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Willerup United Methodist Church
Sermon Notes
Pastor Marvin Singh
The Book of James, Lesson 5
The Taming of the Tongue

The Book of James

This is the fifth in our series of meditations based on the book of James. This book was written by the brother of our Lord Jesus, who called himself a servant of God and Jesus Christ. It was primarily written to Jewish Christians who were scattered in many nations. James talks in this book about practical religion: trials and tribulations, how to apply the Word of God in our daily life, the worldliness in the church and Christian perspective.

The Taming of the Tongue

James 3:1-12

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ²We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

⁷All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. ¹¹Can both fresh water and saltwater flow from the same

spring? ¹²My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

The tongue is associated with taste, and what we take in. We must control what we take in in order to be healthy.

But the Bible says what we take in does not defile us, it is what comes out of our mouths that defiles us.

Matthew 15:17-18

"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'

We talk today about what comes out of our mouths, which comes from our hearts.

1. Teachers or Instructors are responsible for what they teach and say.

They must be mature and careful of what they say and how they say it.

2 Timothy 4:2

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.

Colossians 1:28

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.

Christ gave this warning to so-called Rabbis and teachers of the Law.

Matthew 12:33-37

“Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Paul, talking to the Jewish people

Romans 2:19-24 – Paul reminds teachers to “practice what you preach”

If you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the

embodiment of knowledge and truth – you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.

James joins himself with others in pointing out that we all stumble and then questions, how do we keep our whole body in check?

- a. We need to recognize that we all will be held accountable.
- b. Evil and good comes out of the source (what is stored in the heart).
- c. Humanly it is not possible to tame the tongue, but with God all things are possible. (Matthew 19:26)

2. What is the tongue?

The tongue is an organ of speech, and does but help to express thought and feeling in language, by means of which one man may influence another: language is power, it is man’s dignity and man’s peril. So truly in the expression of a man for apprehension by other men, that it can be said, “By your words thou shall be justified, and by words thou shall be condemned.”

The Preacher’s Homiletics Commentary pg. 570

“See what a flame of discord and insubordination one man, merely by his persuasive tongue, may kindle among the common person.”

Adam Clark’s Commentary on the Bible pg. 1297

God gave man authority. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue.

He describes the tongue as poison.

We hear words such as tongue-tied, tongue lashing, tongue-twisters, long tongue, black tongue, caustic tongue, etc.

The Preacher’s Homiletic Commentary describes the tongue, what it is, and what it can do. (pg 570)

- a. The tongue has a habit of boasting. We take pride in boasting and speak good of ourselves, which is self-conceit. We seek to let people know how important we are. The eloquent speaker sways the crowd one way or the other.

- b. The tongue is a fire – We speak and do not realize how harmful could be our spoken word – it burns them. Tongues can be used to slander, back-bite, whisper, gossip, and for tale-bearing about other people
The unclean word – may burn up innocence in other souls.
The slanderous word – may burn the reputation of other people.
The critical word – may burn the truthfulness in other people.
The doubtful word – questions the honesty and integrity of other people

Speakers use words to motivate people to action.
Road rage begins with words, and can end in action.

- c. The tongue is poison: tongues of serpents are supposed to be means of conveying their poison into wounds made by their teeth.

3. Taming the tongue

a. Two Examples

James gives two examples: how the horse and the ship are controlled by ‘bit’ and ‘rudder.’

- i. Horse: The skillful rider uses a small piece of metal or leather to direct the motion of a powerful horse. (vs.3)
- ii. The ship: The pilot controls the direction of speed of a huge sailing vessel with the touch of his hand on the rudder. (vs.4)

The tongue possess great potential for good and evil.

Good – encourage, evangelize, and endear.

Bad – criticize, mock and curse.

b. A Christian faces a battle to control the tongue

A Christian faces many battles in becoming a new creation.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Yet, we do not forget our past at once, we carry with us our old nature. The tongue is one of the major battlegrounds in our struggle.

Like bits in horses’ mouths, we need to regulate the tongue and guard the flow of speech.

c. Three-fold instructions for the use of tongue

- (i). Weigh your words in balance, and make a door and a bar for thy mouth. Let the words be few, true, and weighty.
- (ii). God has made the tongue **one**; how can a person be double-tongued, double-hearted? It is counter to the way God made us.

