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James 3:1-12, James 5:12

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THE DANGERS AND BLESSINGS OF THE TONGUE

It is an important part of the human anatomy! Doctors sometimes look at it for an indication of health! When we are forced into situations where we cannot use it find ourselves becoming frustrated! If it isn't working, we lose our sense of taste! We can use it to express disapproval without speaking a word. I am, of course, speaking about the tongue.

Some years ago a young man felt a call to join the Trappist Order of monks, an order that forbids spoken communication. Every year, at the anniversary of him entering the order, he was given permission to speak two words only to his superior. His conversations went as follows:

Year 1. "Bed hard."

Year 2. "Room cold."

Year 3. "Food lousy."

Year 4. "I'm leaving."

"Good," said the supervisor, "we will be glad to see you go. You have done nothing but complain ever since you got here."

But think of that Order from another perspective. If we had to live like that there would be a lot of pointing, gesticulating, and frustration, but there would be far less arguments, malice, slander and misrepresentation, and there would be shorter sermons.

But we are not in a Trappist Order. We are in the real world. We do have the power of speech. We use our tongues and our mouths to communicate. And while that is a blessing, it can also be a curse. The tongue is such a powerful part of the human anatomy. It not only helps us taste food. It can help to create and destroy.

Listen to what Proverbs has to say about this tiny organ.

Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment (Prov. 12:18-19).

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits. (Proverbs 18:21, NRSV).

The north wind produces rain, and a backbiting tongue, angry looks (Proverbs 25:23).

So what does James say? So far he has told us that faith is not just a matter of believing but a matter of action. In effect, last week he told us that faith is action and it also relates to our emotions. This week this tiny letter is going to give us more guidance for living. It will tell us to "watch our tongues." It is interesting that in a book which we are calling, "Christian Living for Dummies," James spends so much time warning us about the implications of our tongues.

*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that **we who teach will be judged with greater strictness**. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, **able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle**. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we*

*guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. **So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.***

*How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! **And the tongue is a fire.** The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; **it stains the whole body**, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, **but 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. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh (James 3:1-12, NRSV).*

THE SOURCE OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE FORCES

James writes that with the tongue we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

What was one of the most destructive forces of the twentieth century? When did we see humanity tarnish its name in the so-called civilized age of the mid century? Surely it was when the forces of Hitler's Germany were unleashed on the world? Millions died because of this evil regime and history today is still affected by what happened some 60 years ago. And in the early days of the war, and even in Hitler's rise to power, what were the most effective weapons at the disposal of the Nazis and their murderous reign?

Was it the Panzas and their brilliant tank manoeuvres? Was it the Stuka dive bomber? Was it the introduction of the paratrooper as an efficient war machine? Was it the development of the U boat? They were all effective and important, but Hitler saw something else as important in his armoury.

Hitler himself said, "The force which ever set in motion the great historical avalanches of religious and political movements is the magic power of the spoken word. The broad masses of a population are more amenable to the appeal of rhetoric than to any other force." One historical commentator pointed out that Hitler used favourite expressions such as "smash", "force", "ruthless" and "hatred" to set up the most negative political system in some of our life times.

But in England, there was a man who had been a failure as Lord of the Admiralty after the First World War. He had switched sides in politics and was dumped as the national leader once the war was over. However, he held the nation together, not by his television manner or his brilliant strategies, but by the power of his tongue. A few here today would be old enough to remember Churchill's hesitant voice, with exaggerated inflexions, telling England:

"We will fight them on the beaches. We will fight them on the water. We will fight them on the land. We will never give up."

One tongue was used to rally a nation to a path of destruction and hatred, another to rally a beleaguered nation in the face of terrible odds.

Such is its power. But it is power that is easy to use...sometimes too easy.

EASY TO SAY...HARD TO KEEP

Think about the tongue in the life of Peter.

There was a promise that he was not able to keep: "Lord I will never betray you."

There were words of denial: "I never knew the man."

