

Rev. Janet R. Doyle  
Elmer Presbyterian Church  
17th Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, September 15, 2024  
Scripture: James 3: 1-12  
Sermon: Taming The Tongue

It seems that one day a kindergarten teacher was helping one of her students put on his cowboy boots. He asked for help, and she could see why. Even with her pulling and him pushing, the little boots still didn't want to go on. Finally, when the second boot was on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost cried when the little boy said, "Teacher, they're on the wrong feet." She looked down and sure enough, they were. It wasn't any easier pulling the boots off than it was putting them on. But she managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on, this time on the right feet. And it was only then that he announced, "These aren't my boots."

She bit her tongue rather than scream, "Why didn't you say so?" like she wanted to. And once again she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off his little feet. No sooner had they got the boots off than he said, "They're my brother's boots. My Mom made me wear them." Sometimes it is very difficult to hold our tongue.

During WWI, enemy spies used to hang around the British pubs to hear loose talk about ship movements. Sailors would talk about their next assignments, where they were going, when they were leaving and vital information for the German submarines. Just a few careless words would tip the enemy off and thousands of lives would be lost. A slogan was promoted to remind people of the terrible devastation that could result from words spoken that could cost lives, "Loose lips, sink ships". The problem of careless talk was so great that the government began to put up posters.

Our words are very powerful. Apart from the redeeming work of Christ we will only do harm with our words. We need wisdom from above to use our words wisely. Our words also reveal the state of our hearts. Time and again the Scriptures address the tongue. James devotes an entire chapter to controlling the tongue. Matthew 12:34 says: "The mouth speaks about

what overflows from the heart.” How we handle the tongue is a great indicator of our hearts before God.

Aesop shares a helpful fable to illustrate this point:

“Once upon a time, a donkey found a lion's skin. He tried it on, strutted around, and frightened many animals. Soon a fox came along, and the donkey tried to scare him, too. But the fox, hearing the donkey's voice, said, "If you want to terrify me, you'll have to disguise your bray." Aesop's moral: Clothes may disguise a fool, but his words will give him away.”

Our words give us away. In James 3:1-18 we see that the tongue has power; that it is by nature hypocritical; and that it can only be transformed from God. The powerful tongue can be used for great good or great evil. Apart from redemption it will only tear down and destroy.

The tongue is a fascinating muscle. With it, our tastebuds bring us pleasure by informing our minds if something is sweet or sour, spicy or bitter. It allows us to shape our thoughts from mere sounds into specific words. Words which are useful in expressing genuine emotions and pertinent information. Fact is, without the ability to communicate, our civilization would be doomed. Unfortunately though, because of our tongues, life can be sabotaged, and pain can be inflicted.

Our tongues reveal one other thing about ourselves, it reveals our inner person. Someone once made the statement that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." The truth is, "stick and stones may in fact break bones, but words can crush a spirit, assassinate a character and destroy a relationship. James says that our tongue, though it is small, is like a fire and that it can quickly get out of control and destroy anything in its path.

For example, back in 1871, a small spark in the O'Leary barn in Chicago set off a blaze that engulfed the entire city that left 100,000 people homeless, killed another 300, destroyed 17,500 buildings and incurred approximately \$400 million dollars in damages. Thus, while we have the ability to bless God and others with our tongue, we also have the ability to destroy lives. Let's consider our culture for a moment. From our homes to our schools we are getting ambushed by the weight of our words. Each and every day people are abusing one another by the selection of words. We have become quite adept at talking trash and maliciously slandering one another for the sake of esteeming ourselves. But what is worse, some of us

verbally abuse one another simply for pleasure. We enjoy hurting others so we can build ourselves up. We go out of our way to find a fault in someone's appearance in order that we may cause a rift in that person's soul. And for what reason? To cause them harm. It is no wonder that the Bible addresses the use of our tongues so often. Jesus spoke a great deal on the use of this tiny muscle, because he knew the wealth of its power.

