdo each other in showing love. But the “No Spiral” finds you reacting to each other in a negative way and the next thing you know, you are sitting in silence. And it can happen in a split moment, over something mundane, but it happens because of the way we talk to each other. Through this example of “quarreling and fighting,” I think James is highlighting how fragile our unity can be because these matters of the tongue can pop up at anytime and if there is no check in that “No Spiral” it will eventually take a church down the road of disorder.

In case you are tempted to think that this issue of talking to each other and relationships is not a big issue, you need to consider two things James says about this issue. You might be tempted to think that while we need to be careful in how we speak to each other, it is not like we are talking about major doctrine here. For some, this issue may be a little too “touchy-feely.” Church to you may be just about coming and confessing faith in Jesus but you can kind of take or leave the people. After all, you are going to get in your car at the end of the service and go home until next Sunday. Isn’t the emphasis on relationship a little exaggerated here? Quite the contrary. How we talk to each other is major doctrine. It can’t get anymore major than this. Let me tell you in simple words what James says next. The way we talk to each other impacts our ability to talk to God. *“You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”* Peter says the same thing to husbands in 1 Peter 3:7. He says that our prayers can be hindered by the way we treat our wives. This is why Jesus said that before you come to the altar, get things right with the one you offended. James goes on to say, this is the essence of what it means to be “worldly.” He calls them an *adulterous* people. How we treat God’s people is how we treat God.

The Prescription for our Hearts

So where does that leave us? Our tongues reveal what is in our hearts and it is not always pretty. We are very much aware of the daily battle we face with the passions at war within us. But there is a prescription for our hearts. It is God’s grace. I want you to see two things here. I want you to see the provision God gives us. And I want you to see the posture we must take as we consider taming our tongues and our hearts.

First of all, I want you to consider the provision God gives us. James 4:5 is a fascinating

verse. James writes, “*Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?*” This is a difficult verse for two reasons. For one, it says that “*Scripture says*” and we can’t find an exact verse it is alluding to. But perhaps it is a summary of what we find elsewhere throughout Scripture. But the bigger challenge is how to interpret the word “*spirit*.” Is he referring to the human spirit God has made or the Holy Spirit. I think he is referring to the Holy Spirit here. God is a jealous God. Tasker says in his commentary, “He brooks no rivals.”⁶ When we turn to God in faith and put our trust in Jesus, he gives us the Holy Spirit who keeps us. Tasker says, “God in his love does not abandon the Christian in his temporary unfaithfulness, but his grace is always available for him in his time of need.”⁷ And so James says in verse 6, “*He gives more grace.*”

Aren’t you glad for that? The Spirit convicts us when we misspeak. We confess to one another and we forgive one another and the unity of the Spirit is on display. Then we learn how to pray for the filling of the Spirit so that we might be more known for our words that put us on a path for peace. Pray daily for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

But there is a posture we must maintain. James writes, “*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*”

This passage rattles off ten commands in rather rapid fire: Submit . . . Resist . . . Draw near . . . Cleanse . . . Purify . . . Be wretched . . . Mourn . . . Weep . . . Let laughter be turned to mourning . . . Humble yourselves. This is a good picture of *the meekness of wisdom*. I would like to suggest that while you could do a word study on each of these 10 commands, that you put them all together and see them as a picture of what it means to repent. It is a call for us to remain in a posture of ongoing repentance that acknowledges the sin that lives in each of us.

It is a repentance that acknowledges that I have my own sins of the tongue to worry about before I am worry about someone else. It is a repentance that recognizes that I have no leg up on anyone and that my need for Jesus is total. We say that. Many of us would acknowledge that. But do we really grasp it? We can only truly grasp it if we are truly humble enough to come to the altar and cry out, “God have mercy on me a sinner.” Otherwise, we will look at each other and say, “Thank God, I am not like that person.” That is not humility. That is not repentance.

It is through repentance and Christ and God's grace that we are able to tame the tongue. Rosaria Butterfield said something in her book that really caught my attention. The kinds of people she opened up her home and life to were filled with all kinds of baggage and it would be very easy to size yourself up against them and feel rather good about yourself—"thank God I am not a sinner like that person."

She talked about a neighbor by the name of Hank who moved in next to her family. He was a recluse and initially resisted the Butterfield family reaching out to him. When he moved in to the house, they went over to introduce themselves and welcome him. After they left, he removed the doorbell. For three months he didn't mow the grass and his lawn was a blight to this suburban neighborhood. And yet, they kept reaching out and through their dogs, eventually a connection was made. To make a long story short, one day Rosaria saw the DEA - the Drug Enforcement Agency—in her back yard. Here Hank had been running a Meth Lab in his house and he was now in prison. The entire neighborhood was up in arms and many of the neighbors were angry with the Butterfields because of their friendship with Hank. They opened up their home to the neighbors to process this and Rosaria's husband, a pastor, was able to put a human face on Hank. In the course of this conversation, Rosaria reminded herself that "the sin that will undo us is not someone else's sin, but our own."⁸ While everyone clearly saw Hank's sin, she saw her own. (By the way, as Hank sits in prison today, he is a new man in Christ. That is because the Butterfields chose the road that leads to peace.)

That is what James is getting at with his final words on this topic. Here is the concluding matter. *"Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"* At the end of the day, "it is not my brother, or my sister, but it is me oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer." The sin that will undo me is my own. The prescription that will address my heart and tame my tongue is the posture of humility that cries out to God and says, "have mercy on me oh God." Through this kind of humility, the words of Christ will be formed in my heart and I will speak words of peace to others.

Communion

This is a great lead into Communion. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul is giving instructions for observing Communion. And they are not instructions given in a vacuum. In other words, he is not just giving instructions on how to conduct a Communion Service like it

is a Pastor's handbook. Rather, these instructions are born out of a pastoral situation that has emerged in the church. Do you know what the situation was? They weren't talking to each other well. They were showing partiality. So Paul says that if that is how you are going to treat each other, shut down the table. Don't even observe it. Because in doing so, you deny the essence of it. In fact, it such major doctrine, that because of this sin some were ill and some died.

So with what posture do you come to this table this morning? Perhaps you are very aware of your own sin of the tongue and you don't think you are worthy to come to this table. That is not the case. This table is for those who are very aware of their need for Jesus. This is not a table for A+ Christians. This is the table for those who recognize that only Jesus is A+. This is a table for those who are willing to let go of their pride and to humbly come and say, "Jesus, by virtue of your body and your blood—your death on the cross for me—I humbly come because your grace is greater than my sin."

But we don't come to this table alone. We come together. This table knits us together. We come as the body of Christ together. So when we come and when we confess we also forgive as we have been forgiven. And we confess to each other as we confess to Jesus. Otherwise, we are coming to this table *in an unworthy manner* and we would *be guilty of profaning the body and the blood of Jesus.*" (1 Cor. 11:27) For this reason when we come we examine ourselves.

This humble posture before Jesus and this alone is what changes the tone of our tongue because only Jesus can change the heart. "*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*"

¹Eugene Peterson *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012)

²Elizabeth Jenkins "Open Wide and Say Ahh" [https://www.thespec.com/living-story/5829167-open-wide-and-say-ahh-/](https://www.thespec.com/living-story/5829167-open-wide-and-say-ahh/) September 10, 2105

³Scot McNight *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 310

⁴Peterson

⁵Rosaria Butterfield *The Gospel Comes With a House Key* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018)

⁶R. V. G. Tasker *The General Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 91

⁷Ibid, 91

⁸Butterfield

