6-30-24

James 3:1-12

James, and through him the Holy Spirit, is certainly very hard on the tongue; on our speech. It is very important that we heed this admonishment and submit to the Holy Spirit’s desire to change the way our tongues carry on; to the words that come from our hearts and how they affect others. But let’s also look back in God’s word so we can gain a more eternal perspective. We’ll go back to the beginning; to the Garden of Eden.

In the beginning, God made man in a special way. He didn’t simply call him forth or speak him into existence like everything else. God formed him out of the dirt and then breathed the breath of life into his nostrils; God gave him a spirit. And part of what was given to man was the ability to speak. No other animal can do that. There may be some rudimentary communication or mimicking, but nothing like the complex form of communication that takes place with human-beings.

And notice that Adam had a language right from the moment of creation. Right there in Genesis 1 verse 28, God spoke to Adam and Adam understood. He was certainly able to make his own words. We see that as God brought all the animals to him to name them. But the names probably had something to do with the characteristics of the animal from a language he already had. This is demonstrated when with what he said when introduced to Eve. “*She shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man*.” In addition, “*Now the man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all the living*.” And the word eve means “living” or “life”.

Eve also had the created ability to speak and understand language. Adam and Eve did not just grunt at each other and point, like some married couples. No, and this is demonstrated by her ability to understand what Adam told her about the tree in the middle of the Garden and when she spoke to satan who was disguised as a serpent.

So as we see in the book of Genesis, language and the tongue are something created by God. Recall that God proclaimed all things He had created “*very good*”. Well, what happened that we now have James telling us that the tongue is itself set on fire by hell? In a word: sin. Adam and Eve rebelled against God in disobedience to His command. From this time on, all people were born with a sin nature (except, of course, for Jesus). Sin exists in the world and satan tries to distort any good thing God has made. He goes after the most powerful things the most and the tongue in among the most powerful of God’s creation.

As we mentioned a few weeks ago, the little rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me” is a blatant lie. How many lives have been ruined by false accusations; how many nations have fallen by an eloquent but ruthless leader; how many have been deeply hurt simply because they believed a lie.

Consider our own lives: how often does something come out of our mouth and we really wish we hadn’t said it; it almost seems as if it had a mind of its own. Have we ever said something that was intended to hurt another person? That’s not loving our neighbor. How about just saying something careless that hurt another? That wasn’t our intent and we could have stopped it if we had just thought; but we didn’t. This admonition from James is not one where we can comfortably sit back and think about how it applies to someone else. These words are for each one here. They are harsh and uncomfortable, but if heeded, they will bring us closer to our Saviour.

James begins by giving a tough warning to anyone who wants to be a teacher: you will incur a stricter judgement. Anyone who doesn’t take that warning seriously has no business trying to teach the Scriptures; they are not sufficiently real and important to him.

The issue that James was likely dealing with here was that people who were teachers were held in high regard. They had status and influence in their communities. There were those who would be tempted to become a teacher in the church simply for the position of power and prestige.

But beyond that, for those who truly wanted to teach the Scriptures, James was warning that they had better take it seriously. In the Christian church, a teacher is handling the very word of God and there are no words more important. The Bible can’t be handled haphazardly or without commitment. Teaching the Bible must be done in seriousness and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And here’s the rub: teaching is done by talking. The more we talk, the more chances we have to sin with our words.

With all that we might wonder why anyone in their right mind would want to be a teacher of the Word. The Bible does give us encouragement in that area. First off, right there in the warning of verse 1 James uses the pronoun “we”. He considers himself to be a teacher, but he is willing to incur the stricter judgement.

Also, in Romans 6:6-7 Paul writes: *Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching.* What we see here is that God gives each of us gifts and if we are given the gift of teaching, God has also given us the grace we need to do so properly. If our motivation to teach is to glorify God and feed His flock, then we are good. If our motivation is for self-promotion, we should stay as far away from teaching as possible.

Verse 2 begins: *We all stumble in many ways.* Any of us who are Christians have come to realize this. We mess up. We sin. Even when we don’t want to, we will still do wrong; we will still say something wrong. Now these are different from living in sin: A Christian ought not to be living in habitual sin or at least be trying desperately to get out of it. Nor is this an excuse to sin. Our sin nature does not excuse our sins. We must never try to justify our wrongdoings; we must always take them to the cross in repentance.

James makes an interesting statement. He basically says that if we had the ability to completely control our tongues, we would be able to control all the rest of ourselves too. We could be perfect. Obviously, that is not the case. Our tongues wag when we really don’t want them to and, suddenly, we have sinned. We have hurt one we are supposed to love; we have lied; we have undermined what someone else is working for; there is no end to how much damage we can do with our words.