True Christianity is seen by how we walk as we talked about last Sunday- Faith in Action but it's also seen in how we talk. In James 2:14-26, we read about a false profession of faith; that faith cannot be just an empty confession with words, but it must be backed up with the way we live. We must make sure that our lives are consistent with what we believe, as well. And our words must also be consistent. Our words are just as important.

"The tongue" means our speech. When "the tongue" is used in our text, and in other passages in the Bible, it's not talking about the physical organ in our mouth; it's talking about our speech, our words. Sometimes the Bible uses the word "lips" to refer to our words, but it's talking about the words that we speak. Just as our deeds are evidence of our faith, so our words are also evidence. The tamed tongue is a mark of maturity but only God can tame the tongue.

James uses two illustrations: that of a horse and a bit and that of a ship and a rudder. You have a tiny bit in a big, strong horse's mouth that controls the horse; it goes where you want it to go.

The picture here is of this very small bit in the horse's mouth that controls a very large, strong, powerful animal. Likewise, the tongue has power over the whole body. So if you have power over the tongue, then you have power over the rest of your life and behavior.

James uses the illustration of ships, in verse 4. In James' day, ships were not anything in comparison to today's ships. Today we have big, giant cargo ships and great, big ocean liners that are so huge. If you could dry-dock them or get a picture of the ship, the rudder is very small in proportion to the size of the ship. You have this huge ship and a very small rudder. But that little rudder can control, guide and direct that ship.

So a little bit controls a large, strong horse and a little rudder controls and directs a large ship. This shows the power of our words. God gave us speech, because we are made in His image and God speaks. The best and

highest use of the tongue that I can think of is in praising God. You are using your tongue to glorify your Creator God.

The second use of our tongue that God would have us do is to pray; to talk to God and to intercede to God for ourselves and for others.

The third use of our tongue is to proclaim the Gospel. On April 22, 1855, a man by the name of Edward Kimball went into a shoe store in Chicago, Illinois, and he used his tongue and his mouth to speak to a boy who was working in the store selling shoes. The boy was Dwight Lyman Moody. Dwight Moody accepted Christ, then God called him as an evangelist, and he became the great D. L. Moody. Thousands of people came to Christ through his ministry. So you use your words to proclaim. You pray, you praise, and you proclaim. What a great use of the tongue.

The fourth use of the tongue, which honors God, is to comfort and encourage.

The tongue in verses 5-6 has the power to destroy. It has the power to direct, for good or bad, but the tongue also has the power to destroy. Verses 5-6 will illustrate the little bit in the horse's mouth and the rudder on a ship. "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!" A little word acts like one spark that can start a fire that destroys a whole forest.

There was a fire in Northern California back in 2002 that burned over 14,000 acres resulting in one fatality. It took 1350 firefighters to put the blaze out. Do you know how that horrific fire got started? It started from one small spark made by a 15-year-old boy playing with matches. James writes, "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark."

How could just a few words of gossip destroy a friendship, a marriage, a ministry, a church? Just a few words. It seems so small and insignificant, but James says those little sparks can cause great destruction.

Proverbs 15:4 says, "A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit."

The Bible says that we in ourselves cannot control our tongues. That is why Paul says that we need to be under the control of the Holy Spirit. We must die to ourselves daily, a choice we make every day, and allow the Lord to rule in our lives. When your tongue is under the control of God, you

will speak God's words, but when it is under the control of the flesh you will speak the words of the world.

In James 1:19-20 it tells us to be "quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of humans does not produce the righteousness of God."

Psalms 34:1 instructs us to ".. bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth."

Friends, if you want to see God move in your life, and in the life of this church then we must continually praise Him. The Word of God teaches us that the Lord inhabits the praises of His people.

Ask yourself the following question – "What have I been saying with my mouth?" Be assured that the words you speak will shape your life. The life you are experiencing and leading now has been shaped by what you said in the past. This is why the Bible says that death and life are in the power of the tongue. The tongue can kill, and it can bring life. It can give hope to the hopeless and point the way to God. It can make or break relationships, make or mar your children, heal or kill a church, and attract or repel people from Christ.

Let us all be careful with our words and use them to praise God and encourage one another.