There were words of recommitment: "Yes Lord, you know that I love you."

There were words of challenge: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Think of the promises we have made with our tongue, and remember how easily we have broken them. Some here today have spoken vows of everlasting love in an emotional moment in a wedding service, and a few hours, weeks, months or years later have used the same tongue to scream abuse at their partner.

With my tongue I made a promise in my ordination service, that I would be a minister of the Gospel, that I would preach and take on the responsibilities of leadership within the Church. Sadly the other eight men and women who shared that moment with me in 1968 have all dropped out of ministry, although for reasons that I well understand.

During the 1990's one of our Prime Ministers told us, "No child in Australia will be living in poverty by the end of the century." That was a promise that could not be kept.

Why is it easy to make empty promises?

Sometimes we make a commitment without realizing the implications of what we are saying. How many have married in younger years, and have made the promise "for better or for worse" without fully understanding themselves or the person to whom they are making the promise. They have no idea of how they or their partner will change in the coming years.

Consider my friends with whom I studied for the ministry. They had no idea of their capacity to cope with the pressures that are inherent in ministry, or the minefields that exist in churches, or how, in some places, change is seen as an enemy. They had no idea then of what they were letting themselves in for.

And what of the promises we made when we were baptized? We promised to follow Jesus as Lord, and yet sometimes the very next day have said something which, in effect, was a denial of our Christianity. Why? Because we are young and immature? Or because words are cheap and who cares if we say something one day and do something different the next?

Perhaps, but there is another reason. Sometimes it is because the tongue is one of the easiest organs to slip into action. How often do we say something and then wish that we could reach out and grab those words and put them back into our mouths?

There was a woman, who when she was about to be baptised, let fly with an expletive when she discovered the water was too hot (and she didn't realize the power of the microphone)! Do you remember the man who was walking onto a Qantas Jet in Los Angeles on September 30th 2000 and jokingly used the word "bomb" (and then found himself in hand cuffs a few seconds later)! There was a young minister who got mixed up with the words 'brazier' and 'brassiere'...with embarrassing results!

The tongue is easy to use, but not easy to control. And it can land us in a lot of trouble.

CAN THE TONGUE BE CONTROLLED?

When James is condemning the power of the tongue, I don't think he is just complaining about the 'slip ups'. But I do think he is saying in general that there needs to be an element of control with our use of the tongue. Listen to his pessimism in that regard:

...but no one can tame the tongue -- a restless evil, full of deadly poison (verse 8).

But there is some element of control. In the radio and television world there is the technology whereby something that is said in the studio has a delay factor so that the audience in the home hears it a few seconds later. That little precaution has saved various networks many hours of apologies and many dollars in litigation.

Can we, with God's help, build a delay factor into our speech, so that our tongue is blessed with that great gift of the Spirit, the gift of self-control? How much damage would be avoided if we had that gift.

Perhaps James is saying that there is a need for us to put our brains into gear and our tongue into neutral. A prayer could be, "God help us to say the right word at the right time, and to have the wisdom to avoid saying the wrong thing at the wrong time."

What about swearing? James does condemn the use of the tongue for bad language.

Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation (James 5:12, NRSV).

We are not quite sure what is meant by swearing here. When Jesus uttered similar words in the Sermon on the Mount he was speaking about the practice where you added an oath, "by heaven" or "by earth," to really emphasize that you were telling the truth. The modern equivalent would be, "I would say this standing on my mother's grave." Or when I was a child it used to be "cross my heart and hope to die." Probably James is saying that as Christians, such oaths are unnecessary.

But is he, in the context of what we are seeing in James, talking about exaggerated language about other people? Or is he condemning the impatient, offensive language that is borne out of frustration?

Over the years I have seen changes in the use of language. We never used to say "hell" or "damn". We now speak of things being "stuffed up" but that was considered offensive twenty years ago. I reported a footballer many years ago because he used the word "suck" to describe my umpiring!

Is there a guideline here? If bad language comes out in temper, if it is offensive to the other person, if it abuses the goodness of God, the act of intercourse or the human body, then don't use it. Control your tongue!

THE ABILITY TO BUILD UP OR THE ABILITY TO DESTROY.

I don't remember much about what I learnt during my teacher training but there was one little truism that has stayed with me throughout the years. And that is the difference in the powers of positive and negative reinforcement.

I saw this in a school where as a music teacher, I used to visit adjoining grade sixes. One classroom was run by a teacher who excelled in sarcasm, put downs and threats. The other classroom was run by a Christian woman who used gentleness, firmness and encouragement. One class was run by criticism and abuse, the other by encouragement. One class would erupt whenever the tyrant left the room. The other was always a delight to teach. This demonstrated the power of the tongue to create an atmosphere!

The tongue also has the power to build up lives or destroy them. We can achieve so much more by seeing the positives in people and commenting on them, than just seeing the negatives and mouthing off about them.

James tells us that the tongue is like a rudder on a ship, that steers the entire boat. Or it is like a spark that sets a whole forest ablaze. I have seen children, people in the church, ministers, team members, whoever, come alive because people have used their tongue to express the gift of encouragement. You have no idea of the power you have to restore confidence, to rebuild momentum, to reinforce wonderful patterns of behaviour, because of the power of encouragement. Your tongue can do that. My tongue can do that.

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.
(1 Thessalonians 5.11).

The tongue also has the power to do the opposite (as we have seen with the contrasts of Hitler and Churchill). Let me remind you of the destruction that can be done when a little secret is passed onto somebody else. By the time that person hears that gossip and passes it on to somebody else it has become a little changed. And by the time the news of somebody making an inappropriate comment to somebody of the opposite sex has done the office rounds, it has become a full blown affair and people are hurt and misrepresented.

And what about the little spin we can put on our words! A word said in jest is repeated without the humorous inflexion and war breaks out!

With our tongue we have the power to paint a negative picture! We can point out the failures and shortcomings of a person and forget the wonderful contributions they have made elsewhere.

We can cause destruction by words used in anger! When we have stored up the ammunition and in anger fired all the bullets at once we can leave the person destroyed and speechless.

We can make assumptions about people and their motives, but while they are reported as assumptions, they are repeated as fact.

Or even worse! We can slip into malicious mode and deliberately misrepresent another person and smear their character with words that we know are actually untrue. James acknowledges that we all make mistakes, but sometimes this type of talk is not a mistake. It can be a deliberate misrepresentation of the facts and is designed to destroy the reputation of another person.

WHY DO WE DO THIS?

James isn't too good at telling us why. He just tells us to stop it. However, Jesus goes a little further, and in words that we have looked at recently, he says,

You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure (Matthew 12:34-36).

What Jesus is condemning here is not the “whoops” word, or the things that we say lightly and later regret. He was speaking to the Jews who only observed the externals of behaviour, and was asking them to examine their motives that caused them to speak and behave in certain ways. Jesus is telling us that what our mouth says reflects what is going on within us.

So when we criticize and highlight the negatives? When we use our mouth to destroy the reputation of another person? Are we expressing our anger, our hurt, or our desire to climb over them and possess what they possess? Are we using the only weapon we have to seek our revenge, the weapon of our tongue?

Are we being critical of the other person to hide our own inadequacies? Is the negativity that we express about others really the negativity that we feel about ourselves? When we use our tongues in negative or destructive mode, are we really saying more about ourselves than what we are saying about the other person?

Is it our tiredness, our depression, or our hurts, that are speaking rather than our true selves? This is not so, James tells us. What is within us is being expressed outwardly.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh (3:10-12, NRSV).

Another verse we looked at last week is also pertinent to what we are saying to day.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? (James 4:1-2).

As also mentioned last week, James is concerned about the anger that affects the way that we speak. He says:

Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls (James 1:21).

SO WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

- * Let us reflect on what we are saying about ourselves and about others and check whether we are seeking to harm another person because of inner conflict within ourselves. If we are expressing our own inner conflicts let us try and resolve them before we abuse others with our tongues.
- * Let us pray for the gift of self-control so that we may have the delay factor between what we think and what we say.
- * Let us make a vow this week that we will seek to build up rather than to discourage and destroy.
- * Let us try and be assertive so that we can say the truth when it needs to be said. But we will say it in such a way that while the truth is heard, the other person is not destroyed.

Prayer:

O God,

May we use our tongue to honour you, to praise you and to make a positive difference to our world.

STUDY 3. NOTES FOR LEADERS

1. a. Can you remember saying something that “just popped out”, or a “whoops” moment? What did you say? What were the implications?
- b. What has been the nicest thing ever said to you?
- c. What has been the most damaging thing ever said to you?

2. See Proverbs 10:20, 31, 12:18-19, 15:4, 17:4, 18:21, 21:23

10:20 *The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value (NIV).*

10:31 *The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but a perverse tongue will be cut out).*

12:18-19 *Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment (NRSV).

15:4 *The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit (NIV).*

17:4 *A wicked man listens to evil lips; a liar pays attention to a malicious tongue (NIV).*

18:21 *The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*

21:23 *He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity (NIV).*

- a. These and other verses from Proverbs refer to the tongue. Which one to you is the most striking?
- b. Why do you think, in a book of wisdom, there are so many verses about the use of the tongue?

3. Taming the tongue!

- a. What is your reaction to swearing?
 - i. I let fly now and then.
 - ii. Some words I will use and some I will not use.
 - iii. I never swear.
 - iv. I have to be worked up.
- b. Why do Christians generally back away from using bad language?

Much swearing relates to sexual behaviour or genitals and therefore is abuse of the bodies that God has given us. Some relates to God and is abuse of his name (See Exodus 20.7). Jews thought that if they used the name of God, or of heaven, then their oath or promise had greater veracity. They believed that if their oath was not prefaced by such language, they could be excused from the implications of what they had said. Jesus in Matthew 5:33-36 says that we are to be people of truth and should not need such oaths in order to be believable.

4. Read James 3:1-12.

*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that **we who teach will be judged with greater strictness**. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, **able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle**. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. **So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.***

*How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! **And the tongue is a fire**. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; **it stains the whole body**, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, **but 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. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. (NRSV).*

- a. James says that teachers (and the use of their tongues) will be judged by greater strictness. Is that fair?
- b. “No one can tame the tongue!” Do you agree? Haven’t we all had times when you have held your tongue when you really have had so much that you want to say?
- c. Have you ever been a victim of a crazy rumour? How did it start? What do such rumours teach us about the dangers of the tongue?

a. Teachers in the period that James was written were those responsible for the regular preaching in the church and had the task mainly of building up others in the faith.

5. Read Matthew 12:36, Colossians 3:8-10, James 1.21, 3:10,12, 4:1-2.

Matt. 12:36 But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgement for every careless word they have spoken.

Col. 3:8-10 But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

James 1.21 Therefore get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

James 3:10,12 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers this should not be...My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grape vine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

James 4:1-2. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.

- a. How does your mood or emotional state affect what you say? If you are feeling “grumpy” do you go quiet? Do you verbalize your anger?
- b. When you say something that you later regret, what do you do about it?
- a. Imagine you are angry about something and want to tell the person who has made you angry how you feel. How should you use your tongue?
 - i. Say nothing.
 - ii. Tell the person exactly what you feel?
 - iii. Let the issue go.
 - iv. Try and find a way to say it without damaging your relationship.

Refer to James 1.19

6. See James 3:10 and 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

3:10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing

1 Thess. 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

- a. Has anyone encouraged you lately?
- b. Have you encouraged anyone yourself?
- c. Is there anyone in the group that needs encouragement?

Prayer:

As a group pray that God may help you use your tongue to create good rather than harm, to encourage rather than destroy, to avoid the world of gossip and rumours and to control our anger from saying things that harm relationships.