When Peter waited in the courtyard while Jesus was questioned after His arrest, those around Peter could tell by his “tongue”, his speech, that he was from Galilee.

Psalm 1:1

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.

- (iii). Do not put all your strength in the tongue. All parts of the body should grow in balance.

Preacher's Homiletic Commentary on the Bible pg. 570

d. How to guard your tongue.

Remember how Jesus Christ used the power of silence, restrained and wise speech, because it was the result of self-discipline. He waited for launching his ministry. He wanted to set an example of how to lead one's life with the HOLY SPIRIT.

When Jesus did speak, his authority was recognized.

Matthew 7:28-29

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, ²⁹because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Jesus speech contained power, for healing, and peace, like putting a balm on the people.

There is an old saying, “Silence is golden.”

Many times we have been provoked to speech, but we know that we should depend on God, we don't have to speak, but let the Lord take care of it.

Romans 12:19

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

The one who gave us the tongue can also give us power to speak well.
David shares with us:

Psalm 141:3

Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.

Psalm 119:105

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Psalm 39:1

I said, “I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence.”

Usually we pray before we deliver the message this small prayer: “Let the words of our mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable, O Lord.”

The book of Proverbs is full of wisdom on using our words carefully and profitably.

6:16-17 – ... The Lord hates ... a lying tongue ...

10:19 – When words are many, sin is not absent, but who holds his tongue is wise.

12:19 – Truthful lips endure forever; but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.

17:9-10 – He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends. A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool.

17:27 – A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered.

18:13 – He who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame.

James 1:19-20 – “... Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak ...”

19:9 – A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who pours out lies will perish.

20:19 – A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.

26:20 – Without a word a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down.

26:28 – A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

27:2 – Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips.

28:23 – He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than who has a flattering tongue.

29:5 – Whoever flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his feet.

29:20 – Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

“Remember that we are not fighting the tongue’s fire in our own strength. The Holy Spirit will give us increasing power to monitor and control what we say. Then ... when we are offended, the Spirit will remind us of God’s love, and we won’t react in a hateful manner. When we are criticized, the Spirit will heal the hurt, and we won’t lash out.”
Life Application Study Bible, note on James 3:8

Control of speech is a sign of one’s character.

“Were we to think of our own mistakes and offenses, we should be less apt to judge other people, while we are severe against what we count offensive in others, we do not consider how much there is in us which is justly offensive to them.”

“Self-justifiers are commonly self-deceived.” Matthew Henry.

To steer the ship, winds, water, gunpowder, steam, and electrical all have their part to play.

What is the process of steering?

We can steer the mind off from its grudges, ambitions, bad thoughts, by getting it occupied with good and pure objects that work as a diversion.

Here is a good test to evaluate ourselves, according to Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. Just monitor or observe our words, speech and reactions for twenty-four hours.

A person can be tested on drinking or smoking for a twenty-four hour period.

If he/she gives in that means he/she has a problem of drinking or smoking.

Now test your words/speech.

During the test write down on a piece of paper:

- a. If you have to say something negative about someone who is not present.
- b. Also record what others say that is negative about someone who is not present.
- c. What is your reaction? Do you silence the speech, or do you ask for more details?

e. Positive uses of tongues

Romans 10:14-15

How then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

“Some people bring happiness wherever they go.

Some people bring happiness whenever they go.”

Colossians 3:15-17

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Ephesians 4:29

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

The Taming of the Tongue – With us it is impossible, but with God, it is possible. When we are led by the Spirit, when we feed on the Word of God, then when you use your tongue, the words will come out in goodness and peace, because that is what God has created in your heart, he has given us peace, he has forgiven us.

Then too, we must not only talk about forgiveness, but act on it. Do not keep your old nature, but

Romans 12:2

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind ...

What is the outcome of your mouth?

Is it forgiveness? Peace? Reconciliation? Love?

If these are not coming out of your mouth, then what do you have stored up inside you?

Beware of anger, frustration, past records of wrongs.

It is not easy to follow Christ and His Word.

We can preach, we can read, but if we don't practice, it's no use.

May God help us.

Speak from the Word of God, in the Power of the Spirit.

It will bring blessing, not curses.