Admittedly, these things are sometimes intentional. How many churches have split or died altogether because a wolf in sheep’s clothing entered? They quietly spoke divisive words to certain people and turned them against others or against the pastor. Or how about two members of the church who have a disagreement. They may both be Christians but they are unwilling to give on their opinion. Paul dealt with this in Philippians 4:2, “*I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord*.” Two Christian women can split a church if they choose to insist on their own way. All through words. The tongue is powerful and we must never forget that.

Really, James isn’t bringing out anything that is new; he is elaborating on the teachings of his half-brother, Jesus. Jesus warned us numerous times about what we say. In Matthew 12:36-37 Jesus says: *“But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”*

And why are the words so key in our judgement? Consider in our reading verse 4 where James likens the tongue to the rudder of a ship and by that rudder the pilot steers the ship where he will. Well, who is the pilot of our tongue? It is our mind; and by extension, what we call our heart. What comes out of our mouth is what’s inside our very being. Jesus says in Matthew 15:18-20, *“But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man.”*

Our words are the outlet of what’s in our hearts. Even when we have been a Christian for a long time, sometimes something unexpected comes out; something from our past nonbelieving life. See, all that junk is still in there, and it will be until we are completely cleansed at the return of Jesus. In the mean time we see the importance of Romans 12:2 where it says, “*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*” We must dilute all the evil we have been exposed to and are still being exposed to. We must dilute it with the good things of God: His word, Christian fellowship, prayer, and worship.

I think it’s neat how James goes back to creation ordinances as he gives examples. He tells us that every species of beasts and birds have been tamed by the human race. Which is what God told Adam and Eve to do: God blessed them; and God said to them, *“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”* Because of sin, mankind who has been given dominion over the animals can’t even control his own tongue.

In verse 12 James says that a fig tree can’t produce olives and a vine can’t produce figs. In Genesis 1 when God made plants we are told: *Then God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them”; and it was so.* So here is the problem with the tongue both blessing God and cursing other men. There shouldn’t be two different fruits coming from the same tree. There shouldn’t be fresh and salt water coming from the same fountain.

We need to be reminded that Jesus told us that whatever we do to the least of His brothers, that is what we do to Him. Remember that the next time you are tempted to curse or bad-mouth another person; especially if they are a Christian: you are saying these things to Christ.

The other problem with both blessing and cursing coming from the same mouth is doublemindedness. Back in chapter 1, James warned of the instability of doublemindedness and that such a man should expect nothing from God.

So, is there any hope for us in these verses? There is. In verse 8 it says something like “*no one can tame the tongue*”. That translation leaves out just a little nuance. Where it says “no one” it actually means “no person”. Which leaves change available through the Holy Spirit. As Luke 1:31 says, “*For nothing will be impossible with God.*” We serve the God of the impossible.

Once we turn to Jesus Christ for salvation, the Holy Spirit begins His work on us. His work involves chipping away at our sinful nature and making us more into the image and likeness of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. As we mature in our Christian walk; as we practice obedience to the Holy Spirit’s leading; as we daily renew our minds; we gain more control over our tongue. This process will not reach completion during our lifetime, but the closer we get, the more useful we are as servants of God.

Jesus is the second Adam. He was sent as the major piece in God’s restoration of an earthly paradise. In Christ, we are redeemed; even our tongues. God will create a new heaven and new earth and I believe that it will be even better than Eden. In the new earth, we will be fully regenerated, we will be made new. And we will use our tongues in the proper way: to praise and worship our Lord God.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, it pains us that something You made to be so good has been turned by sin and satan into such evil. Such a wonderful gift is language. Yet we use our tongue to lie and curse and cause division. Such things dilute the worship and praise we offer You and You are worthy of pure worship.

We understand and confess, that our evil tongues are driven by evil hearts. As Your word tells us our hearts are desperately sick. Our minds and wills are warped by sin. We cannot help but speak from the well of foulness within us.

But our absolute hope and confidence is in You. In Jesus Christ we are cleansed of all sin and guilt, and then covered in His perfect righteousness. Your Holy Spirit becomes our constant guide and companion, to keep us on the narrow path that leads to salvation: To work in our hearts to change us; to write Your law within us, to make us like our Saviour. We praise You alone, our Triune God, for any good that comes from us and for making us fit for heaven and the presence of God.

We pray in Jesus’ name

